



Understanding Cities

Nature Formations

Steve

Moving back into the studio I'm lucky enough to have with me two discussants who will take up some of the issues that have been raised in the Uplands case and more generally in Birmingham itself. I'm joined by David Crouch, who's Professor Cultural Geography at Anglia Polytechnic University, and author of *The Allotment, Landscape and Culture*. He's also given evidence to the House of Commons Select Committee on the future of allotments. Alongside me as well is Kathy Pain who's a member of the course team and has written of one of the chapters in Book 3 of the course series on Urban Sustainability. I'm getting a real sense from our experience in Birmingham of allotments as extremely highly-valued places for a lot of different reasons. Why then do you think allotments are so much under threat, and why are they perhaps not valued conventionally as highly as they might be - if I could ask you, Kathy, first on that?

Kathy Pain

Neo-liberal economic relations do pose a threat for allotments and for other types of city nature formations. This is really rather an artificial construct because we have to think about what we mean by value. In a market economy we tend to attach value to economic relations. Obviously in cities the land values which are attached to particular sites are very much related to planning control and to supply and demand. This means that sites like allotments would obviously be very much under pressure for development for another use such as housing, but there are other values as we've already seen that allotments used by diverse groups in society; they're an important part of community life; they're an important way for city dwellers to have an experience; a hands-on experience, of nature in the city; and so we have to say how is it that we decide which actually has more value for society.

Steve

I suppose we're treating the allotments here as a particular kind of city nature formation and there are clearly others, but in this whole question of value why is it do you think that perhaps rural nature constructions, if we can say that, are often valued more highly than their city nature equivalent? David.

David Crouch

I think we have a funny way of looking at it which is kind of caught in a time warp. I think further back in time, perhaps a few centuries ago, we found that people were taken away from nature, and nature was taken away from people at large as most people ceased to be directly involved with growing environment around them, and as a result we have a mindset which peculiarly verifies large expanses of open land but much of that, we must realise, is lacking in bio-diversity and any kind of cultural definition and natural richness, and as a result we found that nature has tended to be felt to be alien from urban areas. At the same time we have the same political, cultural formations which removed people at large from rural areas, having increased their hold on power over the generations, and being able to exercise an extraordinary draw upon the way in which people at large tend to regard the natural value of the urban end of the rural city and the country. And it is within that particular cultural form that we have arrived at a view which argues city, not nature, country nature, but very often that's difficult to pursue in actual examples on the ground.

Steve

I suppose one of the issues – Kathy, if I could turn to you now – of these aren't just questions about cultural construction alone, but there's also issues of social justice here, and you were talking earlier about the planning constraints and how those partly inform the kinds of values that we place on land, and David's now introduced the kind of historical dimension to this. How would you see that, I mean when we protect certain landscapes, are we necessarily involved in the social justice issue?

Kathy

I think that they're very important for social justice, and I think that they have not been looked at carefully enough. Planning legislation can obviously protect land, including allotments, for social purposes, but very often the questions are for whom are not directly investigated. Present issues which are very important in terms of sustainability suggest that urban densification is possibly one way of creating sustainable future for cities, and a part of that thinking is that brown field sites might be quite important in terms of providing land for housing development. But as we've seen in the case of allotments, brown field sites and other sites such as railway lines can actually be important areas, wild spaces and important areas for city nature formations.

Steve

So in terms of questions of sustainability then, there's this whole question of densification but also of greening - would you like to say a little bit more about that?

Kathy

There is a tension between these two aims. Urban densification would help to create sustainability in cities in many respects because it fits with the strategy of containing development, of reducing the amount of travelling which people need to do in today's society, but at the same time as cities become more dense, they become less green and this is one of the issues that we do need to take on board in thinking about sustainability, is how we can keep our cities as compact as possible, but at the same time maintain the green elements of cities and I think that this is important, not just in terms of environmental sustainability, but also in terms of social sustainability, and the allotments example very much shows that.

Steve

We've used the term 'city nature formation' a little bit – do you think that term has any practical value in this kind of debate, do you think it's a term that can do work for us in challenging our ways of looking at these spaces and formations in cities?

David

I think so because it brings together in an active collision the human activities and the human products and the human structures, and apparently natural fragments of land and what's growing on them, and the way in which they operate, and in that sense that expression usefully demonstrates or suggests how there is a much more active practice going on in the way in which we come through, come to understand, come to spend parts of our lives in those natural fragments.

Steve

If I could turn to you Kathy as well and ask do you think the term 'city nature formation' helps us to think about cities in a different way, or these kinds of issues about derelict space and about green spaces, overgrown cemeteries and so on – do you think this kind of term does any work for us?

Kathy

I think that the idea of city nature formations helps us to challenge orthodox representations of the separation between cities and nature. It recognises that cities don't simply contain nature, that they are ecological entities, and that they're complex and fluid networks of relations. The social and cultural and economic aspects of city life actually help to construct different spatial relationships between cities and natures, so that I think that the concept of city nature formations helps to bring this new way of imagining cities and nature to the fore.

David

This paradox, as Kathy has explained, of intensification and dealing with green spaces and expunging them as merely ready for something else to be built on them, demonstrates that there is a lack of understanding in that cultural set that fails to understand that people actually enjoy green bits around their urban areas, and that there is certainly a mistake in bringing together intensification and losing green spaces such as we're speaking of. Indeed, intensification becomes tolerable because there are remaining green bits around us.

Kathy

One of the problems about protecting such sites is that they are not only protected, but they are controlled and they are ordered, and I think that culturally we have come to think of cities as neat and tidy places, and we've come to think about nature within cities as being very controlled, as being transported into the city from outside the city, and nowadays we're beginning to realise that people do value the wilder spaces in cities. In fact, in Tower Hamlets there is a new venture where a piece of derelict land has been ploughed and is being planted with wildflower seed, and this has been a community enterprise, and this is an example of a new interpretation of a piece of leftover land, and it's a new type of city nature formation.