

THE ARCHITECTURE ISSUE

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Imagining It.

Building It.

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Landscaping It.

THE NEXT CITY

Arguing With It.



Guerrilla Gardening

Devotion

City

Reclaiming green space
one anarchic, get-your-hands-dirty, grab-a-flat-of-perennials-
and-a-trowel act at a time.

By Jon Mooallem

PHOTOGRAPHS BY FINLAY MACKAY

Just after sunset on one of the first mild nights of spring, Richard Reynolds parked his hatchback near a traffic circle in the London neighborhood of Hoxton. Tied to his roof were a potted honey-suckle and a dozen box hedge plants, spilling out of garbage bags. Trays of bright white Paris daisies filled the trunk, and cartons of variegated ivy were wedged in the passenger seat. Hipsters drank indifferently outside a nearby pub.

The car was swiftly unstuffed. Soon Reynolds and five accomplices were over a short black fence and onto a small, squalid crescent of land at a bend in the sidewalk. They were ankle-deep in food wrappers and beer bottles and the spindly overgrowth of a bullying bush that Reynolds — bent over, wearing work gloves and high black rubber boots — started clipping fervidly.

“The problem is, it got too leggy,” he said. “This is the kind of plant that needs to be thinned every year, otherwise it becomes a scraggly mess.” The shrub along the rear fence was in fine shape, however, and Reynolds imagined it could be pruned and incorporated into their new garden. “That’s a

The Little Dig: An unauthorized horticultural action (opposite and following pages) in London this May.



Richard Reynolds, author of "On Guerrilla Gardening." Despite the revolutionary trappings of his movement, Reynolds's aims are primarily aesthetic.



buddleja. A *buddleja davidii*. Its common name is a butterfly bush," he explained. (He takes a horticulture course one day a week in Regent's Park.) "It has huge, very pendulous blooms."

Reynolds is 30, long-limbed and willowy, with a floppy pile of dark curls. For the next several hours, as he and his troops reclaimed this lost crumb of London, people — young and old, lucid and drunk — would pause on the sidewalk to stare or cheer them on. Many asked if this was what they suspected it must be: the vaguely political, very radical thing they've heard is happening around the city. And this being artsy Hoxton — "the Williamsburg of London," as one American ex-pat put it to me — what seemed like every third passerby photographed the spectacle for his blog.

But here at the outset, trash was being handed out of the thick-
et, then sorted into bags of recyclables by more foot soldiers. Full dumpsters were rolled across the street and swapped for empty ones. Someone found a wallet. Reynolds stood up holding a stainless-steel sink. A young woman in a green jacket with horses printed all over it stopped to ask what they were doing.

"We're gardening," Reynolds told her.

"Who are you gardening for?"

"For everyone and ourselves," he said. "We're guerrilla gardeners."

Reynolds defines guerrilla gardening as "the cultivation of someone else's land without permission." He didn't invent the term or the tactic but has become, as he puts it, "a self-appointed publicist for the movement" and the breadth of impulses and ideologies behind it.

Last week he published a book, "On Guerrilla Gardening." It's a political history of people growing things where they shouldn't — from Honduran squatters to the artists and students he credits with originating the term "guerrilla gardening" in New York City in the early '70s. During the city's financial crisis, the self-styled

Green Guerillas began cultivating derelict lots around the Lower East Side, either by clipping barbed wire fences or chucking "seed bombs" over them — Christmas ornaments or condoms filled with tomato seeds, water and fertilizer. After early confrontations, the city ultimately gave

in and legitimized many of their plots into one of the country's first community-garden programs, staking a claim for green space before gentrification vaulted the value of all that abandoned land.

Today, rifling through the multitude of guerrilla-gardening Flickr pages and blogs — discovering all the action in Amsterdam, Calgary, Turin, Tokyo or Long Beach — you can almost start to see this kind of vigilante greening as the instinctual human response to city living. In "On Guerrilla Gardening," Reynolds describes gardeners he has met around the world through his own blog, guerrillagardening.org. (Its forum, where guerrillas plan "troop digs" and exchange advice, now has more than 4,000 registered users.) These include a sunflower specialist

Jon Mooallem, a contributing writer, last wrote for the magazine about the afterlife of cellphones.

in Brussels; a founder of an unsanctioned community garden currently fighting eviction from vacant lots in Berlin; and the San Franciscans who converted dis-used properties into vegetable gardens, even pirating absentee owners' water. Reynolds's book is also full of references to horticultural "sleeper cells" and "shock and awe" plantings, and culls tactical advice from the writings of Che Guevara and Mao Zedong — though "I think Mao comes across far more kindly than I intended him to," he told me regretfully.

Reynolds has helped build 28 gardens around London over the last four years.

Unlike many guerrillas I spoke to, he is not building big community gardens, growing food or hijacking neglected, privately owned land to critique the capitalist system. Instead, he is planting strictly ornamental arrangements of flowers and shrubs on roundabouts, roadsides, tree pits and other slivers of public land that have fallen into disrepair. He is fundamentally an aesthete. And at first glance, there's a confounding innocence to it all. Yet Reynolds has managed to stir controversy and, very recently, found himself surrounded by the police. He is quickly becoming both a subculture celebrity (Adidas sent him a treatment for a guerrilla-gardening-themed ad campaign) and a public intellectual, challenging ideas about what it means to live in a city — simply by decorating one.

Reynolds says that he has gardened with several hundred guerrillas in London and now hears of actions he had nothing to do with planning. A few weeks before the dig in Hoxton, a new acquaintance asked for his help reforming a muddy median near Camden's Hawley Arms pub — a famed Amy Winehouse haunt that burned in a huge fire in February. "It's been described here, very inappropriately, as the 9/11 of the indie world," Reynolds told me. In the spirit of healing, guerrillas replanted the area with hedging donated by a woman in Notting Hill. (Reynolds gets frequent donations of plants and cash and says he spent about \$1,400 of his own money on gardening last year.) They planned to prune the hedges into topiary the shape of Winehouse's hairdo.

Reynolds calls such neglected plots "orphaned land." Sometimes, as is the case with the plot in Hoxton, each relevant city agency assumes another one is responsible for the upkeep of a particular patch. Orphaned land is an abundant, underutilized resource in the postindustrial city, as is the creative energy of people like Reynolds who would love to garden but can't afford land of their own. That is, even in cities where land is scarce and expensive, substantial amounts of it are left derelict. Thus, guerrilla gardening mobilizes gardeners without land to take over land without gardeners. A space that previously meant nothing to anyone is turned into "a catalyst for community conversation," Reynolds says, generating a feeling of shared ownership of the city.

By now, most of his energy is devoted to looking after about a half-dozen established plots, keeping his work there from reverting into hives of overgrowth and litter. He and his girlfriend, Lyla Patel, often tidy up or weed at night, on their way home from pubs and parties. Patel, who is 27 and grew up in London, told me that the only times strangers have ever struck up conversations with her on the street are when she's gardening.

Patel and I took the tube to Hoxton together since Reynolds's car was packed with plants. She lovingly described him as easily impassioned and distracted — a classic dilettante, if

Guerrilla gardening is defined by one practitioner as 'the cultivation of someone else's land without permission.'

he weren't also an incorrigible overachiever about everything. Reynolds and his brother were briefly signed to a record label as an electronic-music duo, and along with a friend, he silkscreens and sells a line of T-shirts. One afternoon, he told me he was thinking about starting a one-man painting-and-decorating business to earn extra cash. The next day, he had a Web site up and his first job, redoing a bathroom.

"There's always something to keep him occupied, and stressed," Patel explained. "He pressures himself. He's a perfectionist. But people are always proud of their gardens when they've worked hard on them. It's just, Richard's gardens are all over the city." She smiled. "And he is a show-off."

Christopher Woodward, director of London's Museum of Garden History, told me that Reynolds "is a provocateur. He's asking questions." The museum recently held a party for Reynolds's book, and late last month, it staged a debate among Reynolds, an academic and a landscape architect about guerrilla gardening and changing attitudes toward public space. "There is a real thirst to bring nature and the seasons back into the concrete city," Woodward said. "Richard is one of a number of provocative, creative people in gardens, in horticulture, in public parks, who are genuinely changing the approach." As it happens, Woodward took part in his first guerrilla action the week before we spoke, scattering sunflower seeds and tending to a downed tree. "We lifted the tree back up, and we all felt wonderful," he told me. "There's definitely a real kick, isn't there, to digging up public land?"

In Hoxton, after an hour of filth-clearing, a promising bed of black soil started to materialize. "We've broken the back of it," Reynolds said. He turned up some dirt with a pitchfork to check its depth. "The California poppy will absolutely love it," he announced. Then, raising his voice, he directed everyone: "But let's not do any more digging. I was just curious. Patience!"

Reynolds grew up gardening with his family in Devon and at boarding school in Exeter, where, even at age 8, he took over the shoddy plots of his less-enthusiastic classmates. After Oxford, he settled in the South London neighborhood of Elephant and Castle. He found a flat in a drab, concrete high-rise called Perronet House — a building managed by the borough government. It was the first time he'd lived in a place without a garden

or even window boxes. So he set his sights on the raised-brick flower beds out front, about 80 feet across. A few willful periwinkle plants poked out of the trash and construction scrap.

In the fall of 2004, unsure if anyone would mind, Reynolds began yanking weeds from the beds in the middle of the night. He planted a few clippings from his mother's garden and started blogging his experiment. Gradually, he built the space into a lively garden: "a quite ambitious" take, he says, on the traditional herbaceous border style. (He has entered the Perronet House beds in the "front garden" category of a borough-sponsored competition intended for private homeowners.) Soon, he started venturing farther into the neighborhood to remake other orphaned parcels. "I was doing it for myself," he says. "I was doing it because I wanted to garden, and I was ashamed of the grottness of the area I lived in. It was plain and simple selfish middle-class pride."

The following year, the British news media discovered Reynolds's blog. A burst of flattering coverage began. He had just been laid off from an advertising firm and now had the time, and the celebrity, to coordinate volunteers to create grander gardens in larger spaces. Over four nights in 2006, a total of 80 guerrillas converted a roughly 400-foot-long triangular median of unruly grass south of Westminster Bridge into what Reynolds now calls "our flagship": an expansive fit of euphorbia and helleborus, as well as small willow, cherry and dogwood trees, all vaulting from a blanket of lavender. Once a year, guerrillas harvest the lavender and sew it into little pillows, which are sold to support more gardening. When Reynolds took me by one afternoon, the deep-red tulips had just opened, and he took pictures fervently for his blog. He uses many red plants, he said, and tries to capture them for the blog with a red double-decker bus or red phone booth in the background. "Red is very much London's color," he explained.

Reynolds still freelances in advertising and is compulsively fascinated by the way things are marketed. He is keenly aware of how politicized, how anti-establishment, plants are becoming — even lawful ones. "They're being venerated," he says, as "a solution" to many of society's problems. Plants offset carbon emissions. They can fuel our cars. Community gardens become places to sit with friends in cities where doing so has increasingly necessitated buying a cappuccino. Urban agriculture promotes food security or supplies fresh vegetables to poor neighborhoods lacking grocery stores. Recently, the architect Fritz Haeg has been campaigning to replace American front lawns with crops, calling his new book, "Edible Estates," "a radical intervention" against our "repressive streets of zombie lawn-lined monotony."

Yet aside from a few tomatoes and some Swiss chard, which he says "tasted dirty," Reynolds has never grown any food. Nor is he too tied to gardening as an ecological act, a way of restoring nature's order; he gladly plants invasive species if they're aesthetically appropriate to the setting. Instead, he seems to focus on guerrilla gardening as a socially subversive phenomenon, breaking us out of the unconstructive role we've cast ourselves in as citizens.

"There's this feeling that someone's going to be doing it for us," he told me. We respect public space by not degrad-



Richest cities in 2005 by G.D.P. in billions of U.S. dollars.



ing it: not littering, not vandalizing. But we rarely consider what we might contribute to it. Consequently, the common areas of our cities wind up belonging to none of us rather than to all of us equally. As Andy Brown, a guerrilla gardener in Toronto, puts it: "If it makes sense to put a fresh coat of paint on the walls of your living room, it makes sense to put a fresh coat of flowers on your neighborhood, because they're both places you live in."

Reynolds accepts that cities can realistically spend only so much on horticulture. "We're their solution to a lack of funding," he told me. More important, he argues, guerrillas simply do some jobs better than government. Guerrillas are fleeter. They're not bound up in safety regulations, forced to drag around "Men at Work" signs or to suffer through volunteer trainings or write grant proposals like legitimate volunteers. Several guerrillas told me they're particularly proud to be bringing more imaginative plant combinations to roadsides than the city does, more artistry.

"I grew up singing in a cathedral where every little surface of all the medieval walls was carved in," Reynolds said. "It looked like a place that was really special to people — lived in and loved." His gardening is meant to communicate the same affectionate and collaborative investment in London. "I'm not against the state," he told me. "I'm not an anarchist. I accept society more or less as it is. But there are chinks, there are flaws, there are anomalies in it. There are things that get overlooked, and I think guerrilla gardening can be a solution to that."

"It's sort of the geek in me that says, Oh, no, hang on a minute," he later added. "Let's look at this again. Let's reassess this. This could be so much better with a bit of imagination."

Since he went public, Reynolds's run-ins with municipal authorities have been infrequent but strange. Last summer, after the London Borough of Southwark suddenly decided to resume its own upkeep of the Perronet House beds, encroaching on Reynolds's turf, Reynolds arranged to meet the borough's horticulturists to discuss the issue. "They were all wearing dark sunglasses," he says, and refused his invitation to come up to his flat and talk over tea. At one point, he says, they threatened to tear up his entire garden and generally behaved like "small-minded, stupid, paranoid, negative, aggressive idiots."

Eventually, Reynolds rallied the building's residents behind him and was given verbal permission to continue gardening outside Perronet House — and there only. The encounter persuaded him that hiding his identity, as many guerrillas do, would be a mistake, feeding the assumption that he was doing something destructive. Being upfront about his intentions seems to defuse conflict with authorities, he says, if only because it so thoroughly confuses them.

The week after I left London, however, a troupe of guerrillas were suddenly confronted by more than a half-dozen police officers while refurbishing a traffic circle outside Reynolds's building. Reynolds was as forthcoming as ever ("I've put that flower bed in beneath those railings," he tells the police in a video of the incident, laying it all on the table, "and we've got some nice forget-me-nots going there") but was nevertheless threatened with arrest for "criminal damage." The guerrillas retreated to his flat, where they spent an hour and a half with a bottle of red wine. Then, when the coast seemed clear, they began scampering out, two at a time, carrying purple primrose to finish the job.

Councillor David Noakes, who represents Reynolds's ward in the London Borough of Southwark, told me: "Generally I'm supportive of what Richard's doing. He's providing an example of the kind of member of a community that we want." And yet,



Noakes stressed, guerrillas put the council in a complicated position. Though the borough wants to "accommodate" guerrilla gardening, it must also protect the health and safety of the public and limit its own liability to lawsuits. "I can understand that, to Richard, the council must sometimes appear unnecessarily bureaucratic and very conflicting in its views," he said. "It's a very unusual issue for the council. Unfortunately, there aren't a lot of Richard Reynoldses."

Still, Reynolds's most frequent irritants and obstacles are more mundane. His plants are sometimes stolen. In winter, they are singed by salt used to de-ice roads. At St. George's Circus, in a traffic island he has cultivated for three years, Reynolds has been engaged in a long duel with jaywalkers who regularly cut through his garden. Initially, he blocked them with a laurel hedge. They barged through it. So earlier this year, guerrillas installed "The Pebbly Concession to Suicidal Trampers," a narrow path through the garden to channel and contain the intruders. Yet when Reynolds took me by St. George's Circus the day before the Hoxton dig, the place was a disaster.

The city was digging up water mains and had fenced off much of the island, blocking the Pebbly Concession. "The path is completely pointless now," Reynolds whined. Jaywalkers had started to wear away a new trail, through some lavender and dangerously close to his azaleas. As we stood there, two kids in buzz cuts and hoodies came stamping through behind us.

"You cannot do that, please!" Reynolds suddenly yelled. "Get off my flower bed! You've just destroyed all the plants!" He was screaming now. "Walk on the pavement!" he said, adding an expletive.

The kids didn't care. One swore back at him as he passed, and an elderly man with a walker approached from the same direction. "Oh, now *he's* coming along with his walker," Reynolds moaned. "What's *he* going to do?"

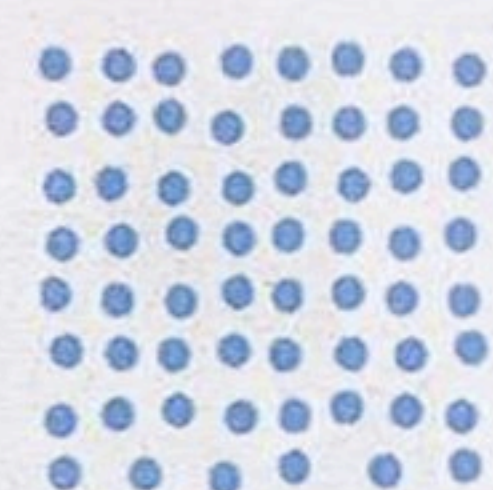
Traffic swept around the circle. Reynolds paced and complained — the perfectionist beset by imperfections, the guerrilla gardener versus the guerrilla pedestrians, each refusing to stay within the lines. Soon he found one of the road crew's striped barriers lying in his heather. He fixed the plank across the trail, leaning it against a cabbage palm: a blockade. He was back to being cheerful, impressed by his cleverness. He stepped back to look at it. Then he photographed it for his blog.

What other malfunctions of the modern city could autonomous activists fix? How far can guerrilla urbanism go?

In his book, Reynolds describes a group of London anarchists who engaged in "guerrilla benching," installing their own wooden benches on sidewalks when a local government began removing benches from public space. In France, guerrilla repairmen built a clandestine workshop under the dome of the Panthéon and, over the next year, refurbished its clock. Recently, guerrilla knitters in New York and elsewhere have been wrap-



MUMBAI
76,790
PEOPLE/SQ. MILE



CALCUTTA
61,945
PEOPLE/SQ. MILE



KARACHI
49,000
PEOPLE/SQ. MILE



LAGOS
47,027
PEOPLE/SQ. MILE



SHENZHEN
44,463
PEOPLE/SQ. MILE

Cities with the highest population density.

By comparison, L.A. is No. 90 on the list, with 7,068 people per square mile; New York is No. 114, with 5,309.

• = 1,000 PEOPLE



ping traffic light poles in colorful, leg-warmer-like cozies.

Still, Reynolds acknowledges that with gardening — particularly the kind of persnickety ornamental gardens he's so passionate about — he happens to have stumbled into a realm of guerrilla restoration that is almost perfectly unthreatening to

References to horticultural 'sleeper cells' and 'shock and awe' plantings fill Reynolds's book, which culls tactical advice from the writings of Che Guevara.

everyone. People generally agree that, unlike squatters or graffiti, tulips and rosemary are beneficial appropriations of public space; they are pretty, particularly if they spring from a beer-sodden trench of weeds. In fact, a spokeswoman for the London Borough of Hackney, the borough in which the Hox-

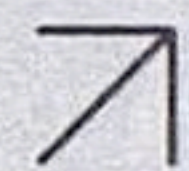
ton roundabout is located, couldn't readily tell me whether what Reynolds and his troops did there is technically illegal. "Gosh, I don't know," she said. "Environmental vandalism would be illegal, but it's hard to argue that gardening is vandalism."

Even the owner of the neighboring pub who stormed out to have a word with Reynolds that night tried to stress, again and again, that he had absolutely no problem with guerrilla gardening; he's all for flowers. But the borough had been reprimanding him about the noisy crowds outside his bar, and he resented the gardeners

for adding to the volume and endangering his business. Reynolds superciliously explained that they were actually *helping* his business — "We're gentrifying the area, making it a more desirable place to hang out!" as he put it to me — infuriating the barman even more. But before long, everyone was back to work, unsheathing the boxwood from its garbage bags. A car slowed through the intersection, and from the crowded back seat a man hollered: "ARE YOU GUERRILLAS?" — enunciating each word as if he were shouting to natives from the bow of his galleon. When Patel and Reynolds called out "Yes" in unison, thumbs shot up around the car.

Soon packets of poppy seeds — remainders of a Gardens Illustrated promotion donated by the magazine — were being torn open and poured into a big red bucket. A young woman in a raincoat stopped to thank Reynolds for "the difference you've made in London and in the landscape" and to ask him if there was any chance he'd visit her neighborhood. "It's really bad, really bad up there," she said, like a weary citizen in a Marvel comic book. "My aim," he told her, "is to encourage people to take the same approach that we have, and just get out and do it."

By 10:30, two and a half hours after the guerrillas descended on that scrappy shred of land, there was indisputably a garden there. A double row of ivy ran behind the fence and, behind it, flanked by clumps of daisies, boxwood enclosed the butterfly bush. Reynolds raked up. Then, when no one was looking, he unceremoniously shook out the bucket of poppy seeds around the edges. "Done," he told Patel. "It's done." ■



GUERRILLA TACTICS A video of Richard Reynolds and some fellow guerrilla gardeners on a nighttime mission in London. nytimes.com/magazine