

# The seeds of sustainable change

The Abundance project is rooted in the potential of cities to produce food. A community in Brixton, south London, has created a flourishing demonstration plot and is working through the issues involved to sustain it

## Project

Activating Blighted Urban Niches for Daring Agricultural Networks of Creativity and Endeavour (ABUNDANCE)

Project coordinator

Robert Biel, UCL

Project partners

Transition Towns Brixton, Guinness Trust

Residents Association, volunteers

Website

<http://transitiontowns.org/Brixton/ABUNDANCE>

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The Abundance project aims to create a 'low input, high output' community garden, and to demonstrate just how productive urban agriculture can be.

'Surveys suggest that a very significant amount, as high as 60 per cent, of food needs could be met within cities if all available space were to be cultivated, including rooftops, balconies, allotments and urban green space,' says project coordinator Robert Biel.

The team and local residents are already enjoying the first crops of fruit and vegetables they've grown in their new demonstration plot at the Guinness Trust allotments in Brixton, south London.

A key driver for Abundance is the emerging global food crisis and the drive to reduce food

miles, with food and fuel prices soaring and global urban populations outstripping rural ones for the first time. The project brings in extensive experience from countries that have been forced by circumstance to cultivate all available land, for example Cuba and Argentina.

In Argentina, for example, community gardens were created to mitigate the effects of the 2001 economic collapse. As the economy recovered, the popular concept was reworked into government-run urban agriculture programmes providing unemployed workers with food and an income. It would seem that adversity breeds sustainability, as the Brixton plot, along with many of London's parks and gardens, was last cultivated during the food shortages of wartime Britain.

'I'm often here and the kids come up to me and ask "Who is going to eat all this stuff?" "Can I have my own patch?" "Can I grow what I like?". At the moment, we don't know all the answers' Louise, estate resident





'We will get a significant yield from the Brixton plot. We're employing a no-dig method, meaning that you don't turn over the soil. The input in labour is very low. We pile compost on top and the worms will do the job. This is a crucial element of the model that we're developing'

*Robert Biel, Director of MSc Development Administration and Planning, UCL*

**Policy and planning**

Yet before we grab our spades, says Biel, another key aspect of the project is the need to explore the policy and planning arrangements that lie behind land cultivation. The UK policy context is complex: do residents have the right to cultivate land on social housing estates? How can we create common property management criteria to manage the space and distribute food? 'These issues have been investigated in some detail in the Latin American context, but they're completely new here,' says Biel.

**A community resource**

The residents are well aware of the issues that need to be thrashed out. Estate resident Louise is one of the community's keenest gardeners. 'I'm often here and the kids come up to me and ask "Who is going to eat all this stuff?" "Can I have my own patch?" "Can I grow what I like?". At the moment, we don't know all the answers. If we did, I'm sure that more people would get involved.' Louise notes, however, that the cultivated garden has never been mistreated. 'There's no monitoring, but I've never seen anyone even walk on ground that's been worked on,' she says.

The team also aims to map cultivable green

space across Brixton and to prepare a 'space surveying' manual. Plots will be mapped spatially and institutionally, with information about land ownership and land use collated along with location. 'Our experiences will feed into the urban planning situation, and we feel that policy guidance on urban agriculture will shift rapidly,' says Biel. It would seem that he's right: during June, even the royal parks in London began to put aside land for cultivation.

The team is also teaching cultivation techniques, with project partner Transition Towns offering courses on permaculture and plot design using the Brixton site as an exemplar. Low input agriculture can be highly productive. 'Although we value the recreational and quality-of-life aspects of the project, we focus on productivity,' says Biel. 'This is something that has never really been addressed by urban agriculturists in this country.'

The team aims to establish a sustainable institutional structure to manage this land, and other plots, once the project ends. ✦

A weekend event in late autumn 2008 at the Brixton site will bring together potential 'growing communities' from across London to share knowledge and good practice. Check the UrbanBuzz website for details

**Key points to date**

**Experience from Abundance** to feed into the MSc in Environmental and Sustainable Development at UCL's Development and Planning Unit from September 2008

**An e-learning module** is being planned in collaboration with Ryerson University, Toronto, which will be part of an international on-line teaching programme

**Growing area designed and planted** with a healthy crop

**Open days** and permaculture workshops held onsite

**Draft guidelines** for community green mapping drafted and discussed at Lewisham council level

**Commitment** from local area representatives to continue growing practice on the test site

**Identification of culturable** land within the London boroughs

**Activity and demonstration** on site is the most effective means of engagement