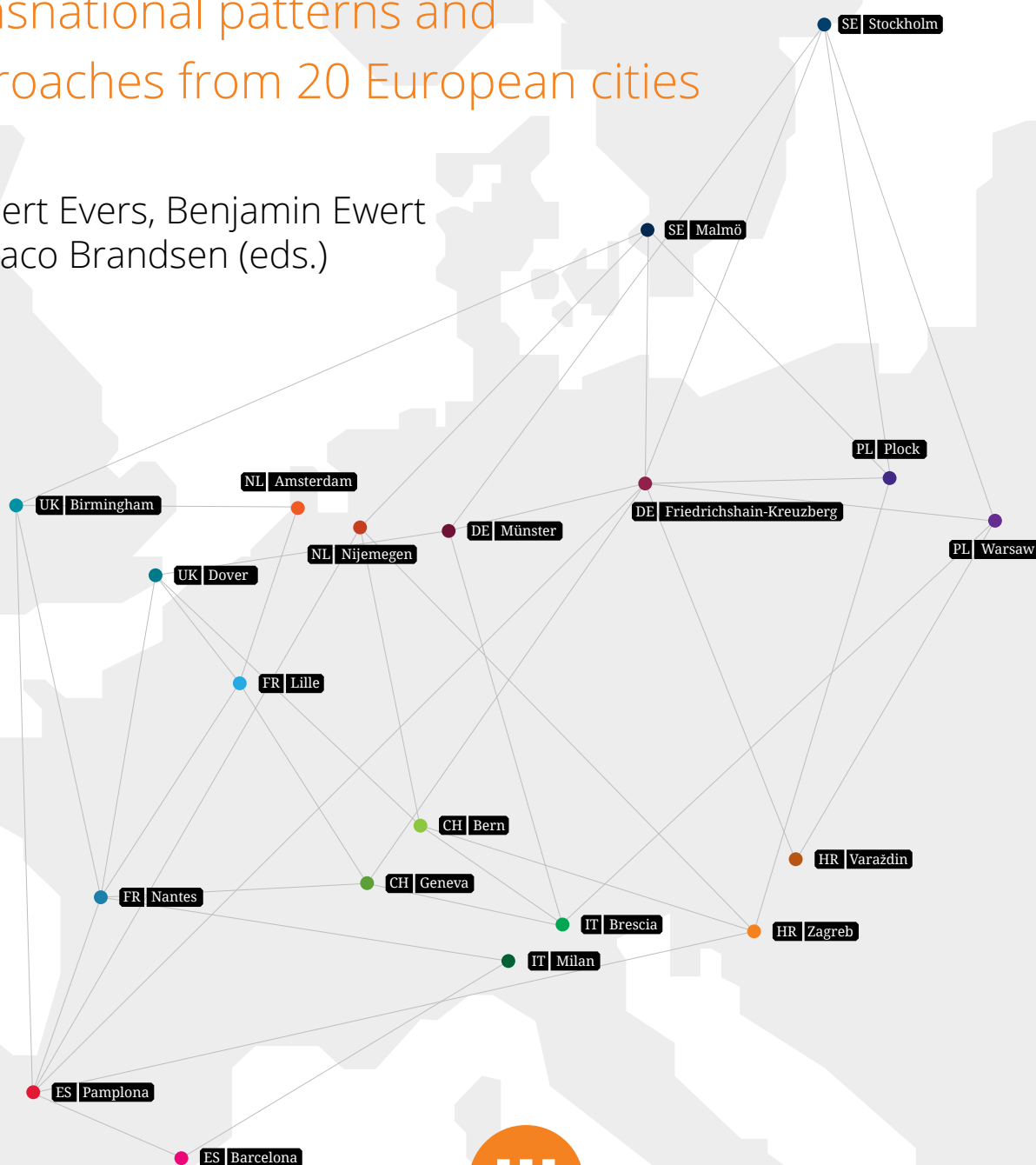


# SOCIAL INNOVATIONS FOR SOCIAL COHESION

Transnational patterns and approaches from 20 European cities

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**WILCO**

Welfare innovations  
at the local level  
in favour of cohesion

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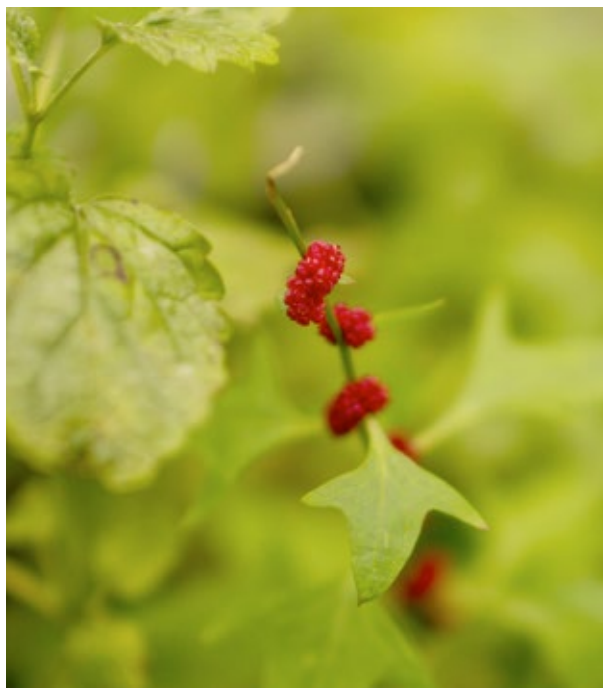
## Princesses Gardens

### 17.1. Short description

The so-called Princesses Gardens in Kreuzberg offer a complex project that attempts to change people's mind sets on a broader scale than most of the pragmatic solutions in the realm of welfare. As a part of the international urban gardening movement, the highly attractive project pursues an alternative approach how to use urban space ecologically and sustainably. Without having concrete short-term goals (such as lowering unemployment among youngsters or caring for certain people in need), Princesses Gardens' activists make a difference on the symbolic level. By creating a huge urban garden area on former wasteland in the centre of the district, the project demonstrates that cooperation and common learning among a heterogeneous urban citizenry is possible. Since July 2009, the Princesses Gardens community accomplished, for example the farming of agriculture crops, the building of greenhouses and the creating of flowerbeds. According to this approach, raising public concern, attention and deliberation is of key importance. Therefore, Princesses Gardens, despite its superficial emphasis on manual labour in the urban locality, also succeed in building bridges to major global discourses such as climate change and sustainability. Hence, participants become strengthened in practical terms by making their neighbourhood a greener place to live in and as citizens who claim a say in the usage of their urban environment. From a social policy perspective, the project contributes to (local) measures of vocational training: the activists attempt to develop new job profiles in cooperation with employers in the fields of gardening and farming.

### 17.2. Conceptions and ways of addressing users

According to Robert Shaw, manager of the Princesses Gardens, the project aims to provide informal education of people through empowerment. Looking at Princesses Gardens' relationship to users in practice, though, value-loaded terms as "empowerment" or "education" are slightly misleading. Instead of building a movement of urban gardeners, the project pursues a rather soft approach. Residents' interest in questions of ecology and sustainability should be attracted while engaging in more pleasant activities such as visiting the garden café or chatting with gardeners. Princesses Gardens are a green recreational oasis where "visitors" should come in contact with each other easily. Characterised by a hustle and bustle of activities, however, they are a classic hands-on project in need of volunteers. Therefore, the "hard core" of the project team, consisting of nine employed workers, continuously involves visitors in small-sized manual activities such as watering plants or sowing seeds. With the help of those "feeding" strategies and the wish of many visitors' to contribute to the garden in one way or another, an extended group of around 70 urban gardeners emerged. "These are the people who take responsibility for the



garden”, says Mr Shaw, describing his own task as “bringing different people together”. For Mr Shaw and his team it is the art of matching volunteers that guarantees success. Therefore, they combine volunteer’s different strengths and assets in order to facilitate a situation of mutual learning. In practice, work groups that consist of unequal team mates such as an older Russian woman with a lot of gardening experience, an ecologically interested unemployed hippie and a designer are not an exception but the rule. “Ideally, the old Russian woman learns German, the hippie a more structured way of working and the designer some basics about gardening, while they all create, more or less as a side effect, a vertical plant-bed”, states Mr Shaw. Such an approach of “common learning without a teacher” requires intrinsic motivation and pleasure from volunteers, something that Princesses Gardens evoke by providing a relaxing and stimulating environment. Additionally, the project offers a range of practical learning events for kindergartens, schools and universities to teach practical knowledge of seeding and growing plants. Thereby, international discourses on ecological food and healthy lifestyles become easily combined with various do-it-yourself activities such as harvesting different kinds of potatoes and using them for cooking meals.

### 17.3. Internal organisation and modes of working

The idea of the Princesses Gardens goes back to Robert Shaw and Marco Clausen, today’s managers of the project. As self-declared “non-experts” in the field of gardening, the founding fathers of the project cultivated an approach of cooperation, unconventional action and continuous learning. Shaw and Clausen did a lot of lobbying in the district for their idea, which they had presented in a detailed business plan. They finally got the opportunity to lease an unused 6,000 m<sup>2</sup> area in the middle of Kreuzberg. Until today, three key convictions have been driving Princesses Gardens: first, the garden should be a “vehicle for social processes” (ibid.); second, activists should develop an experiment-friendly do-it-yourself-mentality; third, the garden should be a non-profit project. According to these guiding principles, modes of internal organisation and working have been developed. Backed by Nomadisch Grün, a non-profit limited liability company, Princesses Gardens have emerged through a number of consecutive projects involving up to 2,500 volunteers per year since June 2009.

In retrospect, it is the project’s finely tuned balance between hands-on activities, educational and cultural events in cooperation with local partners that turned

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Princesses Gardens into a Berlin-wide innovation. In addition to the step-by-step expansion of the garden (up to more than 400 beds and a potato field), the project team successfully spread the concept of urban gardening to the local public and beyond through workshops such as “Urban farming and local empowerment”. Princesses Gardens’ mixed structure of activities is also owed to its organisational form: as a non-profit-organisation, Nomadisch Grün is obliged to invest 51 per cent of its resources into public education and nature protection, while 49 per cent may go to business activities such as the garden café or the selling of vegetables. Since recently, Princesses Gardens’ employees have been offering their skills to schools, companies and public institutions interested in courses about urban gardening or actions to green-up their premises. All in all: the whole endeavour is a good example for a social enterprise in practice.

### 17.4. Interaction with the local welfare system

After 3 years of existence, Princesses Gardens have become “everybody’s darling” in Friedrichshain-Kreuzberg. The project managers succeeded in cultivating the image of a “hip location” where a cosmopolitan Berlin-feeling, a good degree of non-conformism and common ecological learning come together. Hence, cooperation and joint ventures with Princesses Gar-

dens, e.g. cooking workshops for school classes, are much requested. Moreover, the project gains much attention from local politics and authorities. Before local elections in November 2011 major politicians visited the location, praising its contribution to the liveability and social coherence of the district. However, social-cultural acknowledgment did not pay off in terms of real material support. So far, the lease with the local property fund (Liegenschaftsfond) is limited to 5 years. An extension of the contract is uncertain, due to the fund’s interest to sell the lucrative area most profitable – a common practice in the face of Berlin’s enormous public debts. Currently, a local campaign called “Let it grow!” gathers signatures for the maintenance of the garden. Activists, mostly stemming from the wider community of Princesses Gardens, argue that the project has a “pilot character” for innovative urban development policy, and demand a public debate on who owns public space and how it should be used best. In this vein, Princesses Gardens have a strong implicit impact on local politics: they put an issue on the political agenda that was neglected by the mantra of budget consolidation. Mr Shaw’s expectations concerning local authorities’ commitment to support Princesses Gardens’ future are low, however: “I am realistic enough for not claiming money. I only ask for a long-term perspective for projects like ours that are exploited by the city council in terms of city marketing but neglected in practice.”