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BANKSIDE BOUNTY
Artist Fritz Haeg's deep, swirling beds, raised to avoid the polluted soil, provide an edible oasis in one of London's least-gardened boroughs



EDIBLE ESTATES

Conceptual art meets guerilla gardening in Southwark, where Sally Charrett develops a taste for holistic horticulture. Photography by Jane Sebire

THE POWERFUL HEALING effect that gardening can have on mind, body and soul is well documented. Of the myriad reasons why people garden, most would agree that pleasure is the common denominator. Not everyone is lucky enough to have a garden, though. Life in an inner-city flat, for example, can lead to a detachment from nature, and many believe this can have detrimental effects on a person's wellbeing.

Community gardening projects have gained serious momentum over the past decade, as relief for such deprivation, but also work on other levels – adding another layer of green space to a city, or bringing together those who may feel isolated in society.

Tate initiative

The interplay between people, and their relationship to their environment and to each other, were certainly two of the ideas behind the Edible Estates community garden in the London borough of Southwark. Early in 2007, the Tate Modern art gallery commissioned Los Angeles artist and architect Fritz Haeg to design the garden as part of their Global Cities exhibition, which looked at the impact of the unstoppable rise of urbanism. A local green space charity, Bankside Open Spaces Trust (BOST), which had spent the previous five years working on Tate Modern's own community garden, was approached to help get the new project off the ground.

In front of Brookwood House council flats in Webber Street, London SE1, the plot was just a fenced-off, scrubby patch of unused ground until residents and locals, with the help of BOST, converted the area – in the space of one weekend – into a series of raised beds now full of

fruit, vegetables and herbs. Previously only appreciated by fouling dogs, the space has been transformed and is a feast for the eyes in high summer when Fritz's elegant, sinuous raised beds are overflowing with colourful produce.

Fritz was also responsible for sowing the seed of the idea: Edible Estates is a continuation of his similar projects in America. His aim is to challenge 'deeply-embedded social notions that ornamental lawns that repress nature are beautiful, but plants that produce food are ugly and should not be seen', and has subsequently transformed several typical manicured American front lawns into edible paradises.

But Fritz's work is much more than conceptual art; the Southwark project has a political and cultural subtext. His work – and other similar examples – are not just artistic rebellion but statements on the lack of quality of life in cities. 'Edible Estates at Southwark is intended as a new prototype for urban agriculture,' says Fritz. 'It also explores what happens when you publicly grow your own food, hopefully bringing people together.'

Sense of ownership

An initial survey carried out by BOST, to find out how the residents wanted the garden to develop, revealed worries about potential vandalism. But it was the children who proved most eager to get the garden going, and were excited about building it and getting their hands dirty. Peter Graal, an employee at BOST, believes that ownership is the essence to sustaining projects like this in the long term. He had some trepidation before joining though, and says, 'initially I was afraid of patronising people, but it isn't really like that. As long

as you get people into the project from day one and get them to feel that it is theirs, especially the kids, then there's that all-important sense of achievement.' Such community-centred projects can be surprisingly self-policing, it seems.

The Edible Estates garden attracts a host of volunteers, mainly through BOST's popular gardening club, which meets every Thursday and Saturday. The club, advertised through flyers and a mailing list, has attracted around 200 volunteers, and between three and 25 people work on the Edible Estates at any given time.

Some do not have their own gardens and want to learn how to grow vegetables and herbs; others are retired and want to give something back to the community; while others come along to socialise. Because the garden's site is so open to passers-by, they often stop to ask what it is about or to offer growing tips and advice. All produce from the project is divided among those who have volunteered, though in 2008 the project had a glut of potatoes and onions that were given to the local Age Concern charity.

Elevated view

Not all residents of Brookwood House want to be hands-on participants, but they do enjoy the space and the view from their flats – Fritz was always aware that the optimal view of the beautiful arabesque-shaped beds would be from above. Some, however, are prepared to get their hands dirty. Notably, through her sheer energy and enthusiasm for the project, one resident, Denise Withers, has been nicknamed the 'urban farmer'. A sufferer from depression, she says, 'the garden is my therapy when I'm having a bad day.' Despite having no previous horticultural knowledge, she now ►



SOCIAL INTERACTION
Fritz Haeg chats to Brookwood House resident Denise Withers, one of his project's most fervent supporters

considers herself the project's '24-hour protector' and is often out watering as late as midnight during the growing season. She tenses when asked if there is any danger of vandalism. 'No-one would dare,' she says. 'People try and let their dogs defecate there but I shoot them away... as for the kids, I know them all, they respect me; they wouldn't dare ruin the garden, or they'll have me to deal with.' Her laughter melts any tension.

Cheap – and cheerful

Carole Wright, BOST's Project Manager, recognises the limitations and frustrations of gardening in this difficult area – tiny gardens, windy balconies, no soil, no garden centre, no storage space for tools – often made worse by limited income and lack of transport. 'Despite all these needs, community projects aren't always easy to get off the ground because of lengthy consultations with stakeholders, and funding issues. Edible gardens are seen as high maintenance,' says Carole, 'so we are delighted that Edible Estates has been the quickest, cheapest project BOST has ever done – the total cost was only £3,000. We had

quite a few plants from another London environmental charity to get started. The BOST headquarters, just around the corner, has a glasshouse, so the project can get seedlings going.

'The seeds of spent plants are saved,' she says, 'and residents and volunteers often bring along seeds, too. We've also raised funds for compost bins and have been allocated a shed. The local council still maintains the grass around the project, and they always have a smile on their faces when strimming around the steel edging of the beds.'

Carole has clearly enjoyed watching the project blossom. She says, 'people open up and start talking to neighbours they never knew before. We also get a lot of people with mental health problems helping or just watching. The project brings them great solace.'

Of course organisations such as BOST cannot support projects of this kind forever, philosophically or financially. Their long-term survival depends on the local community's dedication to, and ownership of, their garden. Steering groups are set up in the early stages to maintain such sites, involving residents

and volunteers who want to understand about fundraising and marketing as well as gardening.

Many lessons can be learned from this tiny, oasis-like community garden. Fritz undoubtedly would like it to be seen as a model for city life, and passionately hopes that in years to come, buildings, subways and green space will be full of similar projects, naturally, without the help of organisations like BOST.

The real success of Edible Estates, I feel, is that it is not just in private back gardens that gardening can give pleasure and satisfaction, and that, in the public realm, horticulture as a healing tool can be incredibly potent. ■

Sally Charrett is Editorial Projects Manager for *The Garden*

i **Further reading** *Edible Estates: Attack on the Front Lawn*, by Fritz Haeg, Metropolis Books, 2007, £14.95 ISBN 9781933045740

@ For more on Fritz's projects, visit: www.fritzaeg.com/garden/initiatives/edibleestates/london.html
• For more on the activities of Bankside Open Spaces Trust, visit: www.bost.org.uk



URBAN HARVEST

The project's produce (above, clockwise from top left) includes scarlet runner beans, mixed lettuces, yellow Swiss chard and red cabbage



HIGHRISE HOPES

Plans for the future of the community garden, not far from Waterloo Station in London, include a fruiting hedge around the perimeter and a green roof for the estate's electricity substation