

Natural Estates

In a corner of Clapton, just off 'Murder Mile' in the London Borough of Hackney, a floral revolution is blooming quietly, a little riot of its own. Within the labyrinthine mosaic of used-less green spaces that envelop the Clapton Park Estate pinks, reds and yellows are shamelessly adorning nooks and crannies, skirting railings and exploding over the lawns. This is the work of John Little's Grassroof Company transforming the dead spaces into strips of unruly wildflower meadows, lively scarlet poppy'd verges, and rampant daisy-chained rose-beds at the invitation of the Estate's Tenant Management Organisation (TMO). After tentative trials in 2002-03, the TMO grasped the nettle and the wildflowers have been rolled out further across the estate; elderly residents have commented that they haven't seen poppies and cornflowers since they were children.ⁱ

Clapton Park's remarkable wildflowering follows on the heels of innovative precursors, such as Landlife's endeavours in Knowsley and the Green Estate's work with Sheffield Homes, but like them remains largely an exception to the rule.ⁱⁱ For the landscapes of social housing are some of the worst in our towns and cities, easily characterized as dog-shit deserts, occasionally punctuated by punished shrubberies and lollipop trees, and bordered by incessant railings and sweeping concrete vistas. These are spaces that people wish to avoid if possible; but for many, they can't. Ecologically speaking they are invisible.

Social landlords have responsibilities for the millions of people they house and support. They also own and manage huge swathes of open space, although exact amount and coverage is unknown at a regional or a national scale. Their focus is on the people they serve and the bricks & mortar they own; external spaces are peripheral. The green space community has largely overlooked social landlords, unaware of the extent of their green space assets, the problems they face and the potential they offer in improving the lives of the residents that live right by them.ⁱⁱⁱ The excellent work to raise the game on our urban green spaces over the past decade, has largely left those of social housing untouched. *Neighbourhoods Green*, a project set up by Peabody and Notting Hill Housing in 2003, began to address this through guidance and seminars; it published *A natural estate* as a means to promote simple interventions to enhance biodiversity.^{iv}

The Wildlife Trusts are promoting *Living Landscapes*; landscape-scale programmes across the country to enhance habitat restoration, connectivity and adaptation to climate change, which will also help secure biodiversity gains and socio-economic benefits. Within our towns and cities, the concepts of green infrastructure are bedding in, for example the rolling out of the Green Grid across London. Social housing landscapes are yet to be effectively linked to these, but we believe that the *natural estates* approach can help to broker the gaps, through delivering low-cost enhancements and actively facilitating residents' engagement with their local nature.

To this end, we believe there are ample opportunities to improve the ecological interest of many housing estate landscapes that can bring about tangible benefits for residents too. Whilst many estates are bleak and uncompromising, they are also fantastic canvases upon which to weave new ecological narratives. Indeed, many hide ecological secrets; large numbers of estates, especially of the inter-war years and 1950-70s, were built on greenfield sites. Their landscapes may have been relentlessly hammered by gang-mowing, but not ruined to the extent of agricultural land. Old trees, hedgerows and other features often survive within estate landscapes, and relaxation of management often reveals some hidden gems. For example, relict chalk grassland survives within the labyrinthine networks of grassland around the New Addington (Croydon) and Whitehawk (Brighton) estates, and a population of corky-fruited water-dropwort at Southwark Council's Countisbury House (Sydenham Hill) now flourishes after decades of ignorance. And many estates stand adjacent to wildlife-rich sites.^v

London Wildlife Trust is currently working on a range of housing estates, and beginning to further *natural estates* as an approach that social landlords can adopt. We are running *Cockney Sparrow* on a number of Peabody estates, which is bringing residents out of their flats to show them the birds of their neighbourhood, and working with them to implement measures that can enable the robin, blackbird and goldfinch, as well as the house sparrow, to enhance the avifauna of these estates.^{vi} We are heading up a multi-partner *Natural Estates* bid to the Big Lottery Access to Nature fund which, if successful, will carry out biodiversity engagement projects across 10 estates in London. With *Nature Rangers active* on a number of Camden estates, family learning projects in Hounslow, and the start of the *Wild London Inclusive London* programme on estates in Westminster, Islington and Southwark we are hoping to bridge the gap between where London's wildlife thrives and where many people live.

Natural estates isn't a new or even radical approach; its methods are tried and tested. And we owe much to the early pioneers in showing the art of the possible. However, the quality and scale of social housing spaces cannot be ignored. We are convinced that residents deserve far better spaces on their doorsteps, and that by working with them, we can further enhance the opportunities for wildlife along the way, and help to embed social housing landscape within the green infrastructure of our towns and cities.

Mathew Frith
London Wildlife Trust, April 2010

Note: *Neighbourhoods Green* is shortly to be re-launched through a partnership led by the National Housing Federation and CABI Space, and *natural estates* will continue to be one of the programmes which will shape its progress over the next few years.

ⁱ Millis, D. (Ed.), (2004) *Green Places; Review of the Year*, Landscape Design Trust.

ⁱⁱ France, S. (2007) Our Green Estate – Sheffield's inner city landscapes, in *Conservation Land Management*, 5, 1, Spring 2007, Natural England, Peterborough. See also: www.greenestate.org

ⁱⁱⁱ Frith, M. (2005) The Cinderella of green space, in *Green Places*, June 05, Landscape Design Trust.

^{iv} Riley, J., Frith, M., Kimpton, B. et al, (2007) *A natural estate*, Neighbourhoods Green, Peabody.

^v My favourite view within Richmond Park NNR is looking east in late afternoon to the gleaming white tower blocks of the Alton Estate in Roehampton, that anchor the horizon.

^{vi} See: <http://www.wildlondon.org.uk/Projects/TheCockneySparrowProject/tabid/535/language/en-GB/Default.aspx>