

Aspects of the Changing Role of Horticulture in the London Garden Economy



Summary report of research findings for the RHS Bursary Committee prepared by:

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Rationale

Horticultural knowledge is something that can take a lifetime to acquire. Yet those people that live and own gardens in London increasingly have less time within which they might acquire this knowledge. They also have a lot more money than previous garden owners did, as the city economy makes this an increasingly expensive place that only the more affluent can afford to live within. This research has sought to explore the degree to which a love for horticulture can be fostered within such a climate. By examining two places which help people organise their gardens - the garden centre and the garden design studio – it questions the future of horticulture as a domestic hobby within an increasingly urbanised, affluent, and pressurised society.

Aims of the research

The aim of this research has been to explore and question how the garden centre and the garden design studio is run in London. I have been interested to document here, as part of a larger research project on the ways in which plants are experienced in cities, the changing ways in which the people working at these sites conceptualise what they do, the services that they perceive they are required to provide, how they practically go about meeting these requirements, and how they plan to continue doing so in future. For the purposes of this specific research project, I have also sought to explore how the idea of ‘horticulture’, as a particular set of knowledges and activities surrounding plants, is mobilised and engaged with by these individuals. In effect, it was interested in how horticulture fits into what they practically do.

Outline of activities

This research involved two specific types of social research activity within each of the two specified sites. The aim was to productively combine these so as to give the richest sense of how horticulture figured within these contexts through a kind of methodological triangulation. Over the course of a number of months in the spring and summer of 2002, I pursued two separate methodological techniques within seven garden centres and seven garden design studios in London. These two strands were as follows:

Qualitative Interviewing

1. Here, a sample of garden centre managers within London was sought. An aim was to achieve a cross section of different garden centres, but with a particular focus on those that are centrally located. In practice, eight different individuals agreed to take part in the research and interviews were conducted with them at their garden centres. This initially took place in their offices. Then we had a walk around their actual retail site where we discussed and reflected on the things that they were selling here. The aim here was to understand how this group framed their practical activities, how they were changing, and what this implied about how their customers related to the idea of horticulture.

2. A similar process was undertaken with seven garden designers. These were contacted through different means. Some were approached directly from their entries on certain websites. Others were referred to me as some garden designers mentioned others that might also be willing to take part within our interviews. These interviews took place in their garden design studios as we discussed their own perceived role and the ways in which they organised their workloads. Again these discussions often referred to the objects and materials they had around them, as I asked these designers to describe what they did and how they worked with their clients.

Ethnographic Techniques

The aim here was to gain an understanding of the contexts in which people operate and the rules and ideas that underpin their behaviours, through either watching or taking part in the activities they are involved in.

1. At the garden centre, my initial aim was to work at one of the above garden centres for a while. However, I was initially refused the opportunity to spend time there in this way, since I was deemed to have too small a knowledge base and the brevity of my stay would have also made things difficult. However, I was allowed to spend time watching the ways in which people behaved and talked with each other there. So, in effect, I spend time simply being in the garden centres taking notes and exploring developing ideas about their function. I also conducted a number of informal interviews with different members of staff. I did this in total at four different garden centres over a period of 15 days.

2. With the garden designer, my aim was to go with them on their client visits as a means of exploring the assumptions that informed these meetings, together with the types of negotiations that took place within them. Here the research project was more successful. Two different garden designers were happy for me to shadow them on a number of occasions. I attended 12 client meetings in total. The designer would telephone me when a meeting had been arranged and I would meet him or her at the house where it would take place. Then I would sit in on these consultations and make notes about what was taking place and being said. After the meeting I would also ask questions about how it went with the designer, to question themes and ideas that emerged from them. This often happened in their cars because they were often kind enough to give me a lift to the nearest tube station.

What was achieved

What I present here is a summary of some of my main findings. These are developed through some illustrative examples and vignettes. The aim of this discussion is to provide telling examples and further food for thought.

Spaces for horticulture at the London garden centre

During one conversation with a garden centre manager, we were talking about a previous employee. This employee was older and she correspondingly had some different ways of doing things. The manager was pushing for a redevelopment of the garden centre where he wanted the space to be reorganised in a particular type of way. Yet she was more traditional. They had an argument. He told her that she had to

'clean up' the area where she worked. She had different ideas. Her response was that 'it was a garden centre', and so 'it was supposed to be a bit dirty.' Shortly after, she was dismissed.

This is just one case, but, within this research, this case seemed indicative of a broader attitude within the garden retailers of London. That is to say that they feel that they ought to be providing a particular kind of 'clean' and relatively 'sanitised' retail environment - in many ways just like any other shop that their customers might be more familiar with encountering. In other words, their spaces should be ordered and arranged so that signs of any potentially messy plant dealings with repotting, or pruning, or tending to the plants among the products on display was to be made invisible. Indeed some garden centre owners did not feel that their competitors were other garden centres or places where people bought garden products. Rather they thought them to be other high street retailers. Their customers did not particularly want to get things for their garden. Rather they were perceived to be idle on a weekend, simply looking for some sort of retail environment in which to spend pleasurable time. They would potentially buy something, but only if they were so inclined in that instance. It follows, then, that the important thing is to make the garden centre environment as aesthetic and pleasant to spend time within as possible. Other clothes retailers have an explicit focus on these things such as a clean, ordered and stylish layout and, therefore, so should the garden centre.

In terms of garden knowledge, interestingly, this made for a trend towards a particular way of arranging the plants that were sold. This was a trend for incorporating the plants into small individual and attractive displays or, in some cases, an idea of 'small outdoor rooms' that were to be admired and enjoyed by the customer. This is, in many ways, an entirely understandable act in the context of the perceived primary motivations of their client base, but it also takes space away from other potential means of arranging specimens. Here one format that garden centre managers seemed to be adopting less often is the more traditional format of an alphabetical arrangement of stock according to the name of the plant, either common or Latin. There are implications here for the perceived place of horticultural knowledge within the London garden centre as this particular structure associated with it diminishes in significance. The agenda of stylish display here goes directly against that of a straightforward horticultural index, and the first agenda was winning out. This, then, was one manifestation of how garden centre managers perceive their changing relation to the idea of fostering horticultural understanding.

Furthermore, in terms of the products that are presented to the customer, there was also a sense in which the prevalence of plants more generally was in decline. Through watching how customers behave in my research sites, together with discussions with the garden centre managers, it seems that customers were, in general, more at home with dealing with other types of products than plants. As one garden centre manager put it,

"It's hard to make things for them to comment on with the plants. They are much more likely to talk to each other about other sorts of things. It would be like they were saying to each other 'oh just look at that lovely green thing!' They just don't!"

In other words, the people that came to her garden centre, and the people I watched myself, were more at home when they are dealing with things that aren't plants. Around other things such as ornamental pots, and garden sculptures, and garden furniture, customer conversations were generally much more animated. They felt happy to discuss them. With plants, however, there seems to be a lot more to consider in terms of plant behaviour and maintenance and this was comparatively stressful. Furthermore, plants didn't seem so differentiated more generally - since they are all just 'green things'. So what was the case here is that there was a lack of horticultural knowledge, in terms of plant familiarity amongst visitors to these centres. This translated into an easier and happier engagement with some of the other things that they might buy. The garden centre managers, in turn, felt they should respond to, and indeed sometimes inadvertently reinforce, this sentiment in terms of providing customers with an ever expanding range of hard landscape materials that took up increasing amounts of the finite space available in the more central London garden centre. And so the significance of plants was, therefore, to some extent, in decline as a consequence.

Yet this is not to suggest that efforts are not being made to help people to begin knowing and learning about plants. One particular place in which this is fostered was through the ways in which specific plants were presented. In order to make them less intimidating, and maybe more interesting, some of the garden centres have labelled notices attached to particular plants, giving a little of their history and their use. They called them 'information boards'. In this way, a potential interest in the plant itself, and, by implication, a willingness to gain horticultural knowledge, was fostered within customers that often appeared nervous and intimidated when presented with plants.

In terms of garden centre staff working with their customers, there was again clearly much potential for encouraging the public and helping them along. What is certainly the case is the way in which many members of the public were often keen to seek out personal advice about what they should be doing in the garden centre and in their own gardens, which can be situated in the context of a bewildering proliferation of media discussions of the garden more generally. On many occasions I witnessed how a customer would approach a member of staff initially with what seemed to be only a single question. Then, after this has been answered, they found themselves asking all sorts of other connected questions as a means of trying to get to grips more fully with the contingencies of what they are actually trying to do in their garden space. So there are clear opportunities here. Yet there was little money available to pay for the comparatively skilled staff who were able to respond to this kind of query. Furthermore, customer service skills were also increasingly prized over specific knowledge bases. After all, and returning to the above, their competitors were shops.

In the context of this overview of what I have been finding out about how garden centres in London position themselves to customers and are changing in this regard, a particularly telling final example related to the place of seeds in the garden centre. To buy seeds implies a certain degree of horticultural confidence, and also patience. The two are in many ways interlinked. Yet the presence of seeds implicitly seems to suggest something scary about the fostering of horticulture within the London garden centre, it is interesting to note that seeds, on several occasions, have been discussed with me as something that is good, but only good for a specific group of customers,

namely kids. In this way, growing things was perceived to be something that children might be doing as a means of finding out about how nature works. The corollary, of course, was that adults were not. They have less time and they don't perhaps understand how to grow seeds and so they are interested in other things. Seeds can be stocked for children. They are also there because it is still expected that garden centres will have them. But this was certainly not the main area of development for these businesses. They have other arenas to develop, most notable in garden furniture, art, and design more generally. Following on from the perceived strength and power of current media representations of the garden as 'aesthetic space', design was seen as a more important area for business development, compared to horticultural enthusiasm. This leads me to the next area of garden work where this research has been conducted.

Spaces for horticulture within the London garden design process

Garden designers are currently in a fledgling position in several ways. When interviewing one designer called Jane, she told me about a recent meeting she attended with some other garden designers. The other designers were surprised by her because she always wore jeans and a tee-shirt to these meetings. They felt that they should look smart and business-like, that they should wear suits and carry portfolios. This particular example speaks to two different elements of interest to this report. The first is a sense of getting practically involved with the garden that the practice of horticulture necessarily involves. This, to an extent, is a pretty difficult thing to do if you are not wearing more comfortable clothes. The second is the way in which garden designers, as a group, seemed to be seeking to get away from this sort of thing and are supplant it with an air of professionalism and business-like competence. This was a 'business-like' approach that associated itself, with the design industries and with media presentations of the garden as place for stylistic expression. In a similar way to what was seen in the garden centre, this was something which they perceived to be a trend that they need to exploit and harness.

This then spilt over into the practice of what they do and the potential for engaging with horticulture within this practice. At one garden design studio where I interviewed the designers, we went through a number of their designs and they talked me through the process by which they came to the decisions they did. Within the actual drawn design all the different hard materials were labelled: stone, slate, steel. The plants were meanwhile presented under the simple rubric of 'mixed planting.' Such a format of presentation is, in part, due to the fact that the planting was to be discussed at a later date certainly, but it is also indicative of the role to which plants, and a potential practical engagement with plants are assigned. That is to say that it is hard materials which are treated as more important. Many designers discussed with me the pressure to use new and unusual things in their work. This would create an impact and it would mark the garden they created as a 'designed' garden, and, potentially, a designed garden with their own positive brand associations. As such, it naturally was the materials and the structures that might build that were at the forefront of their thoughts, not the extent to which their clients might build a relationship with the plants of the garden over time. Indeed, it was interesting to note that the way in which they framed their garden role was through the idea of 'building.' They generally said that they 'built' gardens. The implication here was that they were constructing with

materials in a relatively short time, rather than setting things up so that clients could 'grow' their gardens, with the connotations of a more gradual plant engagement.

Connected to this is the fact that a slow and gradual tending engagement with plants that is the practice of horticulture is, to some extent, structurally written out of the activity of garden design and build. A garden designer perceives their job to be one of providing a specific finished product. One of the great pleasures they talked about was associated with 'unveiling' the final completed garden to their clients and allowing themselves to be congratulated on the transformation. This is understandable, but what is partly written out of such an agenda is the degree to which a potential engagement with the growing of plants on the part of the client could be considered.

To offer small plant specimens that would take time and energy to grow, then, was actually quite a fraught enterprise. Firstly, this was in terms of this diminished sense of impact and satisfaction that can be gained at the end of their work, but also secondly, and perhaps more importantly, because of the reliance upon the idea of a client actually doing the necessary gardening. Garden designers hope to return to their designed gardens at a later point and photograph them for their portfolios. If a garden then is not looked after and looks unpleasant, then this activity would be of little use. This is also situated in the context of a perception of their clients as being unlikely to either want to or have the time to engage with growing plants. Irrigation for the plants that do find themselves into these gardens is increasingly organised as a standard feature - it is simply too risky to assume or hope that the client will water them since they are likely to be too busy or be elsewhere. The agenda of the garden designer is to create something beautiful and that means making sure that things are not left to the client to potentially go astray. One garden designer talked to me about how she gave her client a small area of the garden to 'play with'. That is, she assigned a small part of the garden for the client to potentially grow things, to experiment with horticulture. But this was only a small part, however - the rest was to be ordered and organised by her so that it would fit the aesthetic vision she had planned.

Of course, this is to present their activity in perhaps an unduly negative way, as one of precluding the potential for client horticultural interest. In many ways having a discreet area within which clients can 'play' and start growing things without being encumbered by any pressure might very well be the best way of fostering horticulture when there was a wider cultural expectation that the garden was to be arranged creatively, successfully and according to personal tastes. A whole garden would make for a daunting task for the fledgling gardener such that they might do nothing with it at all, or concrete it over. From this more positive vantage, it is also true to say that garden designers do very much enjoy the idea of growing and experiencing the presence of plants themselves and, if their clients seemed interested in this too, they are keen to help them share a similar kind of experience. However, the broad sense shared by the designers I spent time with was this possible enthusiasm was comparatively rare, and consequently, they did not cater to this possibility as much as they might have otherwise done.

Problems encountered during the research

There were some access problems associated with this work. Some people felt that they did not want to take part in the research since they were too busy. Others allowed

only limited access and in certain, particular ways. More generally, however, the research was relatively successful in undertaking the required tasks. Further reports and outputs from this study will now follow in academic journals and other public fora. As such I am very grateful of the assistance provided by the RHS here.

Summary of final budget

<i>Expenditure</i>	<i>Cost</i>
Travel passes to get to and from different interview and ethnographic field work sites: (London transport travel cards for the period of data collection)	£250
Payment of the transcription of interview data before later analysis: (This was outsourced to a known transcription company)	£400
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Total costs for this individual piece of research work:	£650

Other funding bodies that have contributed to this research:

This research operates as a discreet project that sits within a longer piece of PhD research entitled ‘Cultivating consumption: lifestyle and gardening practice in contemporary London.’ This has been funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

Recommendations for similar ventures

An exploration of the role and relationship between people and plants in the domestic garden is a relatively new research enterprise within the social sciences. Nonetheless there are now a number of researchers within my own discipline that are moving towards this agenda. In Nottingham, later this year, there will take place a conference specifically to address recent work on ‘horticultural geographies.’ This developing agenda is starting to uncover some important issues that should be considered further with respect to the benefits people feel that plants can bring them.

Within this context, and that of the empirical findings of this study, and with regard to further work on fostering horticultural interest amongst city dwellers, what would be interesting, given the perceived power of media presentations of the garden that this project highlights, would be further ethnographic work that tracks and documents the ideas and activities involved in the making of such televised garden programmes. It would be worthwhile to further examine the embedded notions of what a garden is that take form within these production companies and question how this fits with the expected formats and components of a television programme.

Other potentially useful and complementary studies could explore the ways in which different local cultures of relating to plants are fostered and organised. This line of research could work across countries to question national plants cultures, together

with thinking comparatively about what different places could learn from each other in this regard.

Overall summary and conclusions

This research highlights the changing ways in which two particular types of garden businesses are operating in London today. Garden design make over programmes and the associated positioning of the garden as a stylish lifestyle accessory have prompted much debate. This study has found that the ideas promoted in these programmes have started to infiltrate what people are actually doing within these two sites. Then it considered the implications regarding how horticultural learning could be encouraged in future.

The picture is mixed as there are many different agendas at work here. However, what still emerges from this exercise is a sense in which these media ideas are very much filtering through and how they combine with a perceived sense of the particular lifestyle and affluence of the modern garden owner to make for changes in the ways in which designers and centre managers operate.

For the garden designer, there emerges a sense in which their role and the structure of their work is, to some extent, in opposition to a fostering of horticultural knowledge. This is not to say, however, that people with designed gardens can not become keen horticulturists, but rather to highlight the ways in which garden design works, and how it often implicitly assumes they will not. Within the context of the growth of this profession, this is could be positively engaged with by the RHS, if wider horticultural interest is to be safeguarded. Garden designers are interested in horticulture as a practice certainly, but the formats within which they work, their perceived sense of how they should develop as businesses, and their perceived client base all currently work against a more thorough promotion of horticultural learning and activity.

Within the garden centre, there is also a determination to encourage ideas of fashion and style, rather than the pleasure of horticultural enjoyment. Again the people that I found working there often personally enjoyed the cultivation of plants a great deal, but this is perceived to be of a decreasing importance within the wider retail environment within which they see themselves as operating. Having said this, there remains once again opportunities for rejuvenating the significance of horticultural expertise and activity within garden centres, but these will come up against a number of pressures on garden centre businesses that often currently feel they should focus on other strategies than the promotion of horticultural engagement.

Future plans generated from the project

This project is located within a wider PhD project that examines the changing role of urban nature and, specifically, plants within the lives of people living in cities. This work now is currently being written up and will be examined before the end of 2005.

Findings from this wider project have already begun to be disseminated through a variety of channels. Academically, this research work has been presented at a number of conferences. These include the Institute of British Geographers conference, in both

2002 and 2003, the 2003 Association of American Geographers Conference in New Orleans, and the 2003 British Sociological Association conference in York. A number of academic publications based on these conference presentations are also underway. One has already been reviewed and appears in the following:

Hitchings, R. 2003. 'People, plants and performance: on actor network theory and the material pleasures of the private garden' *The Journal of Social and Cultural Geography*, 4.1. 99-113.

More widely, this research work will hopefully also be presented within practitioner conferences, including that of the Society of Garden Designers with which I have developed links as part of the project. I am also very interested in writing about this research work in any of the RHS publications that may be appropriate.
