

Letchworth Garden City – Urban Agriculture profile

1. A few words about your organisation: Name; Brief history; Social, political and economical context in which you work; Size or scale (i.e. number of people involved either as members, partners or staff)

This is a profile not of an organisation, but of a city. In this sense, it cannot be described through a single organisation or institution, because the starting point is that a city cannot be owned and therefore represented by one set of people. Instead, a wide range of institutions, organisations and individuals that compose the city and contribute (or not) through their practices to food security will be introduced.

Letchworth Garden City is at the centre of a subtle but ongoing debate in which its origin (as a revolutionary idea), its past, present and future are at stake. Letchworth is the first example of the integration of Urban Agriculture (UA) into town planning under social, political and economical premises. This is why it is so important to study this is an example of UA.

This is further explored and described by Ebenezer Howard himself:

“The rate-rent that which will be readily paid by farmer, small occupier, and allotment holder, would be considerably greater than the rent he paid before: (1) because of the presence of a new town population demanding new and more profitable farm products, in respect of which railway charges can be largely saved; (2) by the due return to the soil of its natural elements; (3) by the just, equitable, and natural conditions on which the land is held and (4) by reason of the fact that the rent now paid is rate and rent, while the rent formerly paid left the rates to be paid by the tenant.” (Ebenezer Howard, Garden Cities of Tomorrow, p.64)

The rate-rent concept outlines Howard’s vision of not only urban planning, but also of community management in which it fulfils the goal of rent and tax that will be used for providing services such as schools, hospitals and communications.

Environmental, social, economical and political concerns were the backbone of Howard’s thinking which led to the foundation of Letchworth Garden City in 1903. The city not only included the first “Green Belt”, but as mentioned above, land was seen as a productive asset in which the farmer would certainly benefit from the market generated by the proximity of the town.

2. Practice: How is your organisation involved in urban agriculture? Description of the activities implemented; Where are the main activities conducted? Geographical area; What is the vision that your organisation has of urban agriculture in the future within its local context? How would you define your mission, if any.

There are two different ongoing UA practices within LGC: the first one is related to the Letchworth Garden City Heritage Foundation which owns and manages the 5,500 acre Garden City Estate. One of the five subsidiaries of the Foundation is Letchworth Garden City Farms Ltd., which is responsible for farming 2,500 acres of land. Different kinds of crops and cattle are sold by the Foundation to generate income.

The second organisation involved in UA within Letchworth is the Letchworth District Gardeners Association (LDGA) which is a voluntary nonprofit making society, set up in 1906 to promote horticulture to the residents of Letchworth Garden City and surrounding areas. The Association has around a

thousand members with a keen interest in gardening, whether it is flowers or vegetables, at home or on an allotment.

Allotments in Letchworth are administered by the Heritage Foundation and by North Hertfordshire District Council.

A third dimension is what people cultivate in their own private gardens, which are fundamental to the design of the Garden City.

However, the real value of Letchworth as an UA practice is related to the distinctive form of land ownership; land is the single most important resource when talking about UA. Letchworth is a Community Land Trust (CLT).

A CLT is a mechanism for land ownership in which the land is owned by the local community. This was devised in 1903 by Howard under the name of “co-operative land society” and though after Howard it would not be replicated again in the UK until the 1990s, this was a base for the Gramdan villages in India and also served as inspiration for Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement in the USA.

This kind of mechanism is important not only for its social and political goals, but because it puts the community at the centre of the development of the city. In this sense, the land becomes a productive and necessary link for the people living in it, rather than a speculative asset that can be sold off when its value increases with time. In this sense, other wider goals such as food sovereignty, protection of the local environment and biodiversity and promotion of a more sustainable and socially just local economy (as in the case of local currencies) can find a space. Urban Agriculture would necessarily be an active component of all this.

3. Type of Urban Agriculture practiced: Usually urban agriculture addresses one or a combination of the three following basic dimensions: (i) Social inclusion primarily of vulnerable groups such as the youth, migrants or the elderly; (ii) Entertainment and leisure for urban population deprived of a link with nature, with a strong environmental dimension; (iii) Economic dimension with a drive on income generating activities, job creation and marketable outcomes. Which of these types (or combination of them) better describes your practice/the practice in your city?

Currently, the UA practice in Letchworth has both an economic and an entertainment dimension. The economic dimension is reflected in the revenue generated by Letchworth Garden City Farms, which in 2008 (the latest publicly available Annual Report http://www.lgchf.com/files/LGCHF_Annual_report_2008.pdf) had a turnover of £1,401,000.

The leisure dimension is represented by the Gardeners Association and the cultivation of private gardens.

4. UA and the urban food crisis: Is your practice/programme addressing the current food crisis? Do you have any plans to address it in the future?

It is difficult to assess the situation of Letchworth and the current food crisis, because even when for the above mentioned reasons, the Garden City certainly possess distinctive features, its agricultural policies and food supplies are not that different from other small UK cities. However, precisely because of these features there is a greater potential for the promotion of UA under premises conducive to food security.