**Illegal Urban Agriculture in the UK**

**Occupying the City through Guerrilla Gardening**

Dr Michael Hardman

(Co-authors: Professor Peter Larkham, Dr Julian Lamb and Dr Rachel Curzon)

Birmingham School of the Built Environment, Birmingham City University, UK

**Abstract**

Urban Agriculture (UA) is a relatively new concept in the Northern Hemisphere which involves the cultivation and distribution of food within the city. In its most fundamental form, UA is an umbrella term which incorporates community gardening, allotments, farms and other niche food projects. Yet, whilst there has been extensive analysis on the activity in the North American context, there is still an emerging research base within Europe. The majority of this research blames the lack of policy and planning which ultimately disables UA, citing examples in North America in which guidelines have been adopted to promote the activity more widely.

In recent years, an underground movement has evolved in response to these perceived barriers: improving areas aesthetically and on occasion transforming areas to accommodate UA. The ‘guerrilla gardening’ movement has received increased publicity and awareness and now features frequently in mainstream media and academic publications. Guerrilla gardeners are networks of volunteers who occupy and alter space without permission. Richard Reynolds, the most notable guerrilla in the UK, simply labels the act ‘the illicit cultivation of someone else’s land’ (Reynolds, 2008: 16).

This paper explores one of the authors’ experiences researching guerrilla gardeners in action; transforming urban spaces in the Midlands region of England to accommodate food. In particular, the paper analyses who was involved in this group, the reasons why these individuals pursued this form of cultivation and the hindrances of an unregulated approach. Finally, the paper concludes by evaluating how academics can research this semi-illegal activity in the future. This piece enables a look behind the curtain which clocks guerrilla activity and provides some recommendations for future research in this area.

Keywords: Food Security; Guerrilla Gardening; Spatial Planning; Urban Agriculture

**Author’s Biography**

Dr Michael Hardman is an interdisciplinary researcher interested in topics ranging from food security and urban agriculture to guerrilla gardening and city planning. He received his BSc in Geography and MA Urban Geography in Manchester before completing his PhD at Birmingham City University (BCU). Dr Hardman has held multiple research roles, teaches at both undergraduate and postgraduate level at BCU and holds a visiting lecturing post in cultural geography at the University of Salford. He has been invited to speak at a variety of international events and has published widely in his field.

**Introducing Urban Agriculture and Guerrilla Gardening: Illegal Cultivation in the City**

Research concerning how we grow, transport and educate the populace about food has been available for decades (Bryant *et al.*, 1982; Mougeot, 1999a, 1999b), yet the idea of ‘Urban Agriculture’ (UA) – the growing of crops in the city (Wiskerke and Viljoen, 2012) – has only recently emerged as an important academic topic (Bryant, 2012). There are ample examples of UA from across the globe, with Gorgolewski *et al*’s (2011) ‘Carrot City’ providing a commentary for the more innovative and radical. This exhibition of food is a touring concept visiting a variety of cities across the globe: from New York (USA) and Montreal (Canada) to Birmingham (UK), Paris (France), Casablanca (Morocco) and many more locations (Carrot City, 2012; Nasr *et al.,* in press).

In Europe, several networks have been established to promote discussion around the concept of UA: from the Association of European Schools of Planning Thematic Food Group (AESOP), to several Cooperation in Science and Technology (COST) ‘Actions’, there are increasing attempts to promote discussion around the topic (Hardman, 2012). Essentially, most of the discussion centres on the idea of UA and the embedding of the concept in policy, which has proved difficult in a variety of countries (Gorgolewski *et al.*, 2011; Steele, 2009). For instance, Tornaghi (2012) argues that planning practice is failing to embrace UA and needs to be more proactive towards the concept; adapting legislation to adopt the idea. Recently, several authors blame the planning system for its inability to realise the benefits of these new concepts, holding the practice responsible for the lack of integration into policy (see for example Tornaghi, 2012; Scott and Carter, 2012).

In response to this lack of adoption, some have gone ahead with plans for UA without gaining appropriate consents, such as planning permission (Crane, 2011). Whilst there is some discussion emerging on legitimate forms of UA, there is little discussion regarding unregulated, illegal forms of the concept (Douglas, 2011; McKay, 2011). At the forefront of this form of UA are guerrilla gardeners, individuals who alter land without permission (Flores, 2006; Tracey, 2007). Reynolds (2008) argues that the activity is on the increase in the UK, demonstrating the desire of some individuals, or groups, to tackle neglected land and important issues facing the general public. Whilst guerrilla gardeners are well known for beautifying landscape, their actions with promoting local food – through the illegal planting of vegetables and fruit in the urban – are less widely known (Crane *et al.,* 2012). Existing literature fails to account for the reasons why guerrilla gardeners pursue the unpermitted route, or the impact – on the nearby community – of the spaces they create (Hardman *et al.*, 2012). Fundamentally, as Douglas (2011: 1) states, ‘existing social science research on illegal alterations of urban space is limited’. Whilst guerrilla gardeners have been viewed from afar, knowledge on their actions and interactions is restricted (Crane *et al.,* 2012).

Growing without Permission

Whilst it is evident that there is a growing amount of UA occurring in UK cities, there has recently been a huge upsurge in grass-roots activity, which amongst other activities, also aims to increase UA (Hardman *et al*., 2012; McKay, 2011). This grass-roots approach is often labelled guerrilla gardening, which is essentially:

*“THE ILLICIT CULTIVATION OF SOMEONE ELSE’S LAND.”*

(Reynolds, 2008: 16)

The prefix ‘guerrilla’ has a military connotation, often being used to describe rebels who are in conflict with an oppressive dominant power (McKay, 2011). Reynolds (2008) acknowledges and emphasises this similarity. The guerrillas and authority both ‘wrestle for control’ and attempt to ‘shape the landscape’ (Reynolds, 2008). Reynolds goes one step further declaring that ‘fighting and gardening really are quite natural human pastimes, so combining the two offers no great contortion’(Reynolds, 2008: 28). Differences appear in their motives: whilst “traditional” guerrillas aim to topple a government or combat an invading army, guerrilla gardeners generally attempt to beautify neighbourhoods and increase biodiversity in areas which generally suffer from neglect (Cobb, 2011; Flores, 2006; Lewis, 2012).

Guerrilla gardeners generally tackle small spaces (Winnie, 2010), and since this activity has scarcely been researched, it could be questioned whether their action has any significant or lasting impact. Nevertheless, existing accounts of guerrilla gardening are somewhat one-dimensional; portraying the act in a purely positive light. The only thorough accounts of the activity derive from guerrilla gardeners themselves, such as Crane *et al.* (2012), Reynolds (2008), Tracey (2007, 2011) and various other authors and informal bloggers (see for example: D.C. Guerrilla Gardeners, 2012; Glasgow Guerrillas, 2012; Pothole Gardener, 2012). A review of existing literature reveals that academics who investigate the act are mostly ‘disconnected’: reviewing guerrillas from secondary sources or using techniques which allow only the activists’ views to be expressed (*see* Cobb, 2011; Crane, 2011; Crane *et al.*, 2012; Harrison, 2010; Johnson, 2011; McKay, 2011; Winnie, 2011; Zanetti, 2007). In some situations, such as that demonstrated by Crane *et al.* (2012), academics have started their own guerrilla gardening troop, presumably due to the inability to join an existing group of guerrilla gardeners. It could be argued that this severely jeopardises the traditional view of research as an independent, impartial activity, since in this case the individual reviewing the group was also the one who started it; these guerrilla gardeners did not form naturally, rather they are led by an academic as opposed to an activist with their own desires and issues for pursuing UA. There is no notable, balanced study which explores unregulated UA: the extent of the activity, its impact and the spectrum of those involved: academic explorations are somewhat short and slanted towards a particular agenda. The research carried out underpinning this paper aimed to address this issue through engaging with guerrilla gardeners over a prolonged period.

**A Disabling System? Planning-Centric Criticisms**

The various ideas expressed above all require a proactive planning system (Howe *et al*., 2005; Wiskerke and Viljoen, 2012). Academics have argued that urban planning should pay more attention to food systems (Born and Purcell, 2009; Neegard *et al*., 2012; Shackleton, 2012; Tornaghi, 2012). In Europe, often at the heart of the modern planning system lies the spatial planner, a position which ‘brings together and integrates policies for the development and use of land with other policies and programmes which influence the nature of places and how they function’ (ODPM, 2004).

Spatial planning theory aims to transform the previous system from a controlling, negative, reactive entity to one that is adaptive and positive; facilitating new innovative action and ideas (Scott, 2001; Scott *et al*., 2009; Taylor, 2010). This theoretical ideal elevate s the planner as facilitator and enabler to maximise multifunctionality and diversity that supports more innovative uses of food systems (Nadin, 2007; Tewdwr-Jones *et al*., 2010). However, in practice these ambitions for the spatial planning system appear to be illusory, especially in relation to UA (Tornaghi, 2012). For instance, Qviström (2010) believes that decisions take too long to materialise, and the planning process needs to be more reactive to innovative use of space. In an almost identical manner, Scott *et al.* (2009) argue that spatial planners are increasingly restricting activity and preventing innovative and creative practise, such as UA.

Whilst there are inevitable barriers preventing the integration of food into the urban context, the largest appears to be the restrictive legislation guiding current planning practice (Qviström, 2007; Scott, 2001; Nasr and Komisar, 2012). Spatial planners, according to Taylor (2010), are no different to those previously identified as land-use planners, town planners or urban planners; they still abide by rigid rules which regulate the management of space. Taylor creates the images that spatial planners practice in a similar manner to their twentieth century predecessors, who ‘sought to tame the unruly city’ (Hall and Barrett, 2012: 159). Essentially, spatial planners are seen as stifling creativity through the top-down approach employed (Valler *et al.,* 2012).

Nevertheless, some defend the planning system, such as Greed (1994) who argues that too often academics blame planners for being insufficiently reactive. Greed (1994), although referring to the old planning system, suggests that planners are seen as individuals with huge amounts of power; they are the ones who control the development of the built environment. However, in reality there is a complex web of developers, architects and other practices which change the urban landscape (American Planning Association, 2006; Conzen and Larkham, forthcoming; Inch, 2010; Larkham, 1996). Hillier and Healey (2010: 17) explain that ‘failures of planning practice are sometimes blamedon attempts to implement impossibly abstract or Utopian theory’, essentially they condemn the notion that planners can implement all idealist ideas, especially the more radical. Hillier and Healey suggest that some presume the advent of ‘spatial planning’, and its change in approach, is able to deal with even the most innovative and perhaps unsuitable of projects.

Despite this, there is a substantive literature that perceives the planning system as a potential barrier for UA development. Yet UA-related advisory bodies, such as the Community Land Advisory Service and Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens (FCFCG), claim that planning permission should be sought before any development (FCFCG, *circa* 2005): planning permission can sometimes be refused, but this is an unlikely scenario (Community Land Advisory Service, 2012). This is echoed by PlanLoCal (2012) who stipulates that ‘if you have an idea for a low carbon project or a community garden, you are likely to need some sort of planning permission to make it happen’, and with the latter proposal, evidence of ‘community support’ would be required. The recent report by the Welsh Rural Observatory (WRO) 2012, although not concentrating specially on UA (16% of the sites surveyed were urban), raises questions regarding the planning system, particularly the arduous process of obtaining permission to use land.

 *“There’s so much disused land across Wales and if we could get over that and the planning permissions that’s needed we could have loads of projects up and running for relatively small start up costs”*

(WRO, 2012: 16)

This report highlights the shortage of land, but more importantly, this idea that even once land is found, the planning system could constrain its use for UA. This correlates with earlier arguments from Tornaghi and others suggesting that planning is insufficiently proactive with regard to these new forms of agricultural activity: land owners need to be consulted more quickly and planning practice needs to be more open to the creation of these sites (Milbourne, 2011; Welsh Rural Observatory, 2012). Understandably, it may take some time for planners to adapt to the advent of UA and realise the potential of the concept. Qviström’s (2007) explanation on the constant struggle, mediated by planners, of the expanding city population and farming communities exemplifies the current separation between production and consumers. UA challenges this separation and calls for the integration of food cultivation into the city fabric; in effect this is an immense shift in practice and requires a robust and innovative system to respond (Scott and Carter, 2011; Wiskerke and Viljoen, 2012).

**Creating Havens for Produce through Guerrilla Gardening: Challenging Planning**

In response to a perceived complex permission granting system, several groups have pursued the act of guerrilla gardening to enable more UA to occur within cities (Tornaghi, 2012). This expansion of unregulated UA is hidden from the view of many (Hardman *et al*., 2012); these are projects which have been implemented, and continually run, without authority knowledge or planning permission. The main perpetrators behind these unpermitted forms of UA are the guerrilla gardeners: transforming and using land without permission.

Many official UA schemes have roots in the realm of guerrilla gardening: Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET), for instance, is now one of the best-known UA projects in the UK but began as a guerrilla project, with residents occupying spaces within the town to produce vegetables (IET, 2011). The dominant nature of these individuals soon persuaded the local planning authority to adapt legislation to support their action, with the colonised patches transitioning from illegal to legal uses of space (Adams *et al*., 2013). Another example is that of Rosa Rose from Germany, a group of residents who began colonising a patch of land adjacent to their block of apartments: growing vegetables and holding events on the space (Rosa Rose, undated). The authority was able to liaise with the landowner and gain temporary use of the land for the residents, who were able to expand and grow more vegetables on the space (Reynolds, 2008). In a more comprehensive study, Milbourne (2011: 7) notes how ‘tactics of guerrilla gardening were employed to transform [community garden] spaces and then agreements had been made with the local authority’; in essence, grass-root tactics enabled these UA projects. These are only a few examples, but all demonstrate the link between guerrilla gardening and UA, specifically how the former can initiate a legal, more formal type of food cultivation.

[INSERT FIGURE ONE]

This paper proceeds to discuss F Troop (Figure 1), a group of local authority employees who transformed a neglected strip of land to accommodate vegetables. It focusses on the authors’ experience in the field with this troop over two years: exploring guerrilla in action as opposed from an abstract point of view.

F Troop: The Dual Carriageway Colonisers

The group or ‘troop’, as they commonly refer to themselves, operated in the Midlands region of the UK and comprised a mix of mid 30s – early 40s male and females. The unusual, yet interesting, point about these individuals was that the group was formed entirely of local authority employees: by day they worked from a city-centre office and, on weekends or evenings, the group operated on council-owned land without permission from local authority. Due to the nature of their ‘day jobs’, it was vital that as a researcher one was mindful that revealing the location of where the troop practised would also reveal the authority they represent: disclosing information which could lead to colleagues recognising the individuals. Ultimately, this may end with dismissal or another form of punishment; with this in mind, their identities and the precise location of their action have been obscured in images and publications.

[INSERT FIGURE TWO]

The group was observed and interviewed over a two year period. The author also interacted with several other guerrilla gardeners at the same time, allowing for comparison and the sheer extent of guerrilla gardening to be revealed (see Hardman *et al*., 2012). F Troop cultivated a strip of land adjacent to a dual carriageway barrier; this is partially pictured in Figure 2. Unlike the majority of guerrilla gardeners, the group opted to plant a range of edible produce: from spinach to peas and nasturtium, a variety of vegetation was inserted into the landscape. They were conscious of the wider UA movement and wished to demonstrate how vegetables could grow in even the most inhospitable of urban environments. Through this repetitious digging of authority-owned land and planting of vegetables in the urban, F Troop inadvertently challenges the everyday perception of traditional food cultivation: the idea that agricultural activity should take-place in the rural, far away from our cities (Steel, 2009).

 *“It’s probably also coloured by the fact I work for the, well I did at the time work for the [local authority], and I didn’t really enjoy it. I should have known better, I should have just stuck with being a teacher in a school.”*

(Sarah from F Troop)

In the context of F Troop, the site appeared unnoticed and the only interaction with any element of authority was the six-monthly pruning of the vegetation which existed across the dual carriageway barrier. However, the observations and interviews collated in this research revealed three primary reasons why F Troop opted for the illegal route. The first appeared to centre on their resentment of the local authority – their employer – which, at the time of the first dig, was making redundancies: ‘we do it [garden unlawfully] to piss them [local authority] off’ (Sarah). The second surrounded the troop members’ perception that the planning system was overly complex. In particular they explained that the large amounts of paperwork required for permission was a huge barrier. Thirdly, F Troop appeared to adopt the guerrilla route in order to gain ‘thrills’ from the action. It was necessary to avoid authority, and the planning system, in order to achieve this taste of disobedience.

This pursuit of the illegal, for thrills, is well-documented amongst guerrilla groups. For example Crane’s (2012: 14) recent study of a troop in Ontario indicates how these individuals thrived on the ‘creativity and autonomy’ associated with the activity. This is reinforced when one explores the literature: Reynolds, McKay, Tracey and others suggest that a main draw to guerrilla gardening is this escape from reality and the opportunity to break rules. Less well-documented in the literature is the desire to avoid the planning system, with guerrillas holding the perception that the process is overly complex: these views were derived from previous engagements with planners on projects not associated with UA.

**Making Planning Attractive: Engaging the Guerrillas**

The views expressed through the investigation with F Troop inevitably pose challenges for planning practice. Although, in theory, attempts are being made to change perceptions and practice, this is still characterised by many outside the system based on previous experiences, actions and policies (Taylor, 2010). This, in turn, raises questions as to how planning practice can demonstrate and employ a more adaptive management strategy in an attempt to attract guerrilla gardeners to a more formal version of UA practice (Scott *et al*., 2009). Guerrilla gardeners are effectively volunteers who are transforming land through their passion to revitalise space; they are an untapped resource who could, if provided with wider authority support, revolutionise areas. If the planning process was perceived as more attractive to these individuals, it could be argued that this pool could be opened up and more innovative formal projects could be developed.

However, to a large extent the pursuit of the ‘thrill’ element drives F Troop‘s action: this opportunity to disobey and retaliate is a notable motivation for some guerrilla gardeners (Crane *et al*., 2012; Reynolds, 2008). Inevitably, this pursuit of a ‘naughty activity’ is a step too far for planning practice to manage, and thus presents a major challenge if guerrilla groups, like F Troops’, were ever to seek legitimation. However, Hardman *et al*. (2012) demonstrate how there are willing guerrilla gardeners open to change; they argue that these are less radical than F Troop and only adopt the illegal approach for simplicity and speed. These less radical guerrilla projects, such as those identified by Hardman *et al*., would gladly embrace planning and the wider authority particularly if funds and attractive propositions were to be offered.

There is plenty of guidance, and encouragement, for planning practice to grasp, and promote, this relatively new ideology (Marsden, 2010). Furthermore, IET (2011), Milbourne (2011) and Reynolds (2008), amongst others, provide evidence to suggest that successful projects can spring from guerrilla gardening. This is currently perhaps most evident in North America where UA is more widespread: Canada, the most notable for its adoption of the concept (see Nasr and Komisar, 2012; Nasr *et al.,* in press), has several schemes which began via guerrilla action, due to the restrictions placed by planning processes (Gorgolewski *et al*., 2011). These schemes were eventually legitimised and flourished within a supportive and enabling planning system. However, before F Troop or other guerrilla action can be accepted, the concept of UA must be embedded within planning policy: embracing this alternative form of agricultural activity could eventually pave the way for unregulated projects to be ‘mainstreamed’.

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