



Understanding Cities

Shared Spaces

Steve

But diversity of people, plants and animals has brought its fair share of challenges.

Mario

We have people who are organic gardeners, we have got cottage gardeners, we have got cash crop gardeners, and perma-culture gardeners probably get the roughest deal, not just here on our allotment site, but probably across the country, because when everybody is doing things in a recognisable way, then a person that comes in with an odd activity and an odd way of doing things is immediately an outcast. And perma-culture people, because they allow weeds to flourish, and because perhaps they use a lot more second-hand stuff, and they don't grow vegetables in straight lines, can be a source of irritation to other gardeners who simply do not understand what this process is and perma-culture, for example, challenges the spade cultivation, and spade cultivation is what allotments are based on. The prejudice then extends to the person and that person can be given a very cold reception – anything from reporting them to the Allotment Officer for a swift notice to quit, to just cold shouldering. There are often disputes, lots of disputes, lots of disputes because there's a lot of people, and people have to release their pent-up energies. I don't think it's true that allotments are havens of peace and tranquillity. I think that is an image that only goes so far.

Steve

With a waiting list of a hundred this allotment is thriving, but the threats to other city nature spaces of this kind are mounting up. Eddie Campbell, who works as an Allotment Liaison Officer for Birmingham City Council, and Simon Baddeley, a local campaigner for urban green spaces, both suggest that a main threat is the falling demand for allotments.

Eddie Campbell

Allotments will always be under threat and the threat increases when there are vast areas of allotment land underused because of lack of tenancy take-up.

Simon Baddeley

The "common sense" in inverted commas, view has been that the demand is going down, people have other recreational activities, they want to go and watch the television, go to football and so on, there isn't really demand any more, and we have to be, inverted commas, "realistic" and sell those off where the demand is going down.

Steve

But there may be other underlying reasons for the fall and demand. As Simon suggests the economic value of the land has a role to play.

Simon

My own view, shared by an increasingly large number of people, is that these demands are going down because of vandalism, basically that's an aspect of it; constructive non-maintenance, various forms of blighting which the developer, either consciously, or even unconsciously uses as a way. I mean one of the things you do is just to say we're putting in a planning application to build on this, it frightens a lot of people off. It seems to me that the only way in which you stop a piece of green space in possibly an already densely populated area being built on as well, or in-filled practically up to its edges, is you have to take into account a whole different paradigm for thinking about cities, you have to actually think about green spaces in cities as not just being little bits that got left over which are waiting to be built on. I mean a lot of people think that the word wasteland, for instance, anything that isn't built

on, and it isn't specifically a park or an allotment is called wasteland, and the presupposition is that wasteland is waiting to be developed. And, in fact, I was trying to get the Planning Officer in Birmingham the other day to name the price of a particular allotment site in Birmingham, Victoria Jubilee Allotments which we've been trying to defend from being built on by a private builder, and I said how much is it worth? He said, well, to the builder it's worth five million pounds. Five million pounds! I said well how much is it worth agriculturally? He said we can't even name it, it is not possible to actually name. I said what do you mean? He said well, if it was a farm in the country you could putatively say it's worth about forty thousand pounds from five million, but he said you can't even use that sum, you can't factor that in. So there is no price as I understand it for a piece of space being kept green. The price can only be the development price, and so long as that formula exists, it's like you can love a garden, you can have a most wonderful garden, but if someone discovers you've got oil in the back garden or platinum deposits, you're inclined to think I love my garden, but oh what a wonderful garden I could have if I sold this bit or for the platinum in it. And what happens is that cities are full, particularly with the pressure not to build in the Green Belt, cities are increasingly full of places which have got platinum or oil, or the equivalent, and mainly the development value of these green field sites is the thing that stands out in the neon lights in the minds of the developer.

Steve

However, allotments may still have a place in Birmingham's future as the Council recognises the broad benefits of these and other city nature spaces. Eddie Campbell again:

Eddie

Birmingham has a policy in which it sees allotments as a heritage rather than a hindrance. Those are subsidised activity; we see it as very beneficial to the health of Birmingham citizens and because of that we're doing all that we can to encourage people to take on these allotments, to hold onto them, and to keep on doing the gardening activity because it gives them therapeutic benefits, it gives them exercise, it gives them interaction with other people and many of the gardeners, although we try to encourage younger gardeners, some of the older gardeners they may be the only person in the house, so they see the allotment site as their way of interacting with other people. They also get fresh organic food to eat so the threat of the developers, or whoever else may want to take over these pieces of land because it's seen as very valuable to them, we try to fight that.