

Shortening the food chain

We must design for planned urban agriculture and urban infrastructure which encompasses green technology with food and closed-loop waste-biased city living, say Terry and Bee Farrell

Throughout my career, I have had a commitment to design which respects and responds to the natural environment and sustainability and I believe that food anthropology is increasingly valid in urban masterplanning. Through our more recent projects like Convoys Wharf, Earls Court and St Ermin's Hotel we have been able to demonstrate that sustainable food makes good sense for business, the environment and for our health. At Farrells we recently hosted an event called "Shortening the Food Chain – Reintegrating Food into Cities" and following on from this Bee Farrell was asked to contribute to a new book on this subject. Here are some extracts on what will become an increasingly critical issue for us all to face up to;

The need to provide enough food for a growing urban population, which safeguards finite resources and respects the environment, is an urgent challenge for London as it grows at an unprecedented rate. The contribution of urban planners, as part of an interdisciplinary approach, can incorporate creative and intelligent design solutions to give significant food security. A happenstance approach is no longer a viable option. What is needed is reflective and critical planning which recognises the fusion of historical know-how, locally based knowledge and contemporary technology.

Food is fundamental, a biological necessity which can give social and economic sustenance. Mention food and we all have something to say. As urban dwellers living in established industrial countries we can enthuse about a favourite restaurant and then maybe in the next conversation debate food shortages in Chad, Africa. Although possibly counterintuitive, urban living can be much greener than rural living. Until food is seen as an issue of sustainability rather than trade and consumption it will remain a commodity which depletes resources and widens inequalities.

As with many aspects of our modern lives the consequences of past decisions and behaviour are what we are living with today. Contemporary challenges such as climate change, migration or a world of finite resources are extreme and complex and a more reflective approach can offer insight into causes and their consequences and offer solutions which include comprehensive thinking and green ingenuity.

Ebenzer Howard's vision encapsulated in Garden Cities of Tomorrow advocated the need for local places which encouraged social connectivity, value food chains and had potential as a national and international design model. His Garden City vision required 60 per cent of the available land to be set aside for food production surrounding the planned new settlements, to be controlled by a Trust as community land. This element of his visions was not achieved in the UK Garden Cities and therefore he could not demonstrate whether the planned self-sufficiency in food could be achieved.

The recent history of the urban agriculture movement



ABOVE:

St. Ermin's Hotel has a green roof with bee hives and bio-diverse planting. The hotel employs a member of staff who offers bee-keeping workshops and collects and prepares the honey to be served in the hotel restaurant.

echoes Howard's design work and is a practical and creative way of bringing the countryside to the city. Opportunistic projects that use 'meanwhile' or unused land and empty spaces—including walls and roofs—have shown that growing food in cities has many benefits for the urban dweller. Socially and economically it is acknowledged that there are advantages to growing, cooking and eating together. A food value chain rather than a long food chain increases the amount and quality of available fresh urban food, promotes healthy activity and social cohesion and decreases urban temperatures by greening rooftops, walls and unused spaces. It becomes strategic and infrastructural – and I have always maintained that landscape should be the primary infrastructure.

This important vision of cities and towns providing food for their inhabitants is exciting and echoes the 'Transition Initiative'. This environmental charity promotes "food feet, not food miles" and advocates replacing urban ornamental plants with food producing bushes and trees and encouraging community gardens. However there are insistent challenges to urban food self-sufficiency. These relate to physical, cultural and economic urban contexts. Is there enough land, time, skills and motivation for urban dwellers to eat and thrive on their edible landscape?

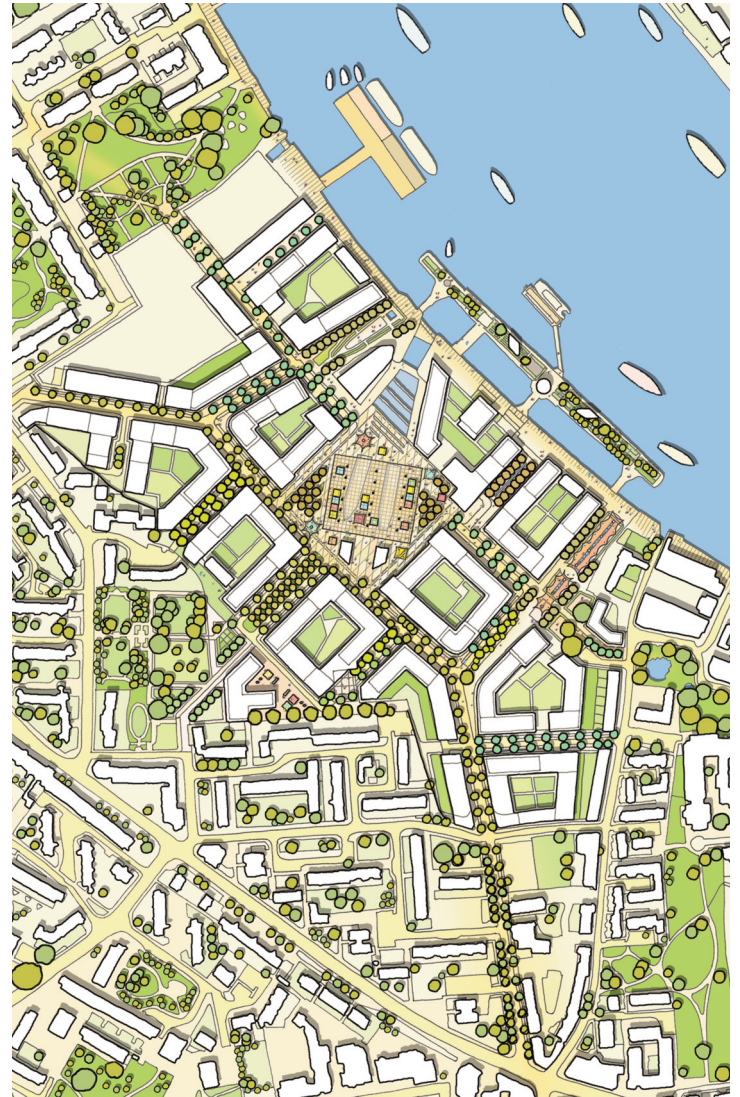
Extracts from a forthcoming book "Building sustainable cities of the future" to be published by Springer. Chapter by Bee Farrell, Farrells on "A place for food within urban masterplanning"



Sir Terry Farrell CBE

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RIGHT:
Convoys Wharf, which includes seventeenth century Sayes Court Manor, is a masterplan for historic dockyard site and gardens that will have "garden streets" with fruit and vegetable growing areas



As Gary Young, Partner at Farrells leading on NW Bicester Garden City, says; "Even with most optimistic expectations using aquaculture, vertical growing, rooftop farms an almost implausibly large part of London's land area would be needed for food self-sufficiency. This would require a major shift in emphasis of city planning. For some this is an exciting prospect, however the challenges of capital city planning are extensive and need a balanced and holistic approach including re- establishing links for local food production from the wider surrounding areas."

The challenge of a predicted 9.6 billion global population needing a 70 per cent increase in food production but with a scarcity of land to grow upon is overshadowing creative and resource efficient solutions. If the contemporary solution to complex challenges is the intensification of farming and the continuing disconnection of urban dwellers from food production and waste it will be an unsustainable way of feeding ourselves. There are so many alternatives which, although obvious, are not mainstream because they demand a new way of believing and behaving.

Urban planners can offer design solutions that create opportunities to support food value chains and healthy urban food. We must design for planned urban agriculture and urban infrastructure which encompasses green technology with food and closed-loop waste-biased city living, like anaerobic digestors. The future of sustainable urban food is challenging. The solutions will have to be new, creative and ingenious, not a replicated enlargement of unsustainable and wasteful food and farming systems. Working with interdisciplinary teams, with food planning embedded in city design is key to urban sustainability. Food is a vital resource and it needs to be respected and replenished through green thinking, food planning, holistic design and urban living which is both reflective and far-reaching. ■

BELOW:

Earls Court is a site of 28 hectares of re-development which includes green roofs, food gardens to inspire people to grow their own food and 27 acres of communal squares.

