Exploring the role of young people in Green Infrastructure: Experiences from the Skip Garden, London

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Figure 1: An example of a green wall and green roof on a block of flats within the King’s Cross redevelopment, near Gasholder Park.
Introduction

Global Generation is an environmental education charity and community organisation based in central London, which brings young people, businesses, and local residents together to foster integrated and environmentally conscious communities. Currently, their main base is the Skip Garden within the 67 acre King’s Cross redevelopment. The Skip Garden is a community garden and food growing initiative which can move to different parts of the development when one construction site is finished. Global Generation aim to foster a sense of community between young people, businesses, families and volunteers, as well as teaching young people ecological, horticultural and business skills, all while creating green infrastructure in the form of the community garden. The Skip Garden is built using recycled materials, helps to reduce the urban heat island effect, and produces organic fruits and vegetables which are cooked and eaten locally, at the Skip Garden Kitchen.

King’s Cross is being developed by the King’s Cross Central Limited Partnership, a collaboration between property developer Argent and Australian pension fund AustralianSuper, and aims to turn an underused, formerly derelict part of central London into a new neighbourhood with homes, shops, restaurants, schools, and parks. The principles of green infrastructure have been integrated into the development, with 40% of the development designated as open space, and green roofs and walls and SUDS schemes throughout. Construction began on the development in 2008, and is projected to carry on for another 5 to 7 years, but already the area feels very lively and populated, with shiny new office buildings and luxury apartments.

The areas surrounding King’s Cross - Somers Town in Camden, and Caledonian Ward in Islington - are some of the most deprived in London, and Global Generation works with individuals from these boroughs to make sure that the development doesn’t occur at the expense of local residents. At the Skip Garden, young people from local schools and the surrounding area are able to take part in workshops and youth programmes, and to learn about food growing, wildlife systems and pollination, amongst other things, and to develop their business, marketing and leadership skills.

I was able to travel to London from 28th to 31st August 2018 with funding provided by the CSGN to research the work of Global Generation at the Skip Garden. Whilst in London I met with representatives from Global Generation and Argent, the developers of the King’s Cross site, to learn more about how the young people Global Generation work with are involved in food growing and greening disused, ex-industrial land, and how the organisation engages these young people in concepts like urban greening and green infrastructure.

Whilst I was in London, I also took the time to visit a number of attractions such as Kew Gardens, the Serpentine Gallery in Hyde Park, and Camden Market. The trip was a really great opportunity for me personally because I’ve never been on a trip like this myself before, and the planning and organisation really increased my confidence, and I had a great time while I was there. It was also beneficial for me, as a Landscape Architecture student, to learn about ways in which the surrounding community, and particularly young people, can be integrated into developments like King’s Cross, and to witness this first-hand, which I am sure will be useful for my future career.

In this report, I will outline the key outcomes of my meetings with Global Generation and Argent, and discuss the implications of these findings for similar projects in central Scotland, and the work of the CSGN.
Figures 2-4: The King’s Cross area is well-used by people from the surrounding areas, including friends meeting up for coffee, workers from local businesses on their lunch breaks, and families and children playing in the parks.
Figures 6, 7: Gasholder Park and its surroundings, including an example of a green wall.

Figure 5: Another view of the green wall shown in Figure 1.
Key results of meetings

Young people’s activities at the Skip Garden:

I was able to speak with Emma Trueman, Gardens and Community Facilitator, and Rachel Solomon, Youth Programmes Director, from Global Generation, as well as Jane Temple from Argent while I was in London. I spoke to them about the role young people play at the Skip Garden; the ways in which Global Generation engage young people; the relationship between Global Generation, Argent and the businesses within King’s Cross; and the relevance of this project as a case study to inform similar projects elsewhere.

Global Generation was founded in 2004, and began by taking groups of young people to the countryside. When construction began on the King’s Cross development, the founding director of Global Generation, Jane Riddiford, approached Argent with a proposal for a meanwhile space within the site to create the Skip Garden. Over time, the relationship between the two organisations developed, and Global Generation are now well into discussions with Argent and the council about a permanent presence on site once development is complete. Initially, young people worked on transforming the skips into planters for food growing, along with construction workers from the surrounding development. The Skip Garden has moved around the King’s Cross site several times to date and has one more location before it will move to its permanent position.

Over the years the charity has been working at King’s Cross, young people have been supported by Global Generation to work on many different projects. Some examples include: gaining BTECs in business studies through projects on urban agriculture; creating designs for bug hotels based on a brief from Eurostar for increasing biodiversity at one of their depots, the winner of which was then built; designing gardens based on commissions from restaurants and businesses in the surrounding area; and responding to a brief from Argent to increase the biodiversity of their green roofs, and creating innovative and aesthetically considered designs to do so. Many of these activities focus on one project from start to finish, and incorporate leadership, communication, marketing and business skills, as well as knowledge about green infrastructure, biodiversity and food growing, giving the young people a rounded experience and the opportunity to develop a range of different skills.

The Generator programme is a youth leadership programme for high school students from the surrounding area, who attend sessions at the Skip Garden every week for around 3 months, and develop skills in leadership, communication and enterprise. While I was at the Skip Garden I met Samika, a senior Generator, who told me that she had really enjoyed her experiences on the programme, which included working on a jamming project, including making, packaging and selling jam, and free fall writing, which opened her eyes to her love of writing. She also told me that before she started the programme her awareness of the environment stretched only as far as recycling, but that it had given her a new consciousness and understanding of concepts like pollination and biodiversity.

Rachel told me that this is quite common for the young people that Global Generation work with, and that the majority are not environmentally minded to begin with. The organisation’s motto is ‘I, We and the Planet’, and they use this to frame conversations around young people’s values, interests, and connection with the wider community and the planet. This allows the organisation to adapt their approach depending on the interests of different groups of young people, and gives them a certain amount of fluidity whilst grounding their work in community and environmental values. This enables the young people to take ownership of the projects they work on, and determine for themselves what will be most beneficial for them to experience and learn about.
Business relationships:

As mentioned above, Global Generation initially approached Argent with the idea of a meanwhile space, but over the years the relationship has developed between the two organisations and it is highly likely that Global Generation will eventually have a permanent space at the King’s Cross site. As well as this, they have been invited to work with British Land on their Canada Water development, which is at the master planning stage, through contacts made at King’s Cross.

While speaking to both Argent and Global Generation, it became clear that the relationship between them has been beneficial for both parties, with Argent providing the space for Global Generation to carry out their work, and Global Generation creating a community at the site and integrating different businesses and stakeholders within that community. Rachel told me she believes the relationships with surrounding businesses and Argent in particular has been fundamental to the work that Global Generation do, because of the meanwhile nature of the space. Global Generation run a lunch and learning programme, which has developed from the initiative of young people working with construction workers to plant the skips, and now consists of young people visiting the site at the same time as workers from businesses around the site on their lunch breaks, and learning about things and building things together. This type of community building and integration is beneficial not just for those who take part, but also for the site as a whole, and the surrounding areas, as it encourages the people who live and work there to take ownership of the place, which is in turn beneficial for Argent in creating a lively and looked-after neighbourhood.

Another important relationship that Global Generation have is with schools in the surrounding area. Speaking to both Rachel and Emma, it was clear that relationships with schools and even with particular teachers were an important way of encouraging young people to take part in their programmes. One of the main ways in which Global Generation reach young people is through speaking in assemblies, and encouraging them to sign up for programmes at the Skip Garden. However, both Emma and Rachel expressed limitations in terms of how effective this method is. Emma told me that one of the main barriers to reaching young people is actually establishing the relationship with the school in the first place, and that after this, even if Global Generation are able to talk at a school, young people who are already disengaged with the school system might be automatically put off from taking part in a programme because they are told about it in a school environment.

Global Generation have been able to establish a close relationship with two new primary schools on the King’s Cross site, Kings Cross Academy and Frank Barnes School for Deaf Children, and the children attend gardening workshops and lunch and learning sessions at the Skip Garden. Rachel also told me that increasingly the young people who take part in Global Generation programmes hear about these opportunities through word of mouth from other young people who have participated previously. Both these factors highlight the benefit of the long-term meanwhile space, since both the personal relationships with schools and the critical mass of young people taking part in programmes take a certain length of time to develop.
Figure 8: Planted skips in the Skip Garden, including the herb skip, and orchard skip.

Figure 9: A view of the Skip Garden from the Skip Garden Kitchen.
Figure 10: A model showing the King’s Cross development in the King’s Cross Visitor Centre.

Figures 10, 11: A model showing the progress of building works at King’s Cross, with completed buildings shown in colour, and proposed buildings in white perspex, inside Argent’s offices.
Implications and recommendations for the CSGN

Successes of the Skip Garden

Due in no small part to the involvement of Global Generation and the Skip Garden, the King’s Cross redevelopment is a good example of how development can centre the surrounding community rather than exclude them. Before construction began, Argent carried out extensive consultation with the local community about what they wanted out of the development, and through these consultations it became clear that the heritage of the area was important to the local communities, and a lot of this was retained, for example reusing gasholders to create Gasholder Park. However, without Global Generation working actively with the local community during construction and in the future after the completion of the site, it is my opinion that the development would not be as successful as it has been. In this respect, Global Generation’s work is extremely important, especially because so much of it centers on young people, who would have to endure any negative repercussions of the development in the future. With any development like this, gentrification of the area is always a danger, but Global Generation’s work allows local residents to take ownership of the site, while minimising exclusion. In this respect, the Skip Garden is relevant as an example of a green infrastructure project which centres young people and which has really flourished.

One of the main reasons for the success of the Skip Garden in my opinion is the relationships which Global Generation have formed with stakeholders in the surrounding area. Obviously, relationships with members of the community are extremely important for any community organisation, but I would argue that the relationships Global Generation have built with businesses around the Kings Cross site have been equally important for their ongoing vitality. The relationship with Argent has enabled Global Generation to secure a long-term site at the King’s Cross development, hopefully with a permanent presence in the future; the relationships with restaurants have provided them with commissions for green roofs and planters which young people have been involved in designing and executing; and the relationships with schools on the site and in the local area have enabled them to recruit young people for their programmes who are now spreading the word themselves. This is a really important message from the Skip Garden which could help influence enduring, inclusive green infrastructure projects in Scotland.

The Skip Garden’s location in the centre of London, surrounded by offices and shops, is also beneficial because it provides footfall for the Skip Garden Kitchen, a cafe serving seasonal food, some of which is grown in the Skip Garden. The profits from the cafe, as well as from the private garden commissions from businesses around King’s Cross, and from hiring out the Skip Garden for private events and workshops, all go towards funding the work that Global Generation do. As well as providing opportunities for young people to be involved in real-life business projects, this funding source also makes Global Generation less reliant on funding and grants from other organisations. This is an approach which I think could be utilised really well in central Scotland, and which would make community organisations more self-sufficient and give them more freedom to decide themselves what to do with the funding they raise.

Another reason I believe the Skip Garden has been so successful is that Global Generation have a reasonably flexible approach to the work that they do with young people, and in this way they manage to provide scope for the young people to determine what activities will be most beneficial to them. Their motto of ‘I, We and the Planet’ frames their conversations with young people about the environment and links it to individual and community well-being. This way of framing the conversation about the environment allows them to engage young people who may not think they are interested in environmental issues, and allows young people to discover for themselves what makes them passionate and excited, and encourages them to take ownership of the projects they work on, creating much more lasting effects than a more prescriptive approach might.
Barriers to the involvement of young people in green infrastructure projects

Although the Skip Garden has been successful in my opinion, there have still been barriers to the involvement of young people, and to the expansion of similar projects elsewhere, which came to light when I was speaking to Emma and Rachel. In my opinion, these barriers are very relevant for the CSGN and any similar projects in central Scotland, because it is likely that at least some of them will be similar between the two areas. This is especially true of more deprived parts of central Scotland, which will be more similar to the deprived wards within Camden and Islington located adjacent to King’s Cross, although of course many factors will also be different between these two locations.

Speaking to Emma and Rachel, it was clear that one of the main barriers to getting young people involved was not only gaining access into schools to tell them about the work of Global Generation, but also in persuading them to listen and see the opportunity as something relevant to them. This is something that they have tried to tackle by building relationships with individual teachers and schools, but this doesn’t solve the issue of young people dismissing the project after they hear about it. Emma told me that when she speaks in schools she tries to appreciate the frustration that young people might feel, especially those who are already disengaged with the school system. She has asked pupils in assemblies to put up their hands if they have felt angry about something they can’t control, in an effort to encourage them to channel that feeling into doing something positive, and to remind them that there are ways in which they can make an impact in their community. This is a barrier which would presumably also be present in central Scotland, but in my opinion the flexible approach taken by Global Generation can go some way to alleviating this issue, by encouraging young people to see that this is something that is relevant to them.

Other barriers which came to light include the lack of exposure of many young people to nature and the outdoors from a young age, meaning that when they reach their teens they have no interest in projects like this. This is an issue which could possibly be addressed by changes to education policy, by more involvement from schools in this respect, and by encouraging primary school-age children to get involved in projects like those available at the Skip Garden. Another barrier which Emma mentioned was concerning bureaucracy, specifically problems with people not returning consent forms, which she indicated can sometimes get in the way of individuals getting involved.

Although the relationship between Argent and Global Generation has been beneficial for both organisations, this may not always be the case between a community organisation and developer. For similar projects in central Scotland, it would be important to find a developer who is on board with the work of the community group, and who will be supportive of their ethos. Rachel told me that they have had discussions with other developers, with whom they felt a partnership such as the one between Global Generation and Argent would not have worked, because the development was not in line with their ethos. In this respect, finding the right developer to work with on a potential green infrastructure project at a similar site in central Scotland would be very important.
Figure 12: A bug hotel and seating inside the Skip Garden.

Figure 13: Inside the Skip Garden polytunnel.

Figure 14: A view of the Skip Garden showing the bug hotel, planters and Glasshouse.
Conclusion

Visiting the Skip Garden in King’s Cross was a fantastic opportunity for me and I learned a lot about the ways in which a community organisation like Global Generation can engage young people on the subject of green infrastructure. One of the most important aspects I discovered while I was there was the interconnectedness of social and environmental action: green infrastructure projects like this one ensure that young people’s communities are resilient to environmental change, whilst also empowering those young people to effect change. Not only is their involvement in projects like this beneficial for young people themselves: Emma also told me that without the involvement of young people, their ideas and their enthusiasm, she doesn’t think anyone at Global Generation would have the drive to carry on doing what they do, meaning that young people provide the impetus for this shared community and environmental resource.

The main barriers I came across when discussing the work of Global Generation to engage young people were: finding developers with whom a community organisation can collaborate when it comes to meanwhile spaces; having the contacts to be able to speak to young people about the opportunities available to them, and getting through to them about the benefits for them; and the lack of exposure to nature that many young people experience. However, the Skip Garden is also a really useful example of a successful green infrastructure project, due to the relationships between Global Generation and surrounding business; their ability to raise funds for themselves without having to rely on external funding sources for everything; and the flexibility of their approach and projects. I think that examining this example could provide some concrete ways for community groups in central Scotland to engage young people who are not necessarily environmentally-minded on the subject of green infrastructure, and embed them into green infrastructure projects.

Figure 15: The Glasshouse in the Skip Garden, made of recycled window frames.