

Green Space of the Month - April 2003

Confused Spaces, Balsall Heath, Birmingham

Contact :Tayear Mahmood, Environment Team Manager, Balsall Heath Forum, The Tree Nursery, 82-89 St Paul's Road, Balsall Heath, Birmingham B12

Tel 0121 446 6183

tayear1@yahoo.com

Balsall Heath, 2 miles South of Birmingham City Centre, has become home to a succession of immigrant communities including Irish, Pakistani and the African-Caribbean community. At one time Balsall Heath had a bad reputation but efforts at community regeneration have gone a long way to turning around the fortunes of the area. Local people are pulling together to tackle crime, promote health, address women's issues and to improve the environment – all of which are seen holistically, as inter-linking concerns.

Confused Spaces are little pockets of council land that nobody seems to care for. In the past, disillusioned residents have used them as a dumping ground for waste. Balsall Heath Forum Environment Team have convinced the City Council, who own many but not all of the spaces, to let them use and improve these small corners, to clear up the rubbish and replace it with cheerful flowers and trees. They are trying to find ways of involving local people in taking an interest in these spaces, taking care of them and making them more pleasant and attractive for everyone. Open air activities such as cultural celebrations, arts and sports events have enticed people to come and see what is happening, and already communities are showing their willingness to support campaigns to protect and enhance their green spaces.

The Environment Team includes paid workers, trainees and volunteers recruited from within Balsall Heath, so they reflect the ethnic profile of the community. At first people viewed their work as low status, with few prospects; but as its impact becomes increasingly visible, the team are optimistic that career routes will open up and they will be recognised as role models, pioneering new areas of education and employment for ethnic communities within the environment sector.

Balsall Heath Forum Premises



Balsall Heath Forum Premises

It was a sunny Spring morning when I arrived at the Balsall Heath Forum premises – an interesting timber framed building set in the grounds of the old tree nursery on St Paul's Road. The first thing that greeted me as I entered the building was a sign on the wall reminding us that 10 years ago in Balsall Heath,

- people were likely to die 9 years earlier than in the rest of Birmingham
- unemployment was 3 times higher than the Birmingham average
- chronic heart disease was twice as high
- level of overcrowding in housing was four times higher
- you were more likely to be a victim of crime – street crime has risen significantly
- educational achievement was lower in Balsall Heath than other parts of Birmingham

In total contrast, on the opposite wall I saw a newspaper cutting showing Prince Charles paying a visit to Balsall Heath, in his capacity as Patron of Business in the Community, in the year 2000. The Prince has taken a personal interest in the area, which he sees as a role model for neighbourhood renewal. The Dutch are also learning lessons from this model. Balsall Heath Forum has hosted a visit from Dutch regeneration experts, and they sent delegates to Holland last year to give a presentation about their achievements. A return trip is planned for April 2003.

Setting the Scene

Balsall Heath is an area of Birmingham which falls mostly in Sparkbrook ward, and also takes in parts of the three wards of Moseley, Sparkbrook and Edgbaston. Balsall Heath Forum recognizes this area as a 'natural neighbourhood' as identified by the residents themselves; and the Boundary Commission has responded with redrawn boundaries.

Community confidence took a knock in the 1950s when a drastic decline in manufacturing industries threw many people out of work. Planners demolished a third of the housing, many of the original inhabitants moved away, and according to the Neighbourhood Development Plan for 2001 - 2004,

“only immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean and Asia, who had little choice, were prepared to repopulate the area in any numbers. At first they had few possessions and did not know their neighbourhoods. The area hit rock bottom. It had no confidence and very low self-esteem”

From that time, Balsall Heath had developed a dreadful reputation for crime, drugs and prostitution. Dealers and pimps would come into the area from all over the UK, making the place feel unsafe for local residents. However since the 1990s, Balsall Heath Forum has played a key role in improving the profile of the area. It has taken a supreme effort to challenge negative images and replace them with a vision of civic pride. Central to this shift in perspective is the Confused Spaces project.

Environment at the Heart of Regeneration

Tayear Mahmood, the Forum's Environment Team manager, told me that many Asian people can remember how, back home there are open, green fields with familiar foods growing, colourful village markets, and a stronger sense of community. Coming to Birmingham, they see the place as one big concrete car park, and they feel like pigeons, cooped up in rows of small brick houses or unsightly blocks of flats. The next generation lacks even the memory of those roots, finding it hard to connect with the open spaces here, which seem so neglected.

This is an urban community with limited opportunity to access green space. There is no overall vision for land use in the area, no grand plan to improve the environment or create better urban green spaces for local people to enjoy. There is no one site that could be developed as a big park. Between the densely packed residential areas are little bits of land that have become derelict. Although many are owned by the City Council, it is often unclear which department is responsible for these small patches of land. In other cases private landlords have moved away and forgotten they are responsible for the land.

Confused Spaces are often no more than narrow verges, small triangles of grass on street corners, traffic islands or sometimes slightly larger areas – plots where buildings have been demolished, and the ground is simply grassed over and forgotten. At one time the City Council would do no more than come and mow them occasionally.

Now the Environment Team is very much working in partnership with the Council and has persuaded it to let them use these odd plots, just for the time being. Rather than try to sort out complicated, long-term leases, there is a less formal licensing arrangement, whereby the Environment Team can do as they please with certain snippets of land - so long as nobody builds on them - until the Council decide they want to develop them. In other cases the team has convinced the Council's Parks Manager to take on maintenance. It is a win : win situation. Parks Department budgets can be better focussed on designated green spaces; and the remaining 'confused spaces' get looked after in a far better way than the Council could ever achieve. This is possible because Balsall Heath Forum has a more street level view of the issues, being based on this patch, rather in some remote civic centre. The Environment Team meets with residents daily, on the spot, and they respond quickly to feedback. So local residents get to have a direct influence on local decisions and to see and appreciate cleaner streets and more greenery dotted around their locality.



I wondered if this temporary arrangement made people feel insecure, that there is no point investing energy to beautify the area if the land may be taken away at any time. But apparently not. It seems many people are beginning to realise that it is worth taking steps to improve the appearance of Balsall Heath, even if some of these initiatives may only last for a short while. It's a way of making the best of an imperfect situation, taking a piece of otherwise blighted land and making it less unsightly, more lovely for today and perhaps for the future. In this way, Confused Spaces points the way towards a greener, healthier future for Balsall Heath. For not only does this approach produce an immediate sense of well-being for everyone who lives here or visits the area; the hope is that as local people begin to engage with these small spaces, they will learn to love and care for them, and in time will want to fight to preserve them.



Filling planters with soil

A splash of colour, a hint of perfume

Tayear showed me several examples of the work of the Confused Spaces project. In front of the mosque on Jakeman Street is a small flower border. At first, when the Environment Team put plants in they did not thrive. The soil was too shallow, and children ran across the corner, trampling the plants. So the team returned and put up a simple wire fence to create an ad hoc barrier, and behind it they planted berberis – an attractive hedging plant with purplish coloured leaves and little spikes. In time this will grow up to form a natural perimeter to this tiny garden. Then they planted two beautiful young trees, a cherry and a eucalyptus, to bring some blossom and perfume to the street scene. They added

bulbs in planters for an extra splash of colour, and already the approach to the mosque looks so much more welcoming. Tayear, who has been working with Balsall Heath Forum for 3 years says, “I genuinely enjoy planting things because it gives me pride in the area”.

Planters – containers full of flowers and plants - are much in evidence on residential street corners throughout the area. Some are of a 1960s concrete design and have needed to be completely re-planted, having become overgrown with weeds. In Edward Road I also saw several terracotta coloured plastic planters gaily sporting displays of yellow and mauve pansies. They looked very jolly alongside the freshly painted bollards, litterbins and finger posts outside the Islamic Resource Centre. It was hard to believe this bustling cross-roads had been a seedy front-line not so long ago. Now, the Environment Team are gradually encouraging shopkeepers to take responsibility for watering the flowers, and perhaps in time they will adopt the planters and revive an interest in horticulture in the community. There has been a problem with vandalism on some sites, so the next initiative is to build some heavier, wooden planters that will look great and yet be more sturdy than their plastic counterparts.

Balsall Heath Forum has pledged to plant two tons of bulbs by the year 2004, and they are already well on the way to meeting this target. Perhaps this is why they recently took a Gold award in the Britain in Bloom competition, and they are soon to appear on Gardeners World! Formerly associated with quaint rural settings, these two most British of institutions are beginning to recognize the innovative nature of urban initiatives like Confused Spaces.



The Green Team planting bulbs in the park

Pickwick Park was already ablaze with golden daffodils and clumps of vivid purple crocuses when I visited in March 2003. We met Muzammel Hussain, the Environment Team's Park Warden, in his Salwar Kamise, wearing a traditional Muslim bushy beard and transplanting multi-coloured polyanthus in the sunshine. Tayear joked with him about stereotypes of Islam and terrorism; and I realized then what a powerful image his active presence in the park conveys to us all, and especially to the ethnic communities who use these spaces.

Trees breath life back into the city

An area in front of the tree nursery had become overgrown with a tangle of sycamore saplings, which had been allowed to grow too tall, too closely together. Rather than remove and destroy them, the Environment Team decided to try and transplant them to parts of town which had few trees. The idea is to create a tree-lined boulevard in Edward Street, and a number of shady groves among the houses, as free play spaces for children. It was obviously quite a major task to move such large young trees, and it remains to be seen whether the operation will prove successful. If they do take root in their new home, the trees will help the city to breathe. For another sad fact is that asthma is a big problem for residents in an area where air quality is poor due to high levels of traffic congestion.

When you remove rubbish and replace it with colourful flowers, the visual impact is instant and obvious. Since air pollution is not really visible, it may take longer for people to begin to recognise the links between traffic, air quality and health, and to understand the role of trees in absorbing toxic fumes and producing vital oxygen. Meanwhile another project is also tackling this problem - Balsall Heath Jungle is a tree-planting project with links to the local nursery school and other community organisations.

Community Participation

Balsall Heath Forum works with a wide range of local community groups and organizations. There are four mosques, two Sikh temples and eight churches, a host of voluntary organizations and various housing associations in the vicinity, as well as a number of new and converted buildings, four parks, a community newsletter and an annual carnival. Tayear told me that sometimes they can get everyone working all together but it's not always easy. Different residents have competing views about how the spaces should be used – as play spaces or quiet areas, for example. The Environment Team tries to consult with residents about what they want to see in their green spaces and includes their points of view when making plans. What usually happens is that people show initial concern for a particular issues eg street lighting, and if they see that their contributions are taken seriously, this leads them on to other ideas. In this way the Environment Team hope that eventually people will want to adopt a corner of Confused Space.

The 22 residents groups which make up Balsall Heath Forum put on a day event to encourage members to join in planting flowers in Confused Spaces, and it was attended by a few volunteers, but they are trying to think how to involve greater numbers in future. Other activities with volunteers have included painting railings around the little non-conformist church; removing graffiti and painting the walls of the skateboard park near Nelson Mandela School; and a Christian group turns out one Saturday per month, to do a litter pick and planting on a small patch of land. In order to get lots of people really interested in participating in Confused Spaces, the Environment Team takes part in community events such as the Carnival, which has been going since the 1970s.

Last year they put on a fireworks party and barbecue, linking the cultural festivals of Divali, Eid, Guy Fawks. The event included DJs, a martial arts competition, football competition, Yemeni dancing, Bhangra, and the Environment Team selling plants from the back of their van. This helped to attract people into the park who might otherwise not have shown an interest. The event was partly a celebration of pride in the local area but also to send out an SOS, to encourage people to get interested in their local green spaces and to support a protest to save the park from development of a new college building. Working from architect plans, volunteers marked out with pegs in the ground the area the building would cover, to show people how much open space it would take away. When people saw this, they signed a petition objecting to planning permission.

Balsall Heath boasts Birmingham's first example of a Neighbourhood Management Project. This means that all residents are able to input to the management of local services, and this applies equally to environmental services. Previously, environmental solutions which may work in the suburbs have not been so successful in this area. The hope now is that by listening to the input from the Neighbourhood Management Project, Balsall Heath Forum will be able to develop a tailor-made service, better suited to meet the specific needs of this densely populated neighbourhood. The Forum is looking to reshape some of the council services, for example now that there is a road sweeping machine, beat sweepers will become more proactive, introducing improvements to street hygiene. At the request of residents, there are plans to introduce regular enforcement sessions with neighbourhood wardens and environmental health officers, to tackle problems of abandoned cars and fly tipping.



A wide range of activities to meet diverse needs

Opportunities for volunteering, training and employment in the environment

The Environment Team comprises two supervisors; a number of New Deal trainees aged 18-24 years; plus various volunteers. Employees are representative of the ethnic profile of the area. Confused

Spaces is just one aspect of their work. The Team also takes on gardening contracts with local housing associations, to help generate some income to support their work; and they help elderly and disabled residents maintain their gardens, inviting a small contribution to cover their costs.

Their role includes unglamorous jobs like picking up rubbish and sorting out recycling, as well as fencing, painting, and planting flowers and trees. Litter pickers are based at the Forum rather than at the council tip, so that they can be more responsive to local need, dealing with fly tipping, graffiti or vandalism as soon as it occurs. And the latest development is the new road sweeping machine which is proving something of a novelty with the kids, who are trying to ride on the back! This clean-up operation is very necessary to tackle Balsall Heath's rat problem. People do have a care for wildlife: they put out food intended for birds, but the trouble is it only encourages rats. So one suggestion is to put up bird tables for people to use.



The team clean up the recycling facilities

Focus on green Space

In 2002 BEN ran a focus group with members of the Forum's Environment Team, to find out what ethnic communities thought about the green spaces in their area. One person said, *“Green Spaces are used more and more by the community as they see us cleaning up the area, and we have talked to them about why we are doing it.”*

Attitudes are gradually changing, and people are venturing out more often to do a range of activities in the open spaces near their homes. But many still need further encouragement to feel safe to go out into the parks. The reasons why people feel unsafe include fear of abuse, drugs, dumping, rats, mud, poor lighting, and lack of space for organising their own activities. *“The biggest barrier was the feeling that no one cared about the parks and so they were not safe places to go. This is changing with the work we are doing and people are more interested.”*

Another team member commented, *“ We have planted flowers and trees on some of the bits of land nobody wanted. People asked us why and we told them. Now they are coming to us to ask if we can do the same for them”.*

We asked what would encourage people to get more involved in green spaces and the ideas mentioned included personal and social factors such as links to health and fitness issues, education and employment opportunities, civic pride, and plants and flowers representative of the culture of people living locally. In terms of facilities, the team identified the need for more park furniture – ideally built locally. And in terms of knowledge, resources and support, they felt that people would get involved if someone provided a starting point. *“Park wardens and community wardens have made the place feel safer so people are coming out and using the park and green spaces.”*

The Focus Group Report concludes that the work of the Environment Team, and all those who have contributed to the Confused Spaces project, needs to be recognised by outside bodies such as the council, and resources need to be made available for the work to continue and expand.

Plans for the Future

The Environment Team plans to set up a garden centre at the old tree nursery in order to draw people in. As the area becomes greener, more and more people are beginning to show an interest in improving their own garden, creating a window box or taking responsibility for a planter on their street corner. And of course the Environment Team will benefit from a bit more income. Already there is a polytunnel on site where Joe the gardener sows seeds of vegetables and bedding plants, and dispenses free advice to keen amateur horticulturists. The wood is in place to produce a quantity of planters. Another idea is to make bird boxes to encourage wildlife to inhabit the newly planted trees. Balsall Heath Forum will continue to make regular contributions to The Heathan community newsletter, promoting awareness of environmental issues among local people.

One very exciting project in the pipeline entails a plan to erect a stone circle on the main route in to the locality with a message “welcome to Balsall Heath”. This will signal clearly that Balsall Heath has become a community proud of its identity and the environment it has created for itself, for all to share.