

Zagreb (HR)

Where the Wildflowers Grow



A photograph from the project site, May 2025

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Prologue: time and terrain

Urban and architectural projects respond to both time and terrain: the temporal context of a project is as important as the spatial one. Our present moment is shaped by two intersecting urgencies: a planetary and a localised one.

At the global scale, the climate crisis demands new spatial and social models of inhabitation, with cities becoming resilient ecosystems of objects, processes and flows. At the local scale, not unlike the rest of the EU, Croatia is facing an increasingly complex array of housing issues. Rent and real estate prices are escalating, and with no clear national spatial standards for housing developments, new construction is too often reduced to a market product – efficient only in numbers. An apartment that is both affordable and good – spacious and sunny enough, with a garden or a balcony, in a decent building and neighbourhood – has become a rare find. And yet, we firmly believe that in the 21st century neither a high-quality home nor access to green, open spaces should be luxuries or utopian ideals. They should be fundamental urban rights.

As Croatia's most developed and populous city, Zagreb holds the potential to set a new standard for affordable housing. This should be approached in a multi-scalar way and comprise guidelines for neighbourhood, building and apartment design. Rather than just singular architectural gestures, the city needs a comprehensive model for producing affordable, high-quality public housing that responds to today's realities and can be adapted to other sites with similar parameters. Klara offers a testing ground for such a model.

I. Reflection site: friction on the fringe

There's friction on the urban fringe: in Klara, problems and potential collide. A fragmentary urban (dis)order, inadequate traffic and social infrastructure, and a scarcity in green and recreational space are met with a quietly appealing proximity to nature, patches of unbuilt land (covered in wildflowers, here and there), and a looseness of form that allows for freedom, informality, and new spatial arrangements. Not yet fully urban, but not entirely rural either – it is precisely that in-between state that sparks interest and opportunity. Therefore, rather than taking a tabula rasa approach, we begin with what is already there. The aim is not to impose a radically new urban

order by erasure or overwriting, but to regulate the existing one, harvesting intelligence from its failures and flaws.

The first domain we re-source knowledge from is Novi Zagreb, the vast post-war expansion south of the Sava. It, too, was conceived as a response to a housing crisis and massive societal shifts. With generous open spaces and sensible building layouts, it is now seen as an urban planning success. But for years, it remained a dormitory: housing came first, while social infrastructure lagged behind. The lesson is clear – merely multiplying homes does not automatically generate a neighbourhood. The second domain for re-sourcing is Klara itself. Its informal edges, everyday habits and semi-rural customs offer a slower, quieter kind of urban intelligence. A place of fairs and exchanges, gardens and neighbourly proximity, Klara still carries traces of the Turopolje landscape it once belonged to. We observe these values, rooted in care, cooperation and the seasonal rhythm of cultivation. Our third re-source domain is nature. Not as an aesthetically pleasing backdrop to urban life, but as a resilient system of relationships. At the edge of the city, where control loosens, nature asserts itself: wildflowers, grasses, birds, pollinators, water... If supported rather than suppressed, these living systems can form the basis of a different, less anthropocentric kind of urbanism.

On the scale of the reflection site, this intelligence is used to regulate Klara's most urgent urban issues: lack of greenery, access to amenities and poor urban connectivity. These are our propositions:

(1) Green pockets: regulating micro-climate

A network of small-scale green interventions – pocket parks, tree planting and soft landscaping – is proposed across the reflection site. These micro-insertions fit into leftover or underused plots, requiring minimal or no demolition while offering considerable spatial and climatic benefits, green breathing space in an overbuilt area. In addition to mitigating urban heat islands, they serve as meeting points: small social condensers, equipped with minimal shared amenities such as outdoor grills, communal tool sheds or smokehouses. By providing collective value and shared utility, these interventions encourage a shift from a purely individual use of space toward semi-collective models. Residents may gradually be inspired to remove redundant auxiliary structures on private plots, as their functions become absorbed into a more communal urban fabric.

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(2) New connections: improving urban mobility and generating interactions

Klara must become a node in a broader, sustainable mobility network. A new bus loop connects rail stops and key tram stations such as Savski most and Vatikanska, with timed transfers and priority routing during peak hours. Cycling is strongly encouraged: small-scale bike & ride hubs are installed on key nodes, enabling a smooth switch between bikes and public transport. Internally, movement is based on daily-distance urbanism: all basic needs should be accessible within 15 minutes on foot or by bike. Alongside mobility, the new social infrastructure supports everyday life. In and around the project site, several new programs are introduced – a kindergarten, a market, sports and recreational grounds, and a network of green public spaces. But the broader area still lacks key services, such as a health centre. Where permanent buildings are not yet feasible, temporary and hybrid models can fill the gap: modular extensions to existing facilities, pop-up services, or community-run initiatives. Together, these spatial and social connections foster a more complete and inclusive neighbourhood fabric.

(3) Rethinking the rural: cultivating the contemporary landscape

Klara is not just located at the edge of the city, but also at the edge of the fields of Turopolje. Here, therefore, urban regeneration must be matched by a new way of thinking about the rural. Can this agricultural land be reframed as productive, ecologically valuable space – not just an undeveloped terrain vague? We explore new practices and patterns: re-parcellation, pixel farming, targeted crop planting and biodiversity enhancement. Wildflower meadows, rotational fields and pollinator-friendly zones become part of a renewed rural ecology. This is not about nostalgic return to traditional farming, but about designing a future-oriented, multifunctional landscape.

II. Project site: everyday Eden

Our moment is also shaped by the shifting dynamics of community and connection. We live in an age of hyper-individualism, and yet people still long for proximity, support and shared experience. We do not seek to address this by reviving past and nostalgic notions of collectivism, but by

recognising how we gather, relate and care for one another today. Whether this happens live or online, it still needs well-designed spaces.

Equally present in our contemporary narrative is the rediscovered significance of nature. In the climate crisis context, urban greenery plays a critical ecological role, mitigating environmental harm and supporting biodiversity. Moreover, in our post-pandemic era, the notion of the garden, once central to everyday life, has reclaimed its reputation as a vital space for balance and wellbeing. The garden, therefore, is no longer a luxury – it is both a planetary and personal necessity.

In our proposal, therefore, these two parallel themes – community and nature – are developed across three scales: the neighbourhood, the building and the apartment.

(1) The neighbourhood: a framework for spatial and social sustainability

The placement and morphology of built structures respond sensitively to the site's various border conditions, with different levels of permeability: opening where green continuity is needed (towards the northwestern fields, as well as diagonally connecting the Z and R zones) and shielding where protection is required (towards the southeastern road). At the central, slightly elevated zone of the neighbourhood, an informal public acropolis serves as a focal and gathering point, with a farmer's market, urban garden and communal hub. Within this hub stands a small tower with three studio apartments, intended primarily for temporary stays – such as visiting artists exhibiting in the city or other urban guests placed there by municipal programs – and occasionally for members of vulnerable groups in need of short-term accommodation. Various informal public spaces, children's playgrounds and dog-friendly zones are scattered throughout the neighbourhood, encouraging organic patterns of movement. The vehicular network is deliberately minimal, supporting a slow and walkable atmosphere: a single main road is planned, with local access roads and emergency routes embedded as needed. Ecological sustainability is supported through green networks, water retention, solar roofs, urban farming, circular systems and habitats for bees and birds. Economic sustainability is embedded in the model of affordable public housing, beneficial not only for residents, but for the city at large. Social sustainability is created through layered amenities and spaces for organic community building. When people feel good in a place, they take care of it.

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(2) The building: a mediator between private life and shared space

The neighbourhood is composed of three residential building types (A, B, C), each with distinct morphological and typological qualities. Yet all share the same foundational logic: generous outdoor spaces, a careful balance between individual and collective needs, and the idea that buildings not only serve their residents but give something back to community and city. Private outdoor spaces – gardens, balconies, terraces – are designed as extensions of the living space. Most apartments have direct entrances, offering a hybrid between collective housing and the spatial intimacy of single-family homes.

Type A defines clear edges – its horizontal, linear wall shields the neighbourhood from the adjacent Sisačka road. The buildings are semi-detached, opening up on the inside to private gardens that may host a variety of communal events (barbecues, parties, small open-air cinema projections etc.). Between the protective street-facing façade and the soft, green domestic core, a gradient of thresholds is created: from public, to shared, to private. A series of storefront-like openings along the street façade, facing the central acropolis, accommodates amenities shared not only by residents of the building, but with the wider neighbourhood as well.

Type B is more compact and freestanding, creating micro-neighbourhoods in dialogue with Type C. To make it softer in appearance, its recessed top floor is clad in metal and dematerialized. Its orientation follows the northwestern agricultural fields, offering open views towards the landscape and Sljeme in the distance. Like in Type A, apartment access is either direct or via open-air galleries, maintaining a sense of privacy and individuality while supporting occasional encounters.

Type C is the most open and playful in form. Its volumes – connected by external galleries – shift, rise and hover, creating covered outdoor spaces, elevated terraces, and a greater diversity of spatial experiences. This type introduces missing typologies to the Zagreb housing market (e.g. duplex apartments), responding to contemporary needs. The type comes in several variations: some of them host communal

programmes at ground level (the 5 small public functions punctuating the neighbourhood), while others are partially lifted to allow for better permeability and visual continuity across the site.

(3) The apartment: a flexible space for living, working, belonging

The design of the apartments aims to strike a balance between spatial generosity and efficiency, work and leisure spaces, domestic privacy and collectivity. All units include generous outdoor extensions: balconies, terraces or gardens. Work-from-home conditions are considered a standard: each apartment includes at least one or two distinct work environments, allowing for parallel use by multiple household members. Linear service zones (bathrooms, kitchens, storage) are clustered along access paths and outer walls, enabling natural ventilation, increasing privacy and improving spatial efficiency. Residents who wish to optimise their private living area are invited to outsource certain domestic functions (laundry, food preservation, sports equipment, storage etc.) into the shared building spaces. This optional redistribution of functions enables smaller apartments to feel more spacious, while promoting a soft form of collective life. Environmental comfort is equally prioritized: all apartments are well-oriented and naturally ventilated, with cross-breezes, shading devices, and appropriate insulation to reduce the need for mechanical heating and cooling.

All these spatial and social strategies at the levels of the neighbourhood, building and apartments converge into a liveable whole – rooted in place, yet open to change. A gentle ecology is planted in the urban fringe: an everyday Eden.

Epilogue: where the wildflowers grow

Where the edge is no longer a margin, but a starting point. Mistakes transform into knowledge, and regulation grows from care. Housing is more than square meters: it becomes a framework for living well – sometimes together, sometimes apart. The collective is not imposed, but gently invited. Freedom takes root, where the wildflowers grow.