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LANDSCAPE AS NEW TOWNS INFRASTRUCTURE. FROM CANVAS TO URBAN IMAGE

Ioana TUDORA, Alexandru AXINTE

University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest, 59 Mărăşti Blvd, District 1, Bucharest, Romania

Corresponding author email: ioana.tudora@horticultura-bucuresti.ro

Abstract

The article presents the results of the New Towns/New Narratives international network project, led by the International New Town Institute, examining the landscape as a multi-dimensional reality in the context of the construction, in the 20th century, of Europe's New Towns. The project was developed under the 'Telling the story' theme as the backbone of the programme and the spin-off of other ongoing topics, such as green practices or the green transition. Starting from the creation,with the (pre)existing territory as a (considered) white canvas, to the green space as the critical infrastructure of the new towns, the green spaces were a central part of urban policy at the time. In the aftermath of the modernist movement, green infrastructure became the central topic in the survival and revival of the New Towns, as a resource for well-being. The article addresses the transformations of the landscape along the rise, the decay, and the (potential for) revitalisation of the New Towns, based on the study cases of the 16 new towns from 13 European countries that were part of the project.

Key words*: New Towns, modernist/socialist urbanism, green infrastructure, landscape transformations.*

INTRODUCTION

Europe is the land of old cities with deep and rich history and strong identities. These pre-modern cities of continuous temporality are specific spatial figures that reconcile a re-centred space with a reordered time. They are symbolised spaces (places) as opposed to non-symbolised spaces (non-places) (Augé 1995).
Beside the historical cities, an entire network of more than 200 New Towns overlaps the entire continent. These New Towns, built in the aftermath of the 19th century industrialisation and of the WWII, are regarded as non-places, devoid of history, identity, and specific urban culture. However, these New Towns have, by now, a 50-70 years (hi)story that defines their particular identities. While the historic cities and city-centres in Europe are regarded as the places of culture and history, the New Towns are often seen as dull cultural wastelands (INTI, 2024a). The New Towns were, at the time of their planning, the (scientific) response to all the diseases of the City. The medical analogies abounded and, in this paradigm, the clean slate to work upon was the dream of planners, unhindered by old and obsolete buildings, attachments, ideas and people (White, 1968).

They are the embodiment of modern planning theories varying from the Garden City to CIAM functional city theory, from game theory to environmental planning, and (in eastern bloc) from Stalin's monumentality to later soviet *microraion*. Today they stand as proofs of concept, or proof of the incapacity of abstract, technical concepts to plan life and communities (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Zoetermeer - First phase of the new town, Driemanpolder neighbourhood (INTI, 2024a)

Regarded from this perspective, the New Towns are not only places of their own history and (community and/or individual) stories, but also places of the history of urban thinking, heritage of modernist utopian dreams.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

It is around these stories and histories that the International New Town Institute (INTI) was formed in 2009, as a platform for research, education, and knowledge. The spin-off New Towns/ New Narratives international network is looking for transformations of these cities and is analysing their histories as the basis for these transformations and the construction of specific identities. The present network, established in 2023, comprises 15 New Towns from 13 different countries:

- Dimitrovgrad (Bulgaria),
- Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (Romania),
- Dunaujvaros (Hungary),
- Evry-Senart, Grand Paris Sud (France),
- Fritz Heckert Gebeit, Chemnitz (Germany),
- Hellersdorf, Berlin (Germany),
- Ilijaš (Bosnia-Herzegovina),
- Kohtla Järve (Estonia),
- Milton Keynes (United Kingdom),
- Nova Gorica (Slovenia),
- Nowa Huta (Poland),
- San Polo, Brescia (Italy),
- Spijkenisse, Nissewaard (Netherlands),
- Visaginas (Lithuania),
- Zoetermeer (Netherlands).

Beside those, Rotterdam was included as a mentor-town alongside Milton Keynes. The network involved 23 partners: local NGOs, local administrations, universities, cultural and educational centres, and institutions.

The preparatory online meetings framed the urgent issues that the New Towns are confronting now, including: “the health and wellbeing of vulnerable citizens’ groups, obesity and loneliness, the gap between local government and residents, the accessibility of the housing market for all, the deterioration of nature, the safety and accessibility of public space, the untapped potential of open space and green areas, the unheard voices of youth and seniors, and the unseen qualities of the cities’ history or the vitality of its social structures”. (Provoost & Axinte, 2025). The summarising ‘umbrella’ theme, as came out from the majority of voices, was decided to be ‘Telling the Story’, which became the title of the resulting volume, published in 2025.

During the two-yearproject, six workshops, organised around six main themes, were held in Spikenisse (*Transformation of identity*), Evry-Senart (*Just and Inclusive Green Transition*), Drumul Taberei, Bucharest (*Informal Green Practices*), Chemnitz (*Telling the Story of Everyone*), Nowa Huta (*The Social Redesign of Space*), Nova Gorica (*The Unplanned Histories of Planned Towns*). The workshops were inclusive, involving local residents as a key point in ‘Telling the Story”, as a compelling story can only be created together with the population, not being imposed top-down, as the initial planning of the New Towns was (Provoost & Axinte, 2025).

Visual and written materials were prepared in advance of each workshop and presented and discussed during the meetings, synthesising cross-information about the history of the town and the present dynamics related to the subsequent research themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

One of the main ideas that resulted from the many exchanges that took place during the two years of research is the important role that open space and greenery play in residents’ use of neighbourhoods and collective life as part of ‘Telling the Story’ (Provoost & Axinte, 2025). Planned from scratch, the New Towns share many similarities, despite the political split in the post-war period. As William White (White, 1968) put it, “philosophically as well as physically, the new town is to be a complete community – so complete that it can exist independent of the old city, and, quite literally, help cut it down to size.” The New towns were supposed to be self-contained, with no need to commute to the (old) city nor to be visited from outside. However, as history showed us, most of them became planned suburbia that only function in the shadow of the central (historical) cities that they support, as dormitory neighbourhoods. As an ironical turnout, many New Towns are still described (and describing themselves) as ‘self-contained satellites’.

All New Towns were invented as finite,finished realms on a drawing board, showing existing and necessary infrastructures (mainly transport and industry), on a white canvas (Figure 2). Scientific Masterplans imposed new visions of 'perfect worlds' based on nearly abstract models, neat, rational, logical, and fixed (Kaplan, in White, 1968).



Figure 2. Scale model of Drumul Taberei district, Arhitectura 1/1972 (courtesy of Union of Architects in Romania - in Provoost & Axinte, 2025)

The original landscapes

Despite their early origins in Ebenezer Howard's Garden City model, supposed to combine the countryside and city qualities and avoid all their shortcomings, all New Town Masterplans erased the rural and/or agricultural past. The modernist approach of the city as a *tabula rasa, beginning* with the striking erasure of the Marais neighbourhood in Paris by Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, was the dominating model of thinking when installing the New Towns.

As many New Towns were developed on old rural territories (Dimitrovgrad, Evry-Senart, Hellersdorf, Nova Gorica, Nowa Huta, Spikenisse, Zoetermeer), one cannot find many traces of it.



Figure 3. La Grande Borne district, Grigny in Évry (INTI, 2024b)

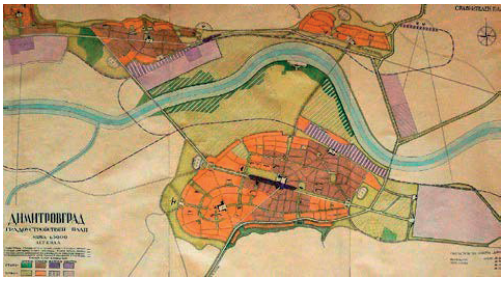

Figure 4. Masterplan for Dimitrovgrad by Luben Tonev, 1947-1948 (Atrium Archive in Provoost & Axinte, 2025)

In general, the rural heritage and landscapes tend to be radically transformed, if not obliterated, in order to make way for abstract, geometrical, scientifically urban compositions (Figures 3, 4). In other cases, like the one of Ilijaš, in Bosnia-Herzegovina, the rural past is kept as an architectural reference, while the original landscape of the rural settlement agglomeration and forest expanses, and the rural life style is drastically transformed. If the agricultural practices and economy are mostly replaced by industrial activities, the new, modern architecture seeks its roots in a critical regionalism spirit, borrowing elements from the traditional vernacular one (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Worker house in Ilijaš, built in 1939 by Juraj Neidhardt, as an expression of modern regionalism; photo: Elša Turkušić Jurić (Provoost & Axinte, 2025)

However, in Ilijaš's case, the rural way of life made a strong comeback, as after the 1990s the ancient rural cores developed into rural sprawls of the urban-industrial centre (Figure 6). "As such, Ilijaš assumes the character of an urbanised local node with clear elements of centrality, toward which surrounding rural settlements gravitate, albeit without clear transitions or harmonised narratives." (Elša Turkušić Jurić, Irfan Salihagić, Maja Pličanić in Provoost & Axinte, 2025).



Figure 6. The town of Ilijaš and its surrounding context (photo: Anto Baskarad in Provoost & Axinte, 2025)

At the opposite extreme, Nova Gorica completely replaced the natural meadow and the villages around it, part of the Italian city of Gorizia's hinterland. The New Town, a kind of modernist abstract and *masterly, correct and magnificent play of volumes brought together in light,* as Le Corbusier saw the new architecture, was a *middle of nowhere* composition, completely ignoring the previous landscape features (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Model of Nova Gorica original design, with the going-nowhere axis, photo: Ioana Tudora

The central axis, starting from and leading to vanishing points without territorial connection, was only running parallel to the new frontier. No connection with the past was integrated into the masterplan. The New Town was the perfect image of the new man in a new society, in a new geopolitical landscape (Figure 8). But the meadow and its rural occupation were no longer there. The New Town was 'connected' by a cut from its landscape.



Figure 8. Still from the video essay '*Town on the Meadow*' by directors Anja Medved and Nadja Velušček, 2004 (Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

In other cases, such as the one of Visaginas, Lithuania, the New Town built in the Soviet era and known as the Atomic City (Atomgrad), the Masterplan (Figure 9) on the natural setting, replacing the forested area on the shores of Visaginas Lake. Nevertheless, in the case, due to its high status among Soviet New Town (*Atomgrads* and *Naukograds* - for science cities - having a special prestige) and the complexity of the terrain, part of the natural setting was integrated into the fabric of the city (Figure 10).



Figure 9. A model of the Visaginas masterplan, photo: Oksana Denisenko (Provoost and Axinte, 2025)



Figure 10. Pine forest in a courtyard of Visaginas, photo: Olga Rožkova (Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

In the case of Nowa Huta, planned to be an anti-Krákow, opposing new values to the old ones; some of the pre-existing agricultural and natural settings stood at the fringes of the city. The Meadows are both a reminder of a pastoral past in the area and a resource for the present and future of the city, already central to its social life (Figure 11).



Figure 11. The Nowa Huta Meadows, photo I. Tudora

In most cases, the New Towns were conceived as new urban implants squeezed in between existing rural settlements, replacing agricultural land but keeping the villages' cores, thus transforming the entire territory's way of life, as in the case of the new implants in Paris-Sud (Évry, Sénart) or the insertion of Fritz Heckert Gebeit in Chemnitz (INTI, 2024b, 2025a).
As a demonstration of an alternative vision, in the exceptional case of Milton Keynes, the existing towns and villages were incorporated into the Masterplan of 1970, seeking to maintain their individual identity and strengthening their role (CNT, 1992). Even the name of the new planned city was that of one of the engulfed villages. Today, the traces of the old settlements are scattered and trapped among precast terraces, business parks, and large car-oriented boulevards (Sudjic, 2017). All of these fragments of city are connected and yet separated by a comprehensive green network (Figure 12). Although the entire public-designed masterplan was developed around the distinctive green grid system, much of its parkland is managed not by the municipality but by The Parks Trust, a charitable body set up by the outgoing Development Corporation in 1992 (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).



Figure 12. The network of parks and green spaces in Milton Keynes (Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

This brings us to the paradox of the New Towns. While dislocating and replacing agricultural land and / or natural areas, all New Town projects were looking to create a green urban realm, having in the centre of the planning schemes generous and elaborated green infrastructures.

The Planned Landscapes

Starting with Frederick Law Olmstead's projects for the new Riverside suburb of Chicago (1868) and the park system of Boston (1878), the image of the new, modern city was connected with the idea of greenery. Green spaces were the main feature of the Garden Cities built at the beginning of 20th century, as well as of the New Towns built after WWII. Green was the panacea for all urban diseases. If the first suburban garden cities were laid out around tamed parkways and public gardens with individual houses (with private gardens) sagely ranged along the leafy streets, the modernistic perspective, expressed by the Charter of Athens, brought a vision of unleashed nature under suspended highways and collective buildings.
In the UK, the New Town Act of 1946, revised several times until 1969, gave the means and the power to create a new utopian vision of tomorrow's dwelling. The landscape became a tool for connecting and separating the planned areas of the city. As Sir Frederick Gibberd wrote about the Harlow development he mastered (1947 - Figure 13): "The Plan was concerned with three arts: Architecture, Road Design and Landscape Architecture. These three arts are fused to become town scenes or townscapes, the making of which is the art of Town Design"

(Gibberd Architects). The proposed landscape scheme separates the built-up areas and extends the New Town into the surrounding countryside, with an irregular boundary, produced by the reorganisation of field patterns from surrounding farms and the use of natural features. The layout of building groups was arranged to preserve woods and tree belts. In the centre, Henry Moore's *Family group* was sitting as the symbol of the new life beginning. A new model of living was set.

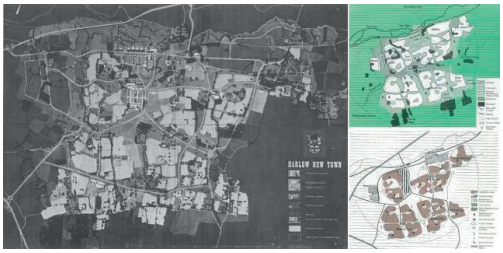

Figure 13. Harlow Master Plan - https://www.gibberd.com/projects/harlow-master-plan

In the frame of most New Towns' masterplans, The Green was tackled in a multiscale way, solving problems of territorial connections and those of daily bases dwelling. As the Rotterdam plan (Figure 14) shows, while great corridors and green infrastructures are (re)waving the new, modern scattered city, connecting the centre with its suburbia, most of the peripheral neighbourhoods, conceived as autonomous New Towns, were planned as Garden Cities, putting the green spaces in the centre of modern housing/inhabiting.

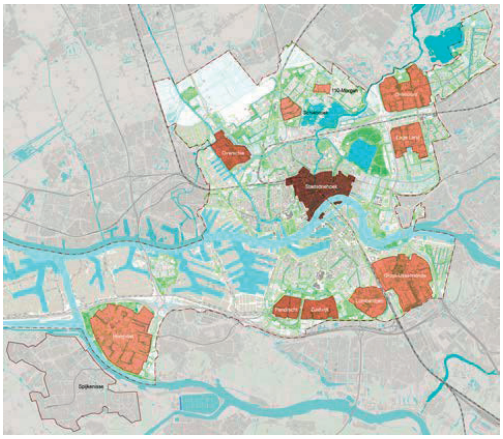

Figure 14. The Garden Cities of Rotterdam (Paul Broekhuisen in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

In the Netherlands, at the end of the 1940s, ideas about the 'organic' and 'open' quarter were incorporated in an urban concept called the *wijkgedachte*, or 'residential district idea', as the key element between the individual and society, between private and public life, combining urban and rural qualities, fact the lead to critical approaches to *wijkgedachte* as 'anti-urban', 'sentimental' and 'regressive'.

Nevertheless, the concept became very popular and it was applied on a large scale in the two decades after the war (Van Hellemondt, 2021). "The scientific approach offered landscape architects the possibility to design a variety of separate yet connected spaces, differing in rhythm, size and material. The downside was that it could lead to deterministic and fragmented urbanism." (Van Hellemondt, 2021).



Figure 15. Urban plan for Pendrecht, 1952-1954 (City Archive Rotterdam in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

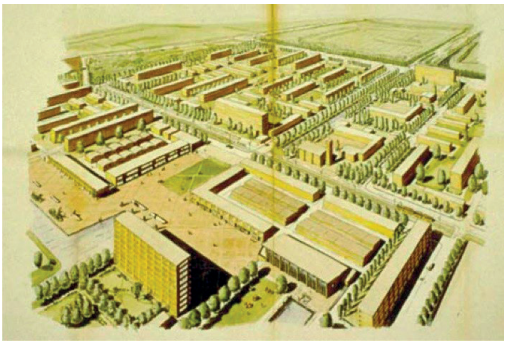

Figure 16. Lotte Stam-Beese - Bird eye view drawing of Pendrecht (Fabrizi, 2018)

The post-war reconstruction brought with it a new orientation in the garden cities planning towards collective housing, thus reinforcing the modernist vision of the future. Rotterdam's Garden Cities conceived during the post-war

reconstruction era were shaped by modernist urban planning ideals, by CIAM principles and Clarence Perry's neighbourhood unit concept, as exemplified by Lotte Stam-Beese's project for Pendrecht, one of the most representative projects of the urban theories developed in Europe in the post-war period (Figures 15, 16). The district is organised in four neighbourhoods laid around a traffic-free/ pedestrian square. Instead of the usual system of perimeter blocks, the fundamental unit of these neighbourhoods was the *wooneenheid* (or cluster): this form of spatial organization implements a physical and social connection between every single home and the neighbourhood considered as a whole (Fabrizi, 2018). The green spaces followed the same fractal structure, from public to community and individual.



Figure 17. Typical housing and collective green from the 1960s, Reyeroord - Stadsarchief Rotterdam, in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

The new neighbourhoods of the Garden Cities "were designed as planned, socially oriented residential environments. Green spaces were interwoven in the built areas as sites of social learning and moral formation" (Figure 17). The planners employed the communal gardens and green buffers as normative spatial instruments. "Unlike the densely programmed city centre, the Garden Cities offer an abundance of green public space, a clear spatial structure, and a legacy of collective living". They represent distinctive urban landscapes including green corridors, communal gardens, and wedge-shaped green spaces that serve as places for social life and values (Joris Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025). But the green recreation was conceived in a very formal manner, rather than informal hanging out, as already CIAM asked for green areas with well-defined purposes.

As an example of the second-generation Rotterdam's urban growth, Spijkenisse is no more a garden city, in fact, a neighbourhood directly related to the city centre, but a New Town in its own right, designated as a working-class neighbourhood and a 'growth centre' in 1976.



Figure 18. Spijkenisse has an extensive network of green spaces and waterways (Municipality Nissewaard, in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

The Masterplan shows a clear structure of neighbourhood units, separated by green corridors and mainly located along the main roads, with important green spaces surrounding the New Town as a belt. The plan envisaged that the neighbourhood units would be structured around more or less central green spaces with public and social roles, although no major public facilities were built nearby in order to activate those spaces (Figure 18).



Figure 19. San Polo development plan by Leonardo Benevolo (Galli 2022)

In most cases, the green network of spaces wconsidered as one of the main infrastructures to sit at the foundation of the New Towns, in some others it was more of a utopian dream.

Such is the case of San Polo, Brescia. The great planner, city historian of the city and theorist Leonardo Benevolo realised the initial development plan, organised around a large park (Figure 19). He mastered the overall urban layout inspired by English new towns, the design research on building types, and the complex administrative system of the operation, able to permit a process of public urbanisation. Today, San Polo is the most densely populated district in the city of Brescia, with more than 19,000 inhabitants. The original design remains intact, but the large park that, in Benevolo's vision, should have delimited the entire district has never been completed (Galli, 2022).

A landscape plan for San Polo was realised by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe, one of the most important figures in Landscape Architecture at the time (Figure 20), who completed the built-up area with a large English garden. Jellicoe's project visually connected San Polo to the historic centre and to the lakes south of the city through a system of micro-reliefs and water bodies. Even if it could have been an additional value for the initiative, it is just part of the list of missed opportunities (Galli, 2022). Instead of a landscape corridor, today San Polo is crossed and split in two by a railway.



Figure 20. San Polo's landscape proposal by Sir Geoffrey Jellicoe (Leonardo Benevolo archive, IUAV - in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

Another practice between utopia, propaganda, and reality was the one present in Drumul Taberei, or, to some extent, in Nowa Huta, and not only. Nowa Huta (Figure 21) was built in the 1950s and remains until today as an example of proletarian monumental architecture from the Socialist-Realism period (with allegedly Renaissance influences), although it was equally inspired by the neighbourhood unit concept devised by Clarence Perry (Kępa, 2017).

But after 1954, under the influence of Hrusciov's discourse, the supremacy of proletarian monumental architecture of the Socialist-Realism style, dominated by classical traits, diminished or was replaced by modernism / international style, and the new architectural paradigm became the economical approach.

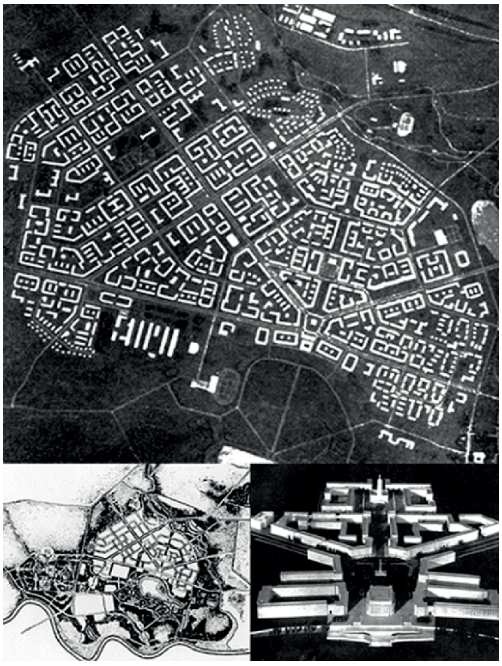

Figure 21. Development plan and model of Nowa Huta (Kantarek & Samuels, 2017)



Figure 22. Scale model of Drumul Taberei district (Arhitectura 1/1972, courtesy of Union of Architects in Romania – UAR - in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

On its side, Drumul Taberei (Figure 22) is an emblematic urban assembly for a period of the "great opening" period of the '60s, built in a "free urbanism" style, although based on the *microrayon* concept, as the architects presented

it (the Soviet variant of neighbourhood unit, used also in Visaginas or Dimitrovgrad).
Usually, the generous planned green spaces were the first to be cut from the investments plan. So much so that, at least in Romania, many professionals, such as Gheorghe Petrașcu or Rică Marcus, in *Arhitectura* review no. 7/1957, are criticising the lack of attention for public spaces and landscape design, accusing the scarcity of paved alleys inside the *cvartals* and the absence of plants in the designated green spaces. In Eastern countries, the *cvartals*, naming buildings organised around inner courtyards (based on the Viennese *hof* model) were the specific urban development morphological unit in the 1950s. Later on, they were replaced, under Soviet influence, by the *microraion*, a more modernistic approach inspired by the neighbourhood unit and the Charte d'Athénes principles (both models are illustrated in Figures 21, 22).
Arhitectura review no. 7/1957 is almost entirely dedicated to the green spaces and sports facilities projects and analyses, an interesting opportunity for some (discreet) critiques. Thus, Rică Marcus, well known for his book "Parks and Gardens in Romania", criticised the use of typified architecture projects that generate monotonous and uninteresting urban landscapes – the reaction to this situation: people's need to regain contact with nature.
Parks and gardens are presented as more than leisure spaces, but, in line with the new Soviet discourse, a means of education (such as libraries, theatres, exhibition halls, sports and playgrounds) is now integrated into the city's green spaces. What is interesting about his standpoint is that he considers landscape design a means to regain the human scale in the new urban assemblies and to diminish the effects of standardisation.
Of course, the socialist city is the only one entitled to solve these contemporary problems, and that is going for almost the entire Eastern bloc. "As to the diffusion of the idea of setting up the plantations, it is worthy of notice that the masses' interest in having parks and gardens cannot be fulfilled in the capitalist regime, in which the private property of the land leads to its being exploited to the limit. An eloquent example in this regard is that of American batching and even that of the so-called garden cities, with lots measuring between 100-150 sq. m. and squeezed houses with only 4-6 m between them. None of these methods addresses the real needs of the population." (Marcus, 1957).
Meanwhile, Gustav Gusti was deploring "the desolate situation on our construction sites, in which unfinished buildings go into use while still being surrounded by unsightly and unimproved terrains, in which the denizens struggle with dust and mud, organising as best as they can the playground, the garbage-depositing space, and the enclosures for poultry and domestic animals" (Gusti, 1954).
If the planting was set aside or minimised for economic reasons, and the New Towns were rather grey or brown than green (Figures 23, 24), the new dwellers took this into their own hands. Which leads us to the next chapter.



Figure 23. Nowa Huta in the 1960s. (photo: Henryk Grzęda/PAP in Kępa, 2017).



Figure 24. Drumul Taberei in the 1960s. (https://b365.ro/i-love-drumul-taberei-ce-a-fost-si-ce-a-ajuns-cartierul-bucurestean-comunist-cu-arhitectura-inspirata-de-le-corbusier-468250/)

The Daily Life Landscapes

As discussed before, in many planned visions of New Towns, the project was never fully completed. While the housing stock and primary infrastructures were already in place, many of

the interstitial areas and spaces between blocks, around entrances, alongside paths, remained unregulated and undefined. These public spaces of proximity became open terrains for residents to act." Immediately after moving in and over time, people began to plant trees in front of their windows or even along streets, organise gardens, place benches, install bird feeders, raise flowerbeds, and build informal fences (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

Quite often, desert, sterile urban landscapes were transformed over time (Figure 25), through private/collective interventions or later administrations' planting actions (in some eastern countries also done by 'volunteer' citizens' work – in socialist states, these practices were formally supported by the state, through resources, organizational formats, and narratives), in rich ecosystems, flooded by greenery.



Figure 25. Drumul Taberei, 2022 (photo: Andrei Gherasim in INTI, 2024b)

Not only in the case of un-finished and un-planted green infrastructures had the open spaces become the playground of denizens. Even in cases of well-implemented green spaces, "collective spatial structures have been weakened by societal shifts, increasing individualization, and changing usage patterns. Many of the original spatial qualities, such as the abundance of green and open layouts, no longer function according to their intended social logics." That we talk about under-designed spaces, left aside during the implementation of the plans, or about abandoned spaces, these underused spaces became a new resource for spontaneous and adaptive actions and reinterpretations (Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

In many cases, underutilized green spaces, due to their initial under-planting/ design or lack of functional/ social clarity, or following under management and abandonment, now offer unique opportunities for spontaneous and adaptive reinterpretation, like fertile ground awaiting reuses and reinterpretations.

As an example, in Milton Keynes, volunteer groups have formed around specific parks or nature reserves, where they clear invasive species, install bird boxes, run guided walks and/or support environmental education. At Linford Lakes, volunteers have helped transform a neglected site into a wetland where birds are thriving, while "in Woughton a group cares for a community orchard, sharing knowledge about traditional fruit varieties and grafting techniques". Other initiatives operate in more hybrid spaces, like the Forest Gardens programme, led by the City Council that aims to create ten small food-forests across the city (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

Another example is The Wijktuin Ommoord (neighbourhood garden Ommoord) resident-led initiative. Ommoord is a typical mass-housing estate designed for working families, organised into spatial units with distinct boundaries, and subject to waves of disinvestment and regeneration, leading to social change. Wijktuin Ommoord started as a grassroots initiative in 1972 (Figure 26) and it has evolved into an ecological hub that integrates sustainability, ownership, and neighbourhood identity. Wijktuin defines itself as a 'nature garden', where everything native is allowed to thrive.



Figure 26. Neighbourhood garden in Ommoord, 1973 (Ary Groeneveld/Stadsarchief Rotterdam in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

Therefore its savage aspect demands volunteer work to maintain accessibility. This means keeping the paths open by managing the herbaceous vegetation at knee.

height, prune overhanging branches and brambles at shoulder height, and remove obstacles. Wijktuin is a pioneering community project that operates as an alternative model of urban stewardship (Figure 27) and contributes to a more sustainable urban ecosystem, having profound ecological and social value, as it also "witnessing a gradual demographic shift, with increasing interest from younger residents and families, further solidifying its role as a cross-generational community asset" (Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).



Figure 27. Wijktuin Ommoord today (photo: Joris Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

In other cases, the pre-existing landscapes play a role in collective memory. Like in the case of Ilijaš, where the natural/rural environment plays a dual role (Figure 28). On the one hand, the forests and rivers offer vital resources and a sense of continuity as residents speak of the hills, the picnics, and mushroom picking as childhood realms. But they are also the triggers of social unrest and activist movements seeking a different kind of spatial redesign, grounded in environmental justice and collective responsibility (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).



Figure 28. Ilijaš surrounding rural landscape (photo: Samna Durmo in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

Designed with community input and managed by local groups, these bottom-up initiatives blur the line between formal and informal. Alongside the formal infrastructure, a quieter story has unfolded: a proliferation of informal green practices, often led by residents and volunteer groups. These initiatives - orchard care, wildlife monitoring, informal gardening, or tree planting are rarely planned in a conventional sense. Many of these practices emerge in what might be called the cracks of the city. "The motivations vary, being nostalgia, ecological concern, or a desire for quiet, but what links them is an orientation towards stewardship without ownership". These are not community projects with funding and formal objectives; they are acts of maintenance that persist without fanfare, often unnoticed by passersby (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

Informal green practices

'Informality' as a concept was borrowed from the economic sector, where it has been used to describe local 'shadow economies'. Imported into urban studies, the concept evolved from informal housing or informal urbanism, as sub products of global neoliberalism, thus placing informality in subaltern positions. However, other studies on informality grew alongside the rediscovery of the 'ordinary city', as a reaction to the increasing transformation of cities into global market powerhouses. Numerous studies have documented the usefulness of informal practices in various contexts, such as the ad-hoc collective production of space, or the negotiated forms of governance. Calls for restoring social justice in cities were beginning to acknowledge the role of informal practices as valuable resources. Autonomous groups and their bottom-up projects and/or informal practices were recognized and valued as already responding to real social needs (Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

In many cases, informality has no conscious political dimensions. It only starts with basic daily practices, quite often as a response to the lack of basic qualities (as planting what the administrations 'forgot' to plant). In most cases, the new dwellers simply started to plant around the blocks as a favourite pastime. Then and now, these practices responded to the shortcomings of institutional maintenance.



Figure 29. Grand Paris Sud: private garden between collective housing (Provoost and Axinte, 2025)



Figure 30. Rotterdam / Lombatuin: a green hub for community connection (photo: Joris Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)



Figure 31. Ilijaš: residents use the green spaces daily for socialising and relaxing (photo: Elsa Turkusic Juric in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

Residents used their own resources, tools, water, seedlings, and time to cultivate something both personal and collective. Some gardens were rather ornamental (Figure 29), others were more functional, with herbs or vegetables (Figure 30). Some were enclosed while others were open to passers-by; this was not in direct correlation with their private or collective character.

In many cases, they served as quiet, or not so quiet, gathering spots for neighbours (Figure 31), as places for play, or as habitats for stray cats and birds (Figure 32) (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).



Figure 32. Drumul Taberei, Bucharest: garden with animal shelter (photo: Alex Axinte)

Among the large span of informal practices in urban space, informal green practices are also emerging at the edge of institutional frameworks - from community gardens and collective urban agriculture to temporary reuses of vacant land and micro-interventions in public space. Informal green practices contribute to a better urban environment and social integration. Therefore, for many cities (mostly from western countries, as in post-socialist ones such practices are merely stigmatized), "supporting informal green practices is not just a nice-to-have, but a political imperative for the current local administrations" (Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).



Figure 33. Mapping of the New Towns | New Narratives: informal practices' descriptions made by the participants at Network Lab #3, Bucharest, 2024 (by Alex Axinte)

Mapping all these informal practices as transformation and adaptation tools of the urban frameworks of the New Towns was a central point in the more general reflection on the evolution of

these cities (Figure 33). This inventory of informal practices showed a variety of interests and purposes, forms of organization, and relationships with the administration.

Thus, New Towns with a strong and long-term public planning culture, such as Grand Paris Sud, Milton Keynes, Rotterdam, Spijkenisse, or Zoetermeer, have developed various forms of partnerships, agreements, or contracts, which aim to facilitate the participation of less institutionalized actors in the management of public spaces, seeking both to regulate and to increase the inhabitants' participation (Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025) This might create a persistent tension, as many administrative documents discuss facilitating citizen initiatives, but their overall attitude remains embedded in a formal, top-down strategy and, quite often, implies a structured, planned methodology that emphasizes how initiatives can be integrated into existing frameworks. Therefore, they are "supportive on the surface but regulatory in practice" and "can act as a constant brake on the fluid and experimental nature of informal green practices", thus risking an excessive formalization and transforming the administration into an organizer instead of a facilitator (Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025). In these institutionalized landscapes, most of the informal actors are represented by citizen-volunteers, specific to associative frameworks such as groups, associations, initiatives, or projects, which participate and contribute as part of a community (Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025). The overall image is a more institutionalized one, quite often based on a strong community infrastructure (Figure 34). "In the more loosely regulated contexts, actors of informality are usually identified as individuals, or at most as small groups, such as tenants, neighbours, elderly, retired, women, or residents with rural backgrounds, who are practicing informality out of need or habit. […] Although at first sight these more discreet practices seem weaker, less organized, and with a lower community impact, they are part of a wider vernacular ecosystem of complementary spaces that are resourcing each other, thus making them more horizontally accepted and adopted as a way of life." (Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).



Figure 34. Collective garden De Zoete Aarde / Sweet Earth in Zoetermeer (photo: Municipality Zoetermeer in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)



Figure 35. Garden with a kiosk for meetings in *Buclă / The Loop* area, Drumul Taberei, Bucharest, 2022 (photo: Alex Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025)

But, on the other hand, they are facing a more complicated relationship with the local administrations. Ranging from ignorance to occasional support (when political aims are demanding it) and passive or active (sometimes violent) interdictions and evictions, the administration's ambiguous and changing attitude is rather discouraging, as in the cases of Dimitrovgrad, Ilijaš or Dunaújváros. "It prevents the crystallization of extended and explicit communities of practitioners and fuels the perpetuation of conflicts over the use of space or appropriation through privatization or occupation" (Figure 35) (Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

From the purpose and interest point of view, the informal practices range from basic needs (like

food production) to aesthetic desires (ornamental gardens around the blocs), social needs (meeting points and outside living spaces), ecological, educational, or mental health concerns. In this perspective, it is also visible differentiations between more publicly oriented actions, led by groups or larger organisations, and more private initiatives, fuelled by personal desires or needs and based on adaptation, domestication, and appropriation. The resulting picture of informality, seen from the perspective of these New Towns and the organisations that represent them, comes as a jigsaw composed of illegal and deregulated, to self-organized, grass roots or bottom-up, to everyday and convivial, up to artist, activist, or guerrilla practices. All of them are "compensating for either the excesses or the shortcomings in the organizational landscape, enacted by spatial practitioners who develop individual and collective agency, fuelled either by grand narratives, or everyday needs and habits; informality is like an imaginary glue necessary for articulating the multiple forms of living together in New Towns" (Axinte in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

CONCLUSIONS

For more than 70 years now, the New Towns have evolved along diverse historical, economic, or socio-cultural trajectories, shaped by extremely different political and economic contexts. Might seems logical that everyday life in these districts has also evolved equally differently. "Despite the diverse ways in which residents adopted and adapted their districts through dwelling, there is still a certain degree of familiarity that transcends across different local contexts. Thus, as if coming full circle, the everyday life of New Towns is still a shared experience." (Provoost and Axinte, 2025). While initially sharing a similar project of spatial organization and a similar attitude toward pre-existing landscapes (more often seen as *tabula rasa*), these districts spread all over the world and evolved in the past decades as more or less different habitats, responding to diverse contexts, historical trajectories, and specific local ingredients. If the original landscapes remain sometimes as punctual witnesses of a long-gone reality (like Nowa Huta's meadow or the hills of Ilijaš), all development schemes proposed elaborate green infrastructures and generous green-spaces networks.

From blueprints to reality, these green networks proved themselves as a cornerstone of the entire development. In some cases, the planted areas became the main feature, asset, and attraction of the new districts, presented as green paradises opposed to the grey, old city centres. Nevertheless, in most cases, housing was seen as too standardised and often monotonous, while green spaces were underused or poorly maintained, falling into abandonment and oblivion. In other cases, the initial green spaces were merely an absence, being brought into existence over time by the new dwellers and their informal planting. As with many planned visions, some projects were never fully completed: the housing stock and primary infrastructure were in place, but the interstitial areas and spaces between blocks remained unregulated and undefined. Thus, public spaces of proximity became openings for residents to act. They fenced private or collective gardens, placed benches in front of the entrances, organised the spaces around the carpet-beaters (a more or less eastern bloc typical feature), adopted stray animals and turned them into community pets. "What began as isolated gestures slowly grew into a layered landscape of informal green practices." (Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

In both cases, the green spaces faced abandonment and social and/or administrative disengagement on the one hand, and a new bottom-up revival on the other. Thus, through these grassroots initiatives, the green infrastructures of the New Towns became the main resources at many levels. Greenery is the feature that characterizes the quality of these, otherwise not-so-attractive, areas. It represents equally the new social infrastructure that generates a sense of community (Provoost and Axinte, 2025). Beside "fixing" the green, informal green practices are capable of generating a new wave of investment and attachment,to build new communities, and addressing problems related to ecological pressures and resilience. Thus, informal practices are generating new landscapes that respond to specific problems and bring a new social, political, and economic balance.

Between anti-planning and un-planning, the new bottom-up landscapes emerging from informal

green practices are able to respond to both local and more general problems, to bring value to otherwise neglected spaces, and to generate new qualities of daily life (Figure 36).

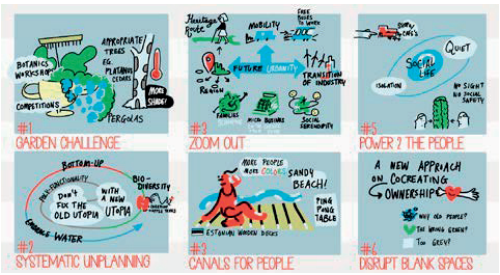

Figure 36. Graphic conclusions of Spijkenisse Lab, March 2024 (INTI 2024b)

In this context, "informal green practices do not constitute a counterforce to formal policy, but rather an essential complement to institutional planning in today's complex and diverse urban landscape. Indeed, comprehensive examples of how municipalities effectively bridge the gap between their top-down planning frameworks and the organic, often spontaneous, nature of citizen-led collective greening remain relatively scarce." The new social dynamics of the New Towns "demand a hybrid governance approach: one that bridges formal and informal logics, embraces diversity and failure, and understands urban quality as something co-produced through practice. Informal green practices not only green the city; they democratize it" (Vermeiren in Provoost and Axinte, 2025).

Passing from the original natural/ agricultural canvas, through top-down planned green networks and infrastructures to the new bottom-up generated daily-life green spaces, the landscape is the main value of the New Towns, playing a fundamental role in building the identities of these cities and districts. It should therefore stay at the centre of all regeneration, renovation, or sometimes patrimonial policies, as it is both the heritage of an already long past and a resource for a better future.

The New Towns epitomise the evolution of the landscape as viewed and described by John Brinkerhoff Jackson: "as an environment where permanence and change have struck a balance" instead of "a static utopia dedicated to ecological or social or religious principles" (Jackson, 1986). Thus, the New Towns' landscapes passed from Landscape *One* – the vernacular/rural/long-time generated by the permanent management and use of the land, to *Landscape Two* - the political/planned/ imposed and image-based one, to *Landscape Three* - seen as a small-scale, balanced construction overlapping vernacular vitality over political schemes, and altering the flow of time (Jackson, 1986).

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Participants:
Dimitrovgrad
- Yoana Mitvichina, Yasho Minkov, Borislav Chonev (Municipality Dimitrovgrad)
- Aneta Vasileva, Georgi Marhov, Zekie Emin, Emilia Kaleva (New Architectural Heritage Foundation)
Drumul Taberei (Bucharest)
- Alexandru Axinte (studioBASAR)
- Ioana Tudora (University of Agronomic Sciences and Veterinary Medicine of Bucharest - USAMV)
- Marius Toma, Mihai Balint, Costin Muraru, Roxana Maria Triboi (Center for Innovation and Urban Design, Municipality of Sector 6, Bucharest)
Dunaújváros
- Gabriella Zsinka, Csaba Gyöngyössy (Institute of Contemporary Art of Dunaújváros)
Évry-Sénart (Grand Paris Sud)
- Béatrix Goeneutte, Wilfried Pingault, Carole Besse, Kinga Kotras, Marianne Lebreton, Emmanuelle Gaubert, Fiona Schut (Urban Community Grand Paris Sud)
Fritz Heckert Gebiet (Chemnitz)
- Luise Vorwerk, Marcus Heinke, Pascal Anselmi, Jonas Diercks, Julia Naunin (Chemnitz 2025)
Hellersdorf (Berlin)
- Jochen Becker, Constanze Musterer, Adam Page, Eva Hertzsch (nGbK Hellersdorf)

Ilijaš
- Irfan Salihagić, Samna Durmo (Municipality Ilijaš)
- Elša Turkušić Jurić, Maja Pličanić (NK ICOMOS)
- Sanja Zagorac Jozic

Kohtla Järve
- Anton Makarjev, Henri Kaselo, Aivar Kamal, Tiit Lillemets, Evelin Danilov, Alevtina Jermakova (Municipality Kohtla-Järve)

Milton Keynes
- Shane Downer (Municipality Milton Keynes)
- Sarah Griffiths (The Park Trust)

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- Blaž Kosovel, Miha Kosovel (Goriška Humanists Association)
- Aleksandra Torbica, Irena Balantič (The City Municipality of Nova Gorica)
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Nowa Huta (Kraków)
- Justyna Dutka, Jarosław Klaś, Monika Kozioł, Elżbieta Urbańska-Kłapa, Jadwiga Bryś, Urszula Tłomak, Barbara Pasterak, Katarzyna Kobylarczyk, Małgorzata Hajto, Monika Fiołek (The Norwid Culture Centre in Kraków)

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- Joris Vermeiren, Marek Vogt, Janneke Derksen, Paul Broekhuisen (Municipality of Rotterdam)

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- Valeria Battaini, Roberta Moneta, Francesca Mainetti (Teatro 19)
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- Misko Papac, Ilyass Benkhattab, Gauke van Rij, Lotte Broersma, Josien de la Croix, Azraa Rawoot (Municipality Nissewaard)

Visaginas
- Oksana Denisenko, Oksana Beliakova, Jevgenija Cholodova (Urban Stories)

Zoetermeer
- Magriet Panman, Inge Breugem, Marten van der Maas, Mark Scholten, Foke de Jong (Municipality Zoetermeer)

Coordinator
- Simone Rots, Michelle Provoost, Caterina Tioli (INTI)

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