

Sustainability:

Comparative noun.

The extent to which any process or system relies on local (bio-regionally defined) renewable resources and processes; eg, rain water, sunshine, wind, decomposition.

The word comes to us via music, where it refers to the duration of notes.

A wholly sustainable system could operate "for ever".

Sustainable:

Adjective

1. Relying solely on naturally renewing materials and processes, and consuming these at a rate lower than the rate at which they locally renew.
2. Requiring a one-off injection of a non-renewable resource (e.g. oil, plastic), and, thereafter, only requiring local renewables.

I composed the above definitions for a slideshow and conversation on the 20th of November 2009. I hoped the room would be full of people who were irritated by the Government's use of "sustainability" as an abstract concept, when it is in fact a comparative noun by which to rate any thing or change in our lives. Sustainable, fulfilling life is not an impossible utopia, but a pleasant reality for many people, myself included. Though for many more in the affluent west, change must be far-reaching before the adjective is tenable.

We are in "transition time" from a consumer-based, unsustainable society to a "one-planet living" one. I hoped that all assembled would agree with me there, and that no-one would need the terms "peak soil", "peak oil" or "manmade climate change" explained to them. As it turned out, the first of these could have had a night to itself, as some of the assembled specifically asked for information about why and how to do "organic" gardening, and making sustainable soil is a practical challenge that will occupy the first project presented; "Let's Go Let's Grow" for years to come.

That project came into being not through an awareness of the absence of sustainable food networks, or the desirability of non-exploitative food-trade, but a simple notice promised "save money, eat better food and get to know some of your neighbours". For its members it is achieving all those aims admirably, along with that most unquantifiable



The Lost Plot (see next page). Towering over the rest of the plot is the tallest herb spiral in Northern England - following the general trend for high rise building in Manchester. In the picture: Rob Squires, initiator of many Mancunian permaculture efforts - here seen in the attempt to reign in the lush growth on the spiral.

substance, community spirit. Education and persuasion might feature more prominently in years to come though.

Rather than spending my time persuading people of the root causes for their potential action. I enjoy spending my time helping those who are already engaged in local, sustainable growth and local, sustainable retreat.

The Lost Plot started off as one person's allotment, but they began to share it, and after a while the big gardening gang ran a permaculture course there to get even more people involved and to align their vision, understanding and plans. It is extremely productive, very harmonious and much more interesting and less exhausting than one person's allotment could possibly be. It is now a part of the superb Manchester Permaculture Network, where residents of Manchester can all visit and help in, learn from and advise each other's projects as much as they like.

While all these projects are superficially about food, that's just the tip of the iceberg of what people have in common. We all need to eat, but from this initial requirement come many other realisations; we can all grow food, we can all make compost and harvest beauty. We can all get along, communicating and understanding each other, perhaps even seeing ourselves as a beneficial element in the complex patterns of society, community, environment and seasons around us. Permaculture is often described as the "science of connections" or "the art of mutually beneficial relationships", and when we dare to seek mutually beneficial relationships rather than standing alone, big changes can happen.



Simon's cunning device which separates dumped rubble from useable soil



Cob bench on the HEAP allotment site in Manchester

The Heap is another community allotment with a very different story. It was "the sacrificial allotment" A plot left uncultivated because, on the edge, its fence looked to a playing field with a high incidence of car burnings, dumpings, and other vandalism. Some friends of mine, noticing the plots existence at the same time as the insurmountable waiting list for allotments, negotiated with the council and took it on. The machine in the photo above is their own invention, the allomentilator, used for separating dumped rubble, tin cans and large pieces of glass from the useable soil on the plot. The heavy work of clearing brambles and removing rubbish from the site would have been overwhelming for an individual, but a large motivated group supported each other and now have highly productive vegetable rotation beds, a pond and fruity forest garden.

Art as well as food is made on the big site, and the image above is a cob bench made from stones and clay that were right there. This bench is probably used by the site's night visitors as well as the daytime users. A large and beautiful

wooden shelter was built first, but burnt down in the night. A smaller group or an individual would have been very disheartened by this vandalism, but the large group support each other well, and more practical and beautiful cob work is planned including benches with musical properties, inspired by Lancaster's the Singing Ringing Tree

Leaf Street Community garden in Hulme, Manchester. A very strong Residents Association existed in this island of 1960s council housing now surrounded by flashy new urban developments. Back in the early nineties, they were one of the first communities to have an internet network, all of the 200 or so flats physically wired into the same server long before the days of wifi!

They negotiated for years with the council to control the green spaces around the block, and eventually the council relinquished one slither at the back. A permaculture course was run in 1996, and now their linear forest garden is mighty to behold, providing soft fruit and pip fruit, perennial veg, annual veg and salads. The density of



Singing ringing tree



Leaf Street Community Garden



Sumac Centre back garden

the plantings mean that it is very resilient to vandalism or neglect. Participation has varied over the years, but a well designed forest garden takes no harm from being ignored for a season or two.

Now I don't have an image of the Sumac centre back garden as it currently looks, but here it is as it was a couple of years ago. Now, in a small polytunnel and several 8 by 4 foot containers, a maximum of 2 foot deep, they are growing food all year round, including sweet corn, tomatoes, potatoes, salads, fruit and other veg. This is con-

tainer gardening at its best as the soil remains healthy by receiving compost and worm juice from compost heaps and wormeries just a couple of metres away, and cover crops or "green manures" are seeded in if the soil is ever in danger of becoming bare out with the growing season. The ingredients travel five to ten food metres into the kitchen to feed people right there. The Sumac centre is a completely volunteer-run social centre in Nottingham, formed by adhering to the advice in the booklet produced by Radical Routes, "How To set Up A Social Centre". Other titles such as "How to set up a housing co-op" are also available (free downloads www.radicalroutes.org.uk), and though I do not have "a sponsor" (The web of mutually beneficial relationships I have across the UK means I never pay rent or bills) if I did, it would be Radical Routes. This is a network of housing coops, workers coops, land projects and social centres. Diverse projects are united under the broad banner



Apple trees underplanted with nasturtium and strawberries, and veg containers with kale and spinach



These long-handled pickers by Wolf are the secret to scrumping success. They extend to over 20ft/6m and reach all but the highest branches on a tall pear tree.

of "Social Change" including community-ownership, self-reliance in food, sharing knowledge, information and skills because it's the right thing to do, not because of a wage or a government policy.

Other very intentional examples of self-reliance are to be found all over our entire flickr, but the above container garden is particularly good.

Having no car frees up that space in the drive, and this suburban street also hides gems of "Guerilla gardening" like a line of potatoes under the hedge.

A less intentional, entirely opportunistic project is "The Scrumping Project in Walthamstow. I embellished an image very similar to the one on the left with the words "Sharing appropriate tools, knowledge and experience. Linking volunteer energy with dilapidated urban wealth."

In London we harvest from parks, streets, schools, and most of all, houses where the current resident

sees the fruit as a wasp and rat-magnet that they cannot handle, and they're grateful for us to take it away! Similar projects exist in Sheffield, Leeds, Nottingham, and Manchester under the less naughty-sounding term "The Abundance Project".

Loads of apples, pears, plums and grapes grow in all our towns and cities, and many go to waste because the people who could pick them are too shy, or feel that they don't have the time, or don't know how to preserve, prepare or harvest this natural abundance.

All apples are good enough for juice, and this small hand-powered press is totally accessible and sometimes really exciting for people of all ages. Sour juices can be mixed with sweeter ones, and the star of Walthamstow is a pink variety that makes pink juice.



It's the bottle/fruit on the left and we call it the Walthamstow Pink Wonder, but the national database has it filed as an ornamental variety called the Wisely Crab. Many good eating apples are unjustly labelled as "ornamentals", and no apples are actually poisonous. The widely held belief that they are, is just one of the disempowering myths to overcome, in the huge social challenge of re-education.

The social challenge of getting people engaged in natural cycles through food production is being taken on by many schools and events, most spectacularly a couple of years ago in the "Feast on the Bridge" project.

This project had children devise a menu that they wanted to serve themselves and their parents, then plan backwards to what they would have to

grow, when they would have to plant it, what sort of compost they would need etc. Over the course of a whole year, their intimate understanding of how food gets onto plates surely became unmatched by any other urban school class.

After the first year, the festival finale of closing Southwark Bridge to traffic for a community feast was turned into a much more commercial event, and sadly not all children are lucky enough to be led through the allotment experience as part of school.

Schools can blame exactly the same list of problems as adults for the norm of non-engagement with their food: time, money, space, experience and knowledge. If you decide to prioritise it though, with enough communication and co-operation, all these means can be gathered easily, where-ever you are.

I don't have images of the Garden Share schemes which I have worked with in Totnes and Tavistock but they would simply show a diversity of veg patches, fruit patches and salad in containers. There is no way to photograph the excellent relationships I've seen between growers and owners. The only limit on success with this idea is the communication skills of the individual garden-owners and food growers.

The most extreme option for anyone to gain experience, is by Wwoofing. In this exchange scheme, for your help, you can learn more about growing food at no monetary cost. The network started off just around London, called "Working weekends on Organic farms" but the acronym now stands for "Worldwide opportunities...". The exchange is always your time and interest, for accommodation and great organic food, and the most permanently healthy and indefatigable type of people I know, are the full-time wwoofers, travelling the country through authentic friendships, eating and growing great food and always receiving heart-felt thanks.

www.wwoof.co.uk

Finding common ground and devising mutually beneficial relationships is daunting to people, because of the disconnected, individualised society that many of us see as reality, but this version of the world is cracking up, as the mysterious values of health, community and happiness are sought. Those daunted by the social skills required can make use of many organisational frameworks such as Permaculture networks and CSAs, community supported agriculture, whose website brings up 50 results for "London"

www.soilassociation.org/Takeaction/Getinvolvedlocally/Communitysupportedagriculture/tabid/201/Default.aspx

If it was just a case of finding out what's going on then there are lots of accessible networks like the Federation of City farms and Community Gardens, but it is not for want of access that those who want to grow more of their own food are not doing so. I propose that what stops people fulfilling dreams of self reliance, community reliance and foodweb-connection is something between shyness and actual fear of our fellow humans, and our natural world. This inter-



Landmatters

connected problem is addressed at every node by some part of the interconnected solutions, including the meteoric rise in the popularity of courses in "Non Violent Communication", or, as the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order sell it "Communicating from the heart". Free downloads here:

www.freebuddhistaudio.com

I champion these workshops, but I'm more actively involved in "Seeds for change" a group sharing methods of non-hierarchical decision making amongst other methods.

<http://seedsforchange.org.uk/>

"Community centres" are generally regarded, post-Thatchersim as places to be avoided, with the perception that they contain more needy users than sorted cohorts. Other recent elements of our disconnection from our bodies and planet are the fear of physical work, and huge misunderstandings about the low risks posed by "getting dirty".

One project which has really succeeded in making all sorts of people enjoy getting dirty together, is "Treesponsibility" in the Calder Valley in Yorkshire.

Their website (<http://www.treesponsibility.com/>) states that they aim to:

"Spread the idea and practice of land-connectedness, co-operation and community as a possible future, and the most sensible way out of the present environmental crisis."

In ten years they have planted over a hundred thousand trees, including orchards, all by hand with volunteers, and mostly on steep, wind-swept muddy hillsides! The improvements already made to soils and micro-climates are wonderful, with orchards now being planted inside areas made suitable through shelter belts planted just several years ago. They are securing new Public Rights of way through the future forests they manage, as well as re-instating old ones, and all this has been done without getting tangled in the complicated business of trying to own land. The existing owners are queuing up to have their diminishing marginal land diversified away from sheep and flooding.

While Treesponsibility deal with the problem of access to land by co-operating with those who already own it, a more bold strategy is favoured by those who want to live there themselves.

Landmatters in Devon rapidly formed a co-op to buy a large half meadows/half woodlands acreage that came up for sale close to Totnes. It was classed as Agricultural, not residential land, but they moved on anyway in simple wood and canvas homes called yurts and benders. The seven households applied for planning permission retrospectively, turning the government's "sustainability strategy" wordings back

on them, and through the very low-impact nature of their homes, their detailed plans for low energy use, productivity, and pointing out that having to drive to land you own would negate some of the environmental benefits you could achieve with it, they won the right to live there. The legal battle took 5 years, but all that time they were growing food, learning about their woods and meadows and enjoying the land they owned. In a historic ruling, it is now classed as land for "Permaculture" rather than "agriculture", acknowledging that land can be space to grow whole lives, not just food.

The Lammas project has recently secured a similar project for several times the number of households in Wales. They went down the wholly legal route, not beginning to move on until full planning permission was secured, so their 5 year legal battle was spent still estranged from the land they had bought. Follow their progress at

<http://www.lammas.org.uk/>

Every household hoping to move on to Lammas had to have a sound business plan for how they would make their living from the land sustainably. Permaculture is the most successful method I know, of getting people who think they hate "planning and management" to plan and manage for themselves, and the design tools within Permaculture were those most respected by the ever-growing founders, friends and members of Lammas.

Permaculture is often criticised for being one-sided in its emphasis on design and creation, rather than engaging with resistance against the shadow of better funded, international corporate, exploitative projects, process and policies which threaten to destabilise us all.

"Sustainable activism" though, balances working for what we want, and working against what we don't want, and there are other more resistance-based groups available like, Greenpeace, Earth First, The Zapatistas, anti-whaling fleet the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society etc. There are thousands of small local campaigns resisting things as diverse as new supermarkets, third runways, rainforest destruction, local school closure and open cast mines, which have very productive links with permaculture projects all over the world.

I found a good encapsulation of the nonsensical, destructive, exploitative tendencies of the profit-based international world in this image:

With it's motto of "Dig, Demolish Design", the Olympic-games restructuring of the Lea Valley betrays the sick root of its methodology, like remembering to 'manoeuvre, mirrors _then_ signal' on a motorway!



The title of this seminar was "Space to grow" yet so much of our mainstream culture is about diminishing space, diminishing our ownership of and access to space. Confining, packaging and marketing experiences. Where I might have delivered a very theoretical, poetic lecture with a broad meaning of growth, I chose to present my real, grounded life of connection and expansion, pursuing connections not profit, and storing my energy in trust, not money or property of my own. I feel an enormous sense of ownership over many of the projects that I return to, again and again, and a real sense of belonging to this whole island whose people, plants and seasons, though well known, always impress me again and again. With my mobile focus and energy I have a symbiosis with people who have chosen to "own" land and animals, though I campaign for a profound sharing of ownership. This issue, and the current restrictions on land management in Britain and the wider world are the explicit topic of the superb publication, coming out three, four or five times a year depending on time and energy, "The Land" edited by Simon Fairlie author of the book Low Impact Development: Planning and People in a Sustainable Countryside and the government report "Can Britain feed itself" (The answer is yes, easily, if land is managed better, and we have a lot of choice about how we balance housing, meat, forestry, vegetables and grain).

<http://www.cultureshop.org/details.php?code=LAND4>

<http://www.audacity.org/APO-Sp17a.htm>

<http://transitionculture.org/2007/05/11/urban-heat-and-rural-heat-by-simon-fairlie/>

"Ideas for the future" was part of the promise of this evening. For me, there is nothing I "want to do before I die" that I am not already doing. There is nothing I hope to see in the future, that does not already exist in an embryonic stage. The projects that I find totally worthwhile and, indeed, essential for the transition from a consumer-based, diseased society to a sustainable one, are all growing or at least learning! I help them grow and learn, or change, spread and diversify.

I composed a slide to summarise some practical applications of this, showing a very tiny suburban back garden with an enormous amount of food growing in it, combined with the following phrases:

food gardens not water features

social centres not consumer cafes,

art as participation not consumption,

spreading true stories of successful community action, not pessimism.

decentralised appropriate co-operative co-ordination rather than hierarchical and remote "council"-style control.

The "art as participation" phrase was cut from the 20th of November broadcast, but my thoughts on art are spelled out in my article "Huge disgusting works of art" which can be read here.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/jedtomas/sets/72157607734337553/comments/#comment72157622853906254>

I hope the rest of the phrases all address a different facet of the “space to grow” concept, and perhaps make connections in your minds; solutions, challenges and ideas that you might not have spotted before. The toxic world of advertising, exploitation and degradation is all around us, but the solutions for a sustainable culture are tangled around and within us too.

Good luck in all things

Jed Picksley, 22/11/09

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More to Explore:

Kew Bridge Eco Village: 2 Kew Bridge Road TW8 OJF,
open Thursday, Saturday and Sunday.

<http://kewecovillage.info/>

<http://www.savvyvegetarian.com/articles/csa-story.php>

<http://www.farmgarden.org.uk/home>



Garmouth