

## A bed for the guerrilla gardener; questioning public space and challenged land through sabotage of the establishment

### Benjamin Brace

#### Abstract

The city landscape; a concrete monolith that suppresses all where nature is dulled and forced to obey an urban rigidity. Throughout this concrete jungle rivers are concealed and channelled away and vegetation is pruned to grow in ways that please the planners and maintenance operatives. This suppression parallels itself in both the workers and residents, who are subsequently conditioned in a way to believe they are individual despite the uniformity, (Anon, 2009). The act of guerrilla gardening and the illicit cultivation of land that is not your own, can be seen by some as frivolous acts of rebellion and revolution against the authoritative regime within the socio-cultural matrix of public space. Yet to others it defines, a fight for freedom of expression and an undermining of capitalism and globalisation ultimately leading toward community cohesion. It is a direct action placed directly within the landscape aimed toward the lack of and abandonment of landscape resources. Rather than inadvertently bypassing social responsibility through the endless administrative red tape and governmental procedure. Individuals are then able to alter their environment to suit their means and take control back.

#### Introduction

The founding father of guerrilla gardening in the UK, Richard Reynolds, believes that there are two main enemies of the guerrilla gardener. The perceived establishment and people in charge of public space are not what he targets, but the two contradictory conditions of open space within the urban matrix, scarcity and neglect; simply an *'insidious enemy that creeps up unnoticed by those that see the scene regularly'* (Reynolds, 2008, p 71). I understand the sentiment that he implies and the reasoning behind simply tackling the shortcomings of those in charge, but I think guerrilla gardening goes beyond that. In considering that the fundamental ideologies behind guerrilla gardening have roots stemming from an activist movement against the establishment, then surely the act of guerrilla gardening is in itself a powerful, politically engendered statement; where these gardens and incidents, 'play a role in asserting public will in the face of institutional change,' (Ring, 2009).

*"Guerrilla gardening is a battle for resources, a battle against scarcity of land, environmental abuse and wasted opportunities" (Reynolds, 2008 p 16)*

Guerrilla gardening is a uniquely urban phenomenon, the urban condition has an innate force on land; rationing it whilst increasing its commercial value<sup>i</sup>. These factors force many inhabitants of the urban matrix to simply not have access to their own land and it also creates vast tracts of land that lie dormant; *"where old buildings are being demolished to make way for new [or] elsewhere [, where] it is simply empty land that has been left to ruin"* (Taylor, 2008). The act of guerrilla gardening takes form through the illicit cultivation of this abandoned and neglected land; be it publicly or privately owned and seeks to question the significance of 'public space' to those who experience it. An emerging trend for the human population shows that it is to become increasingly urbanised; since 2006 half the world's people live in cities (Reynolds, 2008). With this in mind, dwelling space has become precious over the creation of open public space within the urban matrix. The question that is raised is; why should this precious resource of open space be deemed surplus to requirements and detached from the public domain when it lays dormant, to simply become nothing more than litter receptacles?

With more and more people migrating to urban environments the nature of the urban landscape is to become ever denser, with an increasing number of dwellings per hectare. As denser cities are considered to be more efficient in serving their occupants (Reynolds, 2008); but while this scenario is considered utopia for town planners, it directly impacts on the amount of open space readily available to utilise by people in an unstructured way. Through this approach to planning and development there are certain spaces borne throughout the urban fabric that do not have specific program. The landscape is prioritised for dwelling space and it is in the indeterminate and ‘program-less’ spaces that subsequently appear, that guerrilla gardening can give meaning to. ‘Program-less’ spaces such as triangular patches of grass at pinch points between paths, barren, litter strewn roundabouts, incidental roadside medians, forgotten tree pits and randomly located planting areas full of weeds as seen in Fig. One and the privately owned plot of land laying dormant before it becomes financially viable to develop. Detached as these spaces are to the community, the community are in turn indeterminate as to their appropriation of that space and so they lie neglected. There are many reasons why this is so. Sometimes there are a myriad of confusing ownership over the land or further more, an aversion by the owner to allow public access due to fear of litigation (Taylor, 2008). Guerrilla gardening crosses these boundaries of ownership through cultivating abandoned and forgotten land without permission; individuals can then showcase this direct act of rebellion and social activism in a very public way to benefit the community.



Fig. One: An example of the types of ‘Program-less’ spaces that litter the urban environment and form one the main targets of the guerrilla gardener.

There is a continual theme behind guerrilla gardeners and the act of guerrilla gardening that stems from oppression and disillusionment with the establishment; beyond the associations with environmentalism, permaculture and land reclamation<sup>ii</sup>. These deeply political underpinnings of guerrilla gardening directly question and challenge authoritative control over public open space and the mere fact of illicitly gardening in the public sphere shows a ‘*direct rejection of our political environment*’ as Reynolds (2008 p 71) states. It breaks down systems of authority and directly challenges the perceived ‘ownership’ over the environment due to its location in the urban landscape. Where responsibility for the environment, rather than passing it onto someone else, can be reorganised and assigned to those whom it directly affects. Guerrilla gardening intersects the threshold of ownership and begins to break down cultural social regulations; it is an environmental appropriation of neglected space that would otherwise be forever lost to the urban matrix.

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### **Privatisation, Sanitization and Consequence in Public Space**

There is a worrying trend within urban Britain that ‘public space’ is becoming increasingly privatised and controlled by large, multinational companies and corporations. Public space should ultimately be in opposition to the ulterior motives underpinning privately owned space; it should be open to all and wholly democratic in its ideologies (Henaff and Strong 2001 cited in Hou, et al 2010 p 3). However, due to past governmental policies, this democratic ideology of ‘public space’ within urban Britain is becoming continually surrendered to swathes of quasi non-governmental organisations and regional development corporations<sup>iii</sup>. These unelected bodies, funded by public money, whose powers to force through regeneration are enshrined in law. Where previously, ‘the government and local councils ‘owned’ the city on behalf of us, the people, now more and more of the city is owned by investors, and its central purpose is profit’ (Minton, 2009). This creates a public realm that is inspired by neither the culture nor the context of where it is placed, but creates that which is borne exclusively to increase monetary gain.

“...[increasing privatisation and sanitation of public space] *prescribes and homogenises urban activities and identities, placing people in the role of*

*passive consumer rather than active creator or participant.” (Franck and Stevens, 2007 p 4)*

Guerrilla gardening strikes at the very values of what public space should stand for, those values that are concerned with democracy, openness and publicity of debate (Hou, 2010). The effect of ever-increasing privatisation and sanitisation in the public sphere removes these democratic values, and public space can become defunct, banal and without meaning. "For the public good" seems to have been dropped from planning law and replaced by "For the benefit of the economy" and areas throughout the city are re-born as shopping centres and private roads, (Anon, 2009). The space hijackers 'Ivy League' operation in 2007 sought to readdress the balance between corporate architecture and nature as shown in Fig. Two and Three. The demonstration aimed to deflect the centre of attention away from the overbearing, architecture of the place towards the natural elements it seeks to suppress; *"working to promote the liberty of City workers through the medium of nature"* (Nodding, 2007).



Fig. Two: The Space Hijackers found many places to plant into corporate architecture during operation 'Ivy League'

Fig. Three: Bristly Pioneer of Space Hijackers positions his plant whilst taking part in 'Operation Ivy League'



When public space loses its ability to possess 'multiple and shifting meanings rather than clarity of function' (Franck and Stevens, 2007) it loses its underlying democratic meaning as public space should become the embodiment of a diverse city (Hou, 2010). The characteristics of a public space to be open and accessible become blurred and lost to those who use it. This ultimately leads to spaces that fall under neglect and abandonment, unless that space is capable of monetary remuneration, as the community becomes detached from it. And unfortunately as Reynolds (2008, p 73) states *'they [the establishment] need nothing from the space and owe nothing to the community in which it sits,'* so the owners care little of any resounding negative effect if and when it lies abandoned. This lack of care visually blights the landscape and cannot be easily escaped or hidden from view. So the very nature and makeup of our society, one of supposed 'democracy' working hand in hand with capitalist systems, is ultimately fundamental in the reactive and activist nature of guerrilla gardening.

*"The people who truly deface our neighbourhoods are the companies that scrawl giant slogans across buildings and buses trying to make us feel inadequate unless we buy their stuff. They expect to be able to shout their message, in your face from every available surface, but you're never allowed to answer back" (Banksy, 2005 p 4)*

The reactive and politically engendered nature of guerrilla gardening is also highlighted by the contemporary artists collaborative who go by the name of [eating in public]. The group planted a portion of public land on the island of O'ahu, in the State of Hawai'i in 2003. They grew papaya plants in a strip of indeterminate land left over from the fencing off of a private estate, in between a public path and the aforementioned chain link fence shown in Fig. Four. The plants were intentionally grown for the benefit and enjoyment of the community (the fruits were encouraged to be picked and



Fig. Four: The chain link fence that [eating in public] encountered that separated large tracts of privately owned, but abandoned, land from the community

taken away). Unfortunately the local authority disagreed with the organisations actions and after a few months ripped up the plants and, in an act of defiance and authoritarian pressing, relocated the fence nearer to the path; erasing all trace of effort. Admittedly, acting in the way they did, [eating in public] broke laws and the ‘terms of use’ that were set for that space (Chan and Sharma, 2003). Nevertheless, in actively engaging with their environment and breaking down authoritarian barriers, Chan and Sharma (2003) ‘sought to re-present the figure of the ‘activist’ as one engaged in more than symbolic protest.’ Chan and Sharma’s actions stemmed from a community engendered political activism. Their actions focussed solely on and against the increasing amount of neglected or abandoned indeterminate space they encountered. This loss of meaning and value was then reinterpreted as protest.

### A Malleable City; Personal Relation Instead Of Purpose

The action of guerrilla gardening is perpetrated in anonymity, it creates accidental signs and symbols outside the structure of capitalism. This anonymity is explicitly displayed in one of the urban art installations of the anonymous art collective, Luzinterruptus.<sup>iv</sup> The ideas behind the installation of their ‘Garden of the not too distant future’ seen in Fig. Five is to break away from the creation of monoculture within the urban matrix and to promote the preservation of urban

greenery throughout. They attached over a hundred transparent food packaging containers to a wall facing an empty square, inside which they placed leaves and branches ‘donated’ from the surrounding trees along with green LED lights. By placing the artwork directly onto the built form it highlighted the disillusionment they had with their establishment by immediately attacking the banality apparent in their city. This ‘green graffiti’ (namely graffiti that uses plants and natural products instead of chemicals) creates a basic sense self-awareness within the population that is able to equip people with a

Fig. Five: A member of Luzinterruptus attaches an element of the ‘Garden of the Not Too Distant Future’ onto the targeted wall



means to "imagine" their own identity; with a means of differentiating themselves from an obstinate, homogenous society. Ultimately creating a garden that becomes a *‘superimposition onto the city works, not within the planning structure, but on top of it’* as Ring (2009, p 58) states. Guerrilla gardening provides an identity for disenfranchised sections of society, a direct way for them to claim their environment beyond the control of the organisations in charge or who own the space. These newly crafted identities challenge those on the outside to reorganise the signs that define their surroundings, from the undefined residual spaces, non-sites that litter the urban matrix (De Mayer and Versluys, 1999), to the scripts of beautification and food production. It is a narrative of the city, the inscription of its conflicts and triumphs, and the transformation of its infrastructure from one of dead, grey concrete to a vibrant and living green. It becomes part of the relationship between the spaces and historical events that the city consists of (Calvino, 1972 cited in Potteiger and Purinton, 1998 p7). It magnifies the relationship between the fabric of the city and its inhabitants. This city fabric can be bent, shaped, deformed and punctuated when it is guerrilla gardened by understanding that the organisational structures or hierarchical systems that preside over our public realm have a two-way relationship with the physical environment they sit in; *“they both produce the environment and are reproduced by it”* (Merker, 2010 p49). In destabilising the structure and relationships in the landscape deemed ‘public space,’ guerrilla gardening releases possibilities for new interactions, functions and meanings. The ‘program-less’ and indeterminate spaces that appear within the rigid structures and systems of ‘public space’ are exploited; not only does the act of guerrilla gardening in itself become apparent, evidence of the structures that hold the dissent in place can be observed (Purves, 2005 cited in Merker, 2010 p52).

*“These acts do not require overburdening investment or infrastructure, they enable individuals and often small groups to effect changes in the otherwise hegemonic urban landscapes” (Hou, 2010 p15)*

The passer-by is able to then begin to draw narrative from that space where guerrilla gardening has been played out; it makes visible the disillusionment present within the society surrounding it. In crossing those temporal and spatial experiences (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998) it becomes a new narrative for the city from within those indeterminate, suddenly appropriated spaces littering the urban fabric. These acts of dissent and activism become new layers within the continual narrative of the city landscape and ‘create connections between acts of resistance and community initiatives’ (Ring, 2009).

*“...like a gothic cathedral, the garden is a distinct storytelling site.” (Potteiger and Purinton, 1998 p 15)*

Fig. Six: A member of the community organisation CS 28 May stakes claim to the land



### **An Intersection into the City Fabric – The Bed**

The roots of guerrilla gardening therefore, reach further into the city fabric than the initial act is perceived to; hierarchically upwards, into the minds and psyche of governing bodies and deep into the foundations of where the workings of the machine dwell. It is fundamentally a response from those who inhabit the city and a demonstration to the more transient sections of that city. Guerrilla gardening occurs primarily in the horizontal plane but the nature of plants<sup>v</sup> is to grow. Grow up and toward the light and grow down into the soil in search of water and nutrients. This unrepentant growth emerging from the guerrilla garden creates visual breaks in the monolithic, spreading leviathan that constitutes the urban landscape thus making visible places of value and meaning (Ring, 2009). Rather like the conditions for growth, the conditions for the guerrilla garden have to be

correct to be at their most potent. But at once these multi-appropriations of the city’s fabric are fleeting and ephemeral given enough space to flourish they become a stable and a constant within the community. This is depicted in Fig. Six where a community organisation, CS 28 May, was formed in Italy that rose up against the constant neglect and abandonment of a large swathe of land within their local environment. They were able to cultivate a long standing community vegetable garden<sup>vi</sup>. Their resistance was situated within the community, responsive to the concrete physical conditions that surrounded it; an explicit demonstration of what the community ultimately needed to those that govern or control the space.

Perhaps this is ultimately how guerrilla gardening can become common place within society<sup>vii</sup>. Considering that the post-urban landscape can exist in the form of fragmented, threaded, invisible networks, guerrilla gardening becomes an intersection. Not only does it reclaim space that would ordinarily be detached from communities, it allows a glimpse of an unimaginable society founded on principles of cooperation, participation and ultimate democracy. Whereas before a community can fundamentally become reactionary to those *‘indeterminate, indefinite leftovers of land oozing around buildings,’* (Jacobs 1961 p138) preceding a guerrilla gardening ‘attack,’ the space once again becomes a fully functional public resource within the urban landscape matrix.

### **By Way Of Conclusion**

The questioning of ownership of land and the establishment that oversees that land through the act of guerrilla gardening has a profound affect on us when we recognise it; although most people do not notice plants whether cared for or neglected (Ring, 2009). Throughout the discussions explored in writing this paper, it is evident that guerrilla gardening provokes lively debate whenever the underlying issues are raised. Perhaps it is because many people feel detached from those that govern them. In seeking approval from those that govern we enter into the world of bureaucracy and procedure. A world where things must be rubber stamped only for it to be then passed onto another department; an idea forever shifting within the catacombs of local government that may never see the light of day. If we circumnavigate that bureaucratic environment, our surroundings are bettered immediately without cost to the public

and precious governmental budgets are spared the expense. Guerrilla gardening is an action played out in public that *'bypasses the red tape of committees and the stifling procedures of planning permissions to bring life to challenged land'* (Ring, 2009 p 54) and in taking control of our environment without the acceptance of our governing bodies previously disjointed communities breed 'subtle sabotage' throughout themselves. That act of crossing boundaries and planting indeterminate land, albeit an illegal act, defies the establishment and creates new elements of the city fabric; formed outside the intended program of the city's infrastructure. We are able to witness actively minded people appropriating neglected space without the approval of those we *pay* to look after it. If each of those indeterminate spaces that clutter our cityscapes were to be turned over into the ownership of those that surround it, the community spirit created would be monumental; with the community and its components becoming able to fully integrate into the fabric of a city toward a more sustainable environment.

So what does the future hold for guerrilla gardening? People have sought to interact with their environment and appropriate their surroundings to suit their needs and desires from the very first evidence of settling. So perhaps it will carry on ad infinitum. Certainly the installation of a 'guerrilla greenbelt' for cities such as London, proposed by Heather Ring (2009), would formulate what she calls 'a connected corridor of reclaimed spaces.' This would give the many and various spatial opportunities required by the population to become interconnected and engrained into the environment that surrounds them. The feeling of accomplishment and stewardship that arises from owning a patch of land and nursing seedlings that you have germinated is immeasurable; with the cumulative effect of these fleeting, seemingly sporadic guerrilla gardening events within the urban fabric enabling residents to regain the ownership over their neighbourhoods they once had (Ring, 2009). Even in the face of rapid change and sweeping privatisation, under the banner of 'regeneration,' of the public realm. To experience, or participate in, the act of guerrilla gardening yourself reinforces what it is to be part of a community; a society even.

*"The more communities begin to recognise their capacity to assert their agency and shift the public sphere through guerrilla gardening, the greater their resilience will be..." (Ring, 2009 p58)*

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## Image credits

1. Richard Reynolds (via Flickr)
2. Helen Nodding
3. Helen Nodding
4. Gaye Chan
5. Gustavo Sanabria
6. Paolo Facchetti

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<sup>i</sup> According to the National Land Use Database, brownfield land in England stood at some 26,000 hectares in 2006. Over half of this amount lies as derelict or vacant land (Taylor, 2008)

<sup>ii</sup> One of the very first actions was from an English reactionary group known as 'The Diggers' in 1649 as a response against the early enclosure acts and rising food prices in a time of turmoil. The 'diggers' were the brainchild of a one Gerrard Winstanley. His plight centred on the inappropriate use and destruction of large tracts of common land laid to waste when rising food prices and great social unrest followed the execution of Charles I and first English civil war in 1649. The group's beliefs were concentrated around the understanding that there was an ecological interrelationship between humans and nature; this then able to create deeply ingrained connections between people and their immediate context and surroundings.

*"Their movement rose in defence of 'the commons' that were being systematically destroyed by the violent land reforms, privatizations and thefts characteristic of the formative period of industrial capitalism and the ongoing consolidation of European colonialism" (Chan and Sharma, 2003)*

<sup>iii</sup> The foundations of the privatisation of public space were laid in the death throes of Britain's industrial economy in the late 1970s once Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government came to power and pursued certain policies that had a direct affect on planning and property law, (Minton, 2009). One of the essential concepts of urban regeneration that underpinned the earliest days of the Thatcher government was the American concept of 'Leverage' where public money is spent in order to bring in private investment and an increase in property prices (Minton, 2009). This ushered in a period of unprecedented economic growth within certain urban cores Britain and where the privatisation of many public sector bodies was commonplace. This conceptual approach to development also had its beginnings from the deregulation of the stock market in 1986 which allowed companies to sell speculative elements of wealth. It paved the way for a pioneering development in the heart of the East End of London, Docklands; a showcase for the spirit of the times. The deregulation of the stock market flooded the country with an avalanche of newly found investment and founded a newly emerging economy of 'unfettered financial services' that replaced the failing industrial economy (Minton, 2009).

<sup>iv</sup> The anonymous art group 'Luzinterruptus' is interviewed by the German research, science, teaching and art project network urbanartcore here: <http://www.urbanartcore.eu/luzinterruptus-we-are-not-light-art-pioneers/>

<sup>v</sup> ...and politically engendered activist organisations for that matter!

<sup>vi</sup> The community project CS 28 May began in 2008. A large, privately owned estate had lain neglected for many years within the community. The piece of land they chose to cultivate was big enough to warrant the need for a tractor to cultivate it; this was indeed one of the main drivers behind the choice. How could that large amount of space be left to waste when the people surrounding it could not afford the vegetables that were illicitly grown.

<sup>vii</sup> ..and most probably will following the ever increasing erosion of civil liberties within the public realm.