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Putting down roots in the city

By Victoria Bone BBC News

Can our cities keep consuming in the face of food shortages and higher prices? A solution could be for urban areas to grow their own food as is being tried in Canada.



Students and academics at McGill University in Montreal created the Edible Campus in 2007

Campaigners hope the UK will follow and some hope the 2012 Olympics in London could be the catalyst.

So, would you like to study on an edible campus? Or live on an edible estate?

And no, we're not talking about a university run by Willy Wonka or a home designed by Hansel and Gretel.

Instead, this is architecture - and entire urban landscapes - designed to fulfil our ever-growing need for food.

Could we make our cities more sustainable - even self-sufficient - if the need to grow food locally was designed into every stage of building, from drawing board to decor?

Communal growing

South East False Creek in Vancouver could be one of the world's first purpose-built sustainable communities, with growing food at the top of the list of priorities.

Eighty acres of former industrial land south of the city centre is being developed as part of the plans for Vancouver's Winter Olympics in 2010.

The city has pledged to create 2,010 new growing spaces to provide food for the Games - something that could be copied in London.

The architecture and layout of South East False Creek is designed to encourage both communal growing - in parks and other public spaces - and private cultivation, in gardens, on roof tops, and other similar places.

Among the ideas for "edible landscaping" suggested are:

- Locate backyards and other gardens to gain the maximum amount of sunlight and ensure soil is fertile
Build roofs strong enough to support greenhouses and/or rooftop gardens
Provide balconies for as many residents as possible to encourage small-scale growing
Create food gardens on school grounds and encourage pupils to manage them
Substitute purely ornamental landscapes in public areas with edible landscaping
Encourage private growers to sell their produce to local restaurants and through local shops and farmers' market

Visionary group

The planners at South East False Creek have the luxury of starting with a blank canvas.

But elsewhere in Canada - and increasingly in the UK - efforts are being made to transform urban landscapes already in existence.

In 2007, a group of academics and students at McGill University in Montreal joined forces with meals-on-wheels charity Santropol Roulant to create the Edible Campus.

They took a bleak plaza, 1,000sq ft of concrete, otherwise neglected and unloved, and transformed it into a productive garden growing a wide variety of fruit, vegetables and herbs in 123 containers.

The food harvested goes to make about 90 meals a day for elderly and vulnerable people in Montreal.

Those in the know in the UK see no reason why it could not follow the Edible Campus example - and expand it, to hospitals, schools, even car parks.

Colin Buttery, deputy chief executive of the Royal Parks in London, said container growing could transform derelict and under-utilised land, such as that underneath elevated roads.

"Finding land in any city is going to be a real challenge," he said, "and there's quite a lot of contaminated land. So why not put down a membrane and grow on that instead? Basically, create huge grow bags on concrete?"

Gardening School

Such principles are now starting to be considered in the UK and much of the focus is on social housing - that owned by local authorities or housing associations.

Food charity Sustain and the Women's Environmental Network have released a paper, Growing Round the Houses, to come up with some ideas to turn unused spaces on estates into productive gardens.

Ben Reynolds, from Sustain, said: "It's about fitting food growing into every aspect of the design of a place. All the ideas for eco-towns so far just seem to be about putting in a few allotments, but there's the opportunity to do much more than that."

In 2007, housing body the Peabody Trust was awarded almost £4.7m in lottery funds for projects to improve the health of 43,000 people in social housing across London.

Many of those focus on food, including:

- Gardening School - a project based at a school near a Peabody estate in east London where residents learn how to grow vegetables and fruit with the help of a community gardener
Building compost boxes and a greenhouse to grow exotic fruit and vegetables for ethnic minority groups who are unable to buy produce from their homelands in London
High-rise garden - teaching residents in multi-storey flats how to use growbags, containers and hanging baskets to cultivate on balconies and walkways

Other ideas for edible estates include planting fruit and nut trees with the crop either being shared among community members or sold.

Change in attitude

The next challenge for a big city like London will be to design a development from scratch with edible principles built in.

It has happened at Clay Farm, in Cambridge, where allotment and community garden provision has been incorporated into new housing at residents' request.

But to bring these ideas about, local authority planners have to take into account growing space at drawing board stage, and they must also involve residents from the start is key.

Otherwise, the developments are just as likely to create more derelict land, in which no-one living there feels they have a vested interest.

Tony Leach, from London's Parks and Green Spaces Forum, said attitudes needed to change.

"There's the idea that parks are for flowers and people, and farming is for food, and never the twain shall meet.

"There's also a negative attitude towards community gardens. People say, 'It'll never work, they've got to be fenced off', but mainland Europe has been doing it for years. Are we so different?"

Tim Lang, professor of food policy at City University, is very enthusiastic about grassroots growing, but he does issue a warning.

"The danger with projects is they get used by the powerful as little token ticks. States turn to community projects when things are bad and put the onus on the bottom to look after themselves."

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