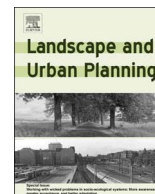




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Research Paper

## Guerrilla gardening and green activism: Rethinking the informal urban growing movement

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## ABSTRACT

Green activism and guerrilla gardening lie at the more informal end of the urban food growing movement, but little is known about the extent of this practice or the future of such unplanned activities. Accordingly, this paper firstly explores a range of informal Urban Agriculture practices, illuminating the practice within Europe, North America, Africa and other continents. The paper then proceeds to focus explicitly on Salford, UK, where guerrilla gardening is being encouraged by the local authority. Using ethnographic and interview data, we focus on the actors involved, their relationship with authority and the wider impact of their activities; exploring their motives, aspirations, values and beliefs. The results reveal the ability of the informal movement to regenerate ‘forgotten’ space and bring communities together, and the ‘darker’ side of the activity, with actors sometimes restricting access to colonised land. Ultimately, the paper reveals how this movement is expanding and that more research is required to better understand the actions of those who pursue a more informal approach to urban gardening and those who seek to regulate land use activity.

## 1. Introduction

With populations rising and cities expanding there is a nascent debate surrounding idea of productive urban landscapes and their ability to tackle food chain disconnects (Wiskerke & Viljoen, 2012). At the forefront of this debate is the practice of Urban Agriculture (UA) which is on the rise across the globe (Moragues Faus & Morgan, 2015; Noori et al., 2016); fundamentally, the concept revolves around the growing of food or rearing of livestock in cities (Caputo, 2012). Arguments for UA vary, ranging from its potential to cut food supply chains and relocate production closer to urban consumers, to the social contributions of the concept such as its perceived ability to bring together communities through allotments, communal gardens and other such spaces (Gorgolewski, Komisar, & Nasr, 2011; Wiskerke & Viljoen, 2012). The latter is often argued to be the core reason for the practice in the Global North, with yield deemed minimal since spaces are relatively small and used predominantly for recreational purposes (Wiltshire & Geoghegan, 2012). Nevertheless, technologies such as hydroponics and aquaponics are testing this argument and enabling vertical systems and high yield

even in the smallest of spaces (Hardman & Larkham, 2014). Meanwhile, in the Global South, there is emerging discussion on the importance of UA and its ability to enable citizens in deprived areas to survive through providing the urban poor with much needed access to fresh produce (Chipungu, Magidimisha, Hardman, & Beesley, 2015).

Urban growing encompasses an array of practices and spaces, from traditional allotments to community gardens and larger spaces such as urban farms and rooftop developments. Yet to date many of these spaces are poorly defined and explored (Caputo, 2012). If we take the example of an urban farm, it becomes clear how this larger form of UA not only lacks coverage in both academic and non-academic literature, but also a distinct definition, with Hanson, Marty, and Hanson (2012, p. 5) attempt perhaps closest: ‘an urban farm is an intentional effort by an individual or a community to grow its capacity for self-sufficiency and well-being through the cultivation of plants/animals’. Indeed, the very notion of UA is contested, with questions surrounding whether the term focuses purely on food growing activities or constitutes any form of agricultural activity within the city context (Lohrberg, Licka, Scazzosi, & Timpe, 2015).

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Fig. 1. The world's largest rooftop urban farm in Brooklyn, New York City, USA (Hardman, 2013).

In terms of exemplars of UA practice, Fig. 1 depicts a large-scale form of the activity, in this case Brooklyn Grange Rooftop Farm in New York City, USA. The figure highlights the potential for UA and how the practice can involve projects which employ gardeners and operate as a business, with the project shown in the figure growing some 50,000lbs of vegetables each year (Brooklyn Grange Rooftop Farm, n.d.). This large-scale form of activity is growing, with companies such as Gotham Greens (2016) starting new UA projects across North America and employing more people within the sector. Within the UK there is a rise in this large-scale form of the practice, with aqua farms, hydroponic, rooftop and conventional urban farms appearing more and more (see for instance Sustainable Food Cities, 2017).

Proponents of UA often cite Detroit (USA) and Havana (Cuba) as exemplars in which the practice has made significant impacts in cities: regenerating space, feeding residents in deprived areas and helping to create more sustainable economies (Giorda, 2012; Ioannou, Moran, Sondermann, Certoma, & Hardman, 2016). In both these spaces, UA has been successful and contributes significantly to both economies. This has in turn enabled residents of the two cities to have better access to food and obtain new skills which could help with future employment opportunities. There are other exemplars, such as New York City's urban farms and community gardens (McKay, 2011) alongside high-tech projects in Singapore (see One World, 2012).

Within academia, a recent argument surrounds the potential for UA to create a more socially 'just' food system (Alkon & Agyeman, 2011). Whilst the link between food justice and UA has a solid research base in North America, there is little exploration elsewhere, particularly in the European and UK contexts (Tornaghi, 2014). There is also emerging research which focuses on the multiple environmental benefits derived through UA, particularly its contribution to regulating and provisioning ecosystem services (UKNEAFO, 2014). However this has led to calls for more research around the risk associated with such practices, particularly in relation to the contaminated land upon which many of the projects are constructed (Chipungu et al., 2015). Yet, whilst there is a blossoming research base on the formal element of UA, there is scant regard for researching the more informal approaches (Zanetti, 2007).

Indeed, evidence demonstrates how many successful UA projects began through an informal approach and legitimised to seize on funding and opportunities to grow their action (Hardman & Larkham, 2014). Guerrilla gardening is a broad term which is associated with actors occupying space for the growing of vegetables or plants without permission (McKay, 2011). Guerrilla gardening is a global movement and is apparent in every country, from Africa to China, the USA and UK, students, businessmen, the elderly and others are regularly practising

the activity (Reynolds, 2008). The perception that guerrilla gardening is merely small-scale is incorrect, with the global Incredible Edible movement and many more formal projects owing their success to the informal practice (Scott et al., 2013). This paper explores informal UA and provides an insight into practices around the globe, drawing on a range of case studies before focussing on a local authority in the UK which is actively encouraging citizens to adopt a more informal route.

## 2. Pursuing an informal agenda

'Guerrilla gardening has seen increased practice and popular media coverage over the last 5 years, but has yet to receive much attention from the academic sphere. This is likely due to guerrilla gardenings' conceptual fuzziness – its relational and contextual nature makes collapsing it to a specific definition difficult'

(Crane, Viswanathan, & Whitelaw, 2013, p. 76)

In a similar manner to the wider practice of UA, the idea of an informal approach is ill-defined and elusive. When raised, the informal movement is often linked to the idea of guerrilla gardening, a broad term which encompasses any form of growing activity conducted without the permission of the land owner (McKay, 2011; Reynolds, 2008). In academic literature the two are used alongside one another uncritically, often without a clear definition of either practice. Guerrilla gardening is a militaristic term and is often stigmatised as an activity of younger radicals with a deep political agenda (see for instance McKay, 2011). Furthermore, there is often a perception that those practising guerrilla gardening are adopting an illegal rather than merely an informal approach (Adams, Scott, & Hardman, 2013; Hung, 2017).

With the lack of arrests and no documented prosecutions, guerrilla gardening is more appropriately conceptualised as an informal act as opposed to an illegal act (Adams, Hardman, & Larkham, 2015; Reynolds, 2008). Although no guerrillas have been arrested, there are several instances relating to threats to detain, such as Richard Reynold; his encounter with London's Metropolitan Police whilst gardening in the British capital (YouTube, 2008). Under UK law, guerrilla gardening would not constitute criminal damage and thus the Police Officer in question was incorrect in this video (Hardman, 2013). Perhaps the most unlawful action of a typical guerrilla gardener is their avoidance of obtaining planning permission or dealing with the bureaucracy of local authorities through avoiding risk assessments, insurance and other such paperwork usually required to establish a formal site (Zanetti, 2007). Ironically, one could argue that the idea of participatory planning may give these actors a voice and enable some avoidance of the informal occupation of land. This concept involves involving the community and

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