

Embodiment and the city farm: potentials of cultural studies for the analysis and influence of urban environmental behaviour

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"The ecological crisis ... a crisis in perception; we are not truly seeing, hearing, tasting, or consequently feeling where we are..." (Sewall, 1999: 246-47)

Within the past few years environmentalism has undergone a sudden transformation from a niche concern of hairy hippies to one that is mainstream and even fashionable. This is unsurprising, as we are living at a time of unprecedented global peril, when the carbon emitted from our travel, our electronic gadgets and our very homes has the potential to bring our civilization to a halt. Suddenly we hear incessantly that a chain of environmental disasters and rising sea levels could mark the end of the world as we know it. Nick Stern's report on the Economics of Climate Change (2007) echoes the scientific consensus of the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (2007) in arguing that the effects of climate change are not something of the future, but are here and now. If they are correct, as they no doubt are, the population of the world must make dramatic changes to the ways that we live in order to curb these potential disasters, and to adapt to those we cannot curb fast enough.

Although the media is filled with stories about trends in sustainable hemp exercise-wear and organic box scheme recipes, these cultural developments do little to challenge the unsustainable practices of consumption and throw-away capitalism that have so characterized modernity and post-modernity. In this paper we argue that something greater is needed: if we wish truly to address climate change, we must address it through our cultural practices.

Embodiment in Practice

Embodiment takes the study of cultural practices to the body. Drawing from the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, and the structuralism of Bourdieu's habitus, the body becomes the site of subject formation through perception and practice. For Merleau-Ponty, 'to perceive is to render oneself present to something through the body' (2002: 459), and thus perception is the first point of contact in creating the subject. The primacy of the body is essential to culture and behaviour. Bourdieu reminds us, however, that 'human behaviour is not monolithic...habitus is not a fate, not a destiny' (qtd in Moran and Mooney, 2002: 29). The productive process of creating habitus involves the body as the site of practice, leading to the formation and reformation of new dispositional behaviours. Therefore human behaviour can change, shaped through the perception and practice of an embodied subject. Where Sewall claims that the ecological crisis is one singularly tied up in perception, we argue that it is also one of practice. In fact, it may be both,

it may be a crisis of embodiment.

In the Foucaultian conceptualisation of 'practice', practices acquire meaning through the discourse generated by the interaction of language and activity. Thus, we understand the practice of punishment not only through the pain it inflicts, but also through the words our culture uses to describe that pain – which transform it from a purely physical sensation into one that is steeped in culturally-specific moral definitions and judgements. If meaning is a text this view of practice makes us performers enacting a narrative - docile bodies.

We must be careful here not to moralise Foucault's notion of the docile body (1995: 135-69). It would be wrong to devalue the docile body simply because certain bodies made docile by capitalism have behaved in ways detrimental to the environment. In fact the very opposite must hold true. The productive nature of the docile body has the potential to be the saving grace of the environmental movement. And so even though we are arguing that perception and practice could be the tools to reconstitute an environmental subject, we certainly make no claims that this new subject is no less docile. Though people's actions with respect to the environment may be in a process of transformation in response to discourses surrounding climate change, that those actions are organised in the productive and constructive docile body remains constant. The idea of embodiment in practice locates the body as the primary site for understanding and affecting environmental change.

Lived Space

The body, however, dwells in space. Lefebvre and Soja both engage in spatialising embodiment, and look at how the body activates within its environment. Lefebvre imagines a dialectic between space and behaviour in that the practice of either affects the outcome of the other. Therefore, changing meaning or behaviour is articulated through its engagement with the space within which practices take place. Perception or conceptual change operates within materiality. Changing space, then, is one way to change behaviour, and ultimately to change the space again. Likewise, in attempting to articulate the notion of cityspace Soja argues that space is made up of objects in space, thoughts about space and a thirdspace of the real time lived interconnections between the perceived and conceived spaces (Soja 2000: 10-11). Cityspace enables a nuanced understanding of space where the materiality and its representations and imaginations all contribute to the activation of a body within it. Soja articulates in his 'lived space' the 'locus of structured individual and collective experience and' more importantly for our paper, 'agency' (Soja 2000: 11). Lived space allows the framework to begin to analyse environmental behaviour in space, and spatialized environmental behaviours, while mixing experience, perception and

imagination into the materiality of place.

Dwelling

The concept of 'dwelling' is the practice of transforming space both physically and in the process conceptually and emotionally. Heidegger describes dwelling as 'the manner in which we humans *are* [italics original] on earth' (1977: 348). In the 1950s Heidegger used the concept of dwelling to argue for the intrinsic connection between humans and their environments. This was at a time when increased use of technologies such as automobiles, airplanes, and industrial-scale food production were enabling humans to disconnect with ever greater efficacy from positions of agency within their environments. A tendency to envision our world as built before and beyond our inhabitation, rather than as something we create through the process of dwelling in it, has contributed to cultural-scale practices that are both environmentally and socially unsustainable.

The dwelling perspective offers both a tool of analysis and of repair. This phenomenological take on the interconnected construction of place and consciousness is summarised in the words of Tim Ingold in *The Perception of the Environment: essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill* as, 'the forms people build, whether in their imagination or on the ground, arise within the current of their involved activity, in the specific relational contexts of their practical engagement with their surroundings' (2000: 185). In the dwelling perspective, consciousness and identity are created within the context of environmental interaction. Thus, by using the body to alter the space around it, we as individuals and as a collective, are able to alter our inherent experiences, uses, and understandings of space and our identities. By changing the space around us through physical activity, we actively and conceptually change our behaviours. The implication that this holds for climate change is that by inhabiting our environments, we gain the ability to conceptualise the effects of our actions and identities.

Case Study

Cultural studies stresses that the investigation of theory is not an end in itself, but rather it is a point of departure for understanding and altering the practices and experiences of daily life. It is with this in mind that we turn to speak of our case study, in which we have examined environmental understandings and behaviours of volunteer and paid farmworkers at Spitalfields City Farm in East London.

There is a cultural ignorance not only about what city farms do, but that they exist at all – particularly in cities such as London where land is scarce and incredibly expensive. But, London

has a long agricultural history. Once Smithfield was used for raising cattle and Covent Garden was just that, a garden feeding the city. Yet the popular understanding of city farms today is that they exist to give urban children access to animals and plants, leading some to imagine them as 'glorified petting zoos'. The separation of food production and the activities of daily life is a relatively recent invention, steeped in the cultural narratives of modernism. These narratives have included: the conceptualisation of natural resources as unlimited, the belief that technological solutions come without side effects, and the idea that nature and natural processes are somehow dirty and undesirable. We would argue that these cultural narratives are a significant reason that we are desperately searching for any and every fix to our present climate changing predicament.

Although city farms provide high profile programmes and activities for children, their existences are much more complex, as discovered during eighteen months of participant observation as volunteer farmworkers at Spitalfields City Farm and other city farms in London. In addition to providing services for children, many city farms offer volunteer opportunities for adults and teenagers who 'have fallen out of the city', in the words of Paul Pearce, Sustainability Co-ordinator at Spitalfields City Farm. The farm's diverse volunteer-base includes permanently excluded teenagers, adults with learning disabilities and/or mental health issues, homeless people, people recovering from addictions, recent immigrants, and students, amongst others. During the week, adult volunteers work with staff members to tend the gardens, care for the animals, turn the muck heap, or to build, care for and transform the many hidden nooks and crannies on the farm. The relationships that the farmworkers have with each other, and with the space are inscribed within not only the art projects scattered across the farm's landscape, but also within the sites of the gardens and the animal pens.

We found that the processes of social and environmental sustainability at the farm were linked through embodied practices. They were linked through the process of performing physical labour within a given place. By building a location, the farmworkers felt a sense of ownership over it and responsibility for it and to the other members of the community. Through the farm's strong commitment to sustainability education, to the point of hiring a full-time sustainability co-ordinator, the farmworkers gained an appreciation for environmental actions. A collective and intentional desire to make the place of the farm sustainable led the farmworkers to engage in positive environmental behaviours.

On an obvious level, the successful sustainability educational program combined with the pressure of expected behaviour within the community led farmworkers to make small but positive alterations in their daily environmental behaviours. Many farmworkers had learned about recycling through their involvement at the farm, and many had made a rapid transformation into inspired

recyclers. Additionally, farmworkers cut down on food packaging and food travel distance by preparing lunch together on-site, frequently using food from the farm's gardens. This activity required physical labour and effectively reinforces the farmworkers' sense of community, but it did not change the geography of the farm itself.

The most pronounced changes in environmental behaviour were the ones in which the farmworkers engaged in altering the space of the farm, both materially and conceptually. During the period of fieldwork from December 2005 to June 2006, the farm underwent major changes in its built fabric as a result of the East London Line extension project. This railway line extension will cut directly across the site of the farm when completed in 2011. As a result, the farm has lost almost half of its original land, while gaining new land from an adjacent park. The farm is in the process of re-building its gardens, its farmworkers' break room, its classroom, its new office, and the Ideas Garden.

Previously an anarchically-planted plot featuring haphazardly abandoned furniture and appliances as planters, now the Ideas Garden is becoming a physical history of urban agriculture in East London. The farmworkers are busy planting and building a space that will resemble a house, with its different rooms telling stories of gardening and animal husbandry in the East End from the end of the nineteenth century to the projected future - mixing up notions of open and built spaces, and then bringing them home. The garden was designed after many farmworkers completed a project on 'backyard farming', collating and presenting the historical evidence on this topic in conjunction with the Museum of London. Then, working with plans created by an artist, the farmworkers designed the site itself.

In the process of designing and building the new Ideas Garden, the farmworkers have inscribed their community, and their community-based decision making processes on the site. Implicitly they have investigated and inscribed questions and incipient answers about the role of community and the process of the embodied experience of dwelling in addressing climate change. The first part of the Ideas Garden to be built is a space that represents both the kitchen of the house and also the present moment. This space features a 'crockery rockery', a low wall covered in pieces of broken crockery as a stand-in for a kitchen countertop. There is a set of shelves that will contain seedlings rather than dried and packaged foodstuffs. By carefully breaking and then re-assembling these bits of crockery, the farmworkers have created a dwelling place through the articulation of their community. It is also a place that queries and ultimately breaks and reassembles historical narratives, in the form of the crockery, but also within the whole Ideas Garden through the process of rescuing and re-presenting the lost history of urban agriculture in East London. The volunteers who have worked on the construction of the Ideas

Garden understand the seedlings in the symbolic kitchen in another oddly symbolic way. 'It's like, in the future, we may not have some things if we don't preserve them now,' one of the farmworkers said. The double symbolism here is important. Without food an individual body cannot live, without environmental awareness the body of our planet cannot live. By creating both physical and symbolic dwelling places, we have the agency to create fresh narratives.

Situational Analysis

Analysing behaviour on city farms through the framework of embodiment in relation to lived space and dwelling demonstrates the importance of not only changing space, both physically and conceptually, in order to manifest behavioural changes, but inherent in our argument is the value of individual and collective participation in these changes, and ultimately these solutions. The power of our case study, then, is as an example of the potential involved with collapsing the dualities of the micro and macro. In this sense, no longer should climate change policies be solely concerned with, on the one hand, very small individual actions by citizens like changing light bulbs and recycling, or very large infrastructure and technological projects by governments like public transport extensions and eco-cities. Rather, the city farm exemplifies a locus of the micro and the macro where individuals are involved in collective participation to both physically and conceptually change the spaces around them, and in doing so, change themselves. Through embodied practice on the city farm, the body in space becomes part of the body politic.

The changes in behaviour observed on Spitalfields City Farm remind us of one thing: the fundamental requirement of collective engagement in space to produce changes in cultural narratives. We must engage perception and practice at the scale of the individual, the body, in the inevitable process of deconstructing and reconstructing space in response to climate change. In the coming years, the power discourse of climate change will become ever more influential in determining not only the outcomes of micro politics, but also global politics. Inevitably, discourses of climate change will be, and indeed already have been, appropriated by a diverse and coordinated set of agencies with varied modes of operation and intentions. However, if the goal of protecting and respecting the physical environment remains of value, which today is seemingly at an all time high, then regardless of where the debates and actions of these agencies turn, it will be fundamentally necessary to directly engage individuals in an embodied approach to collective action to shape their space, themselves, and their relationships with those around them.

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