

The landscape and culture of allotments:  
a study in Hornchurch, Essex

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# Abstract

Allotments gardens are deeply embedded within our national landscape, and are firmly rooted in British cultural heritage. In exploring the landscape and culture of allotments, this dissertation aims to examine the ways in which the allotment is valued, negotiated and experienced by plot-holders, and addresses a subject which has traditionally been marginalised in academia and the wider political realm. Working within the organisational structure of allotment provision at a regional level, my research is located in the London Borough of Havering, and focuses specifically upon the Hornchurch and District Allotments and Gardening Society. A questionnaire distributed to 160 allotment-holders and a series of informal interviews with plot-holders comprise the theoretical framework for exploring the landscape and culture of allotments. A further interview with Havering's Open Space Development Co-Coordinator provides a synopsis of the Council's views on allotment value. A layered and dynamic complexity is found to characterise the allotment, defying conventional stereotypes and understandings of landscape, and embodying an intrinsic culture based upon shared conditions, activities and passions. The ideas, inspirations and values embedded within the allotment resonate with a wider culture that reinvigorates the importance of allotments in contemporary life. Yet the tensions inherent in allotment life render it less an idyll, but a space in which to negotiate relations with nature, self and others. In a dynamic encounter with space, the ways in which plot-holder cultivate their land becomes an expression of self, and the infinitely varied allotment plots produce a culture with its own distinct landscape that is continuously reworked and remade. As a richly rewarding field of study, the allotment accentuates the importance for cultural geographers of exploring vernacular landscapes. Further study could explore the differing response of London Boroughs and allotment activists to the current renaissance in interest in allotment gardening.

# Acknowledgements

I would like to take this opportunity to gratefully acknowledge the invaluable assistance of a number of people, without whom this project would not have been possible. A special thank you to David Matless at the School of Geography, for providing continuous guidance, support and inspiration. Many thanks to the Hornchurch and District Allotment and Gardening Society, and a particular thanks to Janet Dingle, the Society's secretary, for her enthusiasm and advice. I am indebted to the innumerable plot-holders who have given their time generously, and thank especially the plot-holders of Archibald Road, Dunningford and Maylands Allotments for many enjoyable mornings and afternoons. My gratitude is also due to James Rose of Havering Council. Finally, I appreciate my family and friends continued support and encouragement throughout, and especially the UGS!

## Declaration

Having never stepped foot on an allotment prior to this project, and knowing no allotment-holders directly or associated figures, access to the allotment world was attained through strategic research, and careful planning and perseverance.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

‘Allotments are an important feature in the cultural landscape. They combine utility, meaning and beauty with local distinctiveness’

Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee (1998: 1).

Allotment gardens are deeply embedded within our national landscape, and have been a familiar and ubiquitous feature for almost two hundred years (Crouch and Ward, 1997). The story of the allotment is underpinned by our long term engagement with the land, and the cultivation of nature, culture and self. It is through the everyday encounters with the environment that plot-holders can make sense of the intimate geographies in their lives (Crouch and Ward, 1997). Whilst allotment gardening is firmly rooted in British cultural heritage (Crouch, 2003a), the history of the allotment is one of conflict, contestation and vulnerability, and subsequently such landscapes have traditionally been marginalised (DeSilvey, 2003). This is reflected in the piecemeal development of modern allotment legislation, which continues to rely upon unrevised Allotment Acts introduced between 1908 and 1950. Yet the desire to have and to hold a plot continues to remain significant as an increasingly intricate and dynamic element of contemporary life (Crouch, 2003a). Currently, there exists 245,000 allotments throughout Britain, and a renaissance in interest places a further 100,000 people on waiting lists (Malone, 2009). In addition, a national survey undertaken by a property agency revealed that almost half of all residents would rent a plot if land became available locally (Findaproperty.com, 2008). Such figures are remarkable considering the imminent death of the allotment movement has been prophesised for many years (Crouch and Ward, 1997).

### Grounding the Research

Traditionally, the vernacular landscape of the allotment and its moral and cultural significance has been marginalised in a multiplicity of ways, located on marginal and otherwise redundant land in urban environments, and existing at the margins of governmental discourse (DeSilvey, 2003). Within academia too, the subject of allotments has suffered neglect (Burchardt, 1997), and



besides seminal work by David Crouch and Colin Ward, literature specifically orientated towards allotments remains sparse. Thus, my dissertation resonates within, and responds to this underexploited niche.

Under the Allotment Act of 1908, it is the duty of Local Authorities to provide allotments where there is sufficient demand. Working within this organisational structure of allotment provision at a regional level, my research is located in the London Borough of Havering, and more specifically, focuses upon the Hornchurch and District Allotments and Gardening Society. The society was established in the mid-twentieth century, and is one of seven allotment societies in Havering, all of which are engaged in formal Council Allotment Agreements. As one of the few London boroughs to devolve site management to allotment societies themselves, Havering is unique in allotment administration. In terms of physical fabric, Havering allotments are consistent with conventional layouts, being flat and conforming to rectangular plot design. Figure 1 illustrates the location of allotment sites within Havering, and displays the present plot layout of the three allotment sites informing my intensive exploration of ‘allotment life’, highlighting the plots of the allotment-holders interviewed.



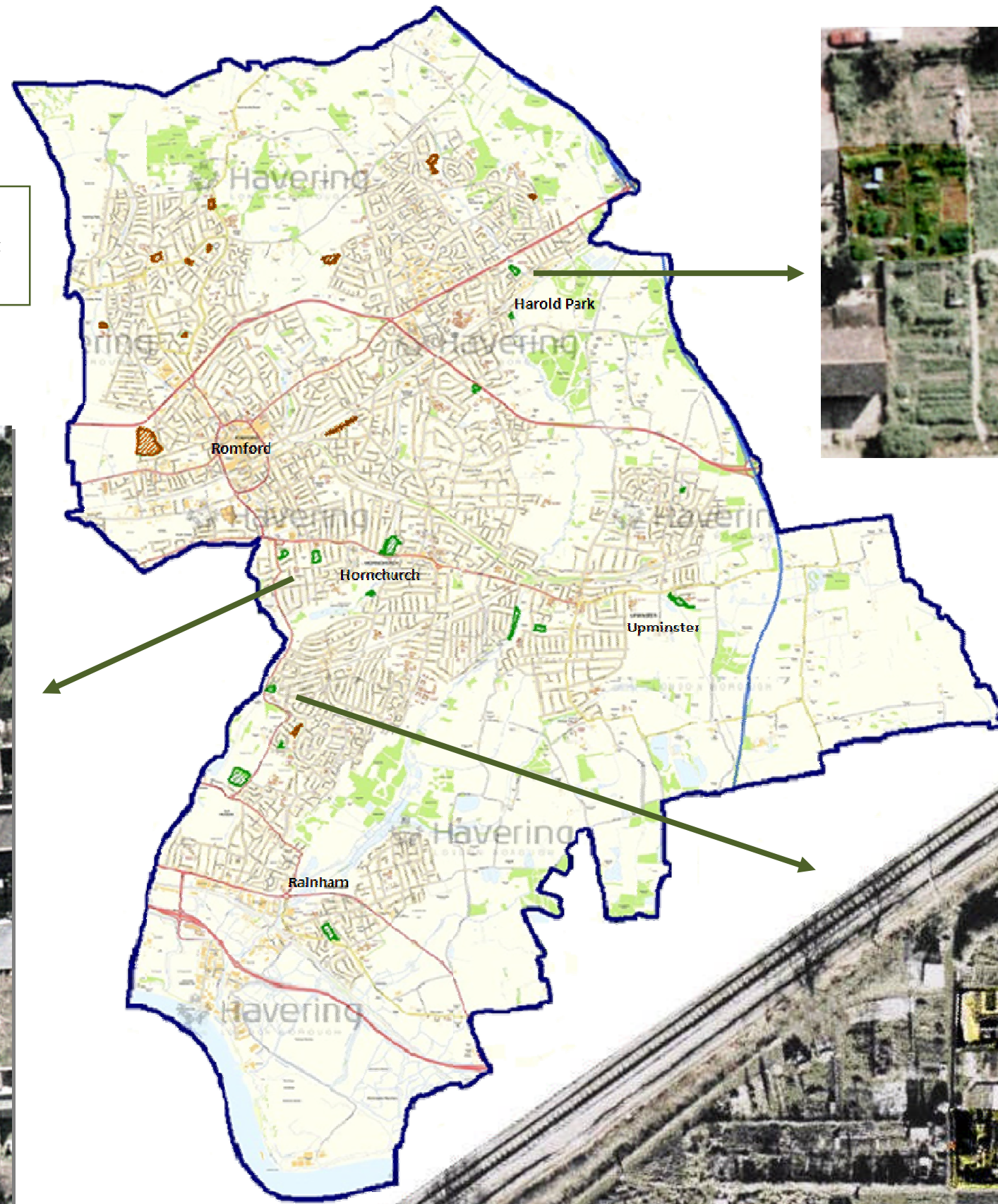
A map to show the distribution of allotments in the London Borough of Havering

**Key**

-  : Allotments in Havering
-  : Allotments under the Hornchurch and District Allotments and Gardening Society

### Maylands Allotments

Albany Road, Hornchurch.



### Archibald Road Allotments

Archibald Road, Harold Wood.



### Dunningford Allotments

St. Andrews Avenue, Elm Park.



Figure 1

Source: <http://maps.havering.gov.uk> <http://maps.google.co.uk>



## Aims and Objectives

In exploring the landscape and culture of allotments this dissertation aims to examine the ways in which the allotment is valued, negotiated and experienced by plot-holders. I have purposely structured my dissertation according to three research objectives:

I seek to deconstruct the conventional stereotypes commonly associated with the allotment, and through an in-depth analysis of 'allotment life', I assess the value of the allotment for plot-holders and the existence of an intrinsic culture based upon shared conditions, activities and relationships. This forms the focus of Chapter III, 'The Value and Culture of Allotments'.

I then explore the politics imbued within allotment life and examine the ways in which the allotment is understood, managed and negotiated, and how the tensions inherent in allotment-holding resonate and interact with a wider culture and community. Chapter IV, 'The Politics of the Plot', addresses this research agenda.

Finally, I examine the ways in which plot-holders appreciate, engage and experience the aesthetics of the allotment, and critically consider how their interpretations coincide with the duplicities inherent in landscape analysis (Daniels, 1989). I further consider how the landscape of the allotment is valued in the cultivation of self-understanding and identity. Chapter V, 'The Allotment Aesthetic' is dedicated to discussions of landscape.

Whilst discussions of allotment value, politics and aesthetics are divided into discrete chapters, it is important to emphasise that my research objectives are not mutually exclusive but interdependent. To conclude my dissertation (Chapter VI), I will bring together narratives which cut across chapters and emerge as critical facets in my exploration of the landscape and culture of allotments.

# CHAPTER II

## LITERATURE REVIEW

An historical narrative tracing the origins of the allotment movement and the development of government legislation, initiates the following discussion as a way to contextualise my research. Drawing upon key literature, I then introduce the allotment as a vernacular landscape, before exploring the ways in which the allotment connects with wider geographical ideas of landscape and culture.

### The Origins of the Allotment Movement

The origins of the British allotment movement are inextricably bound with the continuous Parliamentary Enclosure Acts which culminated between 1750 and 1850 (Crouch and Ward, 1997). Initially a rural phenomenon to compensate disenfranchised cottagers, allotments later became an urban provision, owing to the interests of employer paternalism, town planners and self-help societies (Crouch and Ward, 1997). The newly emerging industrialised cityscape as a world of unremitting squalor (Lasdun, 1991) prompted a national discourse which recognised the social, moral, educational and environmental values associated with garden space (Gaskell, 1980; Waters, 1988). Perhaps most significantly, the allotment has played an integral role as a means of self-generated poor relief (Samuel, 1975).

British allotments undertook a national security agenda at times of war, increasing domestic food supply in response to food rationings. On the home front, the Government-led campaigns promoted domestic cultivation as a patriotic endeavour and achieved phenomenal results (Morris, 1997). The 'Victory Diggers' of the Second World War cultivated approximately three million tons of produce (Murray, 1955) and the spirit of cooperation and collaboration that prevailed was captured in Dorothy Cloke's painting, 'War Allotments in a London Suburb' (Figure 2). During the interwar years, allotment interest fluctuated. Initially, demand transcended pre-war levels owing to the return of servicemen longing for a piece of England (Thorpe, 1975). In the post war period, unprecedented levels of economic prosperity, enhanced living standards, technological developments, such as the arrival of fridges and convenience foods, and a

Figure 2:



'War

Allotments in a London Suburb', Dorothy Cloke (n.d)  
Source: Crouch, D. (2003a: 25).

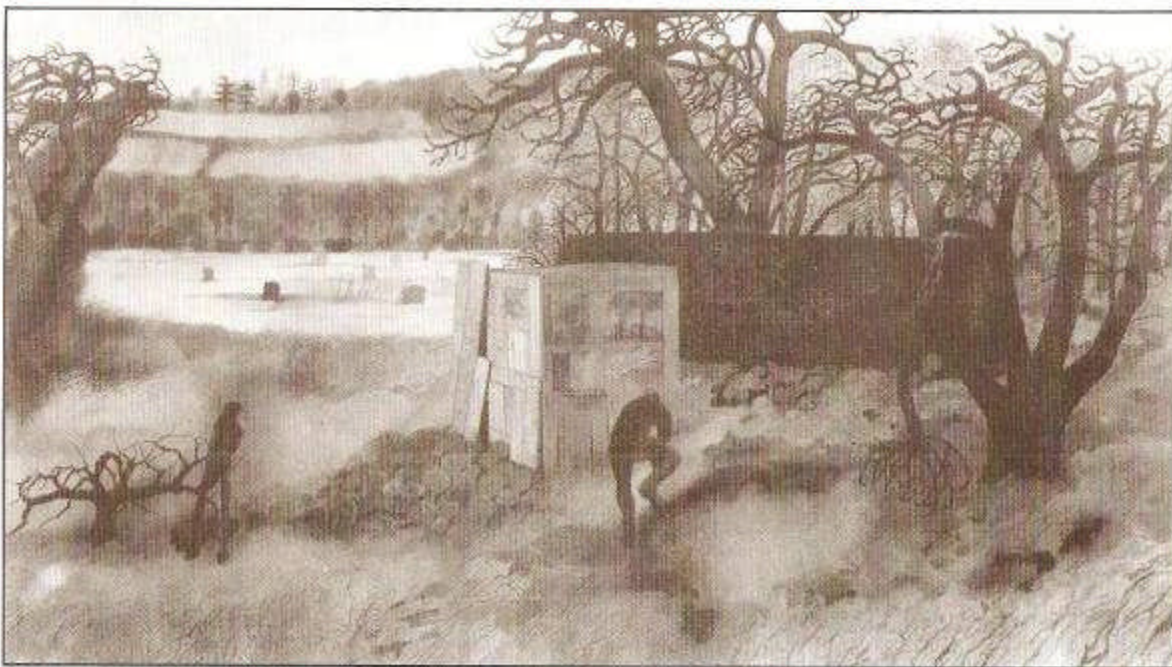


Figure 3: 'The Allotments', Edward Burra, 1963.  
Source: Crouch, D. (2003a: 3).

reorientation of leisure towards commercialisation, resulted in vacant plots and falling demand (Crouch and Ward, 1997). This declining allotment spirit is captured in Edward Burra's painting, 'The Allotments', which portrays a scene of struggle and solitude (Crouch, 1989a) (Figure 3). Owing to associations with poverty, charity and war time needs (Hyde, 1998), people sought to actively distance themselves from allotment activity. Yet, from the late 1960s there has been revived interest, stimulated predominantly by the new impetus for the 'greening' of cities (Simms, 1975). Allotments also came to be perceived as 'trendy' (Hyde, 1998). In the 1990s, concern over food safety prompted further interest (Humphrey, 1996), and in recent years, allotments have found appeal as a practical contribution to local sustainable development initiatives (Crouch and Wiltshire, 2005).

The National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardens undertook the most recent allotment survey in 1997, revealing a loss of 9,400 plots across England annually (Crouch, 1997). This informed the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Report, entitled 'The Future for Allotments' (1998). Owing to the piecemeal development of modern legislation which relies upon unrevised Allotment Acts introduced between 1908 and 1950, the report advised a complete overhaul of existing legislation. This coincides with the principle avocations of the Thorpe Report, a Government Inquiry into allotment status in England and Wales in 1969. In response, the Government dismissed legislative reform, and instead favoured the publication of allotment guidance promoting best practice. The London Assembly Environment Committee has since conducted further research, monitoring allotment provision in London, and outlining a sustainable future as we experience, what the Committee describes as, 'a renaissance in allotment gardening' (Cross, 2006:1).

## The Allotment Garden as a Vernacular Landscape

The garden is regarded as 'central to the culture of this country' (Daniels, 2000: 32), England conventionally esteemed a quintessential nation of gardeners (Darley, 1979). Within cultural geography, academic study has tended to prioritise the 'polite' landscapes of Georgian England (Morris, 1997) with 'no parallel appreciation of...popular, ordinary or vernacular gardens' (Roberts, 1996: 175). More recently, an increasing focus on popular culture has extended the realm of academic study to include the commonplace (Morris, 1997). However, a longer commitment to the richness and value of the vernacular exists (Wylie, 2007). The AmDerekan

cultural geographer J.B. Jackson has long been influential in this field, exploring the vernacular architecture of the AmDerekan front yard for example, and providing an unorthodox commentary on its cultural significance (Meinig, 1979a). Similarly, in 'The making of the English landscape' (1955), the pioneering historian W.G. Hoskins focused on the ordinary man made scene. Indeed, Cresswell (2003: 208) asserts that cultural geographies of landscape 'should be as much about the everyday and unexceptional as they are about the grand and the distinguished'.

David Crouch and Colin Ward have been influential figures in the growing area of academic interest on the 'vernacular' garden space. Their exploration of 'The Allotment: Its landscape and Culture' (1988) has brought to life a vibrant sub-culture that has traditionally been marginalised in academic discourse. Crouch and Ward present a rich history of the way in which the allotment culture has produced distinctive landscapes which shape individual and collective identity. Inspired, Couch (2000), a postgraduate student at Nottingham University, looked to Nottingham's Hungerhill Allotment Gardens in her exploration of 'Life Geographies'. Incorporating landscape as a geographical perspective in the search for the meaning of life (Ricoeur, 1991), Couch examines how 'people make sense of their lives through the making and meaning of their allotment gardens' (2000: ii). As such, the garden becomes a biographical landscape, coinciding with Beverly Seaton's (1979) work on 'The Garden Autobiography'. Seaton contends that in describing their gardens, people 'reveal something of their personalities and sentiments' (1979: 102-103).

For Colin Ward, Britain's greatest anarchist for nearly half a century (Worpole, 2010), his interest in allotments was imbued within wider political discourse. Ward argued against centralised authority in favour of an anarchist society which emphasised the importance of mutual aid and co-operative self-help (Krznaric, 2010). Ward believed that anarchist principles could be discerned in vernacular settings and everyday relations, and considered the non-hierarchical and decentralised workings of the allotment as an example of 'Anarchy in Action' (Ward, 1973). Ward and Hardy's exploration of 'plot-lands... a make-shift world of shacks' (2004: ix), provides a further example of self-organised communities, and shares sentiments with the vernacular allotment landscape.

In an exploration of Scottish Allotment Gardens, DeSilvey (2003) proposes a tentative explanation for why the ambiguity and diversity that characterise allotments contributes to their vulnerability and marginalisation in political representations. In a dual narrative located in

politics and practice, representation and value, DeSilvey's work can be considered to bridge the academic and anarchist interests of Crouch and Ward respectively. DeSilvey highlights that the underpinnings of allotment interest are not confined within the boundaries of the plot, but 'bleed out into the social, political and ecological contexts which frame them' (DeSilvey, 2003: 462).

## Landscape and Culture

Crouch has dedicated a series of papers (1989a, 1989b, 1990, 1992b, 1992c) to British allotments as 'landscapes of ordinary people' (Crouch, 1992a), demonstrating how the vernacular landscape of the allotment connects with a wider set of ideas on landscape and culture. Crouch and Ward (1997) advance that the allotment fits unfamiliarly within contemporary cultural expectations, transcending conventional understandings of rural and urban. Matless (2003) asserts that the capacity of landscape to migrate through different regimes of value which are conventionally held apart, underlies its committed fascination. DeSilvey (2003: 444) describes allotments as 'third spaces' due to the disintegration between 'private and public, production and consumption, labour and leisure'. Thus, the allotment can be considered 'a different kind of place in which different values prevail' (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 271). The culture of allotments has produced distinctive landscapes, thus allotment landscapes can be considered to represent specific cultural values. This coincides with new cultural geographies of the early 1990s, whereby landscape represents a visual image of cultural meanings, a 'cultural image' and a 'way of seeing' the world (Cosgrove and Daniels, 1988). Duncan provides a counterpoint to this interpretation, drawing upon the analogy of landscape as text, emphasising the subjectivity of landscape, 'rewritten as they are read' (Duncan and Barnes, 1992: 5). This coincides with Meinig's argument that landscapes are 'composed not only of what lies before our eyes [but] by what lies within our heads' (1979b: 34).

Due to an emphasis on the visual, landscape is often regarded as an 'artistic...representation of the visible world' (Cosgrove, 1984: 9), a system through which visual symbols produce and transmit meaning, and a key medium through which European cultures have come to understand perceptions of self and other (Cosgrove, 1984). Allotments have inspired artistic endeavour, evidenced in Crouch's (2003a) 'Art of Allotments', Alfrey et al.'s (2004) 'Art of the Garden', and Stephanie Nava's recent art installation (Figure 4), entitled 'Considering a Plot (Dig for Victory)'





Figure 4: 'Considering a Plot (Dig fir Victory)', Stephanie Nava, 2005-2008. Source: [www.viafarini.org/english/shows/nava.html](http://www.viafarini.org/english/shows/nava.html)



(Pasini, 2009), all of which demonstrate the visualisation of relationships between culture and nature.

Non-representational theory follows a phenomenological approach, transcending representational landscapes to focus on performance, and notions of 'being-in-the-world' (Ingold, 2000). Landscape is thus understood as 'embodied acts of landscaping' (Lorimer, 2005: 85), evident in the 'grounded performance' of allotment gardeners, whose embodied activity relates to senses of self, nature and landscape (Crouch, 2003b). For Matless (1997), landscapes are also used and lived in, and in asking what practices and codes of conduct are appropriate for an English landscape, connects the idea of landscape to moral geographies. As such, certain behaviours are considered 'in' and 'out' of place (Cresswell, 1996; Matless, 1994, 1997), expectations which extend to practices of the plot.

Daniels (1989) suggests that the duplicities inherent in landscape between representation and experience, imagination and being, enhances its analytical potential. Indeed, Wylie advances that 'landscape as tension' has 'proved enduringly creative and productive for cultural geographers' (2007: 1-2). Similarly, cultural geography, which is embedded within landscape analysis, presents a 'contested terrain of debate', encompassing a diversity which 'defies easy definition' (Atkinson et al., 2005: vii). Indeed, Anderson et al. (2003: 2) introduce the field as 'a series of intellectual... engagements... a style of thought'. Nonetheless, within this unfolding intellectual terrain, themes are identified which posit culture as a way of life, as meaning, as doing, and as power, aspects of which are embedded within the landscape and culture of the allotment, and are explored throughout this dissertation.

# METHODOLOGY

In exploring the value of allotments, I adopted a ‘mixed strategy’ research approach (Burgess, 1984). In triangulating ‘extensive’ and ‘intensive’ techniques (Harré, 1979) and incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data, I have pursued a research endeavour where ‘theory, methodology and practice are tightly bound’ (Kitchin and Tate, 2000: 1).

Preliminarily, I attended an ‘Open Day’ at Pretoria Road Allotments in Romford, Essex, in June 2009 to acquaint myself with the (then) unfamiliar allotment scene. I recorded fieldwork and research experiences in a diary which developed into a loose narrative, forming the basis for analysis (Valentine, 1997). Inspired by Latham (2003), I experimented with research diaries as a theoretical framework for exploring the value of allotments. Eight plot-holders kept an ‘allotment diary’ for four weeks. Although the returned diaries (Appendix 1) produced interesting horticultural accounts, few plot-holders commented upon the idiosyncratic value of the allotment for them, which had been the emphasis of the brief provided, and the key intent of adopting this particular methodology. Nonetheless, as artifacts from the allotment, and a metaphor for allotment life, the soiled and weathered diaries epitomised the physical engagement of plot-holders with nature.

Parfitt (1997: 76) heralds questionnaires an ‘indispensable tool’ for human geographers seeking to gather primary data on a population’s characteristics, behaviours and attitudes. Subsequently, a questionnaire (Appendix 2) was developed to address specific research agendas, including allotment practice, perception and commitment. After piloting, Mrs Dingle, the Secretary of the Hornchurch and District Allotments and Gardening Society, and the initial ‘gatekeeper’ (Hughes and Cormode, 1998), distributed 160 questionnaires to thirteen of fifteen allotment wardens at a Committee Meeting on 1st July 2009. Stratified sampling procedures were employed, with more questionnaires distributed to larger sites. Relative to the 30% response rate considered typical of postal surveys (McLafferty, 1997), the 59% response level achieved in the specified time period exceeded expectations. This can be attributed to an inherent appeal for plot-holders to comment upon a much loved endeavour. The questionnaire contextualised my research, the results incorporated throughout my analysis. It also inspired further intensive enquiry, and proved an efficient mechanism for recruiting interviewees.

'Interviews can provide rich sources of data' on people's values (Kitchen and Tate, 2000: 213), fostering 'a deeper picture' relative to questionnaires (Silverman, 1993: 15). An interview with James Rose, the Open Space Development Co-Coordinator for the London Borough of Havering, was conducted in October 2009 via email, to explore the council's view on allotments. Twelve plot-holders were selected for interview from three allotment sites in the Hornchurch District (Appendix 3), the sites collectively encompassing many facets of 'allotment life'. The interviewees were theoretically selected from the returned questionnaires to form an 'illustrative sample' (Valentine, 1997: 112). Informants had the opportunity to speak freely on pre-determined topics (Cook and Crang, 1995) (Appendix 4), the semi-structured interviews comprising a conversation with a purpose (Eyles, 1988). The spontaneity of the encounter allowed participants to discuss topics they considered important (Longhurst, 2003), highlighting issues unanticipated in preliminary research. Adopting Valentine's (1997) theoretical framework, I began by asking plot-holders to '*tell me about... your plot*', which served as an effective 'ice-breaker' and initiated a rapport. These descriptive narratives, where the story of the garden and gardener became intertwined, produced what Seaton (1979) described as 'garden autobiographies', revealing something of the value of the allotments.

Interviews were conducted on the allotment throughout August and September 2009, the familiar setting aiding discussions (Valentine, 1997). During my pilot interview, the natural elements interfered with the audio-recording process. Subsequently, I introduced a second Dictaphone and purposely designed encasing, which enabled both interviewer and interviewee to 'wear' the Dictaphones like a necklace, an innovation which was less intrusive than a hand-held Dictaphone passed between bodies. A visual element was also incorporated, with each plot-holder asked to take a photograph which best represented the value of the allotment to them. Due to the routine nature of allotment gardening, it was thought that some plot-holders may find it difficult to disassociate themselves from the allotment scene and articulate their thoughts coherently. Thus, a visual element offered plot-holders an alternative means of consolidating their thoughts and substantiated claims on landscape (Bartram, 2003). Recognising interviews as complex social interactions (Oppenheim, 1992), it was important to be reflexive and consider my positionality and impact upon the co-construction of data and subsequent interpretation (England, 1994), whilst appreciating the limits of fully knowing one's subjectivity (Rose, 1997). Ethical considerations of confidentiality and anonymity remained fundamental throughout my dissertation.

# CHAPTER III

## THE VALUE AND CULTURE OF ALLOTMENTS

### Rethinking the Plot

A dominant and somewhat prevailing discourse posits allotments as an anachronism, an artefact of wartime scarcity, and a relic of an era that has long since passed. A solitary cloth-capped and elderly male digging amongst rows of straggling carrots and cabbages, set within a wintry landscape, characterises the perception of allotments in the minds of many (Crouch and Ward, 1997) and is an image perfectly captured by the work of David Buss (Figure 5). Whilst plot holders acknowledged the continuing presence of ‘old boys, stuck in their ways’ (Edward, Interview) and recognised associations with poverty stemming from the role of allotments in subsistence survival, a reoccurring narrative alluded to the changing perception of allotments in recent years. The majority of plot-holders heralded the diversification of the allotment population as the most explicit manifestation of such change:



Figure 5: ‘Allotments’, David Buss, 1990.  
Source: Buss, D. (1990: 15)

‘Where the general feeling is it’s an old mans game, there’s a lot more younger people,  
there’s a lot more women, and there’s a lot more families now’  
(Derek, Interview).

The allotment as a ‘family affair’ (Crouch and Ward, 1997) was emphasised in the questionnaire, transcending conventional connotations of allotment activity as an independent male preserve (Figure 6). However Crouch and Ward (1997) assert that this is not necessarily a recent phenomenon, a notion supported by the recollected childhood memories of interviewees, where women were portrayed as active rather than passive participants:

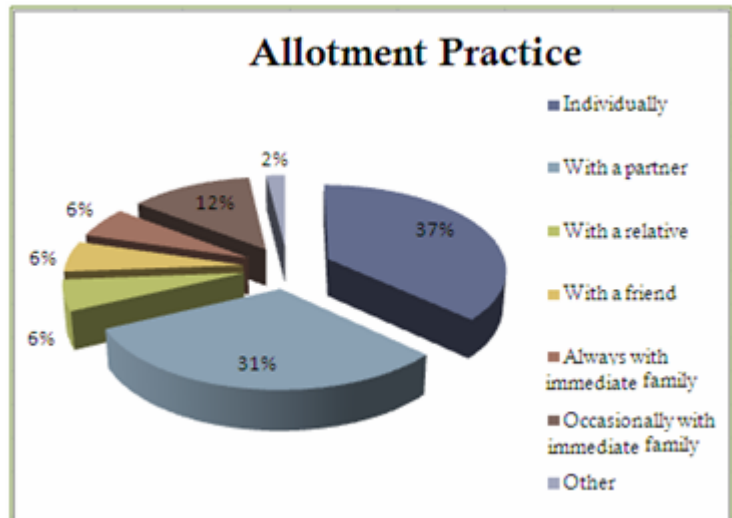


Figure 6: The allotment as a family affair?

‘It was my parents plot, my grandparents plot and I would just help... My mother would have the fork... and I would dig and dig’

(Val, Interview).

It is only in recent years that women have begun to cultivate allotment plots independently. One female plot-holder notes that ten years ago, ‘I was one of the first women...There weren’t many of us’, but now the gender balance ‘could even be half and half’ (Anne, Interview). Thus ‘allotment life’ is no longer an exclusively independent male preserve, and is characterised by a layered and dynamic complexity that contradicts trends of post-war indifference and perceptions of allotment culture as static and inert.

Whilst valued most as a critical source of diet and a supplement to insufficient wages during periods of economic depression (Pahl, 1984), food cultivation has become an enduring pastime in its own right as the recognised value of allotments has shifted beyond the financial *need* to produce food (Crouch and Ward, 1997). This is reflected in the findings of the questionnaire, in which allotment cultivation for the purpose of enjoyment emerged as the most influential rationale for renting a plot, with the agenda of improving health and providing exercise only slightly less significant than growing fresh produce (Figure 7). The change in aspirations of individual plot-holders has led to a resurgence in allotment interest, imbued within a wider

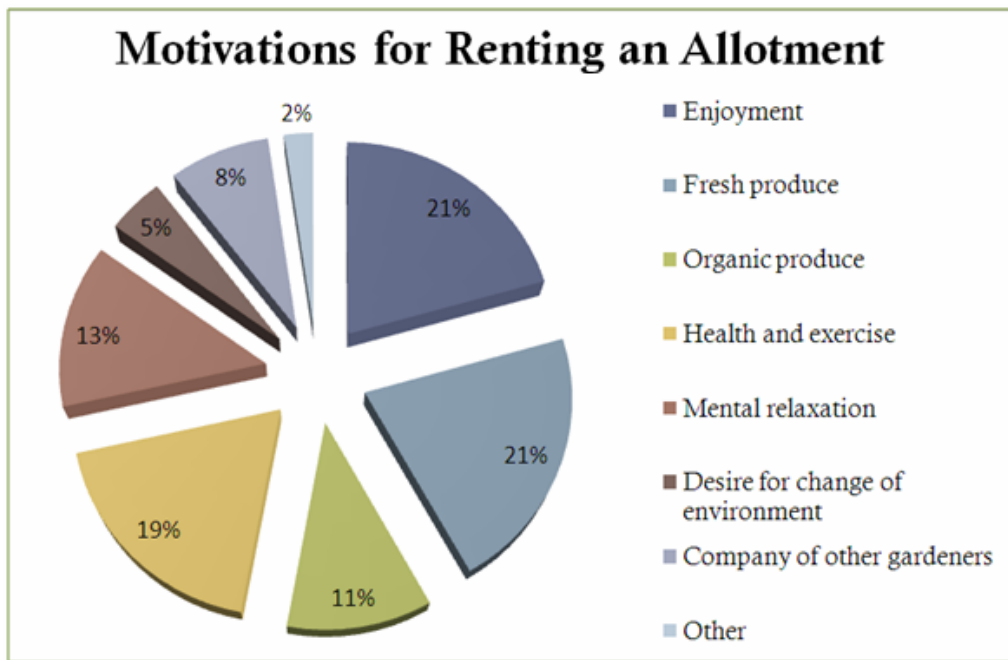


Figure 7: Plot-holder's aspirations underpinning allotment cultivation.

public concern and demand for healthy, locally produced, and affordable fresh fruit and vegetables (Wiltshire and Couch, 2001). Indeed, James Rose of Havering Council commented that 'since...2004, I've seen a rise in their [allotments] importance as public interest has grown', a trend reflected in the lengthening waiting lists that allotment applicants now encounter (Figure 8). This defies Thorpe's (1975) rather pessimistic proclamation in the 1960s, that once the then current generation of elderly allotment holders had passed on, the allotment movement would encounter a fading existence.

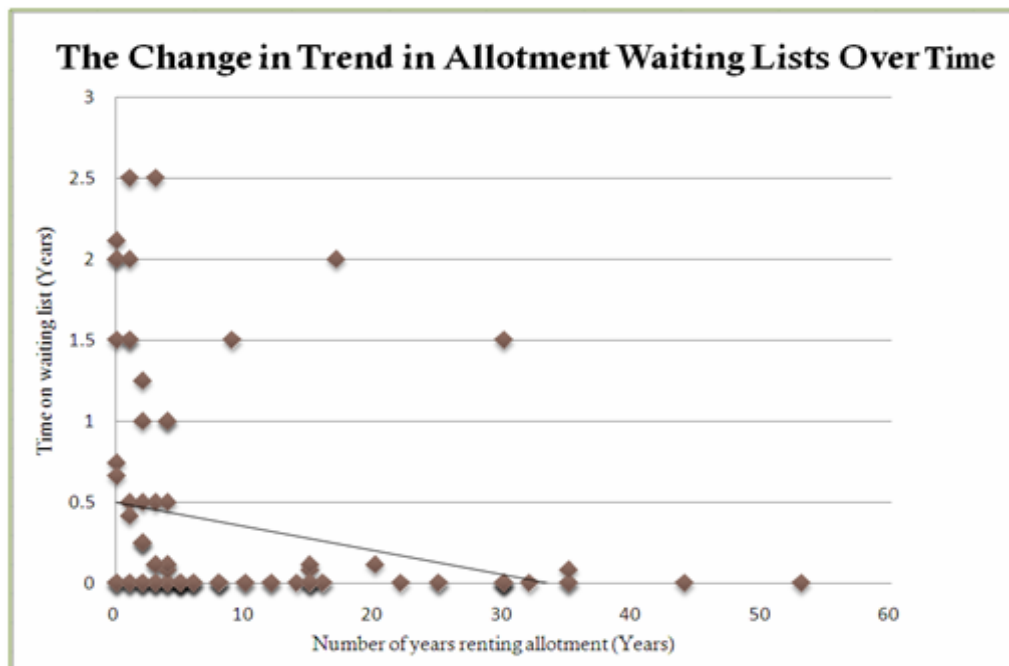


Figure 8: Waiting times encountered by Hornchurch District allotment applicants.

Whilst no longer specifically orientated towards the 'landless poor', many plot-holders emphasised the continuing importance of the allotment in material well-being and physical security: 'I have a big family...it will help to cut costs to do a little bit like this' (Helen, Interview). However plot-holders warned that the financial benefits should not be exaggerated, and this was perfectly illustrated by one plot-holder who had monitored his expenditure in his first year on the plot:

'we spent about £45 with the rent and the seed and so on...the final figure we produced was £452!...Now obviously, if you start saying you'll pay yourself the minimum wage, you start to run at a horrendous loss'

(Douglas, Interview).

Indeed, one plot-holder actually dismissed allotments as a financial supplement and suggested that allotments were best suited to families who enjoy a certain financial stability. This would release a couple from full time employment and allow them to devote the time necessary to cultivate an allotment plot. Indeed, a reoccurring narrative throughout my research emphasised the substantial time commitment entailed in allotment-holding, with most plot-holders recommending an allotment 'to somebody that has some time on their hands' (Gemma, Interview).

Indeed, the culture of the allotment had a unique temporality. Aside from transcending its war time need, the allotment seems to defy the conventions of time by remaining one of the few spaces that relies upon the natural rhythms of the seasons, and has escaped societal conventions that seem to permeate almost all aspects of life. Many respondents commented that on the allotment, it is easy to 'lose track of time' (Carol, Interview). Indeed, when interviewing respondents, time passed by unnoticed, with many discussions far exceeding the twenty minutes initially specified.



## Allotment Life

‘...allotment sites are local communities within the community’

(James Rose, Havering Council).

The significance of friendship emerged as a prevailing theme amongst plot-holders, imbued within a wider allotment community which was based upon shared passions and interests. Plot-holders commented that the exchange of ideas relating to seed selection, pest control and growing techniques for example, was crucial in establishing friendships upon which an allotment community could grow and develop. Plot-holders commented that the allotments generally attracted a certain type of person, a moral person in both conduct and character. Indeed, this was evidenced in the prevalence of ‘the gift relationship’ (Crouch and Ward, 1997), a culture of reciprocity that appears to permeate the internal world of the allotment. Throughout the season, plot holders become both donors and recipients, exchanging seeds, seedlings and produce as well as advice. Despite being new to the allotment scene, Helen found that the adjoining plot-holders automatically shared their tomato seeds with her:

‘I haven’t bought any tomato plants. The seeds were given to me...That’s just typical of an allotment...it’s that generous culture’

(Figure 9) (Helen, Interview).



Figure 9: The gift relationship. (Author’s photo, August 2009)



Allotment holders cherished their right to give, with many purposely growing surplus to share with relations; 'Artichokes...my daughter absolutely dotes on them, so I grow them for her' (Thomas, Interview). Significantly, the interviews themselves reflected the generous culture prevalent on site, with many plot-holders sharing their produce with me (Figure 10).

Archibald Road Allotments, the smallest of the sites explored, had a less prevalent sense of community, with interaction between plot-holders generally confined to neighbouring plots. It seems likely that an absence of an allotment committee, together with relatively fewer plot-holders contributed to this fragmented unity. However, Gemma, a young new-comer to the allotment scene explained that part of the attraction of cultivating a plot was the opportunity to interact with elderly plot-holders, which reinforced a mutual respect and understanding between old and young:

'You learn so much from the older people...Ted has been our allotment guru... he always seems really chuffed that we have asked him something'.

(Gemma, Interview).

Thus, whilst an explicit sense of community lays somewhat dormant, encounters between plot-holders provides an intimate space to develop and consolidate relationships.

A flourishing sense of community exists at Maylands, which is reinforced and developed beyond the insular world of the allotment through committee organised socials, such as Christmas dinner. Although the site lacked a communal area, one plot holder remarked that his shed and adjoining patio could be regarded 'a club house...with the amount of people over here drinking cups of tea!' (Figure 11) (Bob, Interview). In addition, many interviewees referred to the camaraderie that exists on site between the men, jovial banter that consolidates and cements friendships. In one instance, a plot-holder had introduced his friends to 'super cabbage seeds' that he had ordered from a professional seed company. However, the 'cabbages' grew to become Brussels: 'So my name becomes 'Mud', but it's a little bit of banter all the time!' (Derek, Interview). Of course the friendliness of some plot-holders was not always welcome, especially when lots needed doing, and plot-holders revealed the avoidance strategies adopted.

Aside from the values embedded within the allotment community, plot-holders revealed that the allotment was also valued as therapy and escape. Rather interestingly, the allotment as an escape



Figure 10: Gifts from plot-holders. (Author's photo, August 2009)

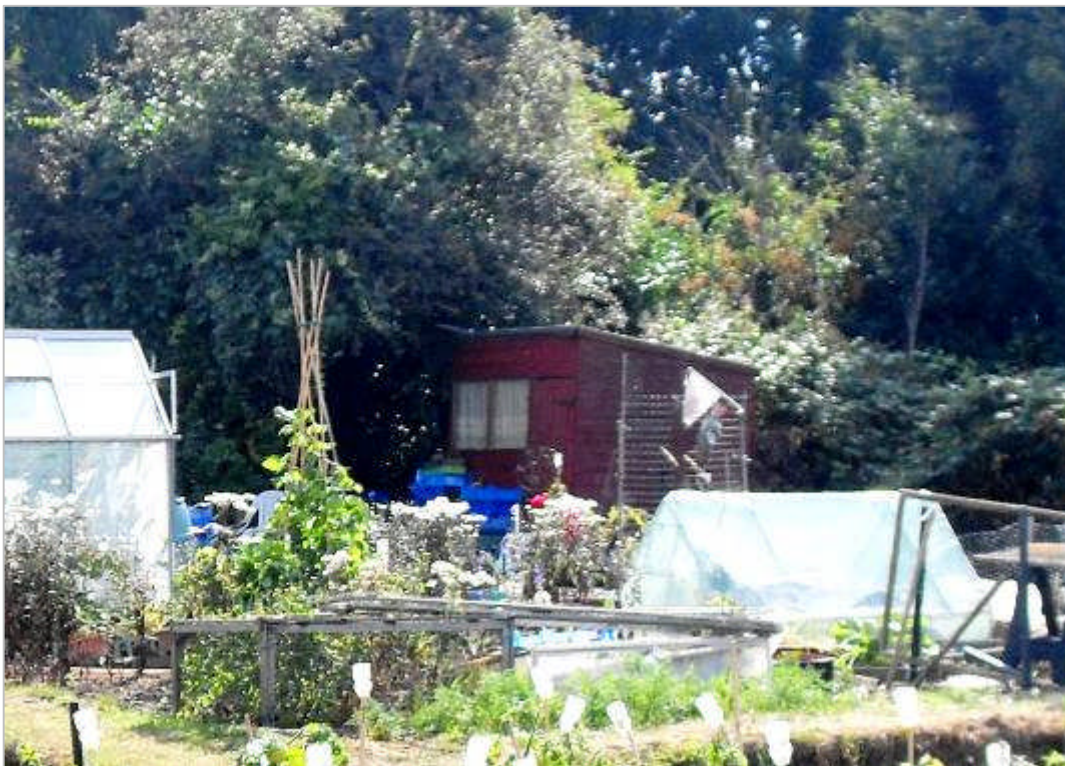


Figure 11: The informal 'clubhouse'. (Author's photo, August 2009)

appeared specifically gendered, with women often embracing the allotment as a welcomed alternative to domestic chores, free from family constraints: 'It is an environment of work at home...I love my children...but I do need a break' (Carol, Interview). The allotment provided women a liberating space to be expressive, creative and independent: 'It's a little world that I can control' (Carol). As a flexible activity, capable of providing strenuous activity or demanding minimal attention, the allotment was also regarded a form of therapy and had helped one plot-holder to recover from myalgic encephalomyelitis (ME). For the partner of another plot-holder who had recently experienced bereavement, the allotment provided 'a break really from the grief' (Gemma, Interview). This would support Hayden's (2001: 18) contention therefore that 'gardening for health is blooming', increasingly being employed for its therapeutic qualities (Foster, 2001). The allotment was also embraced by some as a sacred experience, supporting the contention of Crouch (2003a) that allotments can become sacred spaces owing to the love, care and imagination vested by the plot-holder: 'You're closer to God in the garden' (Douglas, Interview). For Boardman (2001), the garden as sacred stems from an interaction with our natural roots in the recurring cycle of growth, decay, death and new life.

For many plot-holders, the allotment had become a way of life, far exceeding that of a mere pastime, coinciding with Anderson et al.'s (2003: 2) working definition of culture as 'a way of life'. Indeed, for one couple who were forced to take early retirement due to poor health, the allotment had been their saving grace, and had helped them to rebuild their lives. For them, having an allotment provided a purpose in life: '[It] gives you a focus... It just is a way of life now' (Anne, Interview). Reaping the fruits of their labour was immensely rewarding, a satisfying notion prevalent amid plot-holders more generally. The afternoon spent with the couple was a rather humbling experience, and their strength of character and attitudes to life were inspiring. The interview was very informal, and it felt as though I was visiting old friends. Although we diverged from issues of allotments to discuss summer plans and recollected childhood pleasures, this was important in establishing a rapport, and led to a more comprehensive understanding of the value of the allotment in their lives.

Yet, as noted by Anderson et al. (2003), in terms of culture, 'allotment life' is as much about diversity within the culture, as it is about allotment culture per se. Indeed value is idiosyncratic, and as noted by Kopytoff (1986), is forever engaged in continuous process of becoming. For one plot-holder, the allotment featured low in life's priorities, being valued solely for its capacity to produce food. This was reflected in the interview by a general disengagement in allotment issues,



Figure 12: Perception of allotment-holding as labour or leisure.

and a consideration of allotment gardening as labour rather than leisure, which opposed the general perception of allotment-holding as expressed in the questionnaire (Figure 12).

## Conclusion

The telling stories and narratives discussed underpin the internal world of allotments, and characterise and constitute 'allotment life'. There is a culture intrinsic to the allotment, where generosity and mutual aid between plot-holders prevails above all else. Thus, on the allotment 'a different culture...a different mindset' exists (Helen, Interview). DeSilvey questions why such valuable spaces have traditionally been marginalised and ponders whether allotments are 'just too complex to distil, to summarize' (DeSilvey 2003: 460). Appropriately, it is the 'Politics of the Plot' that I will now explore.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE POLITICS OF THE PLOT

‘I always say politics with a small ‘p’, cos it don’t matter what walk of life you’re in, there are politics in it of some description’

(Ernie, Interview).

The history of allotment gardening is deeply political, being one of the most contested urban landscapes in England over the past century (Wiltshire et al., 2000). Whilst allotment gardening is deeply embedded in British cultural heritage, the history of the allotment is intertwined with strong political struggles over the right to have and to hold a plot, which continues to remain significant in contemporary debates (Crouch, 2003a: 1). The dynamic tensions inherent in allotment holding are not confined to the individual experience of the plot-holder, and their interaction with self, nature and other, but resonate with a wider culture which reinforces the importance of the allotment as a vibrant part of contemporary life (Crouch, 2003a: 1). As such, the culture of the allotment becomes political, and the ways in which the plot is understood, managed and negotiated is deeply complex.

#### The Seeds of Discord

Despite the significance of friendship as a prevailing theme amid plot-holders, and narratives alluding to the plot as an idyll, through on-site encounters, an undercurrent of tension surfaced. Some plot-holders felt disempowered and excluded by the current management framework, and alluded to notions of ‘them’ and ‘us’, ‘dictatorial stewards’ and ‘plot-holders’ respectively. Whilst differences between plot-holders are inevitable, one plot-holder recalled how this animosity almost culminated in a physical fight. The tension stemmed from the implementation of a water butt by the steward beside the communal shed. Yet this encroached upon the land of another tenant, who did not respond favourably;

‘Instead of saying “Oh, I would rather you didn’t put that there” and the other chap asking, “Would it be ok?” it almost came to blows... You know, it’s amazing the difference between “will you” and “you will.”’

(Edward, Interview).



Whilst recognised as ‘childish’ and ‘petty’ (Ernie, Interview), plot-holders generally viewed such incidents as an accepted part of allotment life; ‘they get a bit itchy with each other over silly things really, but that’s people isn’t it’ (Beatrice, Interview).

Yet despite this discord, a discussion with Derek, the Chairman of Dunningford Allotment’s Committee and a plot-holder himself, revealed that plot-holders are seldom interested in management beyond their own plot boundaries (Figure 13). Despite the fact an

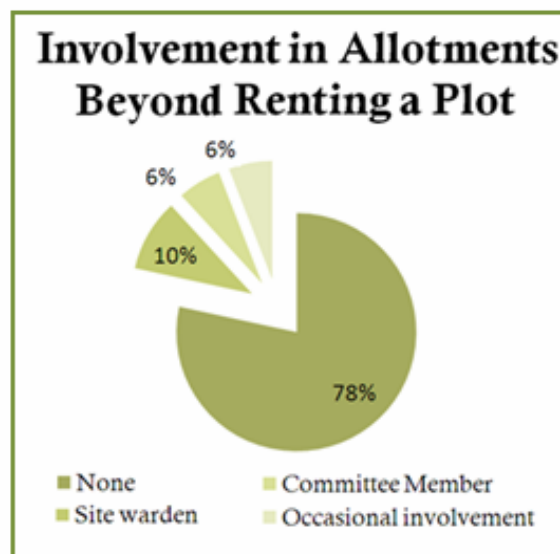


Figure 13: Active engagement of plot-holders in allotment administration.

overwhelming 92% of questionnaire respondents expressed a direct commitment to campaigns contesting the hypothetical loss of their allotment site (Figure 14) Derek commented that sadly this was an obscured reflection. The future security of Dunningford Allotments had recently been threatened by a narrative familiar to the allotment scene, underpinned by economics and the politics of urban planning. The approved closure of the adjoining school in August 2009 for property development stimulated fear amongst plot-holders that their site could be destined for the same fate. Yet plot-holders were reluctant to engage in site management and representation, refusing to ‘give their time for *other* people’ (Derek). This highlights a paradox inherent in allotment life, as the generous culture intrinsic to allotments discussed elsewhere, becomes far less apparent at the level of collective organisation.

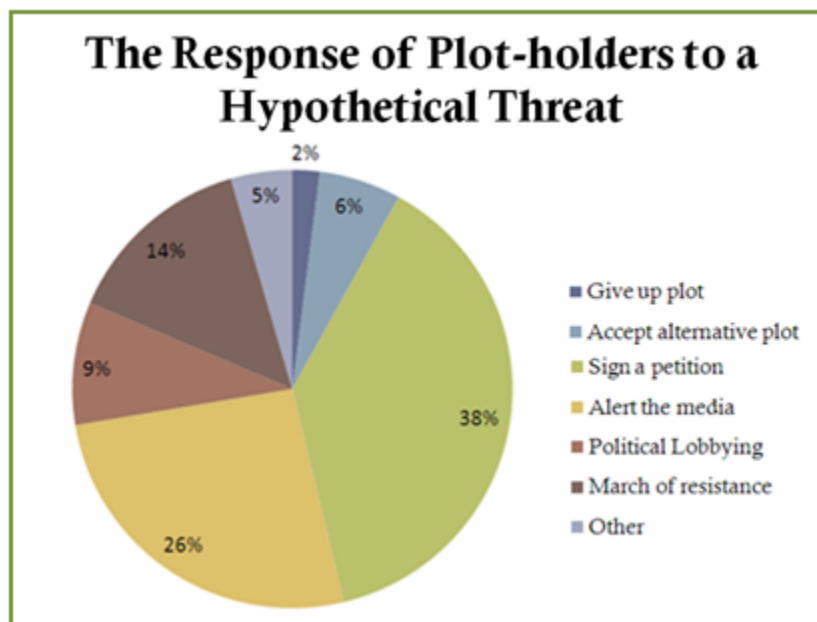


Figure 14: Plot-holder’s response to hypothetical threat.

Yet resisting the potential loss of an allotment site necessitates a collective effort; 'We've got to have a *united* front...to say *yes* we are the allotments, and *yes* we are worth keeping' (Derek). Not wanting to manage the site single handed, Derek formed a site committee, who could respond collectively to Havering's strategy of 'devolved management' (Wiltshire, 1998) - one of the few London Boroughs to devolve site management to allotment societies. Plot-holders generally remarked that the newly formed committees at both Maylands and Dunningford had been successful in enhancing the opportunities to work collectively, replicating the democratic structure underpinning the more recent allotment phenomenon of 'Community Gardens' (Illes, 2001). This was exemplified in the promotion of 'working parties' on Dunningford Allotment, whereby plot-holders gathered on alternate Sundays to collectively clear the site of waste, 'bringing the people together' (Derek). As the social bonds developed, with 'people on that side of the plot now knowing the names of people over on that side!', Derek tells how the 'mysterious incidents' involving missing vegetables have now ceased, as people begin to 'watch out for each other' (Derek). A united front is gradually developing which transcends the individualist approach inherent in the allotment paradox, working towards Burns et al.'s (1994: 274) vision of the allotment community as 'the bedrock of civil society and participatory democracy', and supporting Ward's (1973) vision of the allotment as an example of 'Anarchy in Action'.

## Growing within the Community

'Allotments are a crucial part of everyday life... and need to be projected in the same way'

(Crouch, 2003a: 47).

By extending and embedding the value of allotments in the local community, a wider network of local support can help consolidate the united efforts of plot-holders and establish the allotment as 'part of a growing future rather than a dwindling past' (Crouch and Ward, 1997: xii). Although unanticipated in preliminary planning, my research coincided with the Havering Show, a community oriented event for the public, and a significant event in the allotment calendar. The horticultural tent, one of many marquees, was hosted by the Hornchurch and District Allotments and Gardening Society (Figure 15), with each allotment site having their own display. The displays enticed vast numbers of visitors, many in awe of the giant cabbage and pumpkin displayed by Breton Farm Allotments (Figure 16). The event provided the opportunity for plot-holders to 'talk to people' (Bob, Interview) and to 'educate the public... on what we can achieve' (Edward, Interview). For some, public engagement was also important in challenging the stigma



Figure 15: The horticultural tent at the Havering Show.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 16: Bretton Farm Allotment's display.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)



of charity attached to the outdated 'allotment' label (Crouch and Ward, 1988). The culture of reciprocity that was second nature to plot-holders permeated wider society, and was institutionalized for good cause, with the proceeds from the horticultural displays donated to St. Francis Hospice, demonstrating the value of allotments to the wider community (Figure 17). A further initiative has involved on-site visits by primary school children in an effort to educate them on the origins of food. Some plot-holders were horrified that children are 'growing up thinking... bananas come from Tesco's!' (Edward, Interview). My research was also welcomed as an initiative to engage and encourage the interest of youth.



Figure 17: Presentation Ceremony; Hornchurch and District Allotments Society present their £1940 donation to St. Francis Hospice. (Janet Dingle, February 2010)

The Hornchurch and District Allotments have also entered the 'Havering in Bloom' competition to further engage with the local community. As part of an initiative to instil pride in the borough, Havering Council awards prizes to the best allotment. A past winner explained that whilst she felt honoured, the pressures to conform to competition rules and succeed expectations provoked feelings of anxiety. Her allotment was no longer an intimate space for self-reflection, escape and enjoyment, but had become a public space on show. This highlights a further paradox inherent in allotment holding; Whilst public engagement is crucial in generating a wider network of support, the plot is essentially regarded a private space by plot-holders (Figure 18). As plot-holders invest time and emotion into their plot, endowing it with intimate value and meaning, despite being

publicly owned, a deep sense of private ownership begins to develop which transcends legalities (Wiltshire et al., 2000). Indeed, plot-holders treasured the reclusive nature of their allotment; 'It's well hidden... that's how we like it' (Anne, Interview). Thus a contradiction exists in that public exposure constitutes *over* exposure, and an encroachment upon plot-holders 'private' space can undermine the very value of the allotment itself.

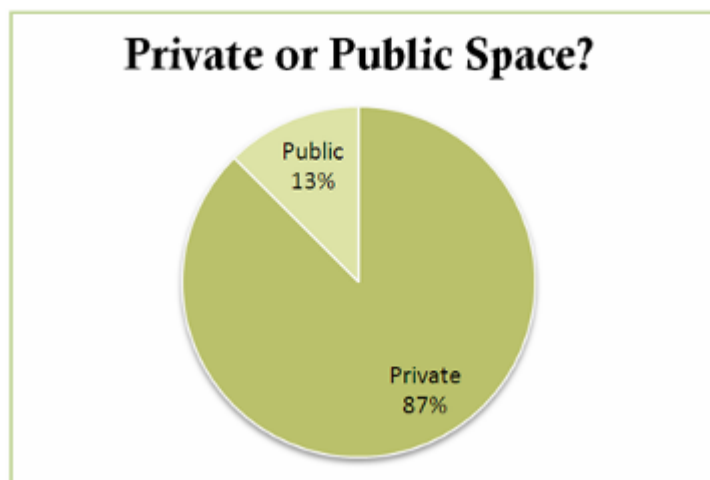


Figure 18: Perception of the allotment as private or public.

## A Plot Divided?

Politically orientated discussions regarding site management and organisation was explicitly gendered, with only male tenants debating such issues. Their dominance in this realm was further reflected in their overt interest in my questionnaire results, and in a tendency for male plot-holders to uphold authoritative positions on site. Interestingly, the authoritative nature of the two site wardens was reflected in their interviews. Contrary to encounters with other plot-holders which were informal, yet guided according to my research agendas, I played a more passive role, the site wardens directing the interview in terms of discursive narrative but also in a literal sense, navigating around the entire site and providing an overview of each plot.

Regardless of gender however, all plot-holders commented upon the more diffuse politics of plot allocation. With the current 'renaissance in allotment gardening' (Cross, 2006:1) and lengthening waiting lists, such an issue is becoming increasingly contentious. A deep antagonism on site stemmed from instances of plot neglect (Figure 19) with weeds from such plots dispersing across the rest of the site. One plot-holder describes the situation as 'awkward', explaining that the site warden;

'can chase them up, but you can't take it [the plot] back from them... [which] seems unfair, considering people on the waiting list'

(Gemma, Interview).



Figure 19: A neglected allotment plot. (Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 20: The compost bin.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)

Another tenant argues that this is where ‘the society has got to carry its strength through’ (Ernie, Interview), a scenario which is yet to occur. Further frustration surrounds the current system of plot allocation whereby plots are allocated to those next on the waiting list. One warden insisted that it would be far more appropriate to ‘match the person with the plot’ (Derek, Interview). Recently, newly vacant plots have been ‘divided into three’ (Douglas, Interview) to address increasing demand. Yet as noted by the London Assembly (2006), whilst reducing waiting lists, this can lead to underestimations regarding the loss of allotment land, as official statistics continue to utilise data based on individual plot numbers.

## Seeds of Resistance

‘Let’s regain what we are losing... From the moment you reconnect with the earth, you become a more peaceful person’

(Val, Interview).

Cultivating an allotment further constituted a political act of defiance against mainstream culture, offering an alternative space to practice alternative values. For many plot-holders, growing their own produce offered a form of resistance to an increasingly artificial society, a society ‘so dictated by what the supermarkets say’ (Helen, Interview), that ‘you end up losing your essence as a human being’ (Val, Maylands). Growing food defied the ‘McDonald’s people’ (Bob, Interview) often encountered in everyday life, coinciding with Ritzer’s (2000) thesis of an increasingly ‘McDonaldized society’. Concern over food safety provided a further impetus for plot cultivation, with genetically modified crops being described as ‘Frankenstein food’ (Val). Contrary to common perceptions, plot-holders were ‘not obsessed with organic’ (Helen), yet emphasised the importance of having control over what they grew: ‘You know exactly what it is... It’s not messed around with, it’s pure, it’s healthy’ (Linda, Interview).

Also encompassed within allotment life is the notion of the plot as sustainable, this environmental logic best epitomised by the compost heap (Figure 20) (Crouch and Ward, 1997: viii). Since the United Nations conference in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which called for responses to environmental issues from local communities globally (Ferris, 2001), recent government publications (e.g. ‘Growing in the Community’ in 2001) have celebrated the environmental logic of allotments as a positive contribution to sustainable government action. Indeed, in Havering,

allotments contribute to initiatives to 'Protect and Improve the Environment' under the Havering Strategic Partnership. However, whilst this narrative of local sustainable development has attracted new plot-holders intent on 'doing our bit for the environment' (Helen, Interview), older, more traditional plot-holders argued that 'we have always been friends with the earth' (Ernie, Interview), with sustainable practice finding natural expression within the allotment tradition. Nonetheless, as noted by Thompson (1997), allotment gardeners can enhance their political advantage in efforts to secure their ground by appeal to environmental initiatives.

## Conclusion

Cultivating an allotment offers plot-holders independence as they negotiate the complexities of contemporary life. The plot therefore, is not an insulated idyll, but resonates with a wider society and culture. Inherent in allotment holding are dynamic tensions between private aspirations and collective action, freedom and control, and the plot as both a private and public space. These paradoxes underpin allotment life, described by one plot-holder as 'a political mind field of a story' (Helen, Interview), and supports the contention of Crouch (2003a: 6) that 'allotments [have] emerged in the new millennium... more politically dynamic than for over a century'.



## CHAPTER V

### THE ALLOTMENT AESTHETIC

Under a borrowed chapter title from Crouch and Ward (1997), ‘the allotment aesthetic’ constitutes a fascinating realm of study, owing to the duplicities inherent in the landscape. Daniels (1989) argues that the seemingly oppositional dualities between representation and experience, geographical imaginings and practical embodiment serve to enhance landscapes analytical potential.

#### A Plot with Many Scenes

The British allotment has become a familiar and ubiquitous feature in our landscape (Crouch and Ward, 1997). As ‘a paradoxical echo of the countryside as it once was’ (Crouch and Wiltshire, 2005: 125), the allotment, as an essentially urban phenomenon intertwined with rural associations, provides a unique contribution to urban landscapes by defying conventional cultural understandings of the rural and the urban: ‘It’s like I’m in the country again. I forget that there’s a town around’ (Val, Interview). This tangled contingency is evident in the questionnaire response (Figure 21). Moreover, the allotment confounds conventional dichotomies between private and public, labour and leisure, and consumptive and productive activities, this disintegration underpinning DeSilvey’s (2003: 444) consideration of allotments as ‘third spaces’.

Plot-holders emphasised however that the notion of ‘them’ and ‘us’, the ‘public’ and ‘plot-holders’ respectively, was one dichotomy that was very rarely conflated, and often centred on conflicting aesthetics. One plot-holder, admiring the allotment’s vernacular landscape commented, ‘as I’m standing here now looking...it sort of pleases me’, yet

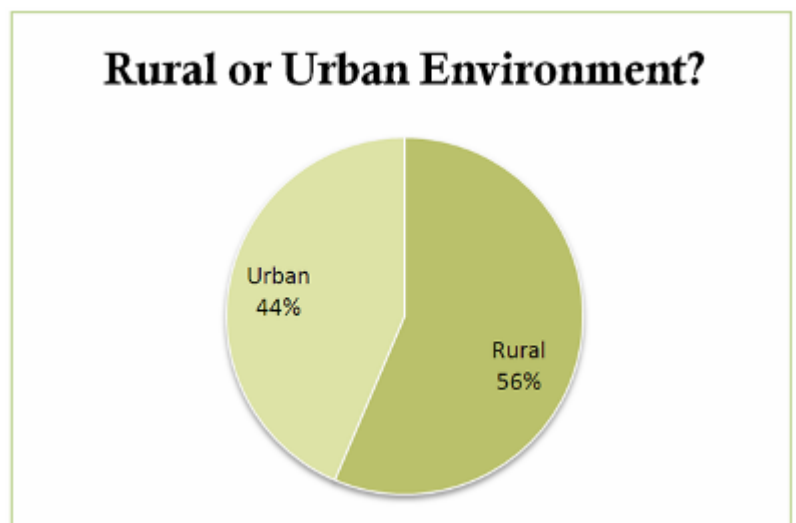


Figure 21: Perception of the allotment as rural or urban.

appreciated that very often the public ‘thinks of an allotment as a dirty old shed, ramshackles’ (Edward, Interview). Thus it would seem that one’s positionality in relation to the plot influences ways of seeing. Indeed, this sentiment is echoed in the work of Crouch and Ward (1997) who postulate that the panorama of the allotment landscape and its kaleidoscopic qualities are best appreciated by the railway traveller. Yet this offers a limited view, and very often the landscape is misunderstood by outsiders ‘unable to realize the nature of the relationships, experiences and rewards found there’ (Figure 22) (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 270). In contrast, plot-holders who enjoy an active engagement with the individually crafted landscape at an intimate scale, appreciate ‘a wholly different aesthetic’ (Figure 23) (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 202). Thus, the scale and intimacy of our engagement with the landscape is fundamental in informing our interpretation and appreciation of that landscape. Professional recommendations concerning the aesthetics of the plot were condemned by plot-holders as ignorant to the ways in which the ‘make-do-amends culture’ (Thomas, Interview) of the allotment had developed. Referring to the aesthetic rehabilitation advanced by the Thorpe Report in 1969, Edward (Interview) commented; ‘I think their approach was wrong... I’m not going to be told what to do’. As one of the few remaining landscapes with no intended aesthetics, the plot can be regarded an expression of individuality and an outlet for creativity. The make-shift ways in which plot-holders utilise the ground represents something of their own unique culture (Crouch and Ward, 1997).

Whilst the allotment represents a space in which plot-holders can enjoy personal freedom, individualism and liberal endeavour, there exist expectations relating to appropriate behaviour, some of which are grounded in allotment law, and others which are taken for granted; ‘You should never touch anything on anybody else’s plot. That’s an unwritten law’ (Ernie, Interview). As such, a moral geography exists within the allotment landscape whereby certain behaviours are considered ‘in’ and ‘out of place’. Ways of seeing inherent in the allotment landscape are connected to ways of dressing (Matless, 1997), and it was only by deviating from the established norms that I became acutely aware that this boundary existed. Having visited an allotment ‘Open Day’ in the preliminary stages of my research wearing my formal work attire, I recorded feeling ‘out of place’ amongst the plot-holders who were dressed in casual and worn apparel. Yet a consideration of the activities of plot-holders as correct and appropriate was not confined to the insular world of the allotment, but resonated with wider society. An allotment shed, naturally considered ‘in’ place by plot-holders (Figure 24), was firmly regarded as ‘out’ of place by local residents who argued that it spoiled an otherwise attractive view. Subsequent efforts to blend the



Figure 22: The allotment landscape viewed from a train.  
(Author's photo, March 2010)



Figure 23: The allotment landscape viewed at plot-level.  
(Author's photo, September 2009)





Figure 24: The controversial allotment shed.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)

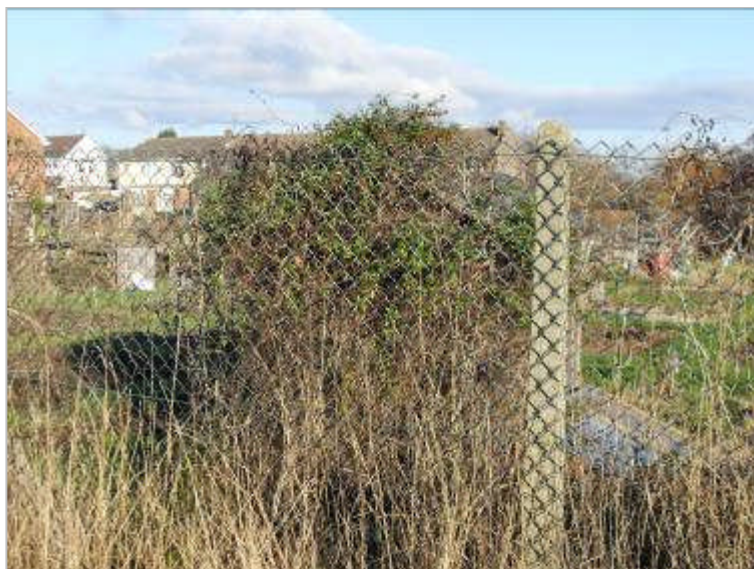


Figure 25: Efforts to blend the allotment shed with its natural surroundings.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)

shed with its natural surroundings (Figure 25) emphasise the allotment landscape as a carefully negotiated space.

Yet to assume the allotment resolves the duplicity inherent in landscape analysis with the ontological and the ideological embraced by plot-holders and ‘outsiders’ respectively, is too simplistic an interpretation. Even at the very intimate scale of plot-cultivation, allotment-holders (unconsciously) abided in landscapes duplicities, demonstrating the possibility to read across variants of landscape (Matless, 2003). On the one hand, plot-holders were concerned with superficial scenery and representation and much discussion centred on how the allotment should look. Whilst the warden of Maylands Allotment frowned upon clutter (Figure 26), Ernie (Interview) explained that ‘this is what happens on allotments...We know it shouldn’t... but it’s a pleasure.’ Other plot-holders cultivated their land primarily for aesthetic display, prioritising presentation over productivity (Figure 27).

Yet on the other hand, the value of the allotment stemmed from physical engagement with the landscape and an embodied interaction with the view, coinciding with recent reworking of Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of bodily practice (Crouch, 2003b). Allotment cultivation as a sensuous and intimate experience freed plot-holders from everyday struggle, their ‘grounded performance’ (Crouch, 2003b) enabling them to make sense of the intimate geographies in their lives through the ways in which their bodies move and feel (Crouch and Ward, 1997).

‘I like textures... the roughness of the courgettes... the softness of the beans... I look forward to the smell of the first tomatoes... This feel of the earth to me, it’s what people should be about... For the mind, for the body, for the spirit’

(Val, Maylands).

On the allotment, as the plot becomes filled with meaning, it is not simply nature that is cultivated, but people’s lives, beliefs and culture.





Figure 26: Allotment clutter. (Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 27: A decorative allotment garden.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)

## ‘Every Plot Tells a Story’

(Derek, Interview).

The narrative approach often informing plot-holder’s garden autobiographies could be considered ‘an extension of the owner’s personality’ (Seaton, 1979: 101), with stories of the garden and gardener often intertwined. Indeed, some allotment-holders saw their plots as a direct reflection of their persona: ‘It reflects my personality in the way that it is organised; it’s very square, very logical’ (Val, Maylands). For others, the reflection was less positive. Coinciding with Beatrice’s self-perception as ‘quite a random type... [who] doesn’t look ahead’, her plot was somewhat chaotic, ‘the raspberries...tangled with the blackberries’. Very often, aspects of plot-holder’s garden autobiography was reflected in the photograph they took which best represented the value of the allotment to them. Indeed, Beatrice purposely photographed a solitary Victorian Plum tree (Figure 28) which was most valued as it represented ‘the tidiest bit’ of her plot (Beatrice, Interview). Edward speculated that onlookers would ‘probably think he’s a bit eccentric... almost bohemian’, owing to his passion for growing flowers in spite of the ‘old boys’ disapproval ‘because you can’t eat flowers’ (Edward, Interview) Yet, as argued by Thomas (Interview), flowers represent ‘food for the soul’. Thomas photographed his fig tree owing to the biography of the plant, and the memories it evoked (Figure 29). A close friend had given him the plant, not as a token of affection, but because it made her conservatory smell of cats!

Both Douglas and Helen’s garden narrative was deeply intertwined with their domestic affairs. Their aspiration to cultivate an allotment stemmed from a desire to reduce expenditure on food, emphasising the continuing importance of allotments in providing for subsistence needs. Douglas photographed his raspberries (Figure 30) and Helen her sweet corn (Figure 31), commenting, ‘that abundance for so little money!’ The value of the allotment for Helen also extended to the moral and intellectual stimulation it provided for her son Jacob, aged five, who considered himself to be most important on site: ‘take a picture of me!’ (Figure 32). Helen regretfully recalled how her father’s horticultural knowledge ‘hasn’t been passed on’ and sincerely hoped to disrupt this cycle. For Linda, her greenhouse best represented the value of the allotment to her, the plants laden with fruit, providing a real sense of achievement (Figure 33). Yet the greenhouse also epitomised the time commitment entailed in allotment cultivation, the plants in the greenhouse needing water every day.





Figure 28: Beatrices's solitary Victorian Plum Tree.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 29: Derek's evokative Fig Tree.  
(Author's photo, September 2009)





Figure 30: Douglas' economically valued raspberries. (Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 31: Helen's economically valued sweet corn. (Author's photo, August 2009)





Figure 32: Jacob watering the sweet corn. (Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 33: Linda's greenhouse, a symbol of commitment.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)



Two plot-holders from Maylands Allotments were unique in their decision to photograph the landscape as a whole. For Edward, by 'looking at the whole site... you don't really notice the nasty bits, the whole thing is satisfying'. In this respect, the allotment aesthetic is rewarding, and in viewing the fruits of his labour on masse, he feels inspired: 'oh my, that is good' (Figure 34). Yet Andrew photographed the entire landscape for very different, if not contrasting reasons. By including 'the mess... the weeds... the ripped netting...', a truer representation of the allotment could be captured (Figure 35). This challenged the 'pristine, glamour-allotments' often featured in the media, where the raw elements of the allotment aesthetic were manipulated in a controlled view, coinciding with Cosgrove's (1984: 1) notion of landscape representation as a 'way of seeing'. By contrast, Edward sought to reclaim the struggles and imperfections that underpin the scenic ideal of the allotment aesthetic, favouring Mitchell's (1996) contribution to landscape analysis.

Rather interestingly, the two committee plot-holders interviewed both placed greater emphasis in their garden autobiographies on wider issues affecting the allotment. Ernie detailed events in the history of Maylands Allotments, describing past fires and the authorities (lack of) response. In a similar vein, Derek extended his narrative beyond his plot, and asked to photograph me on site, the values and actions of youth best representing the issues he considered most important in safeguarding the allotments future, an argument dominating his garden autobiography (Figure 36). This photograph was unique in many respects. Besides the subject chosen, Derek was the only plot-holder to take the photograph himself, and delivered the developed image in person to my home address. This second encounter allowed us to discuss how my research had developed, and Derek's genuine interest was a testament to his commitment to the allotment and its future. The marrow in the photograph, which was presented as a gift, captures the essence of generosity inherent in the allotment culture.

Uniting all plot-holders was the appropriation of the allotment landscape in their narrative of self-understanding and identity, coinciding with work on 'Life Geographies'. Of course, owing to the diverse nature of plot-holders, the role of the allotment landscape in people's lives had varying significance. For those who connected with the landscape on a superficial level, valuing the plot merely for the produce it provided, the idea that the landscape somehow shaped their identity was ridiculed: 'Do I have a bulb growing out of the top of my head!?' (Thomas, Interview). Yet for others, allotment cultivation both fashioned and defined the very essence of life, shaping sense of self and providing an intimate space in which to consolidate relationships with others. This



Figure 34: The plot as a visual paradise. (Author's photo, August 2009)



Figure 35: The imperfections of the allotment aesthetic.  
(Author's photo, August 2009)





Figure 36: The value of young people on the allotment.  
(Derek, August 2009)

was captured in Bob and Anne's photograph (Figure 37), where the couple unanimously decided that on the allotment, they most valued each other. The allotment represented 'a way of life' where they themselves were firmly embedded within the landscape: 'without us there would be no allotment, and without the allotment, there would be no us' (Bob, Interview).



Figure 37: The plot as a way of life. (Author's photo, August 2009)

## Conclusion

The allotment landscape is unique in defying contemporary cultural expectations, falling between urban and rural, private and public. The allotment aesthetic is rich and diverse, its inherent contradictions impossible to resolve. Ways of seeing are intimately bound with one's subjectivity and positioning. The active encounter of plot-holders with the landscape entails an engagement in the complexity of senses that is very different from the experience of an outsider. In a dynamic encounter with space, plot-holders cultivate their individual plots in a way which reflects many aspects of their lives, and the blurring of boundaries between garden and gardener was further evidenced in their garden autobiographies and the photographs taken. Thus, the allotment garden can be considered a 'mirror of ourselves' (Francis and Hester, 1990: 2). 'Alone and together, plotters produce a landscape that is an expression of their culture' (Crouch and Wiltshire, 2005: 129).

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

‘The garden is an inclusive realm. In it are concentrated a whole cluster of ideas and inspirations, some conscious and declared, others no less apparent for being unconscious’

(Hunt, 1998: 30-31).

The allotment is characterised by a layered and dynamic complexity which defies conventional understandings of landscape and embodies an intrinsic culture based upon shared conditions, activities and passions. Plot-holders enjoy a common identity that cuts across occupational and class status, and is underpinned by the appeal of simply working the land, collectively appreciating the landscape itself, and the values embedded within. Yet the tension inherent in allotment life renders the plot less an idyll, but a space in which to negotiate relations with nature, self and others. Whilst plot-holders recognise that the allotment enshrines values which would resonate well in wider society, greater societal integration defies the very value of the allotment as an escape from, and an act of defiance against, contemporary mainstream culture. Thus, with its modest dimensions and content, the plot provides a space in which individual allotment-holders can reflect on life and negotiate the joys and tribulations it contains (Crouch, 2003a).

The ways in which each plot-holder cultivates their land becomes an expression of self, and produces a culture with its own distinct landscape. The active engagement of allotment-holders with the land produces individually crafted plots, an infinitely varied mosaic that comes together as a collective landscape. The multifarious detail characterising the intensive and inventive allotment aesthetic is best appreciated by plot-holders, and often overlooked by external judgement. The high level of internal diversity within the landscape reflects the diversity of plot-holders more generally. There exists no typical allotment-holder or representative site and thus, the ways in the allotment is valued is unique to the experience of each individual plot-holder. The allotment landscape is in part an accumulation of past memories and ideas (Meinig, 1979a). It is never static nor complete, but is continuously evolving (Cresswell, 2003), being reworked and remade both on the ground and in geographical imaginings.



The landscape and culture of allotments can be considered an increasingly dynamic and complex part of contemporary life (Crouch, 2003a), evident in the diversifying allotment population and the changing perception of allotments within society. Yet despite the current ‘renaissance in allotment gardening’ (Cross, 2006:1), the ways in which the allotment is valued, negotiated and experienced by plot-holders has strong continuities with the values identified by Crouch and Ward some twenty years ago. Whilst the fundamental values imbued within allotment life take root in rich tradition, the appeal of the allotment and its representation in governmental discourse *is* constantly changing. Whilst the allotment is currently celebrated as a positive contribution to sustainable development initiatives, different aspects of the allotment’s landscape and culture will be emphasised over time to reflect the changing political ideologies of Governance.

The allotment continues to remain the archetypal vernacular landscape, a familiar and ubiquitous part of our urban fabric which is often taken for granted until threatened (Crouch and Ward, 1997). Yet this dissertation illustrates the importance for cultural geographers of addressing the vernacular. The ideas, inspirations and values embedded within the allotment resonate with a wider culture that reinvigorates their importance in contemporary life (Crouch 2003a). Indeed, as discerned by Ward (1973), the allotment may contain the seeds for social change in the wider community, a community that is increasingly sophisticated, yet increasingly fragmented. Thus, exploring the vernacular remains fundamental in understanding how people make sense of the intimate geographies in their lives. As argued by Jackson, the vernacular constitutes:

‘man’s essential identity... [The] ordering of man’s most intimate world is the prototype of how he orders his larger world’

(Jackson, 1952; cited in Meinig, 1979a: 228).

## Limitations and Further Study

The greatest limitation in this dissertation was restricted time. Thus my study was not comprehensive and many dimensions of allotment life were left unexplored. To elaborate upon my existing research, further study could entail a sustained micro-analysis of Dunningford Allotments, which are currently threatened by the familiar narrative of property development. I could explore the changing values and dynamics of the allotment as private practices become politically significant, and plot-holders develop, advance and implement various strategies in efforts to secure their ground. I could explore the value of allotments to wider society (i.e. non plot-holders), voicing the views of those often absent from allotment debates. Additionally, I could extend my study to all London Boroughs, and explore the differing response of Local Authorities and allotment activists to the renewed interest in allotments, focusing on ‘guerrilla gardeners’ specifically, a grassroots movement premised on converting abandoned urban land into productive urban landscapes.

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