

European Conference
Cities and Urban Spaces: Chances for Cultural and Citizenship Education

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City – Space – Identities in the 21st Century

by Richard Reynolds

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I’m sitting in one of four chairs on stage in a Trieste conference venue. It is the opening session of a three-day conference during which the international delegates have gathered to discuss cultural and citizenship education in the context of cities and urban space. Specifically we are encouraged to explore: “the challenges that politics and civil society in cities and urban quarters are confronted with given an increasingly mobile and heterogeneous population, how disparate social and cultural identities and interests can be kept together, how conflicts can be dealt with and solved, and the roles of innovative and integrative projects in support of participation and fair access to the resources and institutions of a city?”

The diversity of the delegates and the breadth of the subject matter in this invitation are mirrored by the wide spectrum of speakers I’m sharing the stage with. There is a German architect with a specialism in cultural interventions, a Swiss academic with particular interest in the UAE, a British cultural marketing consultant who has just dazzled us with an hour’s slide show of his visits to the world’s leading cities, and me: a man who has earned his place on stage by becoming known for illegally digging up neglected parts of his local area in London, blogging about it, sharing the tales of many others who have done the same where they live and extolling the benefits in my book, “On Guerrilla Gardening”. This article is an attempt to expand on this souk-like hagggle of ideas traded between panellists and jostled with an audience of academic tourists.

In this article I’ve been invited to expand upon what we discussed that evening. To be frank, what I recall now was an enjoyable intellectual muddle as the convergence of a diverse audience, diverse subject matter and diverse panel struggled to pursue a coherent debate. Or perhaps it was just the end of a long tiring day. I recall stridently concluding that for the purposes of practically involving people in cultural activity, that would enrich their citizenship education, we should not consider space in which this happens at the “city” scale but instead at within the “neighbourhood” or even “street”. At this smaller urban scale the individual citizen would have a more tangible role to play and could more directly and deeply impact on the lives of fellow citizens. But this call for pragmatism was left reverberating uncomfortably like an echo in an empty room, perhaps because the audience had gathered to learn about making an impact with broader brush strokes than I was advocating.

So this article is an opportunity to go well beyond that evening’s discussion and present my relevant agenda for the conference: (1) to justify the guerrilla gardening approach in general (2) to present how residents gardening public urban spaces can play a potentially powerful role in creating identity

Guerrilla gardening is the illicit cultivation of someone else's land – typically neglected, accessible land. It has been going on for hundreds of years – there are references to it in Matthew's Gospel. The term was coined in 1973 in New York by a group who called themselves the Green Guerillas. They cleared a derelict lot and turned it into a community garden. From its illicit origins it grew into becoming first a legitimate short-term land use and eventually an officially designated part of the city's green park space. In recent years guerrilla gardening has gained in popularity and profile, particularly in urban areas driven by a wide range of motivations – high density dwellers opportunistically seeking an affordable solution to lacking their own garden, as a remedy to public neglect (exacerbated by public sector cut backs), as a new 'eco' form of street art or a more intentionally political and provocative form of direct action. The ambition, at many scales within a neighbourhood, may be for a more beautiful, social, productive, healthy space, but regardless of the different ambitions, the strategy – of doing it without asking, against the odds of convention and the law – is what unites guerrilla gardeners. This public land is a resource that is up for grabs by anyone. By demonstrating proven determination, commitment and resourcefulness a guerrilla gardener waits for the landowner to object and perhaps hopes for toleration or permission rather than seeks agreement before they have even proven their ability to themselves. Legitimization may not be necessary – it's certainly not necessary for the official institutions of city or a neighbourhood to recognize this space for the guerrilla gardener to be creating identity. From their first dig into the public ground, the guerrilla gardener is going about identity creation.

Gardening in public, by which I mean really in public, without fences, hedges or clear divisions that separate one community from another creates a paradox for those seeking an identity for themselves or the place they are creating. You are almost inevitably visible when gardening in a public thoroughfare even if the illicit nature of your gardening prompts one to seek a costume as disguise or just the cover of darkness. In fact any "disguise" other than something official looking (like a high visibility jacket) will probably make you even more visible, for some is the intention. In Colchester England I know of a guerrilla gardener who dresses up as if he were a giant bush, to ensure maximum visibility and potential conversation whilst also safe guarding his identity. But withholding one's identity with such extremes is rarely necessary and rarely sought by guerrilla gardeners who more typically just go about their gardening looking much like any other hobbyist, just avoiding times of the day when official horticultural or hygiene contractors might be on duty. Whether you are dressed to look curious or dressed to look ordinary, I am convinced that gardening itself is one of the most welcoming and approachable kinds of activity you could be doing in public, perfect for someone looking to strike up conversation, build a reputation and express a very wide range of beliefs and ambitions. Gardening can unite people. People of all ages and backgrounds will spot you, stop and express interest in what you are doing, and though seldom in large numbers, there is a steady stream of conversations. I think part of this appeal is that gardening is more than a spectacle, entertainment or art form, but it is fundamentally useful, a core skill, a worthy yet humble pursuit - perhaps more than ever as people feel some kind of latent obligation to understand how to garden should they need to grow their own dinner in a post apocalyptic landscape, or perhaps because it's become highly fashionable - Burberry's 2009 advertising campaign was set in a London plant nursery, American Vogue published pages of guerrilla gardening themed fashion in November 2009. Unlike more rarefied forms of public 'intervention' that are typically described as art or theatre, gardening is something perceive between a chore and a craft. So the spectators of a gardener do not generally watch on in passive awe but are more participatory, and behave as friendly equals or inquisitive pupils. The identity that comes from these encounters is better understood and it is deeper than were conversation not at the heart of the moment.

The conversations tend to start by asking the obvious, people seek reassurance that the gardening they see is not actually something else in disguise. When that has been confirmed dialogue may linger on practical matters, such as what is being planted, how it is done, where else it is happening. But from these simple exchanges there is an opportunity for conversation to get into bigger subject areas: how would they like to see the area change, how could they go about doing it, why are they doing it through direct action, what else could be done beyond gardening? That this conversation is happening in the street, in an open, informal context, unplanned and where others could potentially join in too is helpful for engaging people who would be unlikely to get involved in these discussions otherwise through more formal arenas such as local community meetings – in these forums I meet a fairly uniform character: the well-rooted resident with long term ambitions for the area. In places with transitory populations you will best find people by putting yourself in a place where they will encounter you. It is seeing someone doing the unexpected in public, but something that is more or less socially acceptable (as I assert gardening is) that is a provocation to think and talk about what is going on: the intended form of the social and physical landscape of the area. The gardener discovers who these passers by are. In London the diversity of encounters I have personally experienced is extreme while guerrilla gardening. I have had conversations with members of parliament, vagrants, tourists, unruly children and best of all my neighbours who I had until then not met. Sometimes conversations develop into friendship, donations or help with the gardening. When guerrilla gardening abroad I have even struck up conversation with the leader a local Libyan Revolution Youth Union in Tripoli, who it turned out not only liked my ‘peace gesture’ but was also keen to share his reminiscences about life studying film in London during the 1970s – a very unexpected anecdote - the exchanged changed my perspective of Libyans.

The conversations can live on beyond the garden if the guerrilla gardener also shares what they are doing online. Blogging and participation in online social spaces has played a key part in guerrilla gardening’s popularity in the last six years, and creation of identity for the movement, for the gardeners and for what has been created. The guerrilla gardeners can signpost people to read more and meet more people online. An encounter on the street is just the portal for this wealth of information.

Identity creation continues in the street too once the encounter is over and the guerrilla gardener is away from their garden. The landscape is an expression of the gardener’s identity by the form of garden they choose to grow. You can read gardens like you can read someone’s clothes. Guerrilla gardens stand out like people who are not wearing an official uniform where you would expect them. The regimented summer bedding plants, the dull clipped hedges, or the weedy dusty scrub of neglect that characterize typical gardens by public thoroughfares – are replaced by an eclectic range of personal expressions – an English cottage style garden at the centre of a roundabout, a vegetable patch on a roadside verge, a frenzy of creepers around the base of a street tree. Any kind of unexpected garden like this says there is an enthusiastic gardener in the neighbourhood and that others respect or tolerate it. The guerrilla garden gives a place identity. Whatever form the garden takes it, says that the authorities have little interest or concern about it. These kinds of garden stand out as creators of identity for a place not only because they look different from the ordinary but also typically because they are planted in places where the opportunity is greatest, where the neglect of the public realm is the norm. Sometimes the statement provided by the plants is insufficient for the guerrilla gardeners’ objectives and so they plant signage alongside the garden, naming the garden, inviting participation and stating objectives. The graphic design, typically hand-painted, communicates their informal origins even to people who might not understand the words. With, or without signs, the contrast between regular garden and the irregular one is strong. This is a guerrilla garden at its most powerful form of identity creation – a living message twenty-four hours a day. It is a visible cared for space despite the law. People are going against convention and taking risks to make this.



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The lawmakers tend to ignore this kind of criminality. Most of my police encounters end with tacit permission, and local councillors are privately supportive even if they usually appear publically antagonized. Guerrilla gardening is an effective strategy to bypass the potential bureaucracy and unnecessary fear of the landowner and gardening without agreement ensures the gardener can test their own commitment without the pressure of making agreements before they have experienced what is necessary to achieve their aims. The benefits of gardening in public exist without the activity being illicit. Doing it as a guerrilla accentuates the impact by being more provocative, unexpected and therefore conversation worthy.

