

Community gardening

Author: Professor Paul Milbourne



Introduction

Although gardening has largely been associated with individual actions in private spaces, recent years have witnessed the increased significance of collective forms of gardening in urban public spaces. Defined as 'an organized, grassroots initiative whereby a section of land is used to produce food or flowers or both in an urban environment for the personal use or collective benefit of its members' (Glover et al., 2005), community gardening projects have been established to produce cheap and fresh food, respond to poverty, redress environmental degradation and provide new green spaces in disadvantaged urban places.

Much of the research on community gardening has taken place in the US. This project provides the first comprehensive account of community gardening in the UK. More particularly, it examines the environmental, socio-cultural and political impacts of community gardens on participants and members of the local community in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in UK cities. The research involved interviews with national

environmental, horticultural and community gardening organisations as well as case-studies of 18 community gardening projects in nine cities in England and Wales. The case study research has included a range of methods, including interviewing, mobile methods, visual ethnographies and participant observations.

Findings

Community gardening visions

The community gardening projects had been established for five main reasons. First, a group of projects had been set up to improve the visual aesthetics of local public spaces that had been largely abandoned by local authorities. Second, some projects had been established to create new forms of green space in high density neighbourhoods. A third group had developed in response to social problems in the area. Here community gardening was being used to mobilise different local groups into taking back control of local space. A fourth reason for forming a community gardening project related to the changing demographics of some of these urban

neighbourhoods and the perceived need to create new forms of cultural integration. Finally, some projects had been set up to provide therapeutic forms of gardening, involving the collective nurturing of land, plants and people.

Spaces of community gardening

Community gardening is taking place within rather ordinary and mundane spaces. Working in and on these spaces had not only altered the physical and aesthetic natures of these spaces but transformed everyday interactions within them, developing new hybrid spaces that combine the public and private realms, as well as producing new meeting places for different groups of the local population.

The case study research also points to the complexities of these everyday spaces of community gardening. While several of the projects conform to conventional spatial understandings of the community garden as a single, bounded and green space that sits within the built environment of the city, it is clear that they represent rather complicated spaces. Certain projects are associated with a single community space that is used by all members of the project, while others combine communal areas with individual plots. In most cases the work of the group is confined to the spaces of the community garden but some projects have extended their gardening into other spaces, either through out-reach work or the physical expansion of the project space. Lastly, while all projects are providing communal spaces for local residents, a small number also have broader spatial concerns, catering for special needs groups, such as people with mental health problems, living beyond the immediate vicinity of the garden, engaging with immigrant groups, including refugees and asylum seekers, and addressing global socio-ecological issues.

Conclusions

- From their rather humble beginnings, the community gardening projects included in this study have proceeded to produce an impressive range of socio-environmental transformations of their neighbourhood spaces.
- These projects are producing new socio-ecological spaces within these places, with horticultural and environmental practices being translated into new forms of sociality, public participation, sustainability and justice.
- The case study highlights the importance of the local environment

References

- Glover, T., Shiner, K. and Parry, D. (2005) 'Association, Sociability, and Civic Culture: The Democratic Effect of Community Gardening' *Leisure Sciences* 27(1): 75-92
- Milbourne, P. (2011) Everyday (in)justices and ordinary environmentalisms: community gardening in disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods *Local Environment* (in press)

Further Information

- Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens: <https://www.farmgarden.org.uk/>