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Reconfiguring Urban Green - Negotiations between Green Structure and Urbanism in Helsinki

Introduction

The interdependency between green and urban structure constitutes the cornerstones of a sustainable community. Urban densification and aspirations for infill development are, however, reshaping this equilibrium and setting new criteria for sustainability. Urbanisation and climate change are challenging the position of green areas in city planning and subjecting them to new expectations. Global ecological arguments for densification are contradicting with local environmental values of green areas. Although green structure and its multiple benefits are widely recognized, its role is concurrently redefined and contested to fulfil the requirements of urbanism (eg. Haaland et al. 2015, Uggla 2012, Campbell 1996). This paper explores the reconfiguration of urban green and demonstrates how the planning strategies of green structure have changed in the 21st century in Helsinki, Finland. Examples of these new strategies are objectives for coherent city instead of coherent green structure and priorities for the quality of green areas instead of quantitative approach. The paradigm shift also affects the character of green areas and emphasizes urban atmosphere, lively plazas and pedestrian streets instead of nature-based values of green areas. Urbanism also poses challenges to preservation of historical landscapes (eg. Antrop 2006). Historical areas are recognized, but at the same time, the values have to be adapted to the agenda of urban planning.

Research Design and Methods

The aim of the paper is to analyse the construction of urban green in the planning discourse of Helsinki. Helsinki, as many other metropolitan areas, is rapidly expanding. The central principle of the new master plan, approved in 2016, is the densification of urban structure. The master plan prepares for a population growth up to 860 000 new inhabitants by 2050 (Master plan report 2016: 7,14). A third of the planned building volume is infill construction, including building on 1900 hectares of green areas. The principle differs dramatically from the previous master plan of 2002 which emphasized coherent green structure and historical landscapes. The paper examines this transforming role of green structure on the basis of master planning documents and three case studies. The aim is to determine how the paradigm shift pertaining to green areas is manifested in urban planning and what values and priorities are embedded in the negotiations between green structure and urbanism.

The study of master plans was conducted as a narrative analysis which aims to identify the story-telling of urban planning. Planning can be seen as a performed story and as a political choice concerning the stories which are told and which remain untold (Sandercock 2003: 26). The research data consisted of planning documents, planning reports and discussions related to the master plan and three case studies: the infill development plan of Central Park, the infill project of Tuomarinkylä manor landscape in northern Helsinki and the development plan of Vartiosaari villa island in eastern Helsinki. The reason for selecting these areas was that they were the most conflicting and debated cases which included infill construction in valuable green areas and active citizen movements protesting the plans. As a comparative analysis and background, the historical development of green structure planning in Helsinki was reviewed, including the previous master plans from the years 1960, 1970, 1992 and 2002.

Findings and Conclusions

Green structure and its planning priorities change with prevailing social-economic-political regimes and design ideals (eg. Jim 2004: 311). Even if compact city policies strive to promote green infrastructure, the tension between growth and green structure is apparent (Compact City Policies 2012). The status of green structure and its planning principles are undergoing a transition. Comparing the new master plan with the earlier green planning strategies identified several differences in design principles which can be interpreted as a paradigm shift. While the master plans 1992 and 2002 highlighted coherent green structure and green

fingers as a planning priority, the new plan emphasizes compact city and urban green with focus on quality, instead of quantity. Furthermore, the previous master plans accentuated cultural environments and historical landscapes, whereas the new master plan regards preservation as problematic, limiting growth. The case studies, related to the new master plan manifest severe conflicts between green and urban structure. Green areas and historical landscapes with a preservation status were contested and reserved for urban infill construction. The ecological goal for densification surpassed local nature values, the historical landscape and the perceived values of the residents. In Central Park, the construction on its edges was based on a dominant goal of transforming the nearby motorway to urban boulevard with urbanised dense construction and providing noise-prevention for the park. In Tuomarinkylä manor landscape a new residential area was proposed on the manor field, due to the future rail connection across the area. The future rail also resulted in urban infill plans on Vartiosaari villa island, a nationally valuable cultural environment. (Most central development areas in Helsinki 2015: 13-14, 32, 39)

The study reveals that the concept of urban green is tightly connected with the urban planning agenda and its values and political interests. In compact city, green structure is modified to fulfil the goals of densification strategies. Additionally, the multidimensional nature of green structure is reduced to qualities that correspond to the hegemonic urban vision. Pocket parks, green roofs and lively pedestrian streets depict the compact city, whereas vast forests and recreation areas are not a part of the approved story-telling. Nevertheless, coherent city without coherent green structure is not resilient. Further discussion is needed to redefine and develop green structure in the urban densification context. In addition, further research is required to combine biodiversity and ecological functionality with the increasing pressure for recreational use and reducing maintenance resources. Finally, the urban planning agenda calls for critical examination and a broader perspective on green structure and its role in sustainable development.

KEYWORDS: green structure, urbanism, paradigm shift, Helsinki

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FIGURES

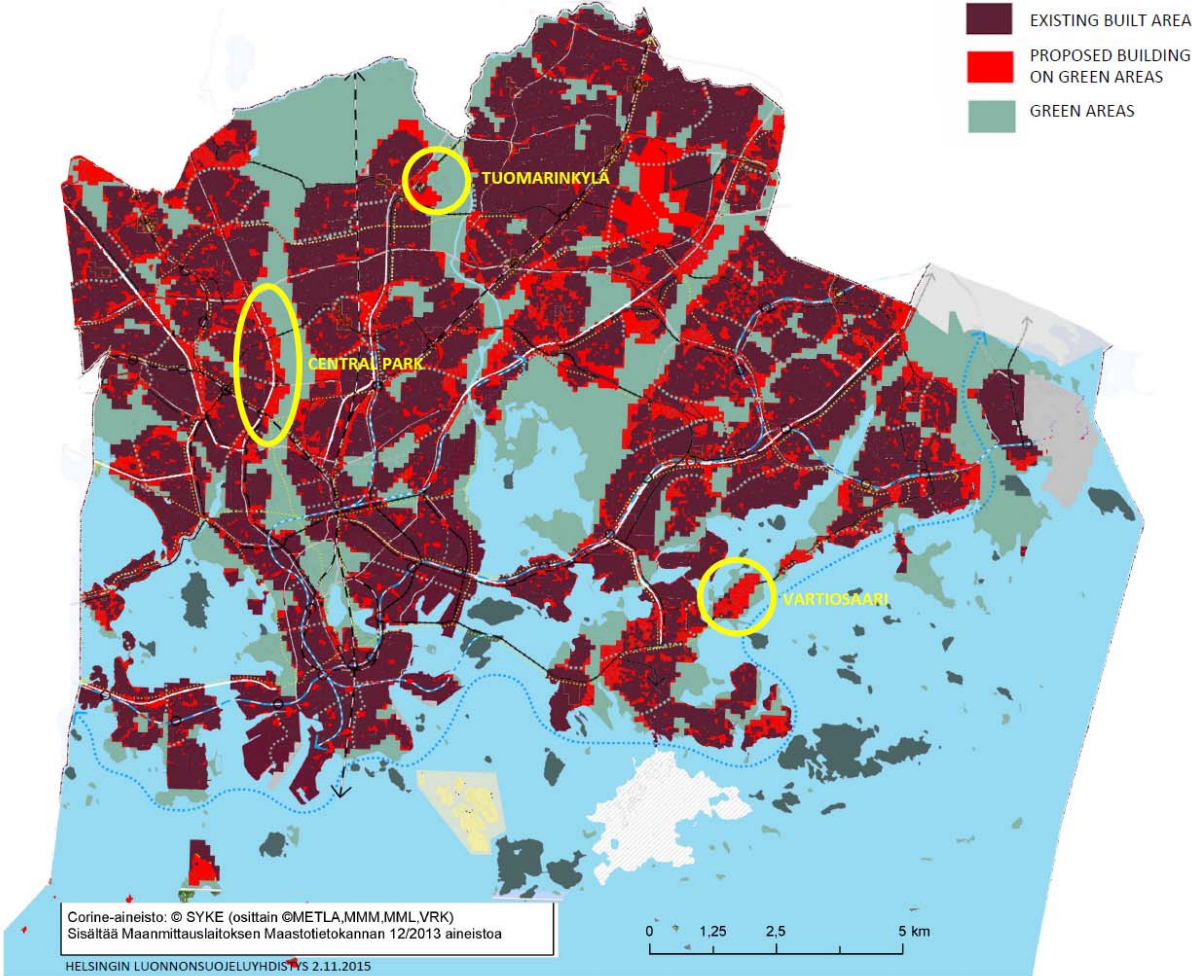


FIGURE 1. Infill construction on green areas in the master plan of Helsinki. The case study areas are marked with yellow circles. (Map by Helsinki Nature Conservation Society 2015)

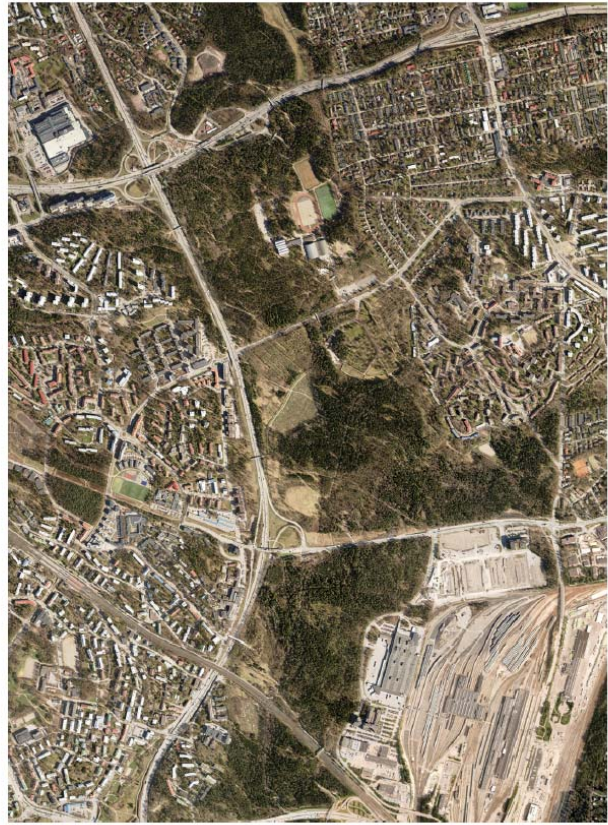


FIGURE 2. Infill development in Central Park, the most well-known green area in Helsinki. On the left the plan by City of Helsinki, on the right an aerial photo from the site in 2016, City of Helsinki).



FIGURE 3. Infill development in Tuomarinkylä manor landscape, a 110-hectare landscape in northern Helsinki. On the left the plan by City of Helsinki, on the right an aerial photo from the site in 2011, City of Helsinki).

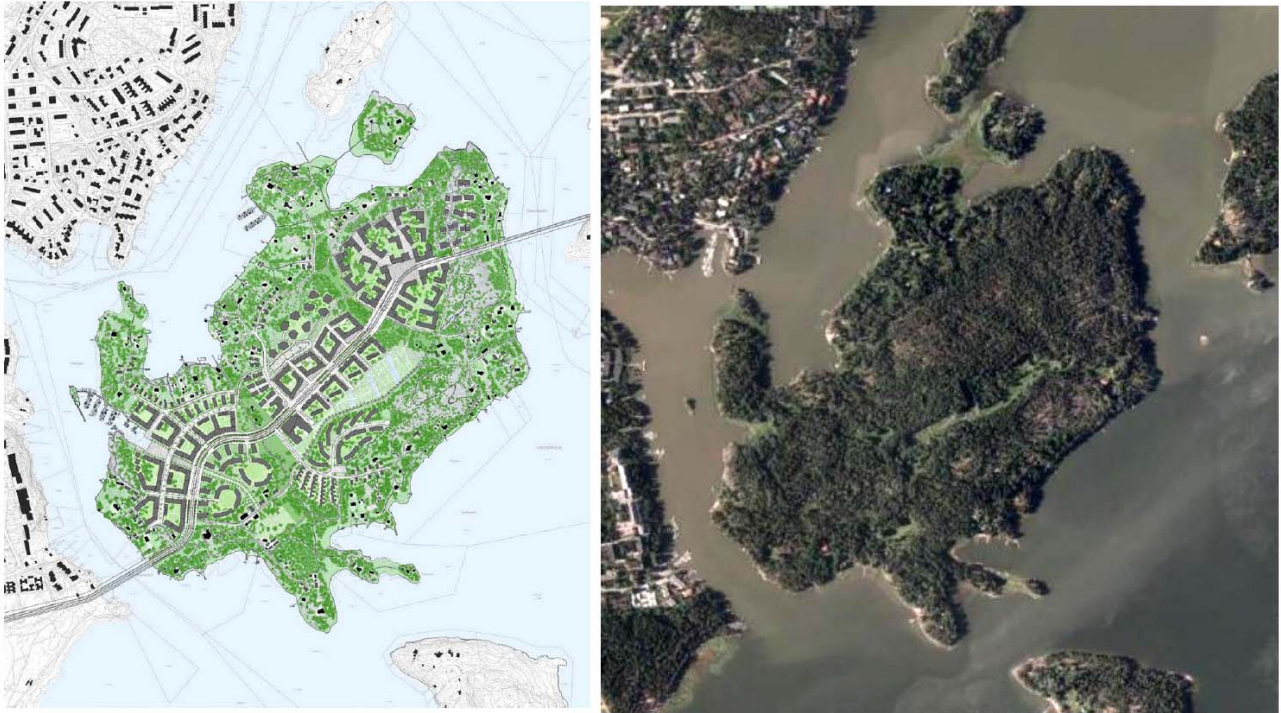


FIGURE 4: Urban infill plans on Vartiosaari, a 82-hectare culturally significant island in eastern Helsinki. On the left the plan by City of Helsinki, on the right an aerial photo from the site in 2016, City of Helsinki.

CV

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