



From rubbish to rhubarb

Sustainable Backcourts Initiative

Kelvin Clyde Greenspace, Glasgow



Around one hundred and fifty households in eighteen closes all looking out on the same backcourt – and it's a tip. Rubbish, rodents and overgrown vegetation. Why should even ten households, never mind one, try to do something about it when the other hundred and forty don't seem to care? How can you get away from the *'what'll we do with this old mattress – lets just chuck it out in the yard like everyone else does'* mentality?

A couple of brave folk decide to get together and ask everyone what they think, discuss the problems and see what can be done. Guess what, they find out that there are others out there who agree and before they know it, the clear up has begun. Over time, it's sorted. It takes a bit of time, well a lot; effort – okay, masses of determination; tenacity in the face of local authority brick walls and physical hard graft; and of course money - £50K+ of public funds to be precise. But five years later, the project has been 'a success beyond expectations' as Eric Kay puts it. Eric and a neighbour were the instigators of the initial rebellion against rubbish.

Kelvin Clyde Greenspace brings added value

While Eric and friends were setting about getting the backcourt cleared of rubbish, they were also trying to phone round and find help and information on what they could do to improve the situation long-term. They came across a lot of people who found reasons not to help, mainly in local authority circles, but eventually someone suggested they contact Kelvin Clyde Greenspace. KCG came on board fairly quickly, as much in the 'individual personality' form of James McMahon, as in the form of an organisation which could provide objectivity, resources, money and a network of contacts.



James himself seems to have been quite an inspiration to the GOW (Gibson Street, Otago Street and Westbank Quadrant) residents group with what one person referred to as his 'tenacity and hands-on-ness'. He's certainly enthused and fired up, which must be a huge bonus to groups like this who need to build up their confidence and make things happen.

In 2002, Kelvin Clyde Greenspace started helping out with the GOW backcourt project. In 2003, largely in response to the problems they found there, they initiated the Sustainable Backcourts Initiative (SBI)

together with local housing associations who had shown an interest in this approach to backcourt development. Funding was obtained for landscape architects City Design Co-operative to carry out a study into the potential for backcourt redesign to meet the needs of the residents of tenements in four areas. Full public consultations were held to obtain residents' opinions about what improvements could be made and work for all four areas has since started.

It was through the Sustainable Backcourts Initiative, that GOW was then able to access further funding by linking in the work which residents and Kelvin Clyde had already begun. In turn, this enabled both the building of new structures and further planting in the backcourt space.

When it works, it works

The main project aim at GOW was always to clear the court of rubbish, provide better waste facilities and keep the grass area under control. Even before KCG became involved, residents were so pleased with their efforts that they arranged for part of the annual West End Festival to take place in their backcourt. This has continued and snippets of Shakespeare have been performed there every year since.

Previous landscaping in the courtyard had left three raised bed 'wedges' which were overgrown with saplings and weeds. Kelvin Clyde don't always emphasise biodiversity, but with these areas just waiting to be used, they were able to suggest a wide variety of plants to make the most of sun and shade and to complement the existing areas of grass and mature trees. They had access to volunteers who could help with the physical workload and residents have been inspired by the gradual greening of the courtyard.



The raised beds now play host to a butterfly garden, a herb garden and a tiny woodland wildflower garden'. Last year, one student suggested people use the old ash bins to grow fruit and vegetables. A garden group has just formed and, spurred on by the enthusiasm which climate change is bringing to gardeners countrywide, has already planted seeds – as we write, it's only February! 2007 will be the real test of whether the greening of the backcourt will be kept going and expand.

Biodiversity isn't such a difficult concept

'I don't have to push it hard to persuade people it's a good idea to include some biodiversity in what they're doing. As soon as I suggest it, they say "that'd be good, let's do that". Then they're full of ideas and we can say here are a few other things you might want to consider.' James McMahon, Kelvin Clyde Greenspace

Who's going to keep it all going this time around?

The housing around the GOW backcourt is a combination of privately owned property and houses rented by Glasgow University students with absentee landlords. Students don't tend to invest money in the fabric of the building, but do look out at the backcourt every day and have in fact contributed quite a range of ideas to this project. Each academic year, the core of private householders face the problem of re-educating new student tenants to the way this backcourt is now managed.

We're told that back in the 1980s this backcourt was looking quite smart following a similar clearing up and landscaping exercise. But over the years, it all fell into disrepair again. This time, the residents group is hopeful. With a devoted core of three, a further three who would come in if problems needed sorting out and around twelve who turn out and graft on clean up days, they feel there's enough people who care to keep it all



Mosaic made from slate off old bin shed roofs

going. A recent poll of residents brought very positive comments. Even landlords have volunteered praise.

Looking ahead

The Sustainable Backcourts Initiative takes a new look at familiar problems. Kelvin Clyde Greenspace have been involved with many projects across Glasgow helping schools and communities in recreating social spaces. What comes over when you're talking to them is that there are no quick fixes if you want solutions that last, and particularly if you also want to market the value of biodiversity. People do really want greenspace even if they tag this wish onto a more tangible lifestyle issue like recycling or clearing rubbish. The difficulty as always is how to get people motivated.

'Ask people; take hands-on action and do something which makes a tangible difference' is Eric Kay's advice, based on experience at work and with the GOW backcourts project. He adds 'communicate and keep on giving people the opportunities to link in. But make sure there's reward as well, not just work. Reward means different things to different people, but you do have to make sure it all feels worth it, especially for the key drivers involved.'

The reward here? Ownership of a better living environment and the personal satisfaction of feeling you've really made a difference.

The backcourt before ..



and after..



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