

Guerrilla gardening as normalised law-breaking: Challenges to land ownership and aesthetic order

Crime Media Culture

1–18

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DOI: 10.1177/17416590221088792

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Abstract

This article considers guerrilla gardening that involves taking on other people's land for gardening, usually without their permission. It is a practice that is overlooked largely by criminology, yet it can tell us something about attitudes to law and land ownership and challenges the approved aesthetic order of where we live. It can soften the look and feel of the city, leading to a different emotional and affective interaction with urbanity. Evidence is presented from a qualitative study of guerrilla gardeners from the North West of England. The discussion is informed theoretically by work on aesthetic criminology, do-it-yourself urbanism and temporary urbanism and the idea of urban commons. In this study, guerrilla gardening is found to be a normalised form of law-breaking that, despite not necessarily being to everyone's taste and the gardeners having an autocratic view of property, is a form of urban intervention that is broadly accepted and welcomed, even by those who enforce the law.

Keywords

Aesthetic criminology, do-it-yourself urbanism, guerrilla gardening, normalised law-breaking, urban commons

Introduction

In this article guerrilla gardening is considered as a normalised form of law-breaking. This is in the context of issues of land ownership and notions of aesthetic order. According to urban geographers Hardman and Larkham (2014: 2) guerrilla gardening is 'the unpermitted use of space for cultivation in cities'. The practice involves taking on other people's land for gardening, usually without their permission, including public land such as verges or tree pits, or privately owned and seemingly abandoned plots. This may be because the guerrilla gardeners lack space of their own,

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see the urban landscape as needing beautification, or perhaps they are motivated by challenging people's use of public space and see the potential for urban agriculture (Hardman and Larkham, 2014; Hardman et al., 2018), turning plots into mini market gardens. The emphasis is 'cultivation in cities', although the practice is not solely an urban affair. Another definition is offered by the British guerrilla gardener Reynolds (2008: 16) who sees guerrilla gardening as simply 'the illicit cultivation of someone else's land'. This 'illicit cultivation' suggests guerrilla gardening ought to be of interest to criminology, yet so far there has been very little attention on the practice among criminologists. Brisman and South (2014: 106) are an exception in their work on green cultural criminology where they recognise how guerrilla gardening can be in direct conflict with the law though 'charges of vandalism, trespassing, obstruction of traffic, or the like'. In England and Wales trespass to land is usually an issue of Tort law, although in specific circumstances under the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 it becomes a criminal offence. Vandalism and obstruction to traffic are both criminal offences, covered by the Criminal Damage Act 1971 and the Highways Act 1980, respectively. Planting flowers or vegetables on someone else's land may not be serious criminality and a low priority for law enforcement – and for criminology – yet it can tell us something about our attitudes to breaking the law, to land ownership and our views on the aesthetic order of where we live, how we want these places to look and feel.

This article is informed by literature on aesthetic criminology (Cooper et al., 2018; Dickinson et al., 2021; García Ruiz and South, 2019; Millie, 2016, 2017, 2019), do-it-yourself and temporary urbanism (e.g. Ferreri, 2015; Finn, 2014; Iveson, 2013; Talen, 2015), and work informed by the idea of urban commons (e.g. Bradley, 2015; Dawney et al., 2016; Kirwan et al., 2016). Supporting evidence is provided from a qualitative study involving in-depth interviews with guerrilla gardeners from the North West of England. The label 'guerrilla gardener' is used although not all were happy with the label, something that is explored further. Those interviewed were an opportunistic sample gained via guerrilla gardening website contacts and through snowballing. Six guerrilla gardeners were interviewed. It is acknowledged that there are more than six operating across the region. The interviewees are not representative of all guerrilla gardeners, but their perspectives are used to illustrate the discussion and they offer insights into the cultivation of other people's land. The research took place between 2013 and 2015 and received ethical approval from the author's institutional research ethics committee. Each interview was recorded, transcribed verbatim and then analysed for key and emerging themes.

The interviewees were anonymised and were from three guerrilla gardening groups: one well-established from a small rural town in Yorkshire (Milltown Group – Eva and Maggie), a recently established group in Merseyside (New Urban Group – Fiona and Peter), and a more established group, also operating in Merseyside (Old Urban Group – Isla and Sarah). The interviewees included five females and one male and ranged in age from late-20s through to 70s. According to the interviewees, guerrilla gardening volunteers range from children through to those who have retired. For instance, according to Peter from the New Urban Group, 'there were even kids there, must have been about 10 years old, or so'. In terms of ethnicity, all participants were White. Whilst guerrilla gardening in the UK is not a uniquely White pastime, the groups represented by the participants contained few Black or minority ethnic members – although this was perhaps partly a reflection of some of the neighbourhoods where the gardening occurred. The social status of the interviewees was a mix of working and middle class, including a community worker, retired teacher, a former smallholder and manager and a former nurse. Two respondents did not give an occupation.

It is useful to provide here some background, including the origins of guerrilla gardening and consideration of the practice in the context of aesthetic criminology, do-it-yourself and temporary urbanism and the notion of urban commons. The views of the gardeners are then explored in more detail, especially concerning their involvement in guerrilla gardening and their views on illegal gardening without permission. The article concludes by presenting guerrilla gardening as a normalised form of law-breaking, an urban intervention that is broadly accepted and welcomed, even by those who enforce the law. This is despite the practice being a challenge to the aesthetic order of cities as promoted by late modern capitalism, and the gardeners having an autocratic view of property.

Background

Drawing on the original meaning of guerrilla action as a 'little war' Reynolds called for guerrilla gardeners to enlist via his website¹ giving each enlistee a 'troop number'. He claimed that:

The battle is gathering pace. Most people own no land. Most of us live in cities and have no garden of our own. We demand more from this planet than it has the space and resources to offer. Guerrilla gardening is a battle for resources, a battle against scarcity of land, environmental abuse and wasted opportunities. It is a fight for freedom of expression and for community cohesion. It is a battle in which bullets are replaced with flowers (most of the time) (Reynolds, 2008: 16).

Reynolds gave himself troop number one which, it has been pointed out (Hardman and Larkham, 2014; McKay, 2011), gave the impression that guerrilla gardening started with him despite it predating his involvement by some margin. The origins of what was to be labelled as guerrilla gardening are often thought to be in New York in the 1970s with the work of Liz Christie and the 'Green Guerrillas' who planted a community garden on an empty lot that they did not own, 'the kind of garbage-filled space you can walk by for years without really noticing' (Tracey, 2007: 24). According to journalist and environmental designer Tracey (2007: 34): 'Not only were they working without a template in 1973, they were challenging popular notions of land use in one of the world's most intensely populated urban areas'. One of the participants in the current study suggested that guerrilla gardening went back further to before the war, although it would not have been labelled as such: 'My mum used to do this in the 1920s, you know, she used to go up and [. . .] with trees in plant pots and plant them, but not many people did it in those days, did they? [. . .] So she was well ahead of her time' (Sarah from the Old Urban Group). Guerrilla gardening can be seen as a form of do-it-yourself urbanism and this may have an even longer lineage with urban design scholar Talen (2015), for instance, claiming that in the US its origins are in the 19th century in reaction to rapid urban growth, and that, '[t]oday's DIY urbanism can be interpreted as a revival of a civic spirit that was the hallmark of an earlier era' (Talen, 2015: 145). Whatever the origins of guerrilla gardening, over recent decades it has grown from the activities of a few dedicated individuals willing to break the law. In this article it is argued that law-breaking through the cultivation of other people's land has become normalised, as reflected in the views of those interviewed and seemingly through the responses from those tasked with enforcing the law.

As noted, the discussion in this article draws on literature on aesthetic criminology, do-it-yourself and temporary urbanism, and work informed by the idea of urban commons. The focus for aesthetic criminology is the interaction between emotion, affect and sensory encounters, as well as the regulation of people's tastes (Millie, 2017). Aesthetic criminology can be regarded as part of a broader move to consider 'the sensory dimensions of criminological inquiry' (Jewkes and Young, 2021: 179). Building on work in visual criminology (e.g. McClanahan, 2021; Rafter, 2014), this 'sensory turn' (Dickinson et al., 2021) includes McClanahan and South's (2020) proposed sensory criminology and Herrity et al.'s (2021) recent work on sensory penalties. These works consider all our senses in our engagement with crime, harm and justice. As McClanahan (2021) has observed, there may have been an ocularcentrism within criminology and thus scope to broaden interest to all the senses. Aesthetic criminology draws influence from writings in urban geography on affect (Thrift, 2004) and sensory urbanism (e.g. Henshaw, 2014; Rogerson and Rice, 2009). It is also influenced by the philosophical study of aesthetics which is often concerned with arts appreciation; yet influenced by Lefebvre (1961) and de Certeau's (1984) recognition of the importance of 'everyday life', and drawing on Saito's (2007) everyday aesthetics, there are also aesthetic concerns in more everyday encounters and activities, such as guerrilla gardening (Millie, 2017, 2019). For instance, whilst the sight of a garden can be appreciated visually, so too can its smell, the feel of the soil, the taste of its produce, or the impact the garden has on the sound of the city. We have an emotional engagement with gardens or other green spaces in our cities and may have an affective response – such as 'hatred, shame, envy, jealousy, fear, disgust, anger, [or] pride, love, happiness, joy, hope, wonder' (Thrift, 2004: 59). For example, in Sheffield in 2018 a private contractor was employed by the local authority to remove hundreds of old trees from residential streets, ostensibly because of concerns about highway management and pedestrian safety, yet the response from residents and other campaigners was highly emotive displaying anger and disgust, with some willing to be arrested in defence of the local trees. According to Sofos (2018):

If people hadn't taken to the streets and hadn't come together [. . .] the trees would have come down without any fuss, but politicians, big business and the police all underestimated how much they mean to people. But it's not just about trees, it's about who the streets belong to and where power lies.

The question of who owns the streets is at the heart of guerrilla gardening, and do-it-yourself urbanism more broadly. According to urban planner Finn (2014: 382), there is no unifying definition or theory for do-it-yourself urbanism as the phrase has been used for anything from graffiti writing and skateboarding (e.g. Iveson, 2013) through to 'the creation of multi-acre, multi-million dollar parks'. This breadth may not be especially useful. Rather, it might be more meaningful to focus on what Finn (2014: 382) calls 'citizen involvement in shaping urban space' and how an unofficial DIY ethos and DIY aesthetic intervene and challenge official urbanity. In this regard do-it-yourself urbanism has a lot in common with the similar term, temporary urbanism. According to geographer Ferreri (2015: 181) examples of temporary urbanism can include 'pop-up shops, guerrilla gardens and interim uses'. For Tonkiss (2013: 313), an urban sociologist, such practices contribute to the creation of a makeshift or temporary city, that forms 'in the cracks between formal planning, speculative investment and local possibilities'. Temporary urbanism can challenge fundamentally the aesthetic order of the city.

Do-it-yourself or temporary urbanism are not new and children and young people have long used and adapted found objects and open spaces as part of street play. For instance, in the 1970s the social historian and anarchist Ward (1978) documented children's street play in the UK in *'The Child in the City'*. One of Ward's photographs demonstrated the do-it-yourself and temporary aesthetic of play, showing a bicycle ramp created on a pavement from a found plank and some bricks. Similarly, from 1977 to 1980 photojournalist Cooper (2006) kept a photographic record of children at play on the streets of New York, with a DIY ethos evident in their appropriation of abandoned mattresses as trampolines, and playhouses formed from assortments of found objects. Yet, do-it-yourself and temporary practices are clearly not restricted to children and young people. According to the geographer Iveson (2013: 941) such activities can be variously grouped together, 'under banners such as 'insurgent', 'do-it-yourself' (DIY), 'guerrilla', 'everyday', 'participatory' and/or 'grassroots' urbanism' (see e.g. Chase et al., 1999; Haydn and Temel, 2006; Hou, 2010). My own preference is the term urban interventionist (e.g. Brisman, 2010; Klanten and Huebner, 2010; Millie, 2017; Pruesse, 1999; Zeiger, 2011). In relation to artworks sited on the public street, art lecturer and curator Pruesse (1999: 9) defined urban interventions as mostly 'not advertised [. . .] not in gallery settings, not signed by artists, not for sale, and do not have arrows pointing to them screaming "this is art!"' Alongside such public art, other urban interventions might include, for instance, street art and graffiti, guerrilla gardening, yarn bombing, flash mobbing, parkour or skateboarding. According to Talen (2015: 135), do-it-yourself urbanism is a 'brand of urban intervention [that] is resident-generated, low budget, often temporary'. This might apply to guerrilla gardening, although some guerrilla gardens are far from temporary.

What guerrilla gardening has in common with other do-it-yourself urbanism is that it is most often small scale and challenges the officially sanctioned aesthetic order of the city that is preferred by late-modern capitalism – as reflected by commercial interests, city centre management, and urban planning. Of course, urban planners may also promote cultural and green practices in order to better the vitality of the city, but these are often with an eye on economic gain (Millie, 2017). For instance, over 25 years ago the Department of the Environment's Urban and Economic Development group (URBED, 1994: 11) suggested ways to improve the vitality of town centres, including the promotion of 'arts, culture and entertainment zones'. This was an aesthetic order that zoned culture into its rightful place; and the aim was that, '[b]y creating places characterised by vitality, these become places where economic activity becomes viable' (Millie, 1997: 3). Guerrilla gardeners may contribute to such vitality and therefore economic viability, yet their activities are not so predictable. They are more chaotic and therefore not ordered and in the correct zone. For instance, in relation to community gardens more broadly, urban geographer Barron (2017: 1150) has stated that:

as many community gardens are located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods [. . .] where gardening is a survival strategy more than a hobby [. . .] their aesthetics tend to be defined by inexpensive, often recycled, materials [. . .] rendering their landscapes somewhat eclectic, idiosyncratic, diverse, and often unkempt-looking.

As discussed later in this article, the guerrilla gardens in this study were not restricted to disadvantaged neighbourhoods; however, the description of them being 'eclectic, idiosyncratic, diverse, and often unkempt-looking' did apply. The most recent National Planning Policy Framework for

England (HCLG, 2019: 25) still seeks to promote ‘the vitality of town centres’, emphasising economic developments that respond to ‘rapid changes in the retail and leisure industries [and] allows a suitable mix of uses (including housing)’. Elsewhere the framework document calls for the provision of ‘social, recreational and cultural facilities and services the community needs’ (HCLG, 2019: 27), including ‘shared spaces’ and ‘open space’. It is doubtful that these would allow for do-it-yourself practices that break the law and challenge the aesthetic order of the city, as well as conventional notions of property and land ownership.

For urban sociologist Zukin (1995: 7), the ‘look and feel of cities’ is a reflection of what and who should remain visible, notions of order and ‘uses of aesthetic power’. Such aesthetic power or aesthetics of authority (see Ferrell, 1996; Millie, 2019) – including that yielded by commercial interests, city centre management, and urban planning – means there can be little room for unpredictability and for communities to do-it-themselves. Rather, an aesthetic order is promoted that is predictable, with everything in its rightful place, and with anything – or anyone – perceived as a threat to commercial gain excluded through various byelaws, zoning ordinances, municipal, planning or criminal rules or normative expectations (see also Valverde, 2012). The criminologist Young (2014: 43) has termed this the legislated city, one that tries to control all ‘perceived unruliness and fecklessness’.

According to urban scholar Bradley (2015: 91), various groups – including those deploying guerrilla and DIY tactics – have attempted to resist such ‘corporate-led urban development and the commercialisation of public space’, in order to ‘democratise the city’. In so doing, such groups can be viewed as trying to create and preserve urban commons:

. . . spaces not primarily defined by their formal ownership but by how citizens use them. This may be manifested in the customary use of open fields as commons, despite these being formally owned by private entities, royal families, the military, etc., or by appropriating privately owned or abandoned spaces as commons and using them as urban gardens, sites for play and experimentation, etc. (Bradley, 2015: 91)

Bradley refers to the use of open fields as commons, yet from the enclosures of common land from the 13th century onwards the proportion of land designated as commons became a tiny fraction of what it once was (see e.g. Fairlie, 2009). That said, it is the *idea* of the commons that persists, and that idea has been transplanted into an urban setting. In this context Dawney et al. (2016: 2) see the commons as, ‘spatio-temporal and ethical formations that are concerned with ways of living together that resist the privatisation and individualisation of life’. ‘Commoning’ is a challenge to conventional notions of ownership, for instance, as evident in squatting (Polanska and Weldon, 2020) and the formation of homeless encampments (Lutz, 2015). It is possible that those who take part in guerrilla gardening similarly challenge property and land ownership and see urban land as being in everybody’s common ownership or having common rights to use. But claims that such action can ‘democratise the city’ (Bradley, 2015: 91) can be challenged as guerrilla gardeners do not necessarily consult local communities and assume their aesthetic vision for beautifying the city or for growing fruit and vegetables along city streets is best. A similar observation has been made by Young (2014) regarding street art which is democratic in that anyone can do it, but also undemocratic as it is imposed on the community: ‘street artists remove individual choice by imposing their works upon the passerby and by adopting an autocratic position with

respect to other people's property' (Young, 2014: 28). According to the philosopher Bachelard (1969) people can display a love of place, or what geographer Tuan (1974: 4) refers to as *topophilia*, 'the affective bond between people and place or setting' (see also Millie, 2016). Whilst guerrilla gardeners may express their love of place through planting flowers and vegetables, it is also possible that others may prefer things to stay as they are.

For Reynolds (2008) and Hardman and Larkham (2014) there are two groups within the guerrilla gardening movement, who either aim to beautify urban space or try to grow crops in it. Both have an impact on the aesthetic order of the city. Of those interviewed, four were interested in beautification through the planting of flowers (Isla, Sarah, Fiona and Peter), while two preferred to grow an assortment of fruit and vegetables across their town (Eva and Maggie) – an approach that has also been labelled as illegal food cultivation (Hardman et al., 2012) or urban agriculture (Hardman and Larkham, 2014). For instance, for Fiona from the New Urban Group 'it is just beautification really'. According to Isla from the Old Urban Group, 'basically people like to see plants [. . .] Yes, it brightens up the area'. In discussing Richard Reynold's contribution to guerrilla gardening, Maggie from the Milltown Group said, 'He's lovely, but it's a bit cutesy, isn't it, you know, planting flowers. We've got a lot more complicated things to do than that'. Her focus on urban agriculture centred on bringing people together through the growing of food. Yet, growing flowers was not discounted; as her project partner Eva observed about an area where they had scattered wildflower seeds, 'Nobody noticed that we'd done it, except now it looks beautiful in the summer instead of rubble'.

Growing plants to beautify the streetscape is hardly new. Similarly, cultivating urban land for food is not unique to guerrilla gardening, from the 'dig for victory' initiative of the second world war, through to the contemporary Urban Farming Global Food Chain – a global campaign to encourage people to plant and register their gardens 'to create an abundance of food for all in our generation' (Urban Farming, 2012). Yet by growing flowers or food on someone else's land without their permission, guerrilla gardeners are challenging ideas of property, they are breaking the law and their actions are political. According to Adams and Hardman (2014) guerrilla gardeners are not always as resistant as previously thought. That said, a lack of political motivation does not mean their actions are not political (e.g. Ferrell, 2019; Millie, 2019); as Eva from Milltown put it, '[e]verything you do is political in an aspect or other'. For Eva, her group was motivated to 'get people thinking about the way they live'. In several US cities the politics of guerrilla gardening, and urban agriculture more broadly, can be associated with cultural identity and inequitable access to fresh produce. For instance, writing from an environmental and food studies perspective, Reynolds and Cohen (2016: 4) claim the benefits of urban agriculture are to:

. . . provide fresh, affordable, and culturally appropriate food in low-income communities lacking conventional food retailers [. . .] a way to increase green spaces in neighborhoods with few parks, to foster relationships among neighbors of different ethnicities and ages, to improve neighborhood safety by bringing people and activities to neglected spaces, and to help cultivate leadership and job-related skills among youth and adults.

It is an ambitious list. The participants in the current study were not uniquely working class and the locations of the gardens were not concentrated spatially in areas of deprivation. Furthermore, cultural and ethnic identity seemed to be less obvious considerations. For Maggie from Milltown,

their actions were political, but ‘with a small ‘p’ [. . .] It’s not party political’. Maggie continued: ‘. . . just the same as we don’t sign up to organic versus non-organic, vegetarian versus vegan versus meat, we keep a broad church because we want as many people to be actively engaged’. For Maggie, it was to do with social justice, but also participation from *all* communities, whether rich or poor:

. . . we’re interested in community and social justice, we’re interested in the rich and the poor, and we think when the shit hits the fan, which it surely will do in terms of climate change, food shortages etc., there’ll be two kinds of people; the Good Life² folks who have got all the stuff, and the poor folks [without]. [. . .] So there needs to be something about kindness, kindness is really our message of everything, that if we all were a little tiny bit kinder it will all be alright.

Whilst the Milltown group was more interested in urban agriculture, others were concerned with beautification; but that does not mean their actions were less political. With regard yarn bombing it has been noted how ‘[c]hallenging people’s aesthetic expectations and their understandings of the everyday use of urban space [. . .] can be regarded as a political action’ (Millie, 2019: 1277). The same is true for guerrilla gardening for beautification. For instance, according to Fiona from the New Urban Group, ‘if there was to be a political agenda I do think that if you own a piece of land you should be responsible to make it look okay, not like a cess pit’.

Involvement in guerrilla gardening

Participants were asked what they thought was the meaning of guerrilla gardening. For Isla from the Old Urban Group it was about, ‘[f]inding an open space, usually in an urban environment that has been neglected and is devoid of anything green or it has got a very small diversity of plants, for example just grass, and making it more interesting for the community’. Sarah, also from the Old Urban Group, similarly noted how guerrilla gardening, ‘. . . enhances the community, doesn’t it? It makes it look, you know, so much nicer, be proud’. For Peter from the New Urban Group, ‘it’s not something I’ve thought about considering until an opportunity arose, and I think, ‘do you know what, let’s go for it’’. For some, the label ‘guerrilla gardening’ was not necessarily helpful and did not reflect them as people. For Maggie from Milltown: ‘We don’t like the term [guerrilla gardening] because it’s macho and it’s got an element of fighting in it’. Maggie continued, remembering when someone had suggested “[d]id you know there was a link between growing your food and terrorism?’ ‘No, I didn’t’, and ‘I don’t care to talk about it, so shut up’’. According to Fiona from the New Urban Group, ‘It’s a bit aggressive, I think, as a term, I actually think our vision and our aims are just to make it nice, not really the guerrilla side’. The activities of her group would certainly fit the definition of guerrilla gardening, being illegal use of someone else’s land – in this case land owned by the railway company, Network Rail. But their activities were perceived as ‘community gardening, rather than guerrilla’ (Peter, New Urban Group). According to Peter, ‘I don’t feel like Che Guevara or anything like that, it doesn’t feel that exciting, like, we come in with balaclavas, get our way through the area and then we’re out again and no one noticed’. Like ‘yarn bombing’ - which is sometimes labelled as ‘guerrilla knitting’ - it is possible that the phrase ‘guerrilla gardening’ hints at something perceivably more radical. Yarn bombing occurs ‘when knitted or crocheted items are displayed in public space, often without permission’ (Millie, 2019: 1269).

It may be that knitting, crochet, or gardening are not commonly perceived as radical – even by those taking part – but by doing it without permission and trespassing on someone else’s land, this is a radical challenge to the urban aesthetic order and to notions of land ownership.

When asked how they first got involved in guerrilla gardening Isla from the Old Urban Group said, ‘[w]ell, I went on a guerrilla gardening website initially, over 2 years ago and I was in contact with other people and discovered what they did. [. . .] [I] own allotments, so the passion, initially, is growing things, for me, I’ve always done it, all my life’. For Fiona from the New Urban Group, she first got involved due to a wish to see a local area cleaned up:

There’s a small patch of land at the end of our road, which is owned, we discovered eventually, by Network Rail. It has been left overgrown, full of litter, for over ten years, so as long as I’ve lived in the area. And, I decided that I was a bit sick of the litter, and decided that I wanted to do something about it, so I suppose the motivation was just to make the area nicer. [. . .] I suppose, you want to be a part of that, and make it look a bit nice, so it is just beautification really. So, I just sent out leaflets to the neighbourhood saying that I would be out there clearing the litter, and if anyone wanted to join me they could. And, to my great surprise, ten other people joined in. So, I suppose, there’s something about that, because people joined in, and people supported it, we continued, and probably did more, and have done more, than I was ever expecting.

According to Peter from the same group, ‘[w]e were hopelessly unprepared the first time. [. . .] you need gloves, and hats, and saws, you know, actually what we needed turned out to be proper equipment. [. . .] we turned up with our bare hands and a saw, and that was it’. Whilst the ambitions of the New Urban Group were focussed on the one plot, according to Eva the Milltown Group was more ambitious, ‘a group of crazy people [that] got together and decided that the governments weren’t doing anything so we had to do something to change the world’. Maggie from Milltown similarly observed how, ‘we just wanted to be more active citizens and not be victims of the state’. For Maggie, ‘we’re not growing food to feed people, it is propaganda, we just want conversations’. For Eva, also from Milltown, the aim was ‘[t]o get people thinking about the way they live and what they’re doing and why they’re doing it and why we’re doing what we’re doing’. According to Isla from the Old Urban Group, ‘it felt like I was doing a good thing’. Fiona from the New Urban Group noted how ‘we all live round here in terraces, and so nobody really has a garden [and] I think one of the best bits has been meeting our neighbours’. Peter from the same group was similarly attracted ‘[t]o make it nicer and to meet people, and so on’. Peter also noted pride in what they were achieving:

Yes, there is general pride as well, because on that first day when we arrived, and it was horrendous and in that first day we cleared so much of it, and you sort of stand back and think, ‘is that what we managed to do?’ Do you know what, it was four hours work and we’ve got what was awful, we cleared all the top litter, and all the rubbish that had grown up, we had all the branches cut up, bagged up and gone, and you do that and you think, I feel good about myself. [. . .] and then people walk past, ‘thanks for doing that, great, you’re doing good work’.

In recalling their first experiences, the participants noted the hard work involved. For Fiona from the New Urban Group, when they first tackled the Network Rail site, 'I think you don't know what to expect, because it's, kind of, covered in weeds, and then as you just uncover you think, 'I need gloves, it's disgusting''. Elsewhere she recalled, 'it was more disgusting the more we got to clear things out. So [in] the litter we discovered used nappies, clothes. . .' According to Sarah from the Old Urban Group, her first experience was that, 'it was quite wet that morning, and we spent ages digging it and planting'. Whilst some were experienced gardeners, others were not; as Fiona from the New Urban Group noted, 'everyone who volunteered, I said, 'do you know what to do?', and they said, 'no'. So, okay. It is very much none of us know what we're doing'.

In terms of the choice of sites, the New Urban Group focussed on the specific plot of land owned by Network Rail to clean up the area. For Eva from Milltown, they similarly targeted areas of blight:

we've always been very careful to take ugly, dirty or even dangerous places and clear them and make them pretty and non-dangerous and plant food on them for everyone to share, and then nobody can find fault with that. We wouldn't dream of going into the local park and cutting a hole in the lawn and putting potatoes in it.

Such an approach appears to overlap with 'broken windows' theory (Wilson and Kelling, 1982), that by tackling low level disorders people will have greater confidence, fear crime less and use these places more, thus making them – as Eva put it – 'non-dangerous' places. 'Broken windows' has been heavily criticised for turning minor nuisances into serious concerns, leading to various forms of order maintenance or zero tolerance policing (e.g. Ferrell, 2006; Harcourt, 2001; Mitchell, 2003). By targeting places perceived to be 'ugly, dirty or even dangerous' it is possible that guerrilla gardening is less of a challenge to the prevailing aesthetic order, that it is conventionally trying to transform areas of blight into safe spaces where people want to be – thus improving vitality and economic viability. Yet, as noted, the DIY aesthetic of guerrilla gardening is 'eclectic, idiosyncratic, diverse, and often unkempt-looking' (Barron, 2017: 1150), and remains a challenge to the more ordered urban aesthetic preferred by those with power, with everything in its rightful place.

It was noted that initial enthusiasm needed to be followed by a commitment to work on a plot for a significant period, a point raised by Adams and Hardman (2014: 1116) who saw how diminishing commitment from participants in 'certain urban gardening contexts has been identified as being a fundamental stumbling-block'. As Sarah from the Old Urban Group noted, '. . .you know, it's quite a lot to look after it as well, you need somebody in that area don't you to look after it'. Similarly, Fiona from the New Urban Group said they did not grow vegetables because of the commitment involved, that, 'we've got jobs, [. . .] you neglect vegetables for 2 weeks, that's it, they're gone'. Fiona added that growing vegetables on contaminated sites might also be problematic: 'I don't think it's that good to be growing vegetables in that land, because I'm still not convinced what's underneath'. According to Sarah from the Old Urban Group, guerrilla gardening, 'takes quite a lot of manpower, you know, it's quite a lot of energy and organising'. For Fiona from the New Urban Group the priorities were, '[w]hat's easy to grow, what doesn't take much effort, and keep on top of the litter really'. Keeping on top of the litter was a common problem; yet Eva from the Milltown group suggested that their work had led to less littering. For instance,

. . . just down the corner here is the only dry bit [in the town], apart from the bus shelter, [. . .] where the drunks and the dope smokers can sit in the dry, because it's a little horse tunnel with a little bit of a bridge. And all of that area there used to be covered with Stella cans, White Lightning bottles, horrible. So, we've taken it now, we've planted it all up with food and berries and apricots and cherries and God knows what else. They still sit there, they still drink there, they never litter; they must bring a bag to take the cans away because there's never a can there. So it alters, it changes people's behaviour, they could have just still chucked their stuff on it just the same, they just don't, we've never said don't.

Eva further claimed that 'vandalism and anti-social behaviour have dropped since we've been doing this as well [. . .] which is a bit of a shock'. Yet, according to Fiona from the New Urban Group, 'The litter is interesting, because the litter is still arriving', but 'proper dumping, now that doesn't happen'. According to Peter from the same group, there is 'large scale fly tipping further up, but I don't think you'd get away with that on cleared land'.

Gardening without permission

All the participants saw their actions as benefitting the community, whether this was in terms of beautification, reduction in litter, bringing neighbours together, or by provision of urban agriculture. Some gardened sites with permission, yet all also gardened plots without the owners' consent. For instance, according to Eva from the Milltown Group, some of their sites are 'legal ones' where permission has been granted, but there are others where '. . .they've never actually been asked for permission for'. According to Maggie from the same group, 'Well I would say we have a licence to grow in public spaces on council land now', but when they started, this was not the situation, 'in the beginning we just, it was kind of grey is good, we just did it'. One example was the planting of a vegetable bed outside a local police station. According to Maggie:

A copper said to me 'It will be so difficult to get permission, [. . .] why don't you just do it, and then people will assume you have got permission' [. . .] So we say 'Just do it, if you make a mistake, it's better to ask for forgiveness than permission', so that's very much a mantra of ours, 'Ask for forgiveness, not permission'.

This is a view that appears elsewhere among urban interventionists. For instance, in 2016 the street artist Banksy painted across the side of a primary school in Bristol, leaving a note saying, 'remember it's always easier to get forgiveness than permission' (The Guardian, 2016). For Fiona from the New Urban Group, she knew the land was not hers, but initially did not realise who owned the land:

I didn't have a clue and thought it was council owned. Then, when I kind of realised that we needed a bit more oomph and more people, I emailed our local councillor to see if they would publicise it. And, I suppose, I was slightly encouraged because our local council was helping in other areas, community gardens, and she wrote back and said, 'happy to support you, but actually the council doesn't own that land, it's owned by Network Rail'. So, essentially, I couldn't

put a halt on the advert I'd sent round, so we went ahead anyway [. . .] As at this point in time we are trespassing, and we are doing it without their permission, all they know, well at that stage they knew we wanted a licence. I have since met someone from Network Rail and he, sort of, I had to advise that we had already started to do things, and he said, 'okay, but you need to stop', and we didn't.

When asked whether the lack of permission was an issue for those that volunteered, Peter from the New Urban Group replied, 'No one cares. We told them all and they went, 'okay, see you next week''. Peter continued, 'it didn't enter anybody's head [. . .] I think, you know, the only issue they could have is, like, say, liability, if somebody hurts themselves, but you know someone could do that anyway. I think because it's so awful, you don't see that wall as any form of barrier to doing anything'. Fiona from the same group had a similar view, that 'I did say to everyone, 'you are trespassing, if you don't want to trespass don't', and no one cared'. Peter claimed that support for their venture was from across the community:

And, you can see the level of support we get, because we've got contributions from the solicitors over the road, they gave us money to help buy some bits and bobs. The bakery comes out, that's the best bit, [. . .] they give us free food. And then, there's people nearby who will come, we've had cups of tea, drinks and so on, and I think people genuinely actually appreciate it as well, the people actively involved wouldn't want us to stop. It's everybody versus Network Rail, and I don't think they're that bothered.

In Milltown Eva recalled an example where they had asked permission from the landowner but were turned down. They went ahead anyway:

There was one example where we did ask permission, which was a big mistake because we were told 'no', several years ago now [. . .] A mill was knocked down and just left and it was just like bomb damage, so we asked, 'could we sow it with wildflower seeds', and they said 'no', so we sowed little wildflower seeds, we just, pink buckets over our heads while we did it.

Maggie joked when talking about the same example, 'people with buckets on their head, Ned Kelly style, just sort of sowing all the wildflower seeds'. Maggie gave a further example of gardening without permission and, in line with literature on urban commons, claimed common ownership of the local environment irrespective of who actually owned the land: 'So it's just so lovely to be able to think 'Actually the environment's ours, all of it is ours', and we, not only do we have a responsibility, we have a right, but we also have a responsibility to fix it and sort it out'. Maggie claimed they had never had any problems with the police; in fact, she stated that the police had donated materials that they had seized from illegal drug cultivation:

No, you know we have a deal with the police to get all their dope stuff [. . .] they recycle, when they do a drug bust they recycle all the dope, compost, the pots, the tents, the vans, the lights, the cannabis liquid. [. . .] to us [. . .] And they now distribute it all over the valley, to schools and growing projects.

Eva from the same group claimed that they will not get arrested for what they do, '...we've been trying to get arrested all these years because, what a story. I even asked our police inspector, 'Please, arrest me for planting a carrot', never'. Eva continued, 'And people say to us 'Do you do it in the dead of night?' We say 'No, we do it in the dead of the afternoon'. If you're trying to make a statement what's the point of doing it at night?' Fiona from the New Urban Group similarly noted, 'We do advertise it [...] there's nothing surreptitious'. Fiona also observed that the local authority and police knew what they were doing, and it had not been a problem:

... actually, the local councillor invited me to a residents' meeting to talk about what we'd done, and how we'd gone about it, and actually at that meeting there are local police officers, who were giving an update. And, I actually didn't sort of mention that we were trespassing, but I did just say, 'this is what we're doing, we'd jump over a fence and we do it', and they didn't say a word. Now, I think, 'oh my God, why would I go and say that?' But equally I think police officers, when they talk other crimes in the neighbourhood, I think they have an understanding of what they should be doing. You know, I suppose, it is a victimless crime in a way, so there are much worse things that go on in the neighbourhood that they need to be doing.

Peter from the same group suggested that, 'you know, if the police turned up, you can't imagine them turning up and saying, 'you've got to get off this land', because it's madness. And, I think they can see it would be madness as well, it's ridiculous'.

As noted, it is possible that the guerrilla gardeners' aesthetic vision for the city may not be to everyone's taste and the participants were asked if there was anyone who did not appreciate what they did. For Maggie from Milltown, 'Of course there are [...] they don't understand it, they don't see the bigger picture'. Yet Peter from the New Urban Group claimed that people walking past thank them for what they are doing and that they '...had the local MP here and got their photo taken with us'. For Sarah from the Old Urban Group there was general support 'because we were in like the no-go area'. According to Isla from the same group, 'If anybody goes around picking up rubbish, it's a bonus, isn't it? Because that's part of it, you don't just grow plants, you tidy up the area around it as well'. There is broader support for what they do, as illustrated by Fiona from the New Urban Group who noted that, '...so when you think, 'oh, we haven't got any more plants', somebody turns up, or somebody drops something else off. Or, somebody donated us some garden vouchers'. To demonstrate this, part-way through one of the interviews for this project, in a local café in Milltown, the person serving drinks offered plants to the interviewee.

Conclusions

From the interviews it appeared that support for the guerrilla gardeners was widespread with local businesses and members of the community offering willing assistance. It seemed that guerrilla gardening had become normalised law-breaking, a form of urban intervention that was broadly accepted and a welcome part of everyday living in certain neighbourhoods. Those that took part did not consider seriously the legal ramifications of gardening on someone else's land without the landowner's permission, irrespective of potential 'charges of vandalism, trespassing, obstruction

of traffic, or the like' (Brisman and South, 2014: 106). The police were not thought likely to intervene and in one instance encouraged the planting of a guerrilla garden outside a local police station. Local politicians were happy to pose for photographs with the gardeners and landowners were – in most cases – perceived to be uninterested.

This article has argued that the DIY aesthetic of guerrilla gardening does not fit with the aesthetic order preferred by late-modern capitalism; yet according to those interviewed their activities were overlooked by those tasked with enforcing such order. This contrasts with experiences in New York in the mid-1990s, for example, where there was conflict over the rights of community gardens, a battle between City Hall, which wanted to build affordable housing, and those from 'poor and racialized communities' who mobilised to 'preserve community gardens in neighborhoods without other open space' (Staeheli et al., 2002: 197). When property ownership is usually seen as absolute, the question is why the guerrilla gardeners in the present study were so often given a pass. Not all were in favour. For instance, the representative from Network Rail told the New Urban Group to stop what they were doing, but even here the request was not backed by threat of enforcement – as Peter commented, 'I don't think they're that bothered'. According to the criminologist McGovern (2019: 101) yarn bombers are rarely dealt with through criminal processes, 'because of judgements that have been made about who they are and what they do. More specifically, they do not fit the image of a stereotypical "criminal"'. For McGovern, this gives them 'exceptional status', framed as 'harmless knitters' rather than 'destructive criminals' (McGovern, 2019: 96). It is possible that those interviewed for this study were similarly given exceptional status and regarded as 'harmless gardeners' because of what they do and who they are. It may be the case that, had the gardeners been drawn from communities more often seen as 'police property' (Cray, 1972; Reiner, 1992), including greater representation from Black and minority ethnic groups, then the police response may have been different, although this is speculation. Much low-level law enforcement is complaint driven and it could also be that there are very few complaints about the activities of guerrilla gardeners, at least in the areas covered by this study. Furthermore, there could be fewer commercial demands on the land being gardened, meaning the local police use their discretion and do not enforce the law. According to those interviewed the police are not interested because they have bigger priorities. The softer, non-threatening nature of guerrilla gardening, and the assumed community benefits, might lead the police to focus their attention elsewhere.

Whatever the reasons, the result is that guerrilla gardening became a normalised form of law-breaking, accepted – or at the very least tolerated – by those tasked with enforcing the law. It is also celebrated in wider culture. For instance, instructions on how to make a seed bomb are available on the National Trust website (National Trust, n.d.). Reynolds himself has featured on various BBC television shows, including *Countryfile* (BBC, 2009) and the *Great British Garden Revival* (BBC, 2014). In the 2014 episode Reynolds stated:

I began gardening here because it was really overgrown and I felt the simplest thing to do was just to start sorting it out myself, and then face the consequences, if they happened, later on. I think guerrilla gardeners do see the potential in land that others wouldn't. And it's more than just creating a beautiful or productive or wildlife friendly garden. It's actually about reclaiming this public space for local people.

Yet this seeming acceptability – especially among middle class favourites such as the National Trust – does not take away from the fact that, without permission, guerrilla gardening is still breaking the law. It is also a direct challenge to the aesthetic order of the city as preferred by late-modern consumerism, and to conventional notions of land use and land ownership. And the guerrilla gardeners' autocratic view of property – which overlaps with writings on urban commons – may be problematic for some. As Maggie from the Milltown Group claimed, 'the environment's ours, all of it is ours'. It is a view akin to the anarchist cliché that property is theft (cf. Proudhon, 1840/1994); yet by not seeking permission, or necessarily canvassing wider views, the guerrilla gardeners are 'imposing their works upon the passerby' (Young, 2014: 28). As noted, claims that guerrilla gardening and other DIY urbanism democratises the city (Bradley, 2015) are challenged as their actions are assumed to benefit the wider community without necessarily asking first. In the previous quote from Reynolds, he claimed that guerrilla gardening is 'about reclaiming this public space for local people', but the assumption is that his tastes are those of the wider community. In a previous study of three guerrilla gardening projects Adams et al. (2015: 1243) observed that:

Whilst the three guerrilla projects [. . .] may visually improve the spaces in which they were situated, in all three instances the guerrillas fundamentally colonised land without prior notification: consultation was non-existent and their practices excluded those who interacted with the areas on a frequent basis.

In the current study it seemed that there was broad local support – although there were exceptions. According to Adams et al. (2015) the local public response was also mainly positive emphasising aesthetic improvement, but some claimed a lack of communication from the guerrilla gardeners. As noted, it is possible that others display their love of place (cf. Bachelard, 1969) by wanting things to stay as they are. They may not approve of the DIY ethos and DIY aesthetic of guerrilla gardening.

It is a question of whether there is space for spontaneity and surprise, or if the status quo, often reflecting an aesthetic of authority with everything in its place, is to dominate. Cities are not ordinarily associated with the growing of crops, and green spaces can be contained within designated parklands; but the role of the guerrilla gardener is to challenge such aesthetic assumptions. Urban living is meant to surprise and delight; and like yarn bombing that 'presents a softer, potentially more feminized urban aesthetic' (Millie, 2019: 1273; see also Crang, 2014), guerrilla gardening can soften the look and the feel of the city, leading to a different emotional and affective interaction with urbanity. Those interviewed might not see themselves as rebellious and preferred not to be called guerrilla gardeners, seeing the label as 'a bit aggressive' (Fiona, New Urban Group); as Peter from the same group noted, 'I don't feel like Che Guevara'. Yet, by challenging land ownership and an approved aesthetic order, the guerrilla gardener is a little bit rebellious – but this rebellion is broadly accepted by law enforcement and by wider culture (perhaps even endorsed by the BBC) and represents a normalised form of law-breaking.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers as well as all those interviewed for this study.

Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Edge Hill University's Research Investment Fund.

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Notes

1. <http://www.guerrillagardening.org> (accessed 1 March 2022).
2. The Good Life was a 1970s television sitcom from the BBC about a couple who attempted self-sufficiency whilst living in suburbia.

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