



Abundance

“sharing the city’s harvest”

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Abundance is spreading. There are several similar yet independent Abundance-style projects arising in the UK and USA that focus on harvesting unused fruit and vegetables and giving them to local projects that can make good use of it. Abundance is about reconnecting ourselves in urban areas to nature, our food, and each other. The first group in the UK was set up in Sheffield, and there are new ones in Manchester, Leeds, Nottingham, Edinburgh, London and Bristol. Julie Weissmann traveled to Manchester to learn more about urban participative garden projects in the UK as part of her studies in social anthropology. She worked and talked with Leonie Morris, one of the coordinators of Abundance Manchester. In collaborative writing they explore some practicalities and ideas behind Abundance, through looking at the particular experiences of Abundance Manchester.

“We don’t harvest the apples in our garden because we buy them at the supermarket.” These and similar ones are the reactions volunteers from the community project Abundance Manchester get when they harvest unused fruit trees in private and public spaces of the city.

How far does our disconnection from what we eat reach? The first contact we get with food is mostly the sterile supermarket-environment, with packed shining apples evoking safety and hygiene. They materialise from places we don’t even register, be it far away countries or the abstract “countryside” conceived as food-producer, in contrast and sharp opposition to the infertile concrete world of the consuming city.

How can we broaden our ability to perceive what actually surrounds us; enable ourselves to challenge internalised oppositions? Wasn’t there an apple tree in this garden next to the square? What about the elder on the edge of the road? Wasn’t there something about the goutweed in this public park being edible? We rarely interact with the abstract “green” of the city defined as distant ornament, playing field for leisure, or urban lungs. But they hide resources, fruit and vegetables, lots of them rot, not noticed or seen as worthless.

A group of people in Manchester wanted to get active to challenge this disconnection and be a catalyst to reconsider “the nature in and the nature of the city”¹. Beyond a theoretical approach, they had the desire to do something practical that makes a concrete difference: “over the last few years I’ve had a growing awareness about the huge problems of the current food system and was feeling quite overwhelmed and depressed by them. Abundance has enabled me to take positive action where you can see immediate and tangible results”, says Leonie. Inspired by a project in Sheffield², they set up an Abundance group that harvests fruit and vegetables in private and public gardens in the city that would otherwise be wasted and redistributes them with bike trailers to groups of people who can make good use of it. Through the fruit and vegetables revalued as precious resources, their activity connects different groups of people: Individuals that donate their trees’ surplus, projects that receive the food, and volunteers that organise, collect and redistribute the harvest.

Organisation

The project has its own plot that was built up on an unused car-park, where food is grown in old bathtubs, toilets and tyres. This is where the organisational core of the group gathers and temporarily stores the harvest. The harvesting itself is done by a varying group of volunteers who work in a cooperative and non-hierarchical way. They meet for picking sessions on private and public trees around South Manchester, always making sure a share is given to tree owners who want it and enough fruit is left for the birds and soil. Thousands of fruit trees go unpicked because people are overwhelmed with vast quantities of fruit, are not physically able to harvest them, do not have time or notice them. The people who volunteer their trees generally hear about the project through local newspapers, posters, radio or community events. Their motivation ranges from not wanting to waste, to wanting to be freed from rotting fruit on their lawn. The volunteers also collect and distribute surplus vegetables from allotments, as well as the harvest of the Ab-

undance plot. Damaged and bruised fruit is transformed into juices, jams and crumbles during communal juicing and cooking sessions in volunteers' kitchens. The groups receiving the fruit and vegetables directly collect them from the Abundance plot or volunteers deliver them by bike trailers. Funding helps but it's not essential: "we picked loads of fruit in the first season without having any external money, thanks to a combination of people's generosity and blagging resources" (Leonie).



Photo: Leonie Morris

Abundance of skills

The possibilities of getting involved don't stop with the harvesting season: for those in Abundance Manchester, the concept of Abundance extends beyond food to resources and skills. "Between us we have so many skills and talents. Through Abundance we are keen to encourage the recognition and sharing of these skills" says Leonie. Abundance Manchester has organised workshops on pruning, grafting, bike maintenance and trailer building from reused materials. These have led to new fruit trees being planted, higher yields from existing trees, and the building of four home made trailers to collect and distribute even more fruit and vegetables. Other Abundance projects through the UK organise tree planting events and create maps with the location and information about trees that give an "alternative perspective on the city as an orchard"³.

Challenging disconnection

Abundance has the potential to change the relation one has to public space and how one relates to the city. Connecting with and becoming aware of one's immediate surroundings in an embodied way can be a catalyst to feeling empowered and getting active and involved. Abundance is also an awareness-raising project to highlight the fact that "95 per cent of fruit and 50 per cent of vegetables in the UK are imported"⁴ while lots of them just rot around us. In the context of wasteful mass production and consumerism on the one hand and discourses of restriction and ending resources on the other, the project has the potential to change perspectives by opening eyes to the abundance in our direct environment. Beyond creating a practical solution to the waste that can happen when people have "gluts", the project has a potential to re-articulate questions about how we relate to scarcity, waste, and abundance. "A couple of times when we were picking fruit outside of flats, people would come outside to ask if they could take some of the apples. It's only when they see other people harvesting fruit that they realise that they could just pick and eat it

themselves”, says Leonie. The approach of the project is genuinely practical and engaging: “We hope to encourage people to think about the problems of the food system by making them apparent through our actions rather than lecturing people about what to do” (Leonie) .

Sharing

The harvest is distributed to projects for refugees, destitute asylum seekers and homeless people, as well as a mental health charity, community cafes and a nursery school. Beyond the practical focus of providing healthy food to small projects that don't have enough funds to afford it or would otherwise buy imported fruit and vegetables, there is the hope that the approach also makes a difference. “The slogan, ‘sharing the city's harvest’ relates to the larger idea behind Abundance, that there is a need for a general change in attitudes in the whole society about how we see food. Because a lot of the problems that we are facing and causing, such as climate change, are linked to people's attitudes to food. As we approached it from that angle, it is not just about helping so-called needy people because we are all needy people in this sense” (Leonie). There is also at least a deep symbolic difference between sharing what is there in abundance and advocating charity to people defined as “in need”. In this sense, Abundance can also be seen as attempt to “reconfigure the relation between those who have resources and those who do not”⁵.

Feedback from recipients of the food shows the diverse benefits the act of giving can have. After receiving regular donations from Abundance, Anne O'Keefe from Safestop, a homeless hostel for young people, got in touch to say what the donations have meant to her project: “Such simple things like this can totally change the atmosphere in the project in ways that may mean little to people outside but here at Safestop just hearing a young person asking, can I help you unload the car’ and then peeling and preparing the fruit, it can be so important. It is times like this that they feel comfortable, so chat takes place and they open up and talk about their problems and you know that sometimes their load becomes a little lighter just because of that”.

In the last year, the coordinators of Abundance Manchester have been keen to involve the recipients of the donated food in its collection and production. As well as giving food donations, the group aims to empower people by giving them the skills to produce their own food. Recent funding made it possible for extra food growing workshops to be run with the recipient groups. By starting up vegetable patches at the places where food has been delivered to, the distance the food travels is reduced to only a few metres in some cases. The workshops also led to extra people attending the Abundance plot and increased the diversity of ages and backgrounds amongst those attending the community vegetable growing sessions.



Photo: Abundance Manchester

Gifts

Through sharing out produce, the project connects diverse groups of people. The tree owners, mostly women or older men living in wealthier areas of the city, are linked with the people in vulnerable positions who receive the food. Destitute asylum seekers volunteer to grow food at the Abundance plot together with students and young homeless people. Leonie especially underlines the potential she sees in the idea of gift to create links between people: "I think gifts have a lot of different social functions. All sorts of social networks are created through the giving and receiving of gifts. In a broader sense, I think the way society works needs to radically change in the way people act towards each other. And I think giving when you don't need to and doing things that you don't have to do which help people, can contribute to a paradigm shift, towards people seeing each other a bit differently. You can see how people are just a lot nicer to each other when they are involved: the people who give us the food seem really happy that they can donate their fruit, and the people who receive it are really happy that we are giving it to them, and then the volunteers are happy that we have done something useful by working together. It has a snowball effect. For me it creates a sense of hope about what is possible to do outside the structures that you are told you should work within. I think it's empowering that you can just go to some garden, take the food, and deliver it directly."

Spreading Abundance

Those in Abundance Manchester are actively encouraging new Abundance style groups to spring up around the city, country and world. They would like these new groups to be based on the principles of Abundance, but to adapt the practicalities of the project to suit their own resources and circumstances. Their vision is for there to be many small Abundance groups in each city, each one acting autonomously; harvesting and delivering surplus food within a small area, enabling it to be predominantly transported by bicycles, and to give people a strong sense of connection with their community and where their food has come from.

If you are interested in harvesting an abundance in your area, see the Abundance Sheffield handbook⁶ and resources on the Abundance Manchester Website⁷. Abundance might be defined as an idea, more than one precise project. And it is open for you to spread.

Footnotes

- 1 www.fallenfruit.org; Fallen Fruit, a Los Angeles-based artist collective
- 2 www.growsheffield.com
- 3 Grow Sheffield 2009: The Abundance Handbook. P. 47. <<http://www.growsheffield.com/images/abundbkview.pdf>>
- 4 Grow Sheffield 2009: The Abundance Handbook. P. 7. <<http://www.growsheffield.com/images/abundbkview.pdf>>
- 5 www.fallenfruit.org
- 6 www.growsheffield.com
- 7 <http://abundancemanchester.wordpress.com>