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## **Places of prosumption: community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods**

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# Places of prosumption: community gardens putting the 'we' into neighbourhoods

## Introduction

There has been growing interest over recent decades in prosumption and prosumers.

Prosumption encompasses both production and consumption and prosumers are those who are the producers of many of their own goods and services (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). To date studies of prosumption have had a strong commercial emphasis, centred on the dominant individualistic narrative of 'I' (see also Black et al., 2015). Examples include customer reviewing of company products/services and the emergence of profit-making companies such as Airbnb (accommodation) and Uber and Lyft (ride sharing) as part of the sharing economy. While these, and other, activities could be based around communal and altruistic motives many have been adopted and transformed by profit making businesses. In this case prosumption is closely aligned to the market and corporate control (Cova and Cova, 2012). Research to date has neglected those consumers who desire to reconnect with sources of production as witnessed in the increased interest around grow your own (e.g. Alexander and Ussher, 2012; Kingsley et al., 2009) and make and mend (e.g. Brook, 2012), often reflective of a collective narrative of 'We' (Black et al., 2015). In doing so, research to date tends to disregard prosumption that can be linked to the creation of new and more progressive forms of social relations that challenge capitalism and mass consumer society (Toffler et al., 1981).

This open space paper seeks to extend the debate around prosumption by moving beyond the recent focus on market and customer-based relations to explore the possibilities for creating a new set of 'we' identities around nature and community (Toffler et al., 1981). We achieve this through developing some important spatial insights into the way particular places can be the catalyst for generating and nurturing alternative non-market based forms of prosumption. This will be achieved through a focus on community gardens and how these places can generate new and more progressive forms of social relations around production and consumption that seek to both critique mainstream mass production and the environmentally destructive food system, whilst also offering alternative ways of 'being' and community enhancement in the city.

## **Glasgow's Community Gardens**

The potential for community gardening is high in old industrial cities where the loss of manufacturing industry has resulted in large areas of unused spaces. While deindustrialisation brings with it severe economic and social problems, community gardening and urban agriculture are at the forefront of initiatives, seeking in effect to address poverty and dereliction through operationalising prosumption in the sphere of urban food policy (e.g., Gallagher, 2007). Glasgow is a particularly compelling case with 1,300 hectares of vacant and derelict land, representing 4% of its total land area and comprising 925 individual sites. As a result over 60% of Glasgow City's population lives within 500 metres, and over 90% within 1,000 metres, of a derelict site (Maantay, 2013). Researchers argue that those living in close proximity to derelict sites experience an increase in adverse effects, including, poor health, social alienation and political disempowerment (Jeffrey et al., 2012; Maantay, 2013; Wallace, 2014). This study explores the role of space and place in prosumption using participant observation and 20 semi-structured interviews to obtain a deep understanding of individuals' experiences across 18 community gardens. The community gardens were selected to reflect diversity in location, scale and practice (see Crossan et al., 2016).

### **Constructing collective spaces of prosumption**

A key element of Glasgow's Community Gardens experience has been the active role played by citizens and community groups in regenerating derelict sites. Figure one and two shows a site as a derelict space before being turned into a community garden:

Figures 1 and 2: Community garden site: before and after



Before



After

Through the practice of community gardening residents are investing their time, labour and emotions in these long neglected parts of the urban landscape, one garden volunteer stated:

*“Now that we have tidied it up and continue to maintain it and weed it, make it look nice then it sort of gives them [local children] a safe place to go out and play and to enjoy just lying around being kids and stuff. People can go and sit in there and enjoy it on a sunny day. So they have that opportunity, whereas before you wouldn't want to go and sit in there. No one would want to go and sit in there. You wouldn't even want to go and walk through it”.*

We see local residents, school children, families, homeless people, those with health difficulties, asylum seekers and minority groups and many other demographic and socio-economic differences coming together in community gardens. In their use of these gardens groups who might otherwise have little substantive contact with one another meet and exchange ideas and stories as they collectively produce new urban places. Places are not static; rather, places grow with the communities that inhabit, use and produce them. Through prosumption we find inhabitants transforming *derelict spaces* into *living places* that become incubators for new and more participatory social relations around food and growing. Here we found a range of cooperative and participative relations at work within these once derelict spaces.

Informants, through their active engagement with place, are empowering one another. In this sense it is not only land that is being shaped, but also people and the organisational practices they employ in facilitating prosumption. Community empowerment is, we argue, evident in the wealth of creative thinking applied by community gardeners to complex issues related to food production and consumption. Members of community gardens collectively addressed a range of issues in relation to their prosumption activities, including design, horticulture, land rights and food distribution. We witnessed self-help and DIY relations in the creation and ongoing sustenance of the gardens:



**Figure three: DIY Greenhouse**

Community gardens were not homogenous in how they approached organisational practices. Indeed, as the gardens themselves were heterogeneous in terms of neighbourhood types (e.g., owner occupied, rented, mixed tenure), personal histories, ethnic mixes, local politics and physical attributes, so too were their practices. The rich variety of place on offer is in marked contrast to the homogenous aesthetics and routinized movements of mass-consumer space prevalent across many other areas of Glasgow and elsewhere.

While pleasure is often associated with consumption, here pleasure is derived from the activities of production and consumption in a community setting, as one gardener stated: *“It has visible, tangible results. You can see things. If you planted peas then every time you...are passing a bed and you can watch the progress of those peas...It gives us the opportunity to be involved in a joint enterprise, a group project activity. That is satisfying. Any gardener will tell you it is satisfying, getting to watch a seed turn into a plant, into a fruit, being able to eat it...that's the whole idea of having this space, not as allotments as such, but as a communal community asset.”*

What is good for the community is good for self and is a source of person satisfaction (see Soper, 2007). The work in community gardens serves to re-establish the relations between producers, nature and community, often missing in established neoliberal market choices. We argue that this redefinition of the relationship between people and environment is producing a new urban experience. Pine and Gilmore (1998) in considering the experience economy have

argued the fullest customer experiences (they use a visit to Disney World or gambling in Las Vegas as examples) encompass what they term 'the four realms of experience'. That is, absorption, immersion, passive participation and active participation. The 'sweet spot' (Pine and Gilmore, 1998: 102) of experience, when all realms of the spectre meet, was evident across the community gardens we visited.

Active participation and immersion are evident across a range of self-directed learning practices in, for example, the areas of horticulture and food preparation. Absorption and passive participation are witnessed in the numbers of people who visit the gardens because, to paraphrase one informant, they are 'just good place[s] to be'. However, unlike the customer moving from game-to-show-to-game in a Las Vegas casino or the child introduced to Disney World's latest motion-based simulator, the community gardeners are both the designers and users of the experience. As another informant put it: 'people have ownership [of the project], which is really important'.

There are no external controllers working to 'manage' the 'positive' experience (Pine and Gilmore, 1998) as required of the experience entrepreneur. Colin Ward (1974) argues that when people define their own environments (with all the complexities and contestations this inevitably involves) they create their own histories and futures, with which they have a moral, material and psychological claim to. For Ward such places are fertile ground for community self-valorisation, putting people right at the heart of problem solving and planning.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we have sought to recover the progressive potential of prosumption as a concept within marketing discourse. In doing so we revisit one of Toffler et al's (1981) insights about the potential for new forms of relations that reintegrate production and consumption in more harmonious relations with both society and nature. The recovery of individual agency, construction of new forms of knowledge and participation, and renewal of reflexive and proactive communities are foregrounded in this alternative vision of prosumption.

Community gardens represent places where dominant mass consumption relations are being contested as part of a broader movement around ethical consumption and a radical ecological politics of transition. 'Shopping skills' are being rebalanced with growing, building, organising skills, moving beyond an identity as a 'good consumer' to the development of capacity and

competency to advance sustainable and pleasurable production-consumption lifestyles (Sassatelli, 2015). This is not to suggest that they hold future immunity to the potential onslaught of capitalist reproduction, as evidenced in examples of neighbourhood gentrification (Smith, 2002) and counterculture of ethical and environmental consumption (Heath and Potter, 2004). However, for now at least, the community gardens in this study appear unbound by the constraints and cycles of consumer society, and may indeed benefit from the alternative measures of societal success as discussed by Trebeck, Black and Shaw this issue.

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