



## Understanding Cities

### *New Ideas*

#### **Steve**

One of the interesting things that we've dealt with is thinking about cities as, if you like, sites where values change, where people because of all this mixing and intensity, and these tensions, that perhaps that's where new ideas come from sometimes, and it strikes me that cities are probably more likely to be a crucible of different attitudes to environments, to being with plants, animals and other people, than perhaps in some of the more traditionally naturally sites which we've talked about, the rural areas.

#### **David**

Yes, I think that's absolutely appropriate to say that because certainly in the last few decades this inter-mixing we've referred to already about the population who are plot-holders has replaced an earlier period where perhaps allotments were more typified by older men, and traditional means of cultivation perhaps hadn't really called the changes in terms of developing the way in which they were using their land, and now this inter-mixing in all sorts of ways, including multi-ethnic approaches, have given a new kind of intensity of activity and development and change, and trying out new ways of using and valuing nature in cities, and I think that that has a much greater intensity on allotment sites than it does over large tracts of countryside where there are more steady approaches, except for a very few exceptions where new methods do get a look in.

#### **Steve**

I think that's very interesting because one of the characterisations of urban folk, if you like, probably by rural folk, is that they have a very shallow understanding of nature and they see everything as a chocolate box cover or a kind of Lake District scene, but what you're saying is through these engagements with these sites and the people, and so on, there's actually almost a new ethic, a new way of being with nature and which includes people. Thinking about the pressures, if you like, on urban spaces more generally, not just allotments but the other spaces that we've mentioned and talked about, perhaps one of the more dominant ways of thinking about cities through a sort of notion of economic rhythms, and that as those rhythms move we get new pressures on land to develop in certain ways to perhaps for an out of town shopping centre, or for new housing, or something like that – is that the best way that we've got of understanding the way a city functions?

#### **David**

I think economic rhythms are very important and it'd be absurd to ignore that, but I think they can be terribly overstated and need to be stepped aside to understand other sorts of rhythms, the ways in which people use, change particular spaces of the city themselves over which they have some control, and over which they feel some ownership, and I think allotments are an excellent example of all of that, and particular changes, cultural changes which bring new attitudes to using allotment sites and other green spaces are just one of those rhythms where people can in not so much a collective way, but as in a numerous way be able to call some of the rhythm in their own lives through what they do themselves.

#### **Steve**

We've talked about a city's footprint on the wider environment which has received some contested kind of opinions, but one thing that strikes me about urban farming, perhaps more generally and perhaps moving out from Britain into other cities and other cultures and so on, is that not only can they produce food for the city, but also I think what we're saying here is they can actually change people's relations more generally with city nature formations within and outside the conventional city boundaries.

**Kathy**

Yes, because the concept of footprints does more than tell us about environmental relations globally. It also tells us a lot about social relations and, as you said, I think that city nature formations can help us to understand not only about nature, but also can help us to understand about each other. As David said, we wouldn't deny that economic rhythms are important and I think we've already seen that in the case of allotments, then clearly a dominant rhythm which in this case is the context of a neo-liberal economy, can have important implications for sites like allotments. But at the same time, as David points out, there are other rhythms and perhaps actually what we're seeing here is the potential that there is in society and in communities for sites like allotments to show people that actually those dominant rhythms need not always be dominant, they can actually be changed, and that people and communities have the power to change them.

**Steve**

I suppose what this discussion and the allotment case has done for me has given me a strong insight into the kinds of complex processes and tensions that are embedded and entangled with any site if you like in the city, and with its relationship to the wider world. In the course terms, if it's opened intensity so it's connected into all sorts of processes which stretch well beyond its conventional boundaries so it's not insignificant in that sense, because it involves flows of people, social relationships, different contexts like the organic food-growing context which has led to a new lease of life for certain parts of the allotment; and then of course there's always the wonderful felt intensities of the place, the social interaction and the interaction with social nature, and the way those two things come together. So I think it's been an important and clear example of what I intended by the term city nature formation, so I'd like now to thank you David for coming along, and thank you Kathy too.