

'Meanwhile' gardening

Horticulture has the power to unlock vacant land and 'stalled' spaces so residents in high density areas can learn new skills, grow plants and relax

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In almost every town and city across the UK there are pockets of disused, derelict, or under-used land.

Exactly how much by area is hard to establish because there are a myriad reasons why land is left to its own devices. However, a 2016 report by the Local Government Association with construction market analyst Glenigan cites 475,647 homes with planning permission in England and Wales have yet to be built. Even with permission in place, the average time it takes for building to begin is 14 months.

While the wheels of progress steadily turn, sites designated for urban commercial development or multiple housing plots are often boarded up, becoming unsightly and having a negative effect on communities. It is sometimes possible, however, to take advantage of such downtime: 'meanwhile' projects, ranging from gyms to gardens, can make temporary use of vacant land to the potential benefit of everyone.

Mobile everything

In the London Borough of Newham, undergoing massive development and change following the London 2012 Olympic Games, a horticultural project is providing a green oasis for people and wildlife, a place for contemplation and a source of valuable horticultural training and therapy.

Core Landscapes (part of Core Arts, a community programme in Hackney helping those with mental health issues) is using a small part of a 2.3ha (5¾ acre) long, thin strip of land running parallel to the London Underground at Canning Town. Only seven years ago the site housed a petrol station, garage and timber yard but, after they were demolished, the site became a boarded-up wasteland overgrown with buddleia. In 2014 the Core Community Plant Nursery and Garden moved in after building work began on its former site, a few hundred yards up the road on Silvertown Way



As well as the nursery, the Canning Town garden offers 20 raised square beds as allotments for local residents. Nurgahn Mosbbir and her granddaughter use theirs for growing a selection of squashes and gourds, chillies and beans.

where it had spent the previous four years.

Site Horticultural Nursery Manager,

Nemone Mercer is under no illusion the project will move again. 'But I hope we get one more horticultural year here,' she says.

The mobility of this project is its unique selling point. Large trees are grown in pallet boxes, display beds have wheels – even the pond can be moved. Although it takes a huge effort to relocate, everyone connected with the project, from volunteers to local residents, believe that having the garden and nursery, even if it is just for a year or

two, is worth it. 'Everyone is positive about the project without exception,' says Nemone. 'Local people are very aware there is a lack of green space in Newham and they value the purpose of our project.'

As it relies on charitable funding, the nursery and garden can only be open two days a week. 'In fact our only complaint,' says Nemone, 'is that we are not open enough.' On these days volunteers come in to lend a hand and be trained, plants are sold and office workers drop by for a wander round during their lunch breaks.

Nemone Mercer and John Bennett, who run the site, have around 30 volunteers on their books. Regulars such as Lee Ann Benstead and Oliver McArthur value the company and the opportunity to learn new skills, while Des Blake has two 'allotments' on the site which he works on with members of other charities he is involved with. These allotments are again mobile. Large crates on pallets, they are rented to local residents and community groups who do not have a garden of their own. By paying a nominal fee for a key to the site, gardeners can water and tend their crops every day.

Another important factor of the project is its non-exclusivity. 'We will work and give training to anyone – there are no exclusions,' says Nemone. 'Our regular volunteers are from all backgrounds and ages. They may be in between jobs, recovering from illness, >>>



The garden in Canning Town is open to anyone who wants to drop by. Here volunteers enjoy their tea break.



The site before the garden was made.



Nemone Mercer, Horticultural Nursery Manager for Core Landscapes.



Volunteers Lee Ann Benstead (right) and Martin Darling pot up stock for the nursery.

Community gardening

or just wanting to boost their confidence.' They can attend every week, or only once in a while, whatever suits them.

Plant sales are an income stream for the project, with most sold to other community groups. As well as plants being grown on site, some are donated by local residents; particularly welcome are the surplus plants given by companies working on nearby landscape projects.

Corporate social responsibility programmes are also immensely valuable – described by Nemone as a 'lifeline'. On these days up to 30 people from one company can turn up to work together: a management challenge for Nemone but an important financial boost for the project, as well as valuable team building for the participating groups.

Future plans

The land on which the project sits has already been surveyed by owner Galliford Try which hopes to regenerate it with nine apartment blocks, a hotel, gym and commercial outlets. Plans at the moment do include a new public open space, an area for growing flowers and vegetables, a play space, and raised container beds for residents.

'Having the project on site has been an important factor in the aspect of the design development,' says Nick Hodgson, Regeneration Projects Manager for Galliford Try. 'While there is a long way to go, we like to think we can retain these [horticultural] elements.' There is also an opportunity for Core Landscapes to



Staff from HSBC held a corporate responsibility day at the Canning Town project in September. They made raised planting boxes from old plastic containers that are designed to be moved by forklift truck.

supply plants for the new development. 'There will be significant landscaping and planting in the development and this can provide

opportunities for organisations such as Core Landscapes to contribute as suppliers to the developer,' says Nick.

Galliford Try does not have an alternative space for Core's garden and nursery, but Nick says it will provide what support it can to help with a move to alternative premises. When building work does actually start, Nemone has no idea where the garden and nursery will go next. 'Ideally it will be somewhere close so we can keep our relationship with the neighbourhood,' she says.

Here's hoping a suitable, local, alternative space will indeed be found. ●

FURTHER INFORMATION

Core Landscapes community plant nursery, Silvertown Way, London E16; www.core-landscapes.co.uk

❖ Search 'Greening Great Britain' and 'Community gardens' at www.rhs.org.uk

Bringing life to 'stalled' spaces

In Scotland, a Government-backed project has encouraged local authorities with support and funding to make better use of 'stalled' development sites, under-used green spaces and vacant or derelict land.

Called Stalled Spaces Scotland and delivered by Architecture and Design Scotland, it was set up as part of Legacy 2014, a program arising from the Glasgow Commonwealth Games to improve town centres. So far it has funded seven councils to get 20 projects off the ground. Of those, 14 are horticultural – either raised beds for growing food or enhancing areas with ornamentals. Others range from a pop-up gym to art workshops.

So far, £82,000 has been awarded and match-funded by the seven councils. 'We are just at the start of this project,' says Emma Halliday, Project Manager for Stalled Spaces Scotland following the first round of funding allocation last summer. 'We are developing workshops to help those involved improve their horticultural and media skills.'

From little acorns

The countrywide project takes inspiration from Stalled Spaces, which began in 2011 by Glasgow City Council and Glasgow Housing Authority. Glasgow is said to have more vacant sites than the rest of Scotland put together. Although most are earmarked for development they can remain vacant for up to a decade before work begins.

Since its inception, 101 Stalled Spaces projects have received £211,000, involved 25,000 volunteers and regenerated 50ha (123 acres) of land. Funding has been matched by other organisations to help those with learning disabilities, substance-abuse issues, young adults with families, and senior citizens.

❖ www.glasgow.gov.uk/stalledspaces

❖ www.ads.org.uk/stalled-spaces-scotland



The Stalled Spaces Greyfriars Garden project in Glasgow provides community allotments for residents in Merchant City and Drygate.

Oliver McArthur watering at the community plant nursery in Canning Town, East London.

