

# THE STRUGGLE OVER NATURE AND RELAXATION IN (SUB)URBAN SPACE: The case of garden colonies in Kbely, Prague 19

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*Abstract: The article deals with a change of an urban space in Prague-Kbely as it was reflected in the municipal press, with special attention to the fate of allotment garden colonies. There used to be several garden colonies in the suburban Prague district of Kbely. In recent years some of them had to disappear in order to make space for new development of Kbely. We propose an analysis of how this change was reflected in the local municipal paper “Kbelák,” which is funded by the municipality and is distributed free to every household in the district.*

*Key words: allotment gardening, garden colony, urban politics, discourse analysis, municipal press, Prague-Kbely*

## Introduction

Kbely, Prague 19, is a municipal district of Prague situated on the north-east edge of the city. It was adjoined to Great Prague in 1968, but it was mainly during the post-communist era that it lost its village character and changed into the current suburban residential area with pavements covered by interlocking concrete pavers, modern blocks of flats, regular and frequent connection to the city center, etc. In this article we would like to address this change to a (sub) urban space by concentrating on the struggle over urban nature and relaxation taking place in it. Recently, this struggle has been fueled in Kbely mainly by the debate about allotment garden colonies and their future and it is this debate, or more precisely one side of it, we are going to deal with in this article. We are going to dissect the image and discourse concerning four garden colonies that

existed in Kbely until very recently as it was created in the official newspaper of the Kbely district council.

Indeed, the articles in the council newspaper represent only a tiny part of the struggle over garden colonies and nature and relaxation in general. However, they can be used as a key to understanding reasons behind the changes to (sub)urban space of Kbely because they exemplify official (council or city) discourse that fuels the changes and that is used by officials to press for them. We hold a serious interest in the case of Kbely and recent history of its garden colonies and the reshaping of its public space. This article represents just an opening stage of our research in Kbely in which we would like to comprehend the changes by means of more complex research engagement with the garden colonies still in existence and with gardeners as well as with officials and the wider public. That is the reason why in this article we concentrate solely on official discourse on garden colonies and do not widen our scope. That is the work that waits to be done.

Therefore, in this article we will present the case of four allotment garden colonies in Kbely and their recent history informed by substantial changes to the overall character of the municipal district of Kbely as it was (re)presented by the official district council bulletin. But before we start, a brief introduction to the issue of garden colonies as a fruitful field of research for social scientists is necessary. The specific context in which Prague garden colonies do and cease to exist must also be sketched in advance. These will to be dealt with immediately, followed by an analysis of the Kbely discourse and a short conclusion.

## **Garden colonies and the Prague context**

The garden as one of the socially most important everyday (micro) landscapes has been widely acknowledged as a topic across social sciences – from sociology to anthropology and cultural geography. The garden is conceived not only as a material background for personal autobiography, but also as a place where social ties and relationships are reflected (Tilley 2006) and where these have been actively formed (Cooper 2006). By means of researching the garden and particularly gardening activities it is possible to grasp the complex relationship between age, gender, spare time, social status etc. (Bhatti and Church 2001). Garden colonies can be conceived of as a material as well as social space imbued with gardeners' autobiographies. They do not exist simply as sets of gardens, but as time-space synergies, as anthropological places (Augé 1996)

into which gardeners are rooted by their long-term presence and activity (see e.g., Relph 1976; Seamon 1980 for this on a more general level). Moreover, the garden also represents a hybrid space where the classical anthropological culture-nature dichotomy can be fruitfully approached since it is the garden where nature has been continuously (re)negotiated in a particular manner by way of diverse activities (Hitchings and Verity 2004).

Gardening and garden colonies in particular serve in Prague as material upon which urban nature, the properties it should have and its wider social as well as spatial implication have been (re)negotiated (see also Gandy 2003 for discussion of this in the case of New York). Garden colonies thus bring attention to issues of urban space and urban change which is in Prague fueled by processes of social transformation after the fall of state socialism. Thus, to analyze garden colonies and the situation they can be found in and the development of their situation brings forward the issue of post-socialist transformation of urban space.

The link between gardening and its specific spatiality with urban space as a material as well as an imaginary entity is, as the Prague situation shows, rather ambiguous and unsettled. Garden colonies in Prague form an unusual urban space while being a materialization of particular (post)socialist experience since they stem (among others) from “chata” and “kutil” culture which fully blossomed during normalization (Bren 2002)<sup>1</sup>. However, garden colonies as a specific landscape component strongly inform the Czech landscape in general (Blažek 2004), not only in Prague. Nevertheless, their role in and for urban space has been continuously questioned. The matter of them belonging or not to urban space has been seriously discussed and dealt with, leading to substantial changes to the Prague cityscape.

The specific space of garden colonies has indeed its own specific aesthetic qualities. It is no surprise that aesthetic arguments play an important role within the (political) negotiations about garden colonies and their future fate in

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<sup>1</sup> Chata is “a simple, recreational cottage in the Czech countryside, either a newly built structure or else a renovated peasants’ cottage” (Bren 2002: 124). To spend a prolonged weekend at the chata has been both during socialism as well as after its fall extremely popular. Due to its popularity with the Czechs and due to time and energy spent on it, the chata is often perceived in literature to represent a so-called “second-dwelling” (see e.g. Bičík, I. et al. 2001. *Druhé bydlení v Česku*. Prague: PpF UK).

A kutil is a person who engages in do-it-yourself; he or she uses used things in order to make new ones, often with a completely different purpose. Kutil culture thrived during socialism due to the general lack of goods but it has survived until present. It has been closely related to chata culture, gardening and garden colonies.

the confines of Prague urban space. What these arguments obscure, however, is the fact that what have been negotiated are not only garden colonies, but also and more importantly Prague urban space as such with all its connections to collective as well as personal memory, remembering, past and forgetting (Forty – Küchler 2001). The future of garden colonies is thus the future of a specific part of our past.

Despite the connection that has often been made between garden colonies and socialism, the colonies are an offspring of industrialization and their origins can be traced to France and Germany. In 1837, French charity *Conférences de Saint Vincent de Paul* started to allot allotment gardens to the poor in order to help them with developing their self subsistence. In Germany, the main proponent of gardening in colonies was Moritz Schreiber, a physician from Leipzig who understood gardening as an ideal means of physical training and activity. The first garden society is said to be founded in Leipzig in 1841 with a particular emphasis put on physical activity of youngsters (Pletánek 1922).

In what was to become the Czech Republic, the first colonies were founded at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, especially in relation to a lack of food during WWI. Some of them still exist although some of the oldest have been dismantled in recent years. Another wave of creation of garden colonies occurred during WWII, but it was the times after the war when gardening changed from a subsistence activity to a free-time hobby and became widespread not only in the Czech Republic but around Europe (see van Eekelen 2003 for discussion of the Dutch case).

The Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (*Český zahrádkářský svaz*) was established in 1957 and until today it is the main body representing Czech gardeners. It showed the highest number of members during the normalization period of the 1970s to the end of the 1980s with more than 460,000 members in 1989 (Generel 2009: 6). The reasons for such popularity of gardening also resulting in many new colonies founded even in the centers of big cities such as Prague were twofold: not only did gardens prove to be a solution to the lack of quality fruit and vegetables on the market, but they also offered possibilities to alternatively spend free time unseen in other spheres of private life in the socialist country.

In relation to societal changes after the collapse of state socialism in 1989, the number of members of the Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners dropped to a current 170,000. What is more important, the number of garden colonies dropped as well, with Prague being no exception, rather on

the contrary. The number of garden colonies rose substantially throughout the 1960s and 1970s when building garden colonies was supported by the city council. After 1989 the number of colonies dropped, especially in respect to property restitution. Although proper data do not exist, it has been estimated that the area of garden colonies in Prague has dropped by at least half since then (General 2009: 16). While the official materials from 1996 listed 569 colonies in existence covering ca. 1000 hectares (General 1996), in 2009 the number of functioning colonies was believed to be 409 covering 670 hectares. A new Master Plan of the City of Prague, which is being prepared by the municipal government, proposes to “transform” the majority of garden colonies resulting in 112 garden colonies being left in Prague (though not untouched but altered as for the area).

### **The fate of garden colonies in the Kbely municipal district**

In what follows we will build upon the context just sketched in order to trace recent development in one municipal district of Prague regarding garden colonies and the discourse that surrounds them. Until recently, four garden colonies have been part of the (sub)urban space of Kbely, Prague 19. But with recent changes to public space, only two have survived.

The largest of the colonies used to be on the place where a new public green space called Central Park Kbely was created (Fig 1, no. 1). After the dismantling of their garden colony, the gardeners were offered the possibility of moving to a new garden colony in the nearby Satalice municipal district. The second colony, locally known as “behind the ERKO hotel,” used to be on the northern edge of Kbely in the area bordered by railway tracks and by Jilemnická, Veselá, and Žacléřská Streets (Fig 1, no. 2). The third colony is on Veselská Street between the PAL factory and the barracks of the Czech Army (Fig 1, no. 3) while the fourth one spreads on both sides of the railway tracks between Nymburská and Drahotická Streets on the south-east edge of Kbely (Fig 1, no. 4). The former two of them do not exist any more; the third one was reduced in size when Veselská Street was reconstructed. At least a half of the fourth colony between Nymburská Street and the railway was newly built after the first garden colony was closed; the story of its older second half is still open to further research.



**Fig 1:** Four Allotment Garden Colonies in Kbely  
(data source mapy.cz, adapted by K. Pauknerová)

In our article, we follow the recent history of those garden colonies as it is featured in the local council newspaper called *Kbelák*: Bulletin of the municipal district of Prague 19<sup>2</sup>. Local council newspapers are quite common in Prague, where each municipal district publishes one in order to disseminate information for inhabitants of a given urban neighborhood and also to promote their successes and plans. The bulletins are publicly financed (from taxes) and offered to citizens “free of charge.” Because of the link between the contents heralding the workings of a given district government and the way the bulletins are controlled and financed, some people perceive them as “council propaganda.”

Using discursive analysis, we went through the 33 issues of *Kbelák* published between June 2005 (no. 114/115) and March 2011 (no. 32). What we did was to

<sup>2</sup> ‘Kbelák’ means ‘inhabitant of Kbely’

search for occurrences of specific word connections – allotment garden colony (zahrádková kolonie), allotment gardener (zahrádkář), little/allotment gardens (zahrádky), the Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners and all names of adjoining streets and local names for the three allotment garden colonies – and to learn the context in which these occur in order to trace recent history of garden colonies in Kbely, its representation in the district council newspaper and the image of garden colonies in this manner created and propagated.

After identifying all the pieces where garden colonies figure and coding them, several clusters of topics appeared. These are: *allotment gardens as agreeable surroundings* (twice), *allotment gardeners help with the “Spring cleaning of Kbely”* (three times), *gardeners litter vicinity* (three times), *decision of the district council to limit the allotment garden colonies* (nine times), *interest in renting an allotment garden* (twice), *district council supports allotment gardeners* (twice). As the above stated evidences, most of the texts in Kbelák concerning garden colonies are about decisions of municipal authorities to limit allotment garden colonies (appeared nine times). Those are informative texts about changes that were or will be imposed by the local council. They do not give any space to discussion; they just inform about the state of things.

The above-given clusters are typical for the particular case of Kbely. However two other key themes appeared: the relationship of garden colonies and nature and the issue of relaxation in which relaxation in garden colonies is put into contrast with relaxation in a public park. These, however, belong among more general key terms used in the discourse about Prague allotment garden colonies (see Pauknerová – Gibas – Čížek 2010). We skipped two articles due to their loose connection to what we are interested in – an article about a storm calamity in Kbely (Kbelák, no. 6, červenec/July 2006, p. 4), which also affected allotment gardens, and an article about changes in the Building Act, which allows the building of cabins in Prague only in allotment garden colonies (Kbelák, no. 7, září/September 2006, p. 6).

In the rest of the article, we are going to present the discourse surrounding allotment gardens and related topics and its development in the district council newspaper from rather positive to generally dismissive.

What appears in the oldest surveyed issues of Kbelák is the understanding of allotment gardens as agreeable surroundings for newly built blocks of flats (Kbelák no. 114/115 červen/June 2005, (not-numbered) úřední strana/office page) or as a place where one of the ten trees signed in the competition ‘The Most Beautiful Tree of Kbely’ stays – a linden tree in the ‘above the

pond' gardens (Kbelák no 8, listopad/November 2006, p. 7) in the first garden colony. Other positive notes about allotment gardeners appeared three times during 2005 and 2006 informing that gardeners joined the 'Spring cleaning of Kbelý' (Kbelák no 114/115 červen/June 2005, (not-numbered) úřední strana/office page; Kbelák, no 3, leden/January 2006, p. 7; Kbelák no. 5, květen/May 2006, p. 7). However, since after May 2006 no positive notes on allotment gardens or gardeners have been published.

Purely negative comments on garden colonies are quite rare. In all the 33 surveyed issues only three negative articles appeared, two of which are rather implicit. The first one is about autumn cleaning of leaves from little gardens ("zahrádka" means both little garden and allotment garden in Czech). It criticizes the practices of "many inhabitants from "behind the railway"" to deposit fallen leaves in the area between the railway and Trabantská Street leading to "a private field to be filled with litter from a private little/allotment garden" (Kbelák, no. 3, leden/January 2006, p. 2). This littered area is right on the southern side of the fourth garden colony between Nymburská and Drahotická Streets. Moreover, the people from "behind the railway" are probably gardeners from the new allotment garden colony in Satalice. Another negative comment is even less readable; it is an announcement that drinking alcohol is prohibited. After criticizing the practice of drinking alcohol in public, the article among others listed the streets adjoining the garden colonies (Kbelák, no. 18, červenec/July 2008, p. 3) and gave the feeling that the surroundings of the garden colonies are potentially dangerous places that are to be disciplined.

The only direct negative comment comes from a person signed "Ing. Menšík," who wrote about past "fights with allotment gardeners, who, with their decaying shacks, were an ulcer of the neighborhood," and he regrets that they moved "with their entire rubbish only one district further" (Kbelák, no. 27, září/September 2010, pp. 22-23). Here the aesthetical arguments often used against garden colonies are echoed. The images of shacks and huts, decay and mess surface from time to time despite the fact that garden colonies are usually tidy places of free-time relaxation.

The issue of limiting the garden colonies represents the topic of most of the articles. The oldest articles are from November 2006 containing readers' questions about the second garden colony (Fig 1, no. 2). The first one asks about the colony behind the hotel ERKO: "How long will we have the possibility to spend time meaningfully by working in the allotment garden in the garden colony between the pond and the railway station?" And the council answers that

the situation is difficult and that no changes will be made in the following two years (Kbelák, no. 8, listopad/November 2006, p. 19). The other reader asks about the same colony whether it is true that any building is planned in place of the colony. And the council answers that a private investor intends to build family houses there (Kbelák, no. 8, listopad/November 2006, p. 19). No previous discussion about closing of the garden colony appeared in the bulletin.

The third colony, next to the PAL factory (Fig 1, no. 3) was significantly reduced when Veselská Sreet was refurbished. In January 2007, Kbelák informed the reader about the Mayor's participating in the committee to overcome the last animadversions to the road construction. There the council insisted that "the construction had to take as short a time as possible and in the highest quality and that the *new* scope of the garden colony had to be respected" (Kbelák, no. 9, leden/January 2007, p. 3, emphasis authors).

The biggest allotment garden colony in Kbely used to be where now Central Park is (Fig 1, no. 1). In March 2007, Kbelák informed local inhabitants that the district council decided that in the central part of Kbely in the area of the allotment garden colony so-called Central Park would be built. Such a park "will together with the pond and the connection to the forest park behind the railway create an irreplaceable rest zone not only for children and walks for adults, but also for minor sport activities and relaxation" (Kbelák, no. 10, březem/March 2007, p. 3). The "Mayor's diary" in the same issue of Kbelák informs the reader that the Mayor and his Vice-Mayor went to an allotment gardeners' meeting and announced to them the intention to replace their garden colony with a municipal park (Kbelák, no. 10, březem/March 2007, p. 3). In May 2007, Petr Štěpánek, councilman for environmental issues from the capital city of Prague, came to visit the area and fully supported the park project (Kbelák, no. 11, květen/May 2007, p. 3). And the council agreed with the Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners that since April the allotment gardens are abolished and that the council would dispose of the things left at its own expense (Kbelák, no. 11, květen/May 2007, p. 4).

The following articles refer to the place as the area of the "previous allotment garden colony." Such articles inform the inhabitants that the capital city of Prague gave CZK 950,000 to prepare the project of the park in September 2007 (Kbelák, no. 13, září/September 2007, p. 4). In October 2008 Kbely receive 32 million to build the park from EU funds (Kbelák, no. 19, říjen/October 2008, p. 9). The following autumn, half of the park was completed (Kbelák, no. 25, září/September 2009, p. 12-13).

These short articles and notes in Kbelák give a very clear picture of how the public space in Kbely is represented and dealt with. The examples quoted show two opposing discourse strategies that are often used within the debate about colonies. While the gardeners rhetorically construct the garden colony as a place of meaningful free-time activity and relaxation centering the discourse around the word “meaningful” and its emotional resonance, the council attempts to give the impression of being absolutely neutral in emphases put on various problems and interests as well as in the language used to communicate its position. This leads to rhetorical disarmament of the emotionally engaged opponent with power remaining in the hands of the municipality all of the time. Gardeners’ subjectively grounded arguments are easily overcome by a seemingly neutral, objective language of what is necessary to be done and changed in urban space in order that it functions properly for all and not only for a group of citizens – gardeners in this case. Thus the nature of the garden colony is made inferior to the nature of the park although any close look shows the strength of the argument lies in rhetorical strategy rather than in the argument per se – park nature is said to be open for all without analyzing of whom this “all” consists.

What else the council newspaper shows is that changes are represented as if they were made by the council with the silent acceptance of Kbely inhabitants since the council newspaper lacks any space for voices of opposition. People asked only (twice) and agreed with the council (once).

Only two short articles belong to the last coded topic left (“district council supports allotment gardeners”). The first is just a note about 40,000 CZK paid to the Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners to build fences around allotment gardens in Nymburská Street as a payback for the fence left in Žacléřská Street (Kbelák, no. 18, červenec/July 2008, p. 2). The second is a not much longer note about prolonging of the contract of the lease of the area where the fourth colony is for an indefinite period (Kbelák, no. 25, září/September 2009, p. 3).

However, from the common clusters of coded topics typical of general Czech/Prague discourse about garden colonies, two were identified – that of nature and relaxation (see Pauknerová, Gibas, Čížek 2010). Opponents of allotment gardens who are in this case also supporters of the Kbely Central Park that was to replace the garden colony understand relaxation in a park as very positive. They speak about “beautiful walks in the forest park and the neighboring [new] park connected by a tunnel [under the railway]” (Kbelák, no. 27,

září/September 2010, p. 22-23). The park represents for them an “irreplaceable relaxing zone not only for children’s enjoyment and walks for adults, but also for minor sport activities and relaxation” (Kbelák, no. 10, březem/March 2007, p. 3). The park also offers “pleasant quiet corners for repose, walks, or just to sit down calmly” (Kbelák, no. 25, září/September 2009, p. 12-13).

On the other hand, allotment gardeners understand relaxation by work in the garden is as “meaningful” (Kbelák, no. 8, listopad/November 2006, p. 19) and their words are infused with emotionality. This position implicitly questions the park and the relaxation in it. “People interested in gardening, meaningful and pleasant spending of their leisure time, can contact the chairperson of the Local Organization [of the Czech Union of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners]” (Kbelák, no. 28, duben/April 2010, p. 27), says one advertisement offering free allotments in the colony between the railway and Nymburská Street (Fig 1, no. 4). The park simply does not offer a potential for active engagement with (re)creating of the place of relaxation in the ways a garden does – meaningfully and pleasantly.

The cluster of topics connected to nature is rather under-represented in Kbelák, though nature, its meaning and value, its preferred shape and function in the urban fabric is implicitly omnipresent. The underrepresentation of the nature topic with respect to a general debate about garden colonies is probably given by the lack of space for, or better to say no space for discussion or alternative views in the council newspaper which would foster an exchange of argument and surely bring the issue of nature to the fore. If nature is present (either literally or not), it follows the general trends. Nature is an element present in the discourse about both garden (colonies) and park. Generally, supporters of each side see the positives of nature in either one or the other. In Kbelák in 2006, one of the most beautiful trees was said to be in one of the allotment garden colonies (Kbelák, no. 8, listopad/November 2006, p. 7). In 2008 it was said about the same trees that they could be preserved for and in the new park (Kbelák, no. 19, říjen/October 2008, p. 9). However in the following year, 2009, “most of the old and for the park unsuitable trees” were cut down “while some of the trees of poor quality were left for anti-noise and anti-dust reasons” and the new park was supposed to be subsequently filled with various new trees and bushes along with meadow and water flora (Kbelák, no. 25, září/September 2009, p. 12-13). All the traces of the former garden colony, even those materialized in natural fabric, have been erased and replaced by other natural elements not dissimilar to those displaced – trees, bushes, and flowers.

## Conclusion

The analysis of Kbelák shows a significant development of the discourse about garden colonies in Kbely throughout the years. In the beginning, in 2005 and 2006, a positive picture of allotments and allotment gardeners appeared throughout the texts. The places were represented as pleasant green areas and gardeners were heralded for participating in the cleaning of Kbely public spaces. Then the years of changes and therefrom restrictions for gardeners came. In 2006 and 2007, closing of the two largest garden colonies and moving into a new one happened; many blocks of flats were built and the new park was designed. Such a radical change happened in Kbely but was not discussed in the council newspaper in any substantial detail. The later years of 2008 and 2009 seem to be years of consolidation of the situation of allotment garden colonies. They received some money for a new fence and the contract of a lease in one colony was prolonged into infinity which for gardeners means no further fear for the future.

The change of the first garden colony into the Central Park means a radical change of Kbely. The historical core was abandoned and a new center was built. It is quite alarming that in Kbelák nobody protested or hesitated about the decisions of the Town Hall and that the situation received rather unfocused attention in only 15 numbers, which is less than half of the studied copies of the council newspaper.

Without the detailed analytical study of Kbelák, reconstruction of the change in Kbely would not have been possible. The analysis gives a picture of the direct aim of the city council – allotment gardens in the new center of Kbely gave way to blocks of flats and the new park. Though expressed in neutral language, the power of the council was proved clearly. Gardeners were moved either to marginal areas at the edge of Kbely and next to the railway tracks or relocated to a neighboring district. Their carefully cared-for flower and vegetable beds would no longer spoil the image of the (sub)urban residential area.

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