

Learning from Klara:

A Prototype for Collective Living at the Edge of the City

Zagreb (HR)

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A Story of Every Day

Klara is often seen as an unplanned, substandard, and fragmented fringe of the city. Marked by informal structures, fenced-off homes, and scattered agricultural plots, it appears to lack both order and civic presence. Infrastructure is limited, public facilities are sparse, and traffic clogs the narrow streets, especially in the early hours. The only truly public element is the thin ribbon of road that winds its way through, somehow stitching the neighbourhood together. Klara feels improvised: car repair shops, hair salons, and other businesses pop up in ground floors wherever possible (fig.1). Public and private investments appear sporadically, without coherence or plan. It would be fair to say that Klara is chaotic – but that's only the surface.

What might look like randomness could also be considered a carefully negotiated coexistence of people, animals, plants, and everyday routines. Known locally as “Mala Bosna,” the neighborhood is home to a close-knit community shaped by multigenerational living and traditional habits. While residents are deeply private and protective of their homes, life often spills into the street. Gardens grow wild at the edges, chickens cluck behind fences (fig.2), and small businesses operate from porches, garages, and ground floors. Privacy and publicity are not clearly separated but coexist in a subtle, negotiated way.¹ The spatial logic is improvised, but it works. Homes are extended, repurposed, or adapted over time. Materials like bare brick or exposed concrete are not unfinished mistakes (fig.3), but honest expressions of a place that is constantly evolving. Architecture here is not static; it responds to needs, routines, and daily life. It is shaped less by plans than by patience, resourcefulness, and lived experience.² What might appear as disorder holds lessons for a different kind of urbanism – one rooted in use, care, and coexistence.

Klara challenges conventional planning logic. It echoes a broader shift in architecture and urbanism: a return to the village, to slowness, to mixed uses, to spatial openness. In many ways, Klara already contains the qualities we now strive for in new developments: adaptability, coexistence, and resourcefulness, all emerging without the guidance of a formal plan.³ These values are sustained not through top-down design, but through tacit knowledge passed between generations, and a kind of circular thinking where materials, spaces, and relationships are continuously reused, reimagined, and renewed. Much like Learning from Las Vegas asked us to take the ordinary seriously, Learning from Klara becomes a way to recognize the intelligence embedded in informal environments.⁴ Klara may not be polished, but it is deeply lived-in. It resists simplification, and in that resistance, reveals its value. As contemporary architectural discourse turns toward flexibility, participation, ecological awareness, and the unfinished as a space of potential, Klara stands as a raw, ongoing example of these very ideals.⁵



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¹ Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Random House, 1961).

² Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

³ Stan Allen, *Points + Lines: Diagrams and Projects for the City* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999).

⁴ Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1972).

⁵ Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014).

Ecology of Publicness Reframing the Suburban Condition

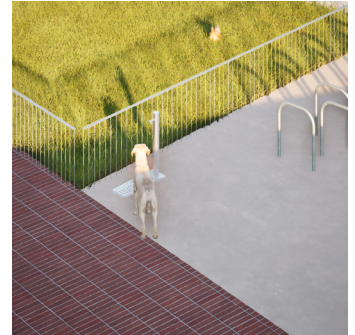
Our project proposes a different model of living – one that listens before it draws. Instead of projecting a new identity onto Klara, we begin by reading the existing conditions. Sveta Klara as a place of thresholds: between urban and rural, improvisation and absence, not fully Zagreb nor truly separate from it; it lives in the in-between. Its organic, often informal development has left it fragmented, without civic infrastructure, without public space, without the symbolic architecture of common life. And yet, life persists. It spills across fences and thresholds in the form of gardens, sheds, animals, car repairs, meals under porches. What appears chaotic is in fact a lived intelligence...⁶

In response, we propose layers of publicness that work across domains of collective, self, nature, and infrastructure. Rather than a fixed plan, we introduce a multiscalar and adaptive spatial ecology. It is made of systems, networks, surfaces, lines, and points. Like any ecology, it allows for change, coexistence, and uneven rhythms. Publicness is not added as a program, but as a possibility: unfolding through small gestures (a bench, a bus shelter, a game table) as well as larger interventions (healthcare center, bike paths, green corridors). We draw from Pier Vittorio Aureli's reminder that urban form is never neutral.⁷ Architecture here becomes a political act – resisting atomization, reclaiming space as a site for the polis, for coexistence, for everyday dignity.

Our proposal is not a masterplan but a toolbox (seed bank). It introduces essential civic functions, offers a strong yet open spatial framework, and leaves room for life to take hold. We recognize that long-term change in places like Sveta Klara cannot be imposed, it must be grown. With time. With patience. And with care. The design supports gradual transformation: enabling public life without prescribing it, embracing what already works, and enhancing it with infrastructure, generosity, and architectural attention. We aim not to overwrite Klara, but to reflect it, more clearly, more collectively, and with a belief that even the most modest spaces can become stages for a shared future.

Spaces for Many

Klara Nova reimagines suburban living through a soft yet intentional choreography of public and private life. At its heart lies a central public spine – a gently winding path that links a future public park on the west side with a recreational sports area on the east, weaving through residential clusters along the way. This spine is more than circulation; it is a stage for daily life. Whenever it touches a housing cluster, its edges are activated with public programs in the ground floors: small shops, bakeries, doctors office, cafés, floral studio, or spaces for community use. Along the path, there are pavilions and shelters that offer spaces for resting, celebrating, or gathering. These structures reflect the ritualistic character of neighborhoods like Klara, where moments of togetherness often spill outdoors and blur the line between private and collective space.⁸



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⁶Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁷Pier Vittorio Aureli, *The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011).

⁸Lacaton & Vassal, "Freedom of Use," in *El Croquis*, No. 139 (2008): 24–41.

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We work with two components: the house and the non-house. One provides shelter, the other invites interaction. The residential areas are organized as clusters of three to five buildings, offering a spatial rhythm that avoids repetition while encouraging small-scale community. Two building types: freestanding and semi-detached, allow for flexibility in density and orientation. Each cluster is connected by a modest access road, but their heart lies in shared outdoor life where children laugh on the playground, neighbours gather around a long communal table, games unfold beneath the trees, and stories rise with the smoke from the open fire pit. Private fruits and vegetable gardens at ground level, balconies filled with flowers above, and peripheral shared sheds for tools and gardening support both autonomy and gentle cooperation. What it was once overlooked as cheap or incomplete – sheds, added staircases, brick walls, semi-outdoor porches – we now recognize as spatial intelligence.⁹ These aren't design errors; they are systems of survival, care, and domestic joy. They generate flexibility, allow for multiple lives in one home, and anchor family rituals.

Architecture for Every Day

The apartments are designed as modular systems, adaptable in layout, expandable over time, and rooted in a structural logic that prioritizes flexibility. Built from cross-laminated timber (CLT), they offer a sustainable, low-carbon alternative to conventional construction, with the added warmth and tactility of wood. Each unit is anchored by a compact core with the kitchen, bathroom, and utilities; around which living spaces unfold with freedom and clarity. This core remains constant, while the rest of the apartment can grow, shrink, or shift in response to changing needs. Units range in size, from studios to four-room homes, making room for diverse ways of living: from single households to multigenerational families, from young couples to older residents who may garden, keep animals, or simply sit in the sun. Pets, chickens, shared meals, hanging laundry, or a shaded bench outside the door...

In Klara Nova, these rituals are not afterthoughts, but starting points. We take them seriously as spatial cues that reveal how people truly live and adapt. In response, we embrace vernacular forms and material logic of simple finishes, additive construction, outdoor extensions; and reflect them back in a more legible, durable, and dignified way.



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⁹ Leopold Lambert, *The Funambulist: Political Geographies of Architecture and Bodies* (Paris: The Funambulist Press, 2015).