



FLOWER POWER

REGENERATION OF AN URBAN PARK IN HELSINKI

Inka Kaakinen
Michail Galanakis

THE SITE

Kallio: a bohemian neighbourhood in central Helsinki characterized by relatively affordable housing, small flats and small households, strong working-class roots but an increasingly creative-class present, and a somewhat shady reputation that has remained unchanged since the early days of its existence, in the beginning of the 20th century.



Figure 1. A view to Kallio neighbourhood in 1911.

Karhupuisto – the Bear Park: a triangle-shaped park bounded by 5 to 7 floor high buildings, most with high architectural value, and small stone base shops. In the immediate vicinity of the park there are several municipal services, and in the park itself two kiosks: the Bear Park café, open in summer season, plus a stall selling nocturnal snacks all year round. Tram and bus stops add to the movement on the square, but the busier streets crossing the zone remain some 400 metres away, and the closest metro stations are at double the distance.



Figure 2. Godmothers watering the flowerbed. The flowerbed serves as means of taming the space, of domesticating the surroundings, of turning the park into a livingroom.

THE PROJECT

The Bear Park had, by the mid-1990s, achieved a steadfast fame as the gritty, inhospitable, seedy centre of the Kallio neighbourhood, when a group of senior citizens living in its vicinity decided to make it flourish, in 1996.

The idea came top-down: the city of Helsinki had previously launched a program “Parks to livingrooms” (under the WHO European Healthy Cities program), but it was the local residents – elderly women who named themselves the godmothers of the park – that seized the proposal, got organized and made it work.

With the strategic support of the police and the municipality, and by means of planting and nurturing a voluminous flowerbed, these “godmothers” did change the nature of the park in less than a decade.

The actors and the distribution of work:

The park division of the city engineer’s office provides the seedlings, coordinates the planting session, cuts the lawn during the growing season and collects the waste

The local police backs up the project by keeping close contacts with the godmothers and by attending their daily gatherings, at 4 p.m., when possible

The godmothers commit themselves to water the plants, rake the pathways, keep the park clean, and immediately report to the police “any acts of vandalism, common nuisance or mischief or [the presence of] intoxicated persons”

In the initial stage of the project, using the park actively, overseeing its condition, simply *being present*, was godmothers’ way of claiming it back from alcoholics that had been the most diligent park-users until then – a seemingly soft but stubborn strategy the godmothers still successfully apply. “We just sat there, on the benches, occupying the space”, one godmother explains the eventual expulsion of the undesired.

THE RESULTS

The Bear Park has become an oasis for a rich mixture of people: the elderly, the students, the gay community. It has been widely promoted in the press and its image has upgraded significantly, a process reflected in its uses as well as in the prices of the surrounding housing stock. Most importantly, the project has opened up



new spaces of participation for elderly citizens, who are now a visible part of “the public”.

Figure 3. The project seems to have successfully tackled the challenge of social isolation for the elderly.

The fact that the project was nominated as Finland’s candidate for European crime prevention award in 2002, in turn, tells how its effects have been commonly, and perhaps equivocally, interpreted through the broken windows -theory. Whereas minor incidents of mischief have decreased, there is no data available concerning the crime rates in and around the park before the project started. In other words, the sense of place (seedy) and the kind of public using it (alcoholics) has been unproblematically translated into high crime levels that, as the idea goes, would have decreased since the project started.



The municipality has embraced the Bear Park project as a showcase of participatory management of the city’s public spaces. The repeatability of the project is provably difficult, though, was it for the lack of voluntary citizens or different characteristics of the sites.