

# Urban Gardening as Neighbourhood Collective Action

## Comparative Study of South Korea and Slovenia

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### Table of Contents

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1. Introduction
2. Neighbourhood collective action and urban gardening
  - 2.1 Collective action and urban gardening
  - 2.2 Urban gardening in South Korea and Slovenia
3. Urban gardening in Incheon and Ljubljana
  - 3.1 Incheon: Ieum garden
  - 3.2 Ljubljana: Onkraj gradbišča community garden
4. Comparison of social importance of Ieum and Onkraj gradbišča
5. Conclusion

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**Keywords :** collective action, community gardens, neighbourhood, urban gardening, urban studies

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, urban gardening has been an integral part of urban life. More recently, the importance of urban gardening in cities has evolved beyond its economic and environmental benefits to include its social and cultural benefits. Whereas urban gardening once provided food for the growing populations in industrial cities, its popularity in post-industrial cities has been associated with leisure, healthy lifestyles, skills development, social learning, education, cultural production, and arts, etc. (Bell et al. 2016). In addition, urban gardening has been recognised for its role in building partnerships between civil society and public institutions, empowering citizens, and strengthening participatory governance (Hou 2020; Certomà, Noori and Sondermann 2019; Bonow and Normark 2018; Nettle 2016; Follmann and Viehoff 2015).

In South Korea (hereafter Korea) and Slovenia, the social importance of urban gardening has not been extensively studied, despite its growing popularity over the past decade. Moreover, existing studies on urban gardening in Korea and Slovenia have rarely been conducted from a cross-cultural comparative perspective. This study compares two reportedly successful cases of urban gardens in Korea and Slovenia to address the existing knowledge gap and gain a better understanding of urban gardening as collective action and its social importance in both countries. The selected cases of urban gardens are approached as forms of neighbourhood collective action to explore their aims, actors, practices, and meaning.

The study is based on a comparative case-oriented research approach. The *Ieum garden* (이음텃밭) in Incheon, Korea, and the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* (skupnostni vrt Onkraj gradbišča) in Ljubljana, Slovenia, were selected as reportedly successful cases

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of urban gardening with important social impacts on each locality (Mittermaier 2023; Križnik and Cerar 2021; Poljak Istenič 2018). In case-oriented research, the relevance of cases to the research question is of greater importance than their representativeness (Flick 1998). Thus, the *Ieum garden* or the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* are not representative of urban gardening in Korea and Slovenia. Instead, they were selected for their relevance in understanding urban gardening as a neighbourhood collective action and its social importance.

The study employs ethnographic research methods. Fieldwork and semi-structured interviews were conducted in Korea in 2022 and in Slovenia from 2020 to 2022. The fieldwork included site visits, participant observation and on-site face-to-face interviews. Additional interviews were conducted via Zoom and email. A diverse range of social actors participated in the interviews, including gardeners, community leaders, experts, and public officials.

The article is divided into five sections. After the introduction, the urban gardening in Korea and Slovenia is contextualised in theoretical and historical terms. The following sections examine and compare the selected cases and their relevance to this study. The concluding section presents the findings of the study and outlines potential research directions on urban gardening in Korea and Slovenia.

## **2. Neighbourhood collective action and urban gardening**

### **2.1 Collective action and urban gardening**

Urban gardening refers to non-commercial food production in urban and peri-urban areas. The environmental, socio-economic, and cultural importance of urban gardening has evolved against a backdrop of historical, social, and urban change in cities (Bell et al. 2016). In recent times, urban gardening has shifted its focus from growing food to growing communities (Hou, Johnson and Lawson 2009). For instance, gardeners increasingly spend time cultivating crops together, helping each other, sharing food, organising gardening and other workshops, participating in community festivals and arts, and even for involvement in environmental protests (Hou 2020; Nettle 2016). Such activities strengthen social relations, solidarity and trust, and shared identities among participants, thereby building stronger communities within neighbourhoods and cities (Bonow and Normark 2018).

Moreover, urban gardening fosters community capacity to engage in collective action. As a form of collective action, it occurs in neighbourhoods and is overwhelmingly local in terms of membership, community leaders, organisation, and shared means and ends. Gardeners are often believed to have little interest in issues beyond their gardens, communities, or neighbourhoods (Nettle 2016). Although urban gardening as a neighbourhood collective action addresses local rather than global issues, it can also be seen as a local response to global environmental and social injustices (Certomà, Noori and Sondermann 2019; Follmann and Viehoff 2015).

As such, urban gardening facilitates the collective capacity of communities to make environmental and social claims, and potentially effect social change beyond the neighbourhood (Nettle 2016). Moreover, small-scale and situated environmental and social activism, such as urban gardening, can also make explicit political claims, challenging and resisting prevailing neoliberal urban strategies (MacGregor 2021). Consequently, recent

studies have increasingly focused on the potential of urban gardening to enable and contribute to transformative social change (Schreuder and Horlings 2022; Winkler et al. 2021). By approaching urban gardening as a neighbourhood collective action, it may be possible to better assess its social importance in Korea and Slovenia.

## 2.2 Urban gardening in South Korea and Slovenia

Korea and Slovenia experienced a period of rapid economic growth between the 1950s and 1970s. State-led industrialisation attracted impoverished rural populations to rapidly growing urban centres in search of new employment opportunities and a better quality of life. Although the situation in Slovenia is not directly comparable to the massive rural-urban migration in Korea, their urbanisation processes have followed somewhat similar patterns. In 1950, only about 20% of the Korean and Slovenian populations lived in urban areas. Twenty years later, the urban populations of both countries had doubled (Table 1). In Korea, the proportion of urban population increased by 47% between 1960 and 1970, and by 39% between 1970 and 1980. In Slovenia, the process of rapid urbanisation began about a decade earlier, when the proportion of urban population increased by 42% between 1950 and 1960, and by 31% between 1960 and 1970 (The World Bank 2020).

Despite historical differences in subsequent urbanisation paths and current rates, the comparison shows that a significant proportion of Koreans and Slovenians, along with migrants from the former Yugoslavia, moved to the cities comparatively recently. This mostly occurred during the period of rapid urbanisation (Kang 1998; Rusinow 1973). Migrants brought with them social and cultural practices and identities that were still rooted in their previous lives in the agricultural countryside. These included the cultivation of edible plants and the rearing of small animals, which became an important means of economic survival for many impoverished migrants. In the past, it was common to observe small, informal, and often illegal backyard, street and rooftop gardens, allotments and weekend farms scattered throughout the city (Jamnik, Smrekar and Vrščaj 2009; Lee 1993).<sup>1</sup> This indicates that urban gardening has long been a part of urban life and culture in Korea and Slovenia.

	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000	2010	2020
South Korea	21,4	27,7	40,7	56,7	73,8	79,6	82,9	85,4
Slovenia	19,9	28,2	37,0	48,0	50,4	50,8	50,0	50,3

<Table 1> Proportion of urban population in South Korea and Slovenia (in %)

Source: World Bank, World Development Indicators, 2020

Cities in Korea and Slovenia today are quite different from their industrial pasts. As is the case in many cities around the world, the importance of urban gardening in post-industrial cities extends beyond mere economic survival and can include numerous social and cultural benefits for neighbourhoods and cities (Certomà, Noori and Sondermann 2019; Bell et al. 2016). For instance, urban gardening in Korea and Slovenia is becoming less focused on

<sup>1</sup> In contrast to Korea, the history of allotment gardens in Slovenia is longer and dates back to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Slovenian allotment gardening was influenced by the German *Kleingarten* movement.

growing food and more on spending leisure time, healthy lifestyles, skills development, social learning and education, cultural production, and the arts. In addition, the impact of urban gardening on community capacity building in both countries is increasingly being acknowledged (Križnik and Cerar 2021; Poljak Istenič 2018; 정나라 외 2017; 이재열 2016).

The following sections examine two cases of urban gardens in Korea and Slovenia to gain a better understanding of the social importance of urban gardening in both countries. The aims, actors, practices, meanings, and social importance of the *Ieum garden* in Incheon and the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* in Ljubljana are compared and assessed.

### 3. Urban gardening in Incheon and Ljubljana

#### 3.1 Incheon: Ieum garden

The *Ieum garden* is located on the outskirts of Songdo International City in Incheon, on a vacant construction site of the future international hospital. In 2020, a proposal to establish the *Incheon Community Garden* (인천형 공동체텃밭) was included in the city's participatory budget (인천시 주민참여예산 사업). The City of Incheon selected the *Incheon Urban Agriculture Network* (인천도시농업네트워크) to prepare, implement and manage the new garden, which opened in 2021.<sup>2</sup> Currently, the garden offers 330 individual plots, 17 communal plots and 8 special plots, which are made available to residents through a lottery system each year (Table 2). In 2024, only one in five applicants was selected, indicating the high popularity and interest in urban gardening in the city (인천도시농업네트워크 2021, 2023).

From the outset, the *Ieum garden* was not intended to be a generic allotment garden. Urban gardening activists and experts from the Incheon Urban Agriculture Network sought to establish an urban garden that would extend beyond the mere growing of food and contribute to community adaptation to climate change, improve access to healthy food, and promote community capacity building in Incheon. To achieve this, activists and experts organise and manage various communal activities that bring gardeners together, strengthen their social relationships, build trust, and improve communication among them. All gardeners are also required to attend mandatory community gardening training and to volunteer a minimum of six hours per year to maintain shared plots and facilities (Figure 1) (인천도시농업네트워크 2023).

Gardeners are engaged in various forms of community gardening (e.g. 똑딱이 공방, 극지농부, 어울림공동체 초록별친구들, 토종종자 공동체 씨앗 이음). They also participate in food sharing (비빔밥 데이), different clubs (e.g. 글로벌 가든, 아이돌 아름다운 이음텃밭의 돌담쌓기 모임, 허브가든, 호박사 호박을 심는 사람들), children education (e.g. 어린이텃밭), cultural activities and art projects (e.g. 이음리 이야기마당, 이음텃밭 야외 영화제, 이음리의 야단법석). Some of them are engaged in environmental and social activism and advocacy. A portion of the produce is donated to local social welfare organisations and charities, thereby expanding social outreach of the garden. The garden also offers guided visits for schools, experts, and policy makers from Korea and

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<sup>2</sup> For details see: <https://www.dosinong.net/>

abroad. Moreover, the Incheon Urban Agriculture Network is an active member of local, national, and international networks of civil society organisations. Concurrently, they maintain collaboration with the City of Incheon, which provides financial and organisational support for the *Ieum garden* (인천도시농업네트워크 2023).



<Figure 1> Ieum garden in Incheon, South Korea  
Source: Blaž Križnik, 2022

### 3.2 Ljubljana: Onkraj gradbišča community garden

The *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* was established in 2010 as a result of a collaboration between the *Obrat cultural and art association* (KUD Obrat) and the Bunker Institute.<sup>3</sup> The garden was initially created as a temporary project on an idle construction site in the centre of Ljubljana along Resljeva Street (Jurman and Lovšin 2021). Nevertheless, following the City of Ljubljana's decision to extend the lease of the land, the number of gardeners and other participants increased from a few dozen to up to a hundred per year. This indicates the growing popularity of urban gardening in the city. There used to be about 40 individual and communal plots (Table 2). The garden was permanently closed in 2022, following the decision of the City of Ljubljana to construct a social housing on the site.

The garden was inspired by similar cases abroad. In addition, the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* responded to the specific requests of gardeners for an accessible green space in the neighbourhood. With their help, KUD Obrat built a garden that provided access to healthy food, improved the local environment, and had a significant impact on community capacity building. Urban gardening eventually not only brought participants together to share their interest in producing food, but also strengthened social relationships, trust, and communication among them (Figure 2). They became engaged in the management of individual and communal plots, organisation of cultural festivals and art projects (e.g. *Mladi levi*, *Načrt s kozo*, *Ulični festival Onkraj*, *Vsakogaršnja zemlja*), childcare, and educational activities (e.g. gardening and permaculture workshops, *Naredi svoj vrt*, *Na divje*). Along with the urban gardening activists and experts, some gardeners participated in environmental and social activism and advocacy (e.g. *Kaj pa mestni vrtički?*, *Za skupno mizo*, *Onkraj v gibanju*) (Jurman and Lovšin 2021).

<sup>3</sup> For details see: <http://www.obrat.org/> and <https://www.bunker.si/>

These activities also helped connecting the garden with the neighbourhood. Moreover, they affected the social outreach of the garden through collaboration with similar urban gardens and community initiatives in Slovenia and abroad. KUD Obrat joined the *Network for Space* (Mreža za prostor), a national network of community initiatives and civil society organisations in the field of sustainable spatial planning. They coordinated the network's temporary land use working group and participated in various workshops and consultations (Križnik and Cerar 2021; Poljak Istenič 2018). The collaboration with the City of Ljubljana, however, proved less successful although the gardeners were aware of its importance for the sustainability of the garden. The City of Ljubljana showed a lack of interest in more comprehensive supporting policy and collaboration, despite leasing the land for the garden at no cost (Mittermaier 2023).



<Figure 2> Onkraj gradbišča community garden in Ljubljana, Slovenia  
Source: KUD Obrat, 2011

#### 4. Comparison: social importance of *Ieum* and Onkraj gradbišča

This section compares the *Ieum* garden and the *Onkraj gradbišča* community garden to gain a better understanding of urban gardening as neighbourhood collective action and its social importance in Incheon and Ljubljana. The *Ieum* garden in Incheon is considerably larger, comprising ten times more plots and offering better facilities than the *Onkraj gradbišča* community garden in Ljubljana (Table 2). Consequently, the former has attracted a significantly larger number of gardeners to date, which may suggest that the two gardens have a rather different social importance. The difference appears to be related not only to the number of available plots in each garden, but also to the supporting policy of public institutions. While the City of Ljubljana provided the land for the garden for a period of twelve years, it offered no other formal support (Mittermaier 2023). In contrast, the City of Incheon not only provides the land, but also continues to offer financial and organisational support (인천도시농업네트워크 2023). Whereas the *Ieum* garden is an ongoing project, the *Onkraj gradbišča* community garden was permanently closed two years ago.

While every place is expected to be different in one way or another, Nijman (2007) posits that comparative urbanism should focus on understanding similarities rather than differences between otherwise separate and distant places. In the case of the *Ieum* garden and the *Onkraj gradbišča* community garden, there are several important similarities despite their different historical, social, urban, and institutional contexts.

Urban gardening activists and experts in Incheon and Ljubljana established temporary urban gardens on idle construction sites. From the outset, the Incheon Urban Agriculture Network and KUD Obrat aimed to create a place that would facilitate cultivation of crops and community. Nettle (2016) argues that such community gardens represent distinct forms of neighbourhood collective action, often following similar aims and activities, and resulting in similar outcomes. In the *Ieum garden* and the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden*, neighbourhood collective action included producing and sharing food, management of the gardens, volunteering, education of children, participation in community workshops, cultural events, and discussions, and even engagement in environmental and social activism (Table 2). Community gardening not only provided access to healthy food and leisure space and improved the living environment, but also strengthened social relationships, trust, and shared identities among gardeners, which contributed to community capacity building (인천도시농업네트워크 2021; Jurman and Lovšin 2021).

	Ieum garden	Onkraj gradbišča community garden
Location	Idle construction site on Songdo-dong 28-1, Songdo International City, Incheon	Idle construction site on Resljeva Street 32-34, Ljubljana
Years active	2021 - on going	2010 - 2022
Size	14.950 m <sup>2</sup>	980 m <sup>2</sup>
Plots	355 (in 2024)	About 40
Actors	Incheon Urban Agriculture Network, gardeners, City of Incheon	KUD Obrat Cultural and Art Association, gardeners, City of Ljubljana
Communal practices	Gardening, food sharing, workshops, children education, cultural events, discussions, volunteering, guided tours, social activism	Gardening, food sharing, workshops, children education, cultural events arts, discussions, volunteering, flea markets, social activism
Social importance	Access to healthy food, provision of green leisure space, improvement of living environment, children playground, education and social learning, strengthening of social relations, community capacity building, active citizenship	

<Table 2> Comparison of the Ieum garden and the Onkraj gradbišča community garden

Moreover, the two cases demonstrate that community gardening in Incheon and Ljubljana has had an impact on the surrounding neighbourhoods and city, largely due to the activism of the Incheon Urban Agriculture Network and KUD Obrat. Both were instrumental in the management of their respective gardens, and in fostering formal and informal collaboration between gardeners, activists, experts, and public institutions (인천도시농업네트워크 2021; Poljak Istenič 2018). This corroborates the findings of previous studies that have identified the social importance of community gardening in facilitating networking and coalition building between civil society organisations, as well as between citizens, communities, civil society, and public institutions (Križnik and Cerar 2021; Hou 2020; Bonow and Normark 2018; Nettle 2016; 이재열 2016). Such collaboration is regarded

crucial in the pursuit of inclusive and participatory governance, which can strengthen long-term resilience of neighbourhoods and cities (Cho, Križnik and Hou 2022; Schreuder and Horlings 2022).

## 5. Conclusion

This study compares the *Ieum garden* and the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* to gain a better understanding of urban gardening and its social importance in Korea and Slovenia. However, the two community gardens are not representative of the entirety of both countries, where the majority of urban gardening still takes place on individual gardening plots or in public allotments that have little to do with neighbourhood collective action. Instead, the two gardens are important because they exemplify a limited number of successful community gardening cases in Korea and Slovenia. Such exemplary practices permit the exploration of the social importance, challenges, and transformative potential of urban gardening as a form of neighbourhood collective action for building resilient neighbourhoods and cities.

In the *Ieum garden* and the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden*, gardeners not only grew food but also engaged in various communal practices that strengthened social relationships, shared identities, community capacity building, coalition building, and collaboration between different actors. This was made possible in large part by the engagement of the Incheon Urban Agriculture Network and KUD Obrat. Their similar role in enabling and sustaining neighbourhood collective action seems to explain the similarities between the two gardens in terms of social importance. However, in comparison to the *Ieum garden*, the institutional support for the *Onkraj gradbišča community garden* was relatively limited. Consequently, the social outreach of the latter was comparatively limited too, thereby underscoring the importance of supporting public policies to sustain neighbourhood collective action in cities.

Future research on urban gardening should continue to explore it as a form of prefigurative collective action and identify existing community gardening practices, their actors and meanings, social benefits as well as supporting public policies in Korea and Slovenia that could contribute to transformative social change in both countries in the future. At the same time, such research would broaden the social relevance of Korean studies beyond the boundaries of the discipline itself.

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