



Research Paper

Places of urban disorder? Exposing the hidden nature and values of an English private urban allotment landscape



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ABSTRACT

Increasing urbanisation is placing significant development pressure upon our urban spaces and green infrastructure. Allotments have strong cultural roots in the urban domain with emerging evidence of multiple health and quality of life benefits associated with their existence, use and management. However, they represent a remnant landscape; out of order and unproductive according to conventional economic and market assessments of urban land use. Consequently, allotments represent highly contested spaces; as opportunity spaces for re-development to meet housing demands or as growing spaces for escape and socialisation. This paper employs a phenomenological approach to explore the values and perceptions of plottolders, residents, planning managers and allotment bodies relating to one privately owned allotment site in Dudley, West Midlands, UK. Our focus on private allotments fills an important research (lack of information on ownership and spatial extent) and policy (treated differently to public allotments as open space in planning policy) gap. Semi-structured interviews reveal that the allotment site is valued by plottolders and nearby residents on a wide range of ecosystem services and community benefits with only minor concerns evident about modern allotment infrastructure and bonfires. This positive picture reflected strong local governance and community relationships. However, there was a misunderstanding among residents that this private allotment had the same level of protection as a municipal site. It is recommended that planning policy treats both municipal and private sites equally and that more research is conducted on the ownership, distribution and governance of private allotment sites given their importance in urban planning and placemaking.

1. Introduction

There are now estimated to be some three million allotments across Europe which collectively constitute a valued social and environmental resource (Van den Berg, Van Winsum-Westra, de Vries, & Van Dillen, 2010). Allotments are defined “as a parcel of land being allotted to someone for their own use” (Bell, 2016:1). Allotments form part of the wider global urban agriculture movement as citizens take advantage of the multiple benefits generated by growing their own food (Bendt, Barthel, & Colding, 2013; Gorgolewski, Komisar, & Nasr, 2011; Hardman & Larkham, 2014; Jerme & Wakefield, 2013). Allotments differ from other forms of urban agriculture due to their bespoke legislation and the formality and structure in the way they involve people (Bell, 2016). Allotment sites set aside individual plots, whereas new forms of urban agriculture, such as ‘community gardens’ favour more collective aspects of cultivation (Adams, Scott, & Hardman, 2014;

Beitin, 2011; Bell, 2016; Firth, Maye, & Pearson, 2011; Holland, 2004; Glover, 2004).

Originally allotments in the UK were introduced to relieve rural poverty during the 18th century and were then adapted for leisure purposes in the densely populated towns and cities where green space was at a premium (Acton, 2011; Barclay, 2012; Cooper, 2011; Crouch and Ward, 1997). Across the rest of Europe as a whole, varied manifestations of allotments arose as a response to similar drivers from the 19th century to post Second World War (Keshvarz & Bell, 2016; Bell et al., 2016).

Allotment sites have a number of complex environmental, social, cultural and economic linkages and benefits across the participants, communities and environment in which they are located (Acton, 2011; Crouch & Wiltshire, 2012; Irvine et al., 1999; Preston & Wilson, 2014). These include increased sense of community, place identity, health, quality of life and local food production (e.g. Acton, 2011;

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Hardman & Larkham, 2014; Kingsley, Townsend, & Henderson-Wilson, 2009; Kingsley & Townsend, 2006; Lohrberg, Lička, Scazzosi, & Timpe, 2016; Quale, 2009; Tornaghi, 2014; Turner, Henryks, & Pearson, 2011; Viljoen & Bohn, 2014).

Allotments can challenge and confirm existing gender and power relations (Longhurst, 2006). Allotments historically convey masculine space which still dominates growing narratives. However, women are increasingly challenging masculine approaches to gardening and enhancing their cultural identities (Metcalf, Minnear, Kleinert, & Tedder, 2012). In the USA research suggests that allotments can also become exclusionary spaces; whilst allotments can offer sites of meaning for deprived communities, these spaces can also become aligned with neoliberal gentrifying processes that seek to exclude poorer residents from urban redevelopment areas (Moore, Church, & Gabb, 2014).

Whilst allotments are popular today, the nature and identities of those linkages have changed markedly over time reflecting fluctuations in supply and demand of allotments. In today's pressurised urban realm they constitute vulnerable and spatially distinctive resources; under threat due to the pace and scale of urbanisation (Barthel & Isendahl, 2013; Elmqvist et al., 2013). This is evident globally, driven by rising urban land values and planning policies that favour urban densification to prevent sprawl and by differential attitudes of policy makers to the protection and value of allotment spaces (Acton, 2011; Bakker, Dubbeling, Gündel, Sabel-Koshella, & van de Zeeuw, 2000; Drilling et al., 2016; Eisenberg, Tappert, Thomas, & Zilans, 2016; Jenks, Burton, & Williams, 1996; Leendertz, 2013; Spiklová and Vágner, 2016).

At a UK level, The Guardian (2009) reported that the total number of allotments had declined steadily since the end of World War Two as they became less popular, from 1.4 million in the late 1940s to around 500,000 in the late 1970s, and with 200,000 plots sold off by local councils unable to find takers for them during the 1980s and 1990s.

In response the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardens (Moran, 1990), as well as the Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens are trying to reverse and revive the fortunes of urban agriculture in the UK including with a growing number of private community-managed allotments. The National Trust launched a scheme in 2009¹ which has now created over 1200 new growing plots for allotments and community gardens within a range of rural or urban communities throughout England, Wales and Northern Ireland, registered through a landshare.

However, whilst there is dedicated legislation for municipally owned allotment sites, private sites remain somewhat "hidden" with a conspicuous lack of information and data on their nature, ownership, extent, quality and spatial distribution (Leendertz, 2013). This raises important questions as to how they are treated in planning procedures, their vulnerability to conversion (as opposed to municipal sites) if owners wish to take advantage of rapidly increasing land values (Spiklová & Vágner, 2016).

Within the English planning system, protection for private sites sits within more general policies for open space. For instance, Birmingham City Council's (2016) approved local plan provides a useful comparison within its statutory development plan policy TP9 which covers both open space protection (within which private allotments fall) and allotments. This illuminates how issues of viability and provision of land as surplus need for development may override general protection. However, the dedicated allotment policy has stronger requirements, processes and protections relating to demand considerations as expressed through waiting lists.

Policy TP9 Allotments

Provision of allotments should relate directly to demand in the area. Where there is a shortage of provision then consideration will be given to

using other surplus open space land for allotments. Allotment land will only be released for development where it can be shown that the site is not required to satisfy the demand for allotments.

Policy TP9 (Open Space)

Planning permission will not normally be granted for development on open space except where:

- *It can be shown by an up to date assessment of need that the open space is surplus taking account of a minimum standard of 2 ha per 1000 population and the accessibility and quality criteria listed below.*
- *The lost site will be replaced by a similar piece of open space, at least as accessible and of similar quality and size.*
- *"Where an area of open space is underused, as it has inherent problems such as poor site surveillance, physical quality or layout, which cannot be realistically dealt with, then in this case proposals that would result in the loss of a small part of a larger area of open space will be considered if compensation measures would result in significant improvements to the quality and recreational value of the remaining area." (Birmingham City Council, 2017: TP9: 80)*

This paper addresses what we believe to be a major research deficit on private allotments within a phenomenological case study exploration of one private urban allotment site in Coseley, West Midlands. We argue that small scale qualitative studies have value in exposing new research agendas that can be upscaled subsequently given its position at the fringe of current urban agriculture and allotment research (Schoneboom & May, 2013). We use the work of Qvistrom (2007) on landscapes out of order to characterise both municipal and private allotment spaces which, in an increasingly technocratic urban landscape where the fetish for order subjugates and reduces nature and landscape to neat Euclidian constructs, located and mapped in two dimensional space, and consequently zoned according to land values and most profitable uses, is somewhat anachronistic. Investigation of differing perspectives from allotment users, nearby residents and planning managers through detailed semi-structured interviews enabled the values, meanings, perceptions, aspirations and interrelationships between the governance, management and vulnerabilities in this private allotment space to be explored and compared with its municipal counterpart as to their contribution of the kind of urban spaces we wish to create.

Specifically the paper will, using English policy and practice framing:

- 1) Locate the private allotment within the wider discourse of spatial planning and nature using notions of order/disorder in urban spaces.
- 2) Investigate the relationships between a private allotment site and its users, and residents
- 3) Investigate the wider governance of private allotment sites through interviews with planning managers and the National Allotment Society
- 4) Assess the extent to which private allotment sites differ in status from their municipal counterparts

2. Spatial planning, order and disorder in the urban realm

The character and distinctiveness of any particular landscape have their own meaning(s) to the viewer/user, which generates contestation about the kind of place that is valued and desired (Adams et al., 2014; Meinig, 1979; Scott, Carter, Brown, & White, 2009).

"Landscapes do not have edges, they are seamless webs which extend out in all directions, constrained only by the conceptual horizons of people for whom spaces mean something" (Darvill, 1998: 16).

¹ <https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/features/allotments-and-growing-spaces> (Accessed 12th June 2017).

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