

# REVIVING PUBLIC SPACES THROUGH CYCLING AND GARDENING

## Ljubljana – *European Green Capital 2016*

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Ljubljana has recently started to accumulate various European and global awards such as the *European Green Capital 2016*. This article analyses the city's sustainable living policy that led to this award and assesses non-environmental factors which improve the quality of urban life – an important indicator for various city rankings. Through case studies of urban cycling and gardening, it focuses on the quality of public spaces as perceived by city-supported initiatives and by grassroots practices that resist the city's vision. It concludes with a questioning of the efficiency of current urban policies for improving the quality of life of all citizens.

Keywords: city branding, sustainable urban policy, public spaces, urban cycling, urban gardening, Ljubljana

### Introduction

In recent years, Slovenia's capital Ljubljana has been marketed as “the city of culture”, “the creative city”, and specifically *World Book Capital 2010*; while in the last two years the city has drawn public attention by gaining a series of prominent European and global titles and awards, such as the *Global Top 100 Sustainable Destinations 2014* and *2016*, *European Green Capital 2016* (won in June 2014) and *UNESCO City of Literature* (won in December 2015). The city has also announced an ambitious goal of becoming *European Capital of Culture 2025*, and has included this in its latest strategy for cultural development. These titles and awards – a means of raising the city's profile and strengthening its position on the European and global cultural and/or tourist map – hint at certain, more or less unique, features that distinguish the city from others and make it an attractive place to live in and visit. Over the last few years, the city has put a considerable amount of effort into developing such features, i.e. creating a healthier and greener environment, a distinctive cultural atmosphere and a lively social scene, which have had a significant effect on residents as well as on urban public spaces – from (past) brownfield sites to the now attractive (but previously traffic congested) city centre. Residents and tourists are now expected to “perceive Ljubljana as a city made to the measure of man. Ljubljana is classified as a mid-sized European city, but it has preserved its small-town friendliness and relaxed atmosphere while providing all the facilities of a modern capital” (Ljubljana Basics).

This article's point of departure is based on an understanding of urban branding as evocative storytelling with the aim of people seeing the city in a particular, positive, and desirable way (Jensen 2007). It relies on narrative interviews with various actors, from city officials to users of public spaces, as well as on the discursive analysis of various media and promotional publications. Despite its “green” (i.e. predominantly environmental) orientation, it is written

from the perspective of an ethnologist who is primarily interested in studying creativity – as a grassroots initiative as well as an economic activity and political agenda. After explaining the features of a brand, and especially a “quality of life” indicator, this article offers an analysis of Ljubljana’s sustainable policies that led to being nominated for and winning the *European Green Capital 2016* award, by trying to assess the non-environmental factors that add to the quality of urban life. It explores the correlation between quality of living and quality of public spaces through case studies of two popular “green” phenomena: urban cycling and urban gardening, while also disclosing grassroots practices that resist the city’s vision of quality of life. It concludes by questioning the efficiency of the city’s current policies for improving the quality of life of all citizens, as access to public spaces for all and the inclusion of everybody in public activities are important characteristics of sustainable development that the city is striving to achieve. However, according to some of the actors involved, the practices described here seem to have failed in their attempts.

## Methodological Framework

This article is derived from the postdoctoral research project, “Surviving, living, thriving: Creativity as a way of life”, funded by the Slovenian Research Agency from 2014 to 2016. Inspired by anthropological accounts of creativity (cf. Lavie, Narayan and Rosaldo 1993; Liep 2001; Hallam and Ingold 2007) and following cultural initiatives that significantly contribute to the perceived “creativity” of the city, but have not been always recognized as creative (at least not in the sense of the creative economy), the goal of the project has been to explore creativity as an *interactive social process* that reflects the livelihood strategies of various individuals and communities mostly active in the field of culture (i.e. in areas encompassed by the national program for culture, cf. *Nacionalni program za kulturo 2014–2017* 2014), who challenge the prevailing notions of the importance of financial capital in favour of human (social, cultural, symbolic) capital. Fieldwork in Ljubljana lasting a year and a half first focused on mapping collective practices across the city, then switched to participant observation of selected practices where mostly informal conversations took place, and lastly to narrative interviews with social actors of various ages, educational levels, professional profiles and work engagement, including local and state management officials. I recorded and transcribed 20 interviews with 23 people engaged in urban cycling, urban gardening or working in the cultural sector (in cases when it affects the practices described or actors’ engagements). The article presents the views gained through formal and informal conversations quoted word-for-word when a specific opinion is highlighted, and summarized when pointing out a general understanding of the phenomena.<sup>1</sup>

As with any other analysis, this article is far from being an objective evaluation of the topic(s) being researched. Being a member of the so-called creative class myself (Florida 2002), and a precarious worker like a great number of people working in the field of culture, I sympathise with artists trying to make ends meet in any way possible. On the other hand, I also understand the opposing views pointing out artists’ contested appropriation of prac-

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<sup>1</sup> Some quotes used in this article are from people I spoke with due to their professional or formal involvement in the practices being investigated. However, since some of the questions in my interviews were general (e.g. inquiring about their private lives as a cyclist, a gardener or simply as an inhabitant or a visitor of Ljubljana), I have treated the answers in the same way as the ones obtained through informal, coincidental conversations. In such cases, even if the personal information of the informant is known, I state only the gender and approximate age in the same way as I do when quoting coincidental informants.

tices that should be regarded as the rights of all people (e.g. food production, participation in decision-making and management of places, social inclusion etc.). Furthermore, I feel more at home in a mainstream culture supported by the authorities on different levels than in an alternative culture, but I also advocate for the “underdogs” of the latter category who fight for the respect of human rights and equality among people, while giving voice and opportunities to the underprivileged. And, last but not least, while living and working in the City of Ljubljana, I have enjoyed its recent refurbishments, but also occasionally feel frustrated when they affect my comfort or routine. This article therefore presents my own struggle to grasp Ljubljana’s city branding and its effects, but also the points of view of various social actors that reflect an often contradictory understanding of city branding as an endeavour to become a “fit-for-all” strategy to improve liveability in the city as well as an “elitist” means of gentrification.

## Branding the City: “Ljubljana Is the Most Beautiful City in the World!”

According to data from 2014, 54% of the world’s population live in urban areas, which is 20% more than in 1960, and the urban population is continuing to grow (Urban population growth). Increasingly dense populations in cities cause growing ecological problems such as pollution, noise, vanishing green areas, natural disasters (such as floods) due to climate changes, inadequate spatial planning etc. Thus, cities are becoming increasingly unliveable (cf. Evans 2002b) and less attractive to live in.

One of the challenges of contemporary cities is to make them desirable for people to live in, but also for other target audiences to engage with them in various ways. A great deal of effort has been put into creating attractive urban spaces and improving the urban environment as a means of attracting inhabitants (i.e. workers), tourists, companies and investment. In order to achieve this goal, cities strive to enhance their reputations, improve their image and strengthen their identity. In attempts to become “the best places to live”, “the most liveable city” or a “creative city”, they have employed place-marketing techniques and/or city-branding strategies (for more on the difference between these, see Kavaratzis and Ashworth 2005), which have become the tools for improving their rankings as they affect the flow of capital – either of economic (foreign investment, international corporations, tourism etc.) or of human capital, and mostly “of the right sort” (Harvey 1989: 295), i.e. the “creative class” (Florida 2002).

One of the terms that cities and places often refer to when attempting to promote themselves is “quality of life”. However, this denotes not only an intangible, subjective, mundane feeling, but is also a social indicator, which is the basis of numerous social indexes (cf. Hagerty et al. 2001), and has as such become a competitive tool for gaining advantage over other cities (cf. Landry 2000). Talking about the objective *measurements* (indexing, ranking) of subjective and intangible *quality* seems an oxymoron that cannot be univocally resolved, as is shown in attempts by social science research (cf. Pacione 1982, 1990, 2003; Nussbaum and Sen 1993; Craglia et al. 2004) as well as policy and popular(istic) applications.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Similar debates can be found on the value of culture (cf. Klammer 1997; Hutter and Throsby 2008). Although in recent years the focus has shifted from measuring the social or economic impact of the arts and culture towards the methods and tools of the economists that fit in with the authoritative decision-making – implying that measurements of intangible quality is indeed possible – some researchers (especially from the Global South) point out that we are “stuck in a narrative in which market economics and privatised

Indeed, there is no generally accepted definition. According to Costanca et al. (2008: 18), who took an integrative approach, it is “the extent to which objective human needs are fulfilled in relation to personal or group perceptions of subjective well-being”. Robert J. Rogerson (1999) summarizes attributes of the quality of life according to environmental and personal characteristics where environmental features (i.e. hard indicators) are necessary conditions for personal satisfaction and happiness (i.e. soft indicators). The first include the environment, pollution, noise, climate, employment, retirement, wages, housing costs and access, food costs and costs of living, state taxes and development aid, commercial space, economy/business climate, political involvement, health care, public safety, transport options, proximity to market, education provision, recreation, arts and cultural diversity and lifestyle opportunities. These are measured according to quantitative data. Happiness, on the other hand, is usually explored through questionnaires using satisfaction scales (from “not at all” to “very satisfied”) or through responses to surveys and interviews on citizens’ experience and well-being. Thus, the results depend heavily on temporary emotions, feelings, mood, and on the psychological characteristics of individuals. In other words, “we must consider both *the city on the ground* and *the city in the mind*” (Pacione 2003: 19).

Despite the controversies concerning quality of life as a social indicator and as a phrase, it remains the central element that cities rely upon when competing with others, which is also the case of Ljubljana: “Ljubljana is proud to be European Green Capital 2016! This prestigious title from the European Commission is a great honour and the highest recognition of our efforts to reach the primary goal of ensuring a high quality of life for our citizens in a beautiful and healthy environment” (Zoran Janković, the mayor of the City of Ljubljana, in *Ljubljana European Green Capital 2016 2015*: 6).

European or global titles and awards (such as the *City of Culture*, *UNESCO Creative City* or *European Green Capital*, to name a few) to which Ljubljana often refers – to such an extent that its place-image building appears as a *bricolage* of everything at hand that has supra-local relevance and value (Kozorog 2012: 7) – are in fact institutionalized brands that promote uniqueness and localness at the same time, but are based on a particular version of quality of life (the one of the well-off class(es) with spending/purchasing power) that is embedded in a cultural milieu based around consumption (Pratt 2011: 125). The brand embodies physical and socio-psychological attributes in the way it represents special qualities and values that evoke an emotional response and projects a vision of the future (cf. de Chernatony 2001). As such it is “the basis for developing policy to pursue economic development and, at the same time, it serves as a conduit for city residents to identify with their city” (Kavaratzis 2004: 58).

Quality of life is also a term to measure cities’ liveability, which reflects the same vagueness as does the term “quality of life”, but it is more often related to the population of a city, region, state etc. than to an individual’s assessments and perceptions. It is either employed through policies that seek to promote better conditions for urban living, or in academic literature as an object of consumption for migrants and tourists, as well as (relatedly) a marketing tool for cities (McCann 2004: 1911). Peter Evans (2002a) defines liveability through two linked concepts: livelihood (i.e. jobs that offer a living wage earned near an area of affordable housing with accessible services and amenities) and ecological sustainability (encompassing protection of a city’s environment, relationship with its hinterlands and equal opportunities of future generations to fulfil their needs). Besides linking liveability to environmental issues,

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ownership are hailed as the formula for all progress, innovation, and prosperity” (Joffe 2014). Therefore, they are calling to find new narratives and models which would take into consideration that culture is valuable in its own right, and that the market is not an adequate indicator of the quality or value of arts and culture.

a considerable amount of academic research on urban quality of life, particularly in connection with “creative city” debates (see Landry 2000), explores the relationship between liveability, consumption and urban policy.

The recent economic crisis has again aroused a growing interest in the creative economy as a means to revive economic development (cf. Florida 2010; Indergaard et al. 2013), and urban policies focusing on creativity (i.e. cultural production and/or the production of knowledge) have become one of the main strategies in solving economic and, increasingly, social issues in cities. Especially when used in applied place marketing, the aspects which define quality of life, or liveability, are used to create an appealing image of a city that attracts new “creative capital” (cf. Lewis and Donald 2010) and contributes to the development of a place. When cities strive for urban renaissance – which is about “creating the quality of life and vitality that makes urban living desirable” (*Toward an urban renaissance* 1999: 4) – the “quality-of-place [i.e. amenities, lifestyle, and environmental quality] is the missing piece of the puzzle. To compete successfully in the age of talent, regions must make quality-of-place a central element of their economic development efforts” (Florida 2001: 8). Danger lies in capitalizing on “commodity fetishism” (Evans 2003: 417) – i.e. in giving too much attention to the economy or, narrowly, consumption – and thus losing sight of environmental as well as social and cultural sustainability. Without sustainability neither communities nor cities can be liveable; the place must maintain the capacity to meet its residents’ future needs in relation to ecological systems, built environment, social systems, the economy, and liveability (Boeing et al. 2014: 37; cf. also Evans 2002a: 2).

## Sustainable Urban Policies: Being Green and Even More

The European Green Capital Award is a European Commission initiative aimed at recognising and rewarding local efforts to improve the environment, the economy and the quality of urban life. (description of the award in *Ljubljana European Green Capital 2016* 2015: 13)

There is a substantive amount of work – both scientific and applied – on green policies, green infrastructure, green cities etc., but there is no significant reflection on what the term “green” refers to, apart from a common relatedness with nature and/or the environment (cf., e.g., Low 2005; Kahn 2006; Soderstrom 2006). On the other hand, when “green” policy is linked to the quality of life or liveability of a city, it inevitably leads to other characteristics (social, economic, cultural) of urban space and urban life, which are probably most thoroughly encompassed in the concept of sustainable development. Despite still being prevalently associated (especially in colloquial language) with preserving natural resources – after all, it stems from earlier conceptions of eco-development and is a continuation of arguments from environmental literature from the 1960s to the early 1980s – it is much wider. This could be seen as its strength, since everyone can interpret it in his or her own way and agree with at least one of the multitude of meanings. However, countless definitions, articles and debates (not to mention media frenzy) demonstrate that the term has become highly ambiguous and contested; it has even been widely discussed whether or not the concept is useful at all (cf. Elliot 2006: 10; for reviews and debates on conceptual uneasiness see Lélé 1991; Richardson 1997; Mebratu 1998; Giddings, Hopwood and O’Brien 2002; Robinson 2004; Williams and Millington 2004; Hopwood, Mellor and O’Brien 2005; Redclift 2005; Connolly 2007, etc.).

The concept is rooted in a concern for nature, but is, as a rule, connected with the economy, which is (at least in common perceptions as illustrated by Google search results) perceived as the main force of development. Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee (2003) therefore argues that the sustainable development paradigm is based on an economic rather than an ecological rationale (see also Lélé 1991; Gotlieb 1996; Haque 1999; Castro 2004); nature is seen through the economy (we are nevertheless speaking about natural *resources*) and is transformed into “the environment”, i.e. designed nature. This notion is also reflected in the classic definition of sustainable development – a “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” – from the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987), which aimed to reconcile economic growth with environmental protection and is responsible for the term and concept being widely adopted in policy discourse on development.

Since then, sustainable development has usually been conceptualized as supported by three “pillars”, i.e. the economy (“economic development/growth”), the environment (“environmental protection/balance”) and society (“social equity/inclusion”). They have been predominantly visualised as three overlapping circles with sustainable development at the centre (probably the legacy of *The Local Agenda 21 Planning Guide* 1996, see Figure 1). “How to achieve economic growth that would be fairly distributed and would not jeopardise the ecosystem?” is the question most frequently posed by planners and policy makers, usually putting environment – and/or social questions – in an inferior position in comparison to the economy, although (romantically) admitting that sustainable development means balancing all three goals of urban planning (cf. Campbell 1996).

However, the 1990s brought many critiques of this model, which pointed out that those dimensions cannot reflect the complexity of contemporary society. Since the meaning of the term “development” and people’s (re)actions are strongly shaped by culture (another highly ambiguous term), the latter has been included in the concept as its fourth pillar, even as the central one fully integrated into the others. This has allowed for greater diversity in policy choice, which has been especially relevant for non-western countries threatened to be colonized by the rational management of resources integral to western economy (Banerjee 2003: 143). Keith Nurse (2006: 40) therefore proposed a new model of sustainable development, with cultural identity in the middle, surrounded by pillars of social justice, ecological balance and (economically oriented) self-reliance. Besides having the main role in all public policies, it has been argued that culture (or the cultural sector) can contribute a great deal to development, both quantitatively (income and employment) as well as qualitatively (equity and well-being) (Bandarin, Hosagrahar and Sailer Albernaz 2011; cf. Culture 2010).

So, in being the *Green capital of Europe 2016*, what does “green” stand for in Ljubljana? Its green policy is mostly concerned with typical subjects such as maintaining green areas (forests, natural and urban parks), eco-transportation, drinkable water and efficient waste management, but also with the development of sustainable strategies. However:

In Ljubljana green equals quality of living. We are proud of annual re-record in tourist visits (+10.7 %) and the University of Ljubljana (World’s top 3 % universities) with over 60.000 [sic] students. We intensely connect with other stakeholders, encourage active dialogue with our citizens, promote sustainable development, share good practices, learn from the best and implement best solutions. That is why we believe we are living in *the most beautiful city in the world*: According to the European Commission’s Perception survey [...], 90% of citizens are satisfied to live in Ljubljana. (City Introduction and Context s. a.: 3; original emphasis)

According to the rest of the application form for the *Green European Capital* award, green quality of living, apart from environmental amenities, also encompasses economically, socially and culturally important factors, for example safety and friendliness, recreational possibilities, preserved (natural and cultural) heritage, sustainable tourism and development of brownfield areas into high-quality districts. As such, it complies with the “evolved” concept of sustainable development (cf. *Agenda 21 for culture* 2008), since culture is an inseparable part of the city’s *Sustainable urban strategy* (cf. *Trajnostna urbana strategija* 2015) and is explicitly described as the fourth pillar of sustainable development (cf. *Strategija razvoja kulture* 2015: 4).

The identity of Ljubljana, described as a “city of culture, spatial culture and heritage” when referring to the cultural dimension of sustainable urban development, is said to be founded on a rich cultural heritage as well as on top quality and diverse cultural activities. Culture is seen as a means of *social inclusion* since the city strives to make culture accessible to diverse groups of inhabitants and understands it as a factor for improving the quality of life regardless of personal, ethnic and social dispositions or circumstances. In the form of *creative economy*, it is also connected with investment plans of revitalizing brownfield areas while being an integral part of *environmental design* (preservation of landscape identity, planned refurbishment of settlement areas, heritage renovations etc.) (*Trajnostna urbana strategija* 2015: 16–17). With this in mind, Ljubljana’s vision is that “the city will become the ideal, sustainable place, with a cosmopolitan character and a modern image. A city for the people, tailored to the individual needs of its citizens, open to investors and professionals from all over the world. As such, Ljubljana will continue to ensure safety and respect for diversity, as well as offer and continue to improve an already high quality of life” (*Ljubljana European Green Capital 2016* 2015: 51).

## Quality of Living and Public Spaces: Selected Case Studies from Ljubljana

Since quality of life is often pursued through public means in the framework of public policy, its indicators are the subject of assessment surveys used to follow the development of a given geographical entity, inform businesses deciding on investments, rank cities or help them to improve its policy (cf. Eurobarometer’s *Quality of Life in European Cities* survey or Mercer’s annual *Quality of Living* survey). One of the questions in the Eurobarometer’s perception survey on the quality of living also concerns public spaces, and according to the results, “the correlation between satisfaction with living in the city and satisfaction with public spaces is fairly high. That is to say, the more inhabitants are satisfied with their city’s public spaces, the more satisfied they are to live there” (*Quality of Life in European Cities* 2015 2016: 59).

Researchers generally agree that high quality public spaces – i.e. those that are supposed to be accessible to everyone (cf. Altman and Zube 1989) – create lasting economic, social and environmental value in various ways, and are probably “the only public service that are able to provide so many multiple, concurrent public benefits to the specific areas within which they are located” (Beck 2009: 241). One of the characteristics of public spaces is that they allow and can also encourage interaction of diverse people and their participation in public life. Cities that want to enhance the quality of life of its inhabitants therefore must find ways to foster socializing since “life between buildings” (Gehl 1987) seems “more essential

and more relevant than the spaces and buildings themselves” (Lloyd and Auld 2003: 344). Social value of the space – derived, as already mentioned, from people’s interactions – refers to historical, cultural, physical, aesthetic, natural and economic qualities that are meaningful in the everyday lives of the community connected with a place (Lloyd and Auld 2003: 342).

As part of its ambition to win the *European Green Capital* award, Ljubljana has recently paid an increasing amount of attention to improving the quality of public spaces and, consequently, the image of the city, as a decade ago people “had to avoid cars in the city centre” and have already forgotten “how hard it was to cross the river, how long they had to wait for their bus at bus stops, and how the banks of the Ljubljanica river were full of car parks” (*Ljubljana European Green Capital 2016* 2015: 9). The core of the city centre has been closed to motorized vehicles since 2012, public spaces in that area have been profoundly refurbished and the main traffic venue has been redesigned into a space for pedestrians, cyclers and limited public transport, as well as into a space for socializing that allows for hosting occasional events. People now generally agree that changes in the core city centre have been quite thorough and evaluate them positively regardless of the initial dissatisfaction (mainly due to the lack of parking places in the vicinity): “All streets were open to [motorized] traffic, and now we have a lot of pedestrian zones with cycling lanes, it is actually much better”<sup>3</sup>.

City residents also stress how the city’s attention to nature (Ljubljana was also awarded with the *European Prize for Urban Public Space* in 2012 for the comprehensive refurbishment of the banks and bridges of the Ljubljanica River) improved their experience of the city. “Today there is a public space; you take a sandwich and watch ducks swimming in the Ljubljanica River. I don’t know what can be more beautiful. What we have, these natural attractions, the city emerged along the river under the hill so that a person in the city could connect with nature [...] and now we have again restored this connection”, claims a citizen who studies urban spatial policies as a hobby and is, consequently, also the member of the municipality’s council for spatial arrangements.<sup>4</sup>

Indeed, preserving green areas has been one of the city’s priorities and has been, as a rule, mentioned first whenever green policy is promoted. Besides being “the lungs of the city” and the “CO<sub>2</sub> sink”, they are often referred to as open leisure public spaces that are especially popular for recreational and socializing possibilities. On top of that, the green flagships of the city have all been culturally important: a green belt with 7,000 trees, known as the “Path of Remembrance and Comradeship”, which marks the location of barbed wire around the city put up by Italians during the Second World War; the Botanic Garden bears historic importance on a global scale and the Ljubljansko barje Landscape Park has been included in the Unesco World Heritage List for its natural and cultural heritage. Outside the core city centre, Ljubljana also designed 40 hectares of new parks in the span of four years (2008–2012) on the location of formerly degraded areas that are now famous socializing and recreational places because of their walking paths, street furniture for rest and relaxation, outdoor sport equipment and children’s playgrounds. According to the previously quoted member of the municipality’s council for spatial arrangements,<sup>5</sup> the parks considerably affected the quality of life in the city:

For example, in Bežigrad [the quarter next to the city centre] there is a park which has been designed [...]. Yes, Navje [the name of the park] is a wonderful case in point, now intended

<sup>3</sup> Female inhabitant, 40–50 years old.

<sup>4</sup> Male inhabitant, around 40, university degree.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.



for the neighbourhood. Not for all the people who come to the centre, but for local people. What is important for people's daily life are these small improvements.

The following subsections provide analysis of two popular green public trends, namely urban cycling and gardening, which have been recently intensively promoted to support the *European Green Capital* brand, and have considerably contributed to the quality of public spaces and liveability of the city.

### Cycling the City:<sup>6</sup> "Taking back Public Areas"

Ljubljana adopted its green *Vision 2025* in 2007 and, among other measures, began organizing urban transport in a more sustainable way. This included the improvement, rearrangement and renewal of the cycling infrastructure (at the beginning of 2016 the city had 133 km of bike lanes and 73 km of cycle tracks), organization of various actions to promote safer cycling, and establishment of a bike-share system that is – despite the city's partnership with a private company – perceived as inexpensive (the first hour of bike rental is free of charge), well-maintained and well-functioning (an online application tells users how many bikes are available at a selected station). The measures also spurred the popularity of urban cycling, which is proven by statistical data on bike rentals as well as qualitative research done for the purpose of this study. As summarized by an already known member of the municipality's council for spatial arrangements:<sup>7</sup>

When you see people, you see old and young, that lady was around 50 and this one is 30 years old [he points out passing cyclers]. You see people of different ages riding bikes, they do it daily, they are not sport cyclers, they are using the bike for daily errands and that is the healthiest culture in cities, if you see such cyclers. And you see men, women, you see children, seniors, so basically the cycling culture is very good.

Due to measures described here, Ljubljana achieved a 12% modal share of cyclers and was ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in *The Copenhagenize Index*, one of the most influential world rankings of bicycle-friendly cities. However, the evaluators specifically warned the city authorities that "[a]ll the talk of becoming a green capital is great but the bicycle will – as it always has – lead the way. Better infrastructure, better network. Think bicycle first" (*The Copenhagenize Index 2015*).

Recent urban changes and the consequent development of a cycling culture have not gone unnoticed by the business sector, which has started to see sustainable mobility as a business opportunity. This is a world-wide trend seen not just in Slovenia. For example, stores and other businesses have provided equipment for safe bike-parking for customers and employees, urban couriers and food suppliers use bicycles for quicker delivery (one of Ljubljana's pizzerias in the quarter bordering the city centre even uses a custom-made bike for delivering food), companies (and public services) have bought bicycles to enable employees to perform tasks around the city in a more convenient and efficient way, etc. The influence of more sustainable urban policies has also been seen in the successful development of cycling-related creative industries, as numerous economically successful products for more ecologically oriented mobility have been listed, for example, on the popular Kickstarter funding platform, including four globally successful (out of 60 applications) from Slovenia.

<sup>6</sup> For more on this topic see Poljak Istenič 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Male, around 40, university degree.

Another sector that profited from the city's green measures is tourism, as many tourists and locals rent or use bicycles for sightseeing: "Discovering Ljubljana on a bike was a pure 'wow' to me", one of the locals told me.<sup>8</sup>

Everybody said that it is very "wow", because suddenly you discover Ljubljana, because while walking you are slower to reach your destination. This walking perspective of Ljubljana is more familiar to me, because I've known it for a long time. But then you suddenly ride! You have wind in your hair; you look up at how these pictures go by. Like in another movie ...

The Slovenian Cycling Association also joined the efforts to encourage cycling and organizes events that liven up public spaces. In 2014, for example, it organized a cycling festival in Ljubljana and invited an anthropologist and an architect to guide a cycling trip to Ljubljana's socialist factories. The goal of this event, named Goodbye Factories, was to present people with Ljubljana's industrial cultural heritage, and bicycles were used as a means to travel among the five chosen factories. However, according to the anthropologist,<sup>9</sup> cycling added an unexpected, positive dimension to the trip:

The atmosphere at the very beginning was very good; it was interesting to me that people of different ages came to the event, even those who worked in the factories and also a lot of younger people. And it seems to me that some sort of dynamic was established among the people. They started to cooperate at the very beginning, and then that you sit on a bike and cycle away, I think that it somehow strengthens this feeling. [...] It's definitely good that if a debate heats up, it is not too far to the next stop, because the energy could diminish. Cycling is in a way a connecting power that maintains the dynamic. At the fourth factory we were already so connected to each other that we took a photo together [with our bikes].

On the other hand, the tour was not purely an entertaining and recreational act, but became politically charged since the guides, representatives of the "creative class" (both came from academic sector), used this opportunity to trigger a debate about access to public spaces – since, as was already mentioned, "public" implies access to all (Altman and Zube 1989; cf. also Wikipedia) – and to specifically question the rights of different social strata, especially the working class and other socially underprivileged citizens, to (their own) urban heritage:

For me the question is for whom is this heritage now. To what extent do different social strata have access to it? It's great that occasionally there are some dance events [in a building that is under protection], but they are accessible to the elite. The idea was opening the space, let's think about these things. [...] I mostly wanted to raise the question of the politicisation of industrial heritage, who is allowed to tell his story and who is not, these are not only walls. [...] How much of this industrial heritage still lives? How do the workers who used to work here and are still working [in this particular place] understand it as their space? To open up this debate.<sup>10</sup>

The revival of public spaces through cycling-related activities was also the main idea of the initiators of the Muslauf Association.<sup>11</sup> "Our projects were not imported from abroad", its

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<sup>8</sup> Female inhabitant, 40–50 years old.

<sup>9</sup> Female, around 40, PhD, employed at the research institute.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> The Muslauf association brings together cyclists on fixed gear bikes, i.e. bicycles that have a drivetrain with no freewheel mechanism and are usually also without brakes. The name derives from the German expression *mus laufen*, which indicates the need to pedal non-stop in order to keep the bicycle going.

founder told me.<sup>12</sup> “They were really copyright projects. [...] For example, I have an old bike for riding on the water and then we used it on the Ljubljana River”. His friend, a PR specialist,<sup>13</sup> further explained: “And we made this into a social event, totally uncommercial in nature. [...] This project was not done by professionals, was non-commercial, but it was the moment of taking back public areas we’ve forgotten about”.

However, their events that were only cycling-related, without any other goal or additional activities, have failed to attract people outside the cycling communities, despite being declared as open to all: “We have had a cycling identity and that has been always our [community’s] common point, but this common point was never to exclude others. Everybody’s always welcome”, explains one of its members.<sup>14</sup> It is precisely due to an emphasis on a “cycling identity”, that everyday cyclers point out that in Ljubljana “being a cyclist is a statement”, which is the reason why many people explicitly declare themselves not as “cyclers”, but only as “people who ride a bike”.<sup>15</sup> To attract wider communities, urban cyclers occasionally organize their events as part of public festivals or events from other organizers, or include other activities that are not necessarily related to cycling and target, for example, children, families, urban music lovers etc. As told by the member of the Muslauf Association:<sup>16</sup>

If I can expose this Musfest, it was also our event that took place for two consecutive years, and we always communicated its open nature, we organized it in Park Tabor, and last year’s theme, 2014, the underlying theme of the festival was taking back public areas. Again in the middle of the day we organized it, we had colouring books for young children, [we offered] bicycle repair for voluntary contributions, again because of some social responsibility. To offer people qualitative socializing [which is important] according to the times we live in.

Park Tabor, which has recently hosted various public activities and events (a flea market, children’s workshops, thematic events etc.), is currently one of Ljubljana’s public spaces that artists and other members of the creative class have “taken over” in the framework of different projects (supported by the city, state or EU) that (are said to) encourage local communities to participate in taking care of public spaces in the neighbourhood. However, such events are also perceived as gentrifying the space and diminishing the quality of life for a certain population (cf. Bajič 2015). “Counter-events”, organized to raise such issues, included a “self-organized, illegal street party” (Illegalni street party), prepared by an anarchist organization with an aim to “decontaminate it [the place] of gentrifying clutter with self-organized socializing” (Prostor brez rož). According to one of the Facebook commentators, the party was legitimate because it was a case of

appropriating practices “from below” by non-governmental organizations that sell those practices to the authorities for three working positions [implying that three people can live from project funds]; they frame, institutionalize and integrate them [those practices] into the system – and on the other hand they sell a story of participation to nice city residents who are still waiting for somebody to organize something for them. NGOs repack political practices into trendy products and strip them of political charge. When the park becomes too nice for a tramp to feel comfortable, when it becomes too loud at night and needs locking up, when nice events for refined residents start to happen, there is no more place for me, rascals do not feel comfortable anymore, and they are not the only ones who are pushed out of public space. (Prostor brez rož)

<sup>12</sup> Male, around 30, incomplete university degree, artist, precarious worker.

<sup>13</sup> Female, around 30, university degree, precarious worker.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Male inhabitant, 60–70 years old.

<sup>16</sup> Female, around 30, university degree, precarious worker.

And last but not least, the bicycle is a frequent means to get in touch with nature, as 26% of people who rent a garden from the city use one to get to the allotments (Gardening in Ljubljana) – which leads to the next important green activity the city is proud of.

### Urban Gardening: “It Is Hip to Have a Garden!”

Local statistics from the city’s website on the *Green European Capital* shows that in September 2016, residents were renting 632 city-owned gardens, and 20 residents are on the waiting list for each gardening area; for now, there are four managed areas for gardening with facilities and sheds. Gardens measure 50–70 square meters and yearly rent totals 1€ per m<sup>2</sup>. Approximately 45% of allotment holders travel to the gardens on foot, and (as already mentioned) 26% use bicycles. Around 82% of them live in apartment buildings or high-rises and state that working in the garden is a means of coming in contact with nature as well as an opportunity for recreation and relaxation (Gardening in Ljubljana).

Economic crises as well as scandals in the food industries have brought about existential reasons for producing one’s own food, i.e. food and economic security – one eats what one sows and saves money not spent buying vegetables, herbs, and other plants one decides to grow. However, not many people in densely populated urban areas have this opportunity and even fewer have enough land to be self-sufficient, so gardening in the city is, more or less, a matter of prestige or (in rare cases) tradition (as some parts of Ljubljana have been known for producing vegetables for central marketplace at least from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards, cf. Židov 1994; Tercelj Otorepec 2001). Gardens are therefore highly valued and sought-after goods, so the City of Ljubljana (besides renting already designed gardens and arranging new allotments) also took the role of an intermediary between plot owners and garden seekers with an agenda of ensuring management of private gardens in line with its decree (see *Pravilnik o urejanju in oddaji* 2016). Currently they cooperate with nine private providers.

Although the residents do react to the city’s measures of arranged gardening in line with the city’s green, clean and controlled plans, people also seek – and find – various ways to produce food on their own terms that are not always in accordance with the city’s vision (although not as many people as before 2007 when the city began to remove illegal gardens). As most of the allotments for rent are at the edge of the city while they want to grow food near their homes, they look for almost any patch of land between buildings and streets, occupy it or make an agreement with the owner, and arrange a garden. Gardens in Ljubljana can be found on undeveloped land, in abandoned places, parks and on agricultural land, while some people create vegetable gardens in troughs, sacks or containers placed on balconies or on roofs. In 2014, eight ways of gardening (besides cultivating city-arranged gardens) were identified in Ljubljana: gardening colonies, gardening as the continuation of tradition, temporary use of land, gardening as maintenance of an area, gardening between houses and apartment buildings, gardening at a neighbours’ place, guerrilla gardening, and gardening in troughs (Simoneti and Fišer 2014; see also Simoneti 2015).

Although there are at least three areas where gardening is a collaborative community practice (cf. Simoneti and Fišer 2014), the most well-known is the garden named Beyond the Construction Site. As part of the cultural festival *Mladi levi / Young lions* in the summer of 2010, Bunker, an NGO for performance and organization of cultural events, rearranged an abandoned construction site between apartment buildings next to the central train station

in the centre of Ljubljana into what could (with time) become a community urban garden. After the festival, due to a great deal of interest among residents mostly from the near-by flats, the site indeed developed into a community garden that was managed by the cultural association until it was taken over by a self-organized coordinating committee in 2015. Today around 100 people take care of 40 gardens and participate in numerous public and community-based events that take place at the site or in other public spaces. The city boasts about the garden on the *European Green Capital* webpage and it often attracts media attention related to sustainability.

The land is cultivated by residents of different social, ethnic and educational background (cf. Prijatelj 2011), so it has become a place where people can become comfortably familiar with differences and learn how to actively co-design and share urban space, but it has also become a place where people establish informal contacts, form friendships, and exchange information, services and goods: “It’s only because of the garden that I take skirts in need of mending to Ružica, I’m arranging a workshop on Japanese food with two girls; people bond with each other, they exchange recipes and talk about self-harvesting of seeds. If you mention how great someone’s vegetables in the garden look, you quickly get some to take home. But still, everybody can do whatever they want to”, said one of the gardeners, the art director of the NGO that initiated the garden, to a journalist writing about the practice in 2011 (Prijatelj 2011).

The garden community also established a number of communication channels with the neighbourhood and the city in order to encourage their participation and involvement, as well as to diversify the possibilities for socializing. Besides regularly issuing a fanzine to document and present their work and making use of a notice board outside the garden, they also organize public events to revive local public life. Along with open hours, tours and other, more or less informal events, in 2014 they started organizing regular weekly workshops called Out in the Wild for younger schoolchildren. The children get to discover nature in the city, learn about local plants and animals, practice gardening, process grown food and create with natural materials. In 2015, the garden, along with 13 others from all over the world, participated in the Chelsea Fringe festival, “an alternative garden festival celebrating community growing initiatives, outdoor performance, botanical art, walks, talks and events” (Chelsea Fringe Key Facts). Ljubljana’s garden community organized Days of Open Beehives with a presentation on urban beekeeping and tasting the first honey from the garden’s bees. Another event that attracted a great deal of visitors and media attention was the celebration of the garden’s fifth anniversary in the same year when the community organized a street festival and flea market, where the first garden honey products were big sellers (*Ulični festival Onkraj*).

Similarly to cycling, gardening also occasionally serves as a political act against social insensitivities and inequalities. Such an urban community garden is sometimes understood as a critique of a city’s rigid policy of organizing and leasing small garden plots for a fee based on the number of years people have lived in the city and how far away from the garden they reside, and claims to be an altering participatory practice aware of power relations. Some feel there is a thin line between the city’s support and instrumentalisation of activity for urban policy goals.<sup>17</sup> They wish to have more active role in shaping the city and want to create within spaces that are not subdued by consumption and capital. “A contemporary city can only be a heterogeneous and inclusive city!” shouted the members of the cultural association that has been managing the garden in the introduction to their fanzine published on the garden’s fifth anniversary (Lovšin et al. in *Fanzine Onkraj* 2015: 3).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. female inhabitant, the founder of the garden, around 45 years old, PhD, artist, precarious worker.

On the other hand, several alternative groups draw attention to the fact that such practices are mostly supported financially by local and state authorities or the European Union, as they are in line with mainstream society's expectations and with the green policy of the European Union. This was also the case with the Beyond the Construction Site garden, as its first steps were taken in the framework of an Interreg project in the Mediterranean area. The garden is also mentioned as a good example in a catalogue of sustainable community practices (Brecelj 2015) created as part of the national programme, *European year for development 2015*. These practices are therefore often appropriated by the non-governmental sector that, in the opinion of its critics, ends up gentrifying the area and pushing out grassroots initiatives sprouting up in degraded urban places (a point also mentioned regarding Park Tabor in the subchapter on urban cycling).

The loudest – or maybe only the most eloquent (as they even translate some of the entries on their website in English) – opponent of city-supported urban gardening (individual and community) is the Zadruga Urbana (Urbana Cooperative), an informal anarchist association formed by people dissatisfied with the current system of food production. Although they share the same desire with the initiators of the Beyond the Construction Site garden, i.e. to take gardening into their own hands, they want “to connect individuals and collectives in a horizontal, non-hierarchical way, to promote autonomy in local food production and freer access to public land. We also plan to reclaim/collectivize more locations in urban spaces and organise guerrilla gardening” (What is Zadruga Urbana). They wrote, published and even translated a gardening manifesto entitled “(De)institutionalization of gardening” which draws attention to the fact that

[g]reen cities became a norm of civilised society and the basic need for producing the food is turning into the newest trend. Commercialisation of green politics is present at all levels; from the directives of European bureaucrats to all the state's and municipality's decrees and regulations – in the last years gardening is more and more constrained by institutions. Institutions themselves with the help from non-governmental organisations and non-critical individuals wrap most of the environmental issues in a shiny cellophane of popular culture. – It is hip to have a garden. You have succeeded when the others say so. The biggest success is if you create a gardening project that is financially or otherwise approved by influential local, state or above-state elite. (Deinstitucionalizacija vrtičkanja)

They continue by deconstructing gentrification, voicing their concerns for grassroots initiatives, introducing possible solutions and alternative ways of gardening (“unforced” by “formal structures”), and with a call to “take the land back!” in order to improve the quality of life for all people (and not just the privileged). To add to this goal, they regularly engage in a revival of public spaces: they cook at vegan dinners; organize film nights, educational activities and discussions, distribution of goods and an exchange market; and cooperate in solidary actions, for example, to protest the EU's handling of the refugee crisis and to support the migrants.

## Conclusion

*The Green Capital* title gives Ljubljana a marketing tool to appeal to tourists and to inspire civic pride among its own citizens. Local events and activities are planned throughout 2016 with a different theme each month [...]. The award also carries weight with other cities.

“Before we became European Green Capital, it was impossible for me to visit the mayor of Paris or the mayor of Berlin,” Janković says. “After this prize, all doors were opened.” (d’Antonio 2016)

The extract from an online article about how Ljubljana turned itself into a “green capital” supports the claim that place-branding raises the city’s profile as well as affects the identification of its residents. Branding usually appeals to quality of life or liveability, proving it with public amenities and satisfaction surveys, and pointing out various characteristics of the city depending on the marketing purpose and the target audience. According to the promotional material, Ljubljana intensively praises public spaces, their quality (e.g. green nature, cultural heritage, accessibility, traffic-free zones, drinkable water from public drinking fountains) and liveliness (events, activities etc.).

People claim public spaces through feelings and actions (Francis 1989). In Ljubljana, cycling and gardening seem to stand out among the examples of appropriation of public spaces – with or without the city’s consent. They add to the tangible factors used to measure the quality of life in the city, since they affect the environment, transport options, recreation, lifestyle opportunities etc. Even more importantly, they positively affect feelings of happiness and satisfaction. Richard Florida, in his analysis of cycling in American cities, assesses that “[b]iking metros are richer, better-educated, and more fit than non-biking places. They’re happier, and [...] more creative too” (Florida 2011). And where gardening is concerned, besides stressing opportunities for socializing and recreation, solidarity, friendship and other valued phenomena that public spaces are sought for, people often express the happiness that a garden provides them with: “When you have your own garden, your own piece of land for cultivation, you are happy. You see what you can do on a really small parcel. Our gardens are really small. But never mind, what you sowed, planted, raised, that grows. And this tomato, pepper, lettuce, parsley taste so good. The taste of happiness” (Breznik Bertoncej in *Fanzine Onkraj* 2015: 29).

The question remains: who has access to public spaces and to such activities? According to an informant<sup>18</sup> who is currently trying to gain non-refundable funds to establish a start-up company offering on-line courses on gardening, she has no chance of getting the city’s support to teach people about proper ecological gardening or of setting up a community garden according to the principles of biodynamics and permaculture. The mayor liked her idea, but pointed to planned allotments, and the webpage on the Green Capital of Europe proves that for the city the model community garden is Beyond the Construction Site with a powerful cultural association backing it up. Similarly, urban cyclers who are “living on the bike” (and refuse to use a car) feel left out of the city’s plans for improvements to the infrastructure, as they offer help in marking dangerous spots for cyclers, but get no desired response despite extensive experience (in all seasons) with cycling infrastructure.

This implies that indicators of quality of life are contradictory measurements because different groups and users of the city react to the assessed measures and evaluate their effects in contradictory ways, depending on being included in or excluded from it (Craglia et al. 2004). In 2012, 85% of Ljubljana’s citizens were satisfied with public spaces (*Quality of Life in European Cities 2012 2013*: 46). Despite later efforts by the city’s authorities to improve their quality (as described in this article as part of the efforts for winning the *Green European Capital* award) the satisfaction level of the inhabitants over the next three years improved by only 1%, while overall satisfaction with living in the city improved by 2% (cf. *Quality of Life*

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<sup>18</sup> Female inhabitant, 30–40 years old.

in *European Cities 2015* 2016: 55, 21). People do talk about how “Ljubljana made a fantastic leap”,<sup>19</sup> and it is also true that, with such a high percentage of satisfied inhabitants, it is difficult to make a progress (i.e. improve the results), but in order to do so, the city should find a way to enhance the quality of public spaces and, consequently, quality of life that would resonate with the unsatisfied citizens as well. Perhaps the problem lies precisely in the exclusion of institutionally unsupported, alternative or grassroots activities that, at least in some cases, aim to improve the life of the underprivileged and marginalized (e.g. migrants and refugees, the long-term unemployed etc.) and pave the way to their social inclusion.

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<sup>19</sup> Male inhabitant currently living abroad, 30–40 years old.



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## Oživljavanje javnog prostora biciklizmom i vrtlarenjem. Ljubljana – *Europska zelena prijestolnica 2016.*

### Sažetak

Ljubljana je u posljednje vrijeme počela dobivati razna europska i svjetska priznanja, poput *Europske zelene prijestolnice za 2016.* U ovom se članku analizira gradska politika održivog življenja koja je gradu donijela tu nagradu te se procjenjuju neekološki faktori koji unapređuju kvalitetu života u gradu, kao važan pokazatelj u raznim načinima ocjenjivanja gradova. Kroz studije slučaja urbanog biciklizma i vrtlarenja, fokus se stavlja na kvalitetu javnog prostora, kako je percipiraju inicijative podržane od strane grada te građanske prakse odozdo (*grassroots*) koje se odupiru gradskoj viziji. Članak se zaključuje propitkivanjem učinkovitosti današnjih gradskih politika u unapređenju kvalitete života svih građana.

Ključne riječi: brendiranje grada, održiva urbana politika, javni prostori, urbani biciklizam, urbano vrtlarenje, Ljubljana