

Growing (in) Todmorden.

28th-29th October 2011

Eco Nomadic School Civic Seminar, Todmorden, Calderdale, UK.

Organizers: Michael Breen, Sarah Broadstock, Sam Brown, Yian Chang, Thalia Charalambous, Erini Christofidou, Jenny Ohlenschlager, Marinela Pasca, Conor O'Sullivan, Martha Shields, Fengyan Zhu, Ying Zhao (SSoA) Doina Petrescu, Kim Trogal, John Sampson (*Agency/SSoA*)

With

Participants and Contributors: Pam Warhurst, Mary Clear, Nick Green, Michael ?, Estelle Walsh, Fred (*Incredible Edible*)

Constantin Pectou, Anne Marie Vulsteke, Daniel Demarque, Léonard Nguyen Van Thé (*aaa*), Nigel Lowthrop (*Hill Holt Wood*),

Anne-Marie Dillon (*Ballykinler Ballykinlar Cultural Centre/ My Villages*),

Theo Teiosanu, Micea Onica, Radu, Bogdan Nistor (*FCDL*)

As well as passers by, children, neighbours and other interested people.

Locations: Unitarian Church and various growing sites around Todmorden and Walsden

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The civic seminar was organised by masters students at the School of Architecture, University of Sheffield, as a part of their *Live Project*. *Live Projects* form a six week part of the curriculum, dedicated to working with 'real clients' in 'real time.' In this case, students were working with *Incredible Edible*, a campaign group for local food in Todmorden, investigating concepts of 'food commons' and community based urban agriculture. The students choice of title for the civic seminar, *Growing (in) Todmorden*, summarises well two of its key aspects: how to grow food in Todmorden through various initiatives for urban agriculture, and how to grow Todmorden, i.e. how to nurture community and practices of a place, at the same time.

We gather in the Unitarian Church and are welcomed by the students. After a general introduction to the *Incredible Edible (IE)* project by Pam Warhurst and some local food for lunch, Estelle Walsh one of the key members of *IE* takes us on a tour of some of the town-based growing sites.

Our first stops are Mary's former rose garden, which she transformed into a public garden for growing and sharing vegetables three years ago, and a guerrilla gardening patch next to some car parking spaces. Estelle explains that Mary took down the front wall of her garden, took out all the roses and planted vegetables instead which she has offered to passers by for free ever since. There are small insect houses, a water butt and an information panel explaining what each of the plants are and when they can be harvested.

By the parked cars, Estelle explains that the group furtively dug up the previous plants, "prickly shrubs" that are planted by the local authority to minimise maintenance. Such plants need little care (no additional watering, little pruning), prevent other animals from nesting or feeding there, and most importantly for the group produce nothing edible. In their place, they have planted fennel and other herbs, things that you can eat and that 'smell nice'.

In discussion, we learn about the double-edged nature of acting to take care (of plants, of an issue) without taking care of other people. Estelle explains the group have a “can do” attitude. They like to get things done. In this location and a number of others, they did not bother asking for permission, intuiting an endless bureaucracy, but went ahead and did it anyway. The presence of ‘prickly shrubs’ demonstrated that no-one cared about this particular place anyway. The ecological imperative to ‘just get on with it,’ is clear enough and their act of caring (for plants) in this location has been a success, because no-one else cared. But in other locations, where others do have interests, Estelle admits they have made mistakes.

We walk along the canal, where *IE* have planted nasturtiums, blackberries as well as peas, beans and other vegetables. I can’t quite be persuaded to eat nasturtiums yet, but others have more adventurous palates. They have a peppery taste I’m told and are good in salads.

We arrive at the community herb garden, a space they have managed to carve out of the health centre car park. The garden is the result of long negotiations with the Primary Health Care Trust, whom they have persuaded to donate the space. They also managed to dissuade them from planting prickly shrubs. In their place, *IE* with the Health Care centre planted blackberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, rhubarb, as well as cherry trees and apple trees.

Raspberries instead of shrubs is a small but important victory. They have transformed a public space that no one otherwise wanted to care for into spaces that are collectively looked after and productive.

The apothecary garden contains borage, woad, lavender, lemon balm and many others, some labelled some not, so unless you know what you are looking at it’s difficult to tell. Estelle tells us that the garden has also had an impact on health care, whilst doctors cannot officially proscribe herbal remedies as ‘cures,’ they can recommend them to patients, to offer patients the choice. She explains they have also created a database of medicinal use of herbs on their website.

We then follow the trail of the new ‘green route’ through town, arrive in the old, but still functioning market. The green route is a collaboration between *IE* and other local groups, like Todmorden in Bloom.

We take a route via the market and speak to local butcher, who explains sales for local produce has increased. We finish our tour by visiting the raised beds outside the community college and then police station. A group of around 50 volunteers goes around all the beds, taking care of the plants. We ask is how is it *IE* manage to get so many people engaged? How do they organise volunteers?

Estelle explains part of their strategy is about ‘starting small,’ people are invited to participate for very small and manageable tasks. *IE* now have a database of around 200 local volunteers, when an event is coming up or a task that needs doing, *IE* will call out for that event, and maybe 15 will be able to make it.

But what will make this sustainable? And how and why do people volunteer? At this point, an interesting discussion begins about the nature of participation and volunteering in the different localities. How is *IE* able to get 200 people involved in an initiative like this in the first instance? Our Romanian participants suggest that in their town of Brezoi, this would not be imaginable.

Estelle suggests that sharing and giving away food, as they have done with their gardens is one way. In *IE*’s words, this kind of public garden is *propaganda*. But Theo and Radu are not so sure, that

there is something qualitatively different, sharing publicly in their locality will be viewed with suspicion. But they also make me aware of a paradox, that is the incompatibility of an ethics of sharing and gifts, as a form of propaganda.

By a feat of some logistics, the students manage to ferry the entire group to *Incredible Edible's* site in Walsden. This is a piece of land owned by a local garden centre, on a five year loan to *IE*. The site has been conceived and is run by Nick Green who gives us a tour.

The site is surrounded by a large fence, we are told this is primarily to keep rabbits and sheep out, rather than people. It is publicly accessible and *IE* have planted the perimeter with fruit trees, but it will be several years yet until they can expect a harvest. On site they have begun grafting fruit trees, and it is hoped that this will generate revenue for the project in the future and provide someone with a full time job or business.

On the site they have now built three polytunnels, which at the moment is used for growing salads. These are sold to local restaurants and we're told have the highest profit margin. We follow a route along side the ponds, ducks, and a number of raised beds, which are taken on like allotment plots. On the Northern edge of the site, we are shown high piles of manure, which to my surprise do not smell. It has been 'gifted' to the project by local farmers.

Michael, who also works on Walsden the site, explains the permaculture principles behind its design. Informally, Michael also tells us of his time in the Amazon, different foods and his interest in wildlife. He now also organises 'wild food walks,' to show others how to forage and what to do with what you find. Another issue that emerged for me, was the recognition that reclaiming lost knowledges for eco-civic practices must be *applicable* to everyday life, either at home or work

Dinner and talk, Walsden

This is the first time the *ENS* group meets, and dinner gives the opportunity to get to know one another. We discover Micea is a hunter, and he has brought some Tzuica (Plum Schnapps), which he made himself to share with the group. Anne Marie is an artist in Northern Ireland, others in Paris are beginning their own urban gardening and recycling. Some have brought recipes and seeds to share which students collect.

This is a really enjoyable part, and it is not just a 'nice to have' aspect of the seminar. I realise that the teaching of Eco Civic Practices in general (not just within the confines of this project) will be contingent on this. Talking on the walks or at dinner gave us the opportunity to *really* listen to each other, the affective connections are difficult to describe without being reductive. These informal situations were quite powerful, in giving confidence, inspiration, motivation and also important in building a network.

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We start the second day at 9am in the church. The students start by opening up a discussion about commons. What is interesting, are the diverse meanings that emerge. For some like Micea, Theo and Radu the concept of a commons is more appreciable, for others, especially urbanites it is a notion that is more conflated with notions of public space.

We split into three smaller groups and discuss further the subject of commons based on three 'key words' from the Live Project group's research: 'Resources, Governance and Visibility'. Students facilitated the discussions, and in pairs 'scribed' the dialogue using words and pictures. In doing so

they helped support a dialogue across contexts. To give an example, in our discussion on resources we cover material aspects: like forests in Brezoi, beaches in Northern Ireland, and public spaces in Paris; as well as immaterial ones like humour, skills, knowledge and relations, like friendship. This provided a collective opportunity to reflect on existing resources and how to engage them.

From both the discussions during the workshop, the walk and at dinner we each began to grasp some of the different conditions facing groups in different localities, but with the identification of common issues for eco-civic practices. What stood out for me in particular, was the importance of transforming the affective barriers that prevent participation. Whilst the reasons for barriers may be different in different places (post-conflict in Northern Ireland, or the history of a State based communism in Romania), the outcomes are sometimes similar: cynicism, not wishing difference, fear of others succeeding etc.

We had the privilege to hear talks about other projects elsewhere, from citizen led, self-managed spaces in Paris (*aaa*); technological experiments in urban agriculture (*urbed*) 'pensioners forever' (*Anne Marie Dillon*), and xx (*Hill Holt Wood*). This opened up question of eco-civic practices beyond bottom-up urban agriculture, as practiced by *Incredible Edible*.

That groups can form through learning processes is quite a well known phenomenon, but one of the more challenging aspects of the *live project* format is that this dynamic stops after the timetabled six weeks. By integrating *ENS* civic seminar within the live project, it provides a longer window, allowing the dynamic to be sustained over longer period.

The students, with Agency, I think set a precedent. They exposed others, who are currently outside university teaching, to a learning process, based on walking, talking, brainstorming, dialogue.

Their questions around commons also seems to be a thematic continuing in other seminars, maybe due to its importance in environmental terms. However, this was a topic all different groups could relate to in many respects.

Summary of pedagogical outcomes:

- A mutual awareness of the issues concerning eco-practices in different European localities (e.g. youth migration, aging population, landscape, de-industrialisation etc.)
- An understanding of the issues surrounding urban agriculture and local food production. Such as, building reciprocal relations with existing systems, land use, broad principles of permaculture etc.
- An understanding of some strategic aspects of local engagement, for example, working with schools, use of events, 'starting small', use of local networks, how to develop and maintain a group of volunteers etc.
- An understanding of the strategic aspects of campaigning and promoting eco-practices on *specific* issues (e.g. propaganda gardening/ local produce/ keeping chickens),
- An ability to reflect on resources and aspects of local food in relation to one 's own locality.

SB, KT, DP on behalf of Agency