8 Contesting the politics of place

Urban gardening in Dublin and Belfast

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Introduction

Social exclusion and social polarization are characteristic of many cities where "urban space, while it is functionally and economically shared, is socially segregated and culturally differentiated" (Robins 1993, p. 313). Against this backdrop research shows that public and voluntary bodies operating in the civil society sphere can play a crucial role in fostering better social relations, integration, and social cohesion (Vertovec 2007). Recent literature suggests that a "shared politics of place" attained through joint activities which acknowledge difference and promote inclusion, foster social integration and provide people with a means to practice cooperation (Baumann 1996; Sanjek 1998; Sennett 2012). Such a shared politics of place is most likely to occur in the context of public space conceptualized broadly as "the setting for everyday spatial behaviour of individuals and communities, emphasizing ordinary activities of citizens" (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007, p. 8). In this chapter we investigate the extent to which a shared politics of place can be created and nurtured amongst the cultivating citizenry, and the implications of that for urban equity and sustainability.

Allotment gardening in both Dublin (Ireland) and Belfast (Northern Ireland) was originally provided for under British legislation which has ensured its provision, maintenance, and statutory legitimacy to the present day. The residualization of UA was a marked trend in both cities during the twentieth century. More recently, a renewal of interest in UA is evidenced in rising demand among the citizenry for plots, increased provision by municipalities and private landowners, and a growing public awareness of the value of growing your own. Our aim is to identify what role UA can play in fomenting a shared politics of place as a basis for social cohesion given both the general challenges faced by cities today, and the specific challenges faced by Dublin and Belfast. We argue that UA is not just an environmental or ecological intervention in urban space. Rather it is a social process that contributes to the tradition of nurturing inclusive and vibrant public space and public infrastructures in the contemporary city (Amin 2010). As such UA has a key role to play in advancing a more equitable and sustainable vision of the city.

Toward a shared politics of place

In this chapter we illuminate elements of the interactive order of everyday urban life focusing particularly on the cultivation practices of urban allotment holders. We are interested in the potential of urban allotments to help re-shape the politics of place at a time when cities are viewed as becoming ever more privatized, more polarized, and more exclusionary (Punch 2005; Sennett 2005; Sassen 2013). Lownsbrough and Beunderman (2007) while acknowledging these trends point to the emergence of new types of public space in cities and neighbourhoods: formal and informal, public and semi-public, deliberate or spontaneous. They identify eight main types of "spaces of potential": exchange, productive, service provision, activity, democratic/participative, staged, in-between, and virtual. These are not to be interpreted in a narrowly spatial sense: in practice many places will have elements that cut across more than one definition, since the category into which a space falls is dictated by the activity happening within it at different times. It is the central importance of trust and confidence from users in creating valuable public space that links these "spaces of potential". The elements of new public space include: capacity for multi-use, accessibility, legibility, clarity about the boundaries between public and private, local relevance, adaptability to people's diverse needs and desires, open-endedness, and safety. Madden (2010) counsels that we move the analysis of public space beyond questions of inclusion and exclusion, and "toward an empirical examination of the powers, practices, institutions and ideas which do the work of constituting the public" (2010, p. 191). We argue that the empirical investigation of allotment gardening in two urban contexts reveals the possibility of re-framing a local politics of place, to produce a more socially inclusive notion of the public. This is possible because participants' commitment to cultivation is premised on individual labour carried out in a common cause, observance of mutually agreed tacit rules of engagement, and tolerance of diversity. Thus, they fulfil an important role associated with public urban life (Sennett 2011). Moreover, allotment gardening, facilitated and supported by local municipalities, promotes a more public politics of place (open, accessible, and traversed by all) which stands in contradistinction to a more privatized politics of place (evidenced in shopping malls, gated communities, policed public thoroughfares, and so on). These themes are elucidated in more detail in the remainder of this chapter.

Researching urban gardening in Dublin and Belfast

Tornaghi, in a recent critical review of urban agriculture research, argues that we still lack a systematic analysis of "the geography of urban food cultivation and its relations with the politics of space" (2014, p. 3). She calls for an exploration of the meaning of UA initiatives in different urban contexts, and in particular, its role in addressing urban problems. This chapter addresses gaps in the literature by focusing on two cities in the Global North each of which has faced specific

localized challenges – the financialization of urban space (Dublin) and the politicization of urban space (Belfast).

Dublin city flourished economically during the early years of the twenty-first century. Incomes and spending power rose in Ireland, generating high levels of consumer exuberance among large swathes of the populace. This was evidenced in the exorbitant prices paid for modest homes, an increase in international travel, and dramatic levels of consumer spending (dependent on credit rather than savings) generally. After the economic collapse of 2008 (largely attributed to a property bubble) came the IMF/EU bailout of 2010. The mandated imposition of austerity policies resulted in significant drops in income, higher unemployment levels, and a contraction in consumer spending (Rigney 2012). Crucially though, the availability of vacant space arising from the property crash created opportunities for UA (Corcoran et al. 2017). We have observed a demonstrable rise in UA practices in the city of Dublin, reliant on both public and private provision of allotments in the city and on its perimeter. Demand has been partially driven by a flourishing civil society sector committed to promoting sustainable forms of production, greater food awareness, better strategies for health and well-being, and food sovereignty.

Despite the political resolution of the conflict in Northern Ireland, Belfast remains a city divided along religious and ethno-national lines. The sectarian inscriptions on the landscape continually reinforce both the idea and the reality of a divided city. The physical environment of the city and its morphology – in terms, for instance, of the range and distribution of places of worship – demonstrates the continued salience of religion in everyday urban life (O'Dowd and McKnight 2013). Violent division is effectively inscribed in the cityscape, through periodic protests, riots, and paramilitary campaigns aimed at disrupting the normalization process underway in the wake of the political resolution of the conflict. O'Dowd and McKnight note that although there are examples of alternative forms of social solidarity and social mobilization that engage in bridge-building across the community divide in the city, these are less frequent, less visible, and are less embedded in either civil society or the state. To some degree the publicness of the city has been re-configured as a theatre of action in which two ethno-national traditions are publically performed and played out. This raises the question of what avenues may be available that can allow urban dwellers in Belfast to engage in a shared politics of place despite the history of sectarianism and residual ethno-national conflict. We argue that urban agriculture sites might be classified as non-contested space and as such have the potential to become shared-in-common places in the city. Given the significant policy and political commitments to social cohesion and social inclusion in both Ireland and Northern Ireland, there is, we argue, "a need for a more thorough analysis of the potential for different types of public space to support positive interactions between different social, economic and ethnic groups" (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007, p. 10).

The four Dublin municipal authorities currently provide 1,120 allotment sites across ten locations in the Greater Dublin area (many more allotments are

provided by private landowners). The population of the Greater Dublin area is 1,325,700 (Census 2016). Belfast City Council serving a population of 339,000 (NISRA 2016) currently provides 278 sites across six locations. (In both cities there are long waiting lists to access sites). Our study employed multi-sited ethnographic methods using methods of triangulation (semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and visual analysis). Field work was conducted in two phases between 2009 and 2013, and involved photographing seven allotment sites in Dublin and six in Belfast. While some allotment gardens are sited close to the city centre, the majority tend to be located in the suburbs or on the urban perimeter. Both publicly and privately provisioned sites were included in the sample. Data was also gathered at a community garden in West Belfast, located in an interface area where Protestant and Catholic communities remain almost wholly segregated. Forty-eight interviews were carried out in Dublin and 27 interviews in Belfast. Interviewees were primarily drawn from the ranks of plot holders, with additional inputs from allotment activists, and relevant members of local municipalities. The case study based approach was adapted as an optimal means of elucidating the potential of UA to generate a shared politics of place on the ground in the contemporary city (for more details on methodology see Kettle 2014).

Access, sociality, and social levelling on allotment sites

There is a certain tension inherent in allotment gardening in terms of their legal, physical, and normative publicness/privateness. In terms of their spatial distribution allotments are frequently located in interstitial or peripheral places in the city. While nominally public in terms of location (generally provided on public lands), they exhibit tendencies towards privatization as evident in their weak visibility to the public-at-large, difficulties of access, and security concerns. Security is an issue on both Belfast and Dublin sites. Respondents in Belfast informed us that there are strict rules about sites being locked at all times to ensure everyone's safety. Sites have to be secured on entering because there is residual conflict in the city and tensions remain high. Similarly, in Dublin allotment holders are issued with keys to the sites and are expected to secure access point on entry and egress.

Municipal allotments are provided on public lands, or on private lands leased by the authorities. As such, they constitute a public good in which all tax payers and citizens have a stake. As a resource held in public trust they are potentially open to all. In terms of social practices, however, allotments are at least semi-privatized through gated access, boundary creation and maintenance, and formal tenant/landlord arrangements. They require payment of a fee, however nominal, which constitutes a further barrier to entry. Some are characterized by contingent status, but all limit security of tenure through an 11-month leasing system. Furthermore, waiting lists for allotments indicate that supply exceeds demand and that access is therefore limited for prospective plot holders. Newer allotment sites are being provided on private lands on the city perimeter, particularly in Dublin.

Here tenancy is also limited, and the cost of renting a plot is not subsidized but rather is set by market demand.

Once access is gained, allotments provide an arena for socializing and sociality. They enable individual and collective cultivation, exchange, and dissemination of knowledge. They are spaces that are conducive to lingering, and allow for plot holders to be individually busy and active, *and* to interact with one another. They are also sites of production and exchange which explicitly eschew a cash nexus. In that specific sense they constitute a productive space that exists between the market and the state. Allotment holders now constitute a diverse population. No longer dominated by older, working-class males, plots are tended by working-class and middle-class women and men, the unemployed, immigrants and community groups, and advocacy groups catering for clients with special needs. People join together in a common understanding, with a shared concern for cultivation in a designated space. They act in concert despite the fact that they bring with them "multiple geographies of affiliation" and may only have "fleeting encounters with strangers" on site (Amin 2010, p. 4):

> That is the huge potential of allotments, the sense of bringing people together. I really feel that. I have seen that countless times. Out there, there are no boundaries or no barriers. It is a great social mixing place. Now more people on neighbouring plots might get to know each other because there are no walls or fences like there are with gardens. Every plot almost merges into the next.
>
> (MF, DN, 082009)

One plot holder in Belfast explained that allotment space allows people to move beyond parochial understandings of their lives and the constraints of institutionalized sectarianism. His own efforts to promote allotment gardening, particularly for men, are intended to give people a sense of private ownership and control of a space *albeit* in the public realm:

> they could come in their own time, they could come in the evenings, you know, they could come on Sundays, whenever, and they had an ownership of it . . . so if they had one of these wee beds they could come up and own it, look after it, in their own time, and simply talk to people and break down barriers that were there for so long.
>
> (CH, BT 30052013)

Busy professionals who live relatively compartmentalized lives testify to the elective affinities that are generated purely as a result of cultivating an allotment alongside unknown others. As one female plot holder based in Belfast explains allotment cultivation is a total contrast to her scheduled and highly structured work life:

> this is like a free flowing and I like that. It's a social thing on one level, and I mean the man whose working here beside me, he's been working there since

> the year I was born and his company has been very stimulating. He's really into this on a very deep level. I see him carrying his little plants and he sows like it's a sacrament . . . and then there's all the guys around here who are good *craic*.
>
> (GX BT 082012)

The absence of physical boundaries, (walls), and the creativity associated with designing, managing, and maintaining one's plot, facilitates the construction of "a peopled-landscape" (Viljoen et al. 2012) which provides an opportunity to meet with and interact with others, and generates a sense of belonging. As noted earlier, allotment gardens are frequently located on the city perimeter, or if within the city boundaries, in interstitial places. They constitute terrain not at the centre, but on the edge. As Sennett has observed this very edge-like quality is precisely where "one community, one difference, meets another" (Sennett 2011, p. 396). In this context, allotment holders observe a form of presentation of self in which particularities are eschewed in favour of commonality focused purely on the activities associated with working the land. Allotments are perceived by those who frequent them as a *social leveller*. Plot holders eschew divisions based on class and status, and insist that social categorizations are left at the gate. As one woman on a Dublin allotment site explains:

> We've got guards [police officers] here. . . . We've civil servants. You've bank managers. You've people unemployed. From all walks of life. And when you're up here in your wellies full of muck it doesn't matter who you are. You're the same. Everybody's the same. When we walk in that gate, we're all the same. . . . it gives you the excuse to come out and meet others without having to prove yourself, explain yourself, what you do for a living. It doesn't matter what car you drive, what kind of home you have, and what you do for a living. When you come in that gate, you're the same, we're all the same and everyone treats each other that way . . . it's a leveler that's what it is, and you can come up here and de-stress, lose yourself for hours and meet wonderful, wonderful people you wouldn't have ever met out on the street.
>
> (DX DN 2013)

Another Dublin plot holder reiterates this point observing that symbolic markers of class and status are rendered irrelevant when people are engaged in the task of cultivation:

> You're up there in your working clothes, there's no symbols of wealth as such. There are no suits. You know there's no people dressed in their good clobber. You're in there with your spade and your veg and it kind of . . . it's a neutralising environment where you wouldn't feel threatened by talking to another person.
>
> (FN2, DN 2009)

Similarly, on the sites in Belfast there is also an explicit recognition that the allotments are not an exclusively working-class preserve. People recognize that they attract people from different social classes as well as different communities in the city. This is significant in the context of Belfast where so much of public space tends to be inscribed with ethno-national territorial claims, and as a consequence, is effectively proscribed for those who do not share those claims.

> there's people from both communities here, absolutely, and people from different social strata as well.
>
> (BX, BT 07062013)

> It [the allotment site] completely disregards your class, your religion. It's just about growing, that's what brings people here.
>
> (RX BT 062013)

> Well, there's all walks of life up here. That's what it's all about. There's men and women from all backgrounds and everyone mixes. . . . You've some Chinese people here too and we gave them a bit of a dig out and got a wee thing going, like to make them feel welcome and that you know.
>
> (GI BT, 062013)

On the allotment site the problem of how strangers express themselves to each other is solved through a focus on applying knowledge, skill, and physical labour. The terrain sets the boundaries to interaction. In both Dublin and Belfast respondents reported that in general the sociality they experience on site does not extend beyond the site. People who share this public space and engage in rites of cooperation and sociability with others, tend not to continue those social relations once off-site. Encounters with others are primarily about *civil interfacing*, rather than creating lasting or deep attachments. Sennett has written of how disparate groups might make use of theatrical language and role play as a basis for a common speech "which creates an 'as if' as though they are in the same realm" (2011, p. 395). Plot holders, intimately connected to the material practices of cultivation, privilege that version of themselves above all other as a means of creating a common ground with unknown others. It is all about *the doing*, the getting on with the practical task of cultivation. But this practice necessarily draws them into circuits of sociality as well as shared knowledge. These exchanges produce "vivacity" in the public space of the allotments.

Allotments facilitate the striking up of easy interactions between plot holders. They are places where strangers seem less strange:

> When I'm coming for four hours I'll always bring me flask and if someone was around I would say do you want a cup of tea, they might take it and they might not take it.
>
> (FN1 DN 2009)

There is a sense of fellowship connected to the joint project even if each plot holder is in effect engaged in an individual enterprise. A premium is placed on the willingness and capacity to share the place with others. In Belfast, one respondent fondly recalled the words of a longstanding plot holder:

> Old Colin used to say if you don't have time to sit down in the communal shed and have a cup of tea with your fellow allotment holders, then you shouldn't be here.
>
> (GI, BT 062013)

Activists in particular are keen to stress the potential of allotments as social levellers:

> Allotments should not be a refuge for retired males. I thought that families should have access to them, I thought that young couples should have access to them. They should be available to all . . . irrespective of employment status, age that families should have access, special groups-mental health groups should have access. I have been arguing for multi use.
>
> (MF, DN 092009)

For advocates the allotment landscape acts as an important resource in the city that facilitates social interaction. They see that UA can offer the contemporary urban dweller an opportunity to reconnect with the land but, crucially, to connect with other social actors. For plot holders, the spatial layout and in particular, the absence of physical boundaries facilitates, promotes, and enhances the construction of a sense of belonging to the place. As two women plot holders in Dublin note:

> Well I bought my apartment in the height of the boom and paid a fortune for it, and although I have a balcony, it's really not enough. I grew up here (in the area) and my parents had a large garden and I didn't realise how much I'd miss having a garden until I bought my own home. . . . I like coming here and a lot of the time I'd sit and read or potter around in the shed, tidy it up and do little odd jobs . . . oh I love the company here. I absolutely love it. There's x down there, and y here beside me and we're all great buddies.
>
> (KX DN 2013)

> Well I just had to have one. The minute I saw this [site] opening I was down in a shot. . . . you've no room in the new apartments and like you've the park there for a walk and that's ok if you've a dog and you'd go walking regularly, but it's pretty lonely going on your own all the time. I do go, and I love it but here, here I can have a chat, do a few bits and basically just enjoy the open air.
>
> (HX, DN 2013)

The physical reconfiguration of Dublin in the years of the economic boom created new modalities for living to which Dubliners continue to adjust. Apartment living is a relatively new phenomenon in the city and here we see how people respond to the challenges which this new kind of living engenders. A patch of land for cultivation re-grounds them, providing recreational access to the outdoors, an opportunity to grow food for consumption, and a version of shared public space that is not available in the context of privatized apartment living.

Moving beyond ethno-national divisions

We have already alluded to the problem of Belfast as a divided city. Ethno-national divisions are inscribed in the cityscape in very public ways. Remarkably, such demarcations are noticeably absent from the allotments spaces. Allotments offer a space where people can interact *without* having to be conscious of or adhere to prescribed ethno-national distinctions. What stands out is the neutrality of these spaces in a city with markers of identity at every turn and where interface barriers are designed to "police" divisions between the two main communities.

On allotment sites, manifestations of religious or political views are frowned upon. Significantly, politics are not generally discussed on Belfast sites. Most respondents were adamant that such subject matter was effectively out of bounds, not permitted under the tacit rules of engagement. Respondents maintain that religious views or political opinions are completely irrelevant in the context of shared cultivation of land:

> No, no. . . . they wouldn't talk about religion. No. You know, nobody really knows what religion you are . . . . it's a neutral kind of eh . . . there's never any question whether you're [coughs]. . . . the sole interest is the allotment, and our conversation revolves around that, and that's it. No, no one would ever speak of anything like religion . . . you're not interested in any of that carry-on in here.
>
> (JK, BT 062013)

> I know more people on this allotment in four weeks than I do living on my street for eight years. If you don't feel like being friendly you can just hide in your shed but you wouldn't do that. No one talks about any of that stuff in here . . . I've never been asked about my political opinions or that, and I do not think it's really anything people would bring up to be honest. I really don't think people would be bothered with that in here.
>
> (IC BT 062013)

In general, politics cannot be discussed on the site as there is a latent fear that one could all too easily antagonize people. One plot holder who had previously worked for the prison service observed that:

> You don't discuss your background, and I certainly can't get into any conversations about that here, *with my background*.
>
> (GG BT 2013) emphasis added

This capacity to bracket difference, even temporarily, is relatively novel in a divided city such as Belfast. Plot holders are entering a public space and discarding the particularities of their identities – class, gender, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation. In effect, the allotment site constitutes a public realm which enables plot holders to transcend distinction and difference and move beyond self-interest (Arendt 1958). They enter into "a community of equalization of speech in which self-reference is a violation of the norms of politics" (Sennett 2011, p. 396). Through the application of this tacit rule of engagement a new politics of place is thus opened on the allotments. The allotment space provides a level playing field enabling the dissolution of an ethno-national configuration and its replacement by a community of growers, whose *raison d'etre* derives from ground up cultivation:

> Well everyone is just all one, and we just all work together here. Everyone is all one, we all teach each other and share what we know. . . . there's none of that nonsense in here . . . everyone's all one in here. . . . . I've met people from different creeds and from different parts of Belfast and I never had trouble with any of them.
>
> (FX, BT 07062013)

A number of initiatives are underway in Belfast to create opportunities for disadvantaged young people and ex-prisoners to become involved in UA. This mirrors similar initiatives undertaken in Dublin, albeit that the context is much less politicized than in the North. It is noteworthy that some respondents in Belfast were hesitant about the rehabilitative possibilities that allotments might be required to sustain. For some, social mixing is all very well when people share the same broad class categories and hail from what they perceive as the law-abiding sections of the ethno-national communities. Such respondents who reject overt political violence have their doubts about integrating people who "had not kept their noses clean" i.e. people who had been involved in political or paramilitary activities. There is a fear that the presence of this "other" on the site might lead to a disengagement of existing plot holders. When asked about their openness to potential plot holders who "had a past" they were equivocal:

> It's hard to . . . I mean in the interest of, like I rarely come in here to the shed and I usually stay up on my own allotment, but I would certainly exchange the time of day with them, and I certainly wouldn't be antipathetic. Plus, I would be watching for a trend, to make sure that they kept their nose clean and that we didn't have unintended consequences.
>
> (GI BT 062013)

The legacy issue of the Troubles cannot be easily erased as another respondent observed:

> Oh well, I found that over a long, long time because if you live for maybe 30 or 40 years and your life depends on either keeping your mouth shut or keeping your head down or making sure you're in the right place, even though things have changed, there would be a residual wariness.
>
> (GI BT 062013)

While generally the majority of plot holders are deemed to leave their politics at the gate, there is concern about how making one's political views known, particularly if they were deemed to be antagonistic to one community or the other, could destabilize the tacit rules of engagement. Nevertheless, respondents are adamant that most plot holders conform to the social requirements:

> The vast majority of people are ordinary decent people who you could trust your life with, borrow their bits, could get advice, you'd get assistance and there'd be no hassle, and you'd be quite comfortable with, have a chat and go on ahead, and all would be well.
>
> (GI BT 062013)

But crucially, they observe that the kind of integration that occurs on the allotments is organic rather than prescribed. They believe that any forced attempt to, for instance, apply quotas to the numbers from different ethno-national communities in the allotment allocations policy would be doomed to failure. The beauty of the allotments is that the prime focus is on the love of the land for *its own sake*. The commitment to cultivation pushes all other identifying markers into the background, rendering them less salient and demonstrating through practice the possibility of integrating different communities. Several respondents recounted small acts of unforced kindness. A Catholic plot holder commented on the generosity of her neighbours when she had to leave her site in Belfast for several weeks while her sister was terminally ill in Dublin:

> They all got together and looked after it, and I choke up when I think of that. . . . so that I wouldn't lose it [the plot]. A couple who subsequently moved to the plot next to me, and a woman up there and another couple . . . I didn't know their names . . . and they were Protestants too, and I was very touched by that.
>
> (GX BT 082012)

An ex-paramilitary saw allotment gardening as a means of moving on from a past which had involved him in conflict and sectarian violence. The allotment constitutes a refuge, a place away from home that affords the prospect of low intensity sociability. He repeatedly spoke of it as a place which offers "peace of mind". His view is that:

> The allotment helps the kids see a different way forward, away from all the sectarianism that's going on.
>
> (TX BT 062013)

From this perspective, the ethno-national conflict sits firmly in the past, and the allotment provides a template for how to get on and grow together. Respondents accept that there are differences between people – political, religious, and cultural – but suggest that these differences can be transcended:

> you have to tolerate that, we're all different here, and you just have to get along.
>
> (TX BT 062013)

> Well my attitude is that success in Northern Ireland is measured in small amounts, and you know it's been analyzed to death and this is why I can't be bothered with things like that and here I think the majority of people feel the same. . . . They're here to grow vegetables and socialize, regardless of where you are from. People just want to move on, so it's a measure of how well things have moved on.
>
> (GG BT 2013)

Another respondent referred to the possibility of "softening" attitudes even among those older plot holders who held entrenched political views. This attitude softening might be the unintended consequence of working in harmony with others in a shared space with a defined, avowedly non-political, practical goal. The nature of agricultural productive work which requires both *individual* enterprise as well as *collective* responsibility creates a very visceral imperative "to get along".

Lownsbrough and Bunderman have documented the particular qualities associated with good public space. They argue that a constellation of "spaces of potential" have emerged in recent years with the potential to sustain and increase interaction in public space (2007, p. 19). This comparative study of allotment gardening in two cities – Dublin and Belfast – provides an opportunity to test whether UA can act as a "space of potential" wherein social or ethno-national cleavages might be managed, challenged, and/or transcended. We have demonstrated the extent to which UA as a practical activity can engender cooperative responsiveness to others on their own terms (Sennett 2012, p. 6). We argue therefore that the kind of civil dis-affiliation associated with privatization and marketization in the contemporary city is not inevitable. Contrary to what is often assumed urbanites (and suburbanites) may exhibit a strongly developed sense of place attachment and belonging, that overcomes – even if only temporarily – class and ethno-national differences. As we have demonstrated this is evidenced in the orientations and practices of plot holders in the context of allotment gardening in the cities of Dublin and Belfast. They overtly challenge those forces which may undermine a sense of shared public space: in Belfast, the heightened

sensitivity about ethno-national territoriality and in Dublin the valorization of social class differences. Just as places may become non-places over time, it is also possible that non-places may be re-fashioned as places that are both meaningful and functional within the urban vernacular. We suggest that the urban allotment is a significant "space of potential" in the twenty-first century. Moreover, we have shown that allotments constitute a particular localized form of public space that can play a crucial role "in providing a focus for practical solutions that increase our sense of society and mutuality" (Lownsbrough and Beunderman 2007, p. 3). They have, therefore, a role to play in urban sustainability.

Urban gardening and sustainability

Interest in sustainability has broadened the terms of reference of analysts to the extent that a wider range of disciplines from within and outside of the traditional social sciences are now being called upon to contribute to a sustainability agenda. The EU Communication on Green Infrastructure explicitly links natural capital depletion to social capital depletion, if more emphasis is not placed on sustainability in planning futures (COM 249 2013, p. 2). This Communication (even if largely discursive rather than pragmatic) represents a significant advance at supra-national policy level in linking society and nature, affording them co-equal concern. Promoting the well-being of its citizens is a primary objective of the European Union (Article. 3 [1] of the Treaty), but how we define well-being has to be linked to wider social, political, and environmental contexts of sustainability. In practice, most cross-national comparisons have been based almost exclusively on economic variables such as GDP that are wedded to the concept of growth. However, a developing body of work (including the current volume) addressing the issue of sustainability is having an increasing impact on critical policy and research debates. The report by the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi Commission (2009) represents a milestone in terms of the recommendations it made on developing a more comprehensive approach toward gauging human well-being. The goal of promoting urban sustainability through, for instance, fostering social cohesion and minimizing social polarization, is predicated on enhancing the capacity of people to participate fully in the life of their society, and this is central to quality of life. Socio-economic security and a sense of empowerment and personal capacity foment collective social capital and enhance the collective life world. Parra and Moulaert (2012) advocate a perspective in which "the social" is primarily seen as a socio-political process that dialogically reveals the essential multi-partner and multi-scalar nature of sustainable development and its governance process.

Pathways to urban sustainability, especially as articulated at policy level, are frequently aspirational with little practical guidance on substantive content or strategies for implementation. By focusing on real practices of urban sustainability such as those outlined in this chapter and in the wider volume, social scientists can make the connections between sustainability goals (articulated from above) and the life world of real citizens (articulated from below). Urban

gardening as an intervention in urban space has grown in prominence in response to shrinking cities, "degrowth" agendas, and the failure of neoliberal development models. The significance of urban gardening has been amplified in the context of the recent global economic downturn. Whether in Dublin or Belfast or other cities across the Global North, the practice of urban gardening in its myriad manifestations is contributing to urban sustainability. However, we need to adapt urban sustainability policies appropriately to the growing diversity of urban populations, and develop more scepticism about the prevalent discourse on sustainability which especially reflects middle-class values (Bradley 2009). As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, social scientists have an important role to play in interrogating the grassroots experiences and practices of actors on the ground, and to mediate those to relevant policy makers.

Conclusion

This chapter set out to explore urban gardening as a particular and localized instance of a "shared politics of place". We demonstrated the potential of gardening activities to generate civic and social dividends for participants, thus contributing to urban sustainability. The chapter focused on the experiences of plot holders in the city of Dublin where daily life has been largely overshadowed by austerity policies since 2008. Austerity succeeded a period of intense financialization of everyday life. We also focused on plot holders in post-peace process Belfast, a city still coming to terms with the ethno-national divisions that shaped its past. The chapter drew on extensive qualitative data gathered in both cities to demonstrate the centrality of allotment cultivation to the creation of shared-in-common places. Public space, far from being marginal space in the city, can be defined by its centrality to the city's life world. Ideally, individuals and communities create and sustain *civil interfaces* where barriers are dismantled, knowledge is exchanged, stereotypes are challenged, empathies are generated, and where people get on with the business of simply getting on with their lives. As we have demonstrated, this is how allotment gardening works in both contexts, predicated on a willingness to disregard social and ethno-national categorizations once on site.

We argue that such a reshaping occurs through the process of social levelling on site. Key features of the allotment sites – their openness to all comers, their democratic structure and the low threshold of entry – position them closer to the public than the private realm. Furthermore, the kinds of social markers that have a taken-for-granted currency in everyday life are generally eschewed by plot holders. Identifying characteristics are parked at point of entry which allows for the creation of a different kind of politics of place. Class, status, and ethno-national identities are rendered less salient, as allotment holders invest their mental and physical labour in the care and cultivation of the land. The social levelling which results – albeit temporary and site specific – indicates that urban gardening facilities constitute an important "space of potential" in the city.

This is not to deny that such differences exist, and that they are salient beyond the allotment gates. However, in the cultivation practices that prevail on the allotments sites a degree of cooperation and civil integration is generated in the sense that plot holders become engaged in "the acquisition and routinization of everyday practices for getting on with others in the inherently fleeting encounters that comprise city life" (Vertovec 2007, p. 4). UA in the city has the potential to reinvigorate sites that are unused or underutilized, to green brown fields, to create sustainable models of growth and development, *and* to revive the public realm at the heart of the city.

O'Dowd and Komovara report that it is easier to secure a measure of cross-community agreement in Belfast on issues that involve making decisions about space with less determinate boundaries (2009, p. 6). Allotments are relatively open spaces that proffer the opportunity to engage in a politics of shared place. This is relatively novel in the context of Belfast, and also to some extent in Dublin, a city that is highly socially segregated in terms of social class. According to Sennett (2012) living with difference – racially, ethnically, religiously, or economically – is the most urgent challenge facing civil society today. Sennett argues that it is imperative that we move beyond tribalism in the modern city, and take up the challenge of evolving cooperative relations with unknown others. But this task is made all the more difficult because modern society has been de-skilling people in the practice of cooperation. The practical activity of land cultivation which links us back to the rural past and addresses some of the equity and sustainability challenges of the present, offers a template for reform. Working the land, not just as individuals but as cooperating partners with unknown others points the way ahead toward a new "geography of acceptance" (Massey 1995, p. 74) in cities of the Global North.

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