

Calthorpe Project – Green Space of the Month March 2004

Contact Louise Gates 020 7837 8019 calthorpe@green-fingers.co.uk

The Calthorpe Project is a unique building integrally linked to a small, multi-use green space on the Grays Inn Road in London's King's Cross. The site was initially established in 1984 after local people fought to save it from development. The purpose built community centre and meeting venue was constructed using highly innovative building techniques about 13 years ago. It now caters for a very diverse range of regular users and occasional visitors. Good definition of space allows for a wide variety of functions and helps to maintain a harmonious atmosphere between the different groups.

Calthorpe is taking part in the Open Garden Squares weekend in London on Saturday 12th June 04. If you would like to join in, you can get more details from the London Parks and Gardens Trust website (details below).



Diverse visitors

The Calthorpe project caters to a phenomenal diversity of users. In a typical year they can expect to attract as many as 30,000 visitors, which is remarkable for this tiny 1.2 acre space. According to a recent annual report "the majority are local residents who are attending classes, using the under 8's drop in or just enjoying the open space. Many are visiting Eastman's Dental Hospital next door and drop in to relax before or after an appointment. Students from Westminster Kingsway College sit in the garden during a sunny lunchtime alongside staff from the many offices along Grays Inn Road. Some of our visitors travel many miles, such as the Scottish Community diet Project, which was researching growing food in the city. Our children's plot recently featured in an article in 'The Guardian' about the resurgence of community allotments in London. We had a group from Finland, from the Deaconess Institute of Helsinki, finding out about the work we do with children and families. The editor of 'The Ghana Times' wanted to compare community gardens in his country with those in London."

Louise Gates, the project co-ordinator, told me that Calthorpe's users originate from all the countries of Africa, Latin America and Europe. This is truly a community green space in that it gives people a

chance to meet one another who are neighbours, but might otherwise remain isolated in their flats. I have it on good authority that counted among the many visitors are occasional courting couples.

Consulting communities

The project has strong links with other community organizations and makes a point of consulting widely and monitoring the needs of users in order to ensure that they are offering the kind of services local people really want. With so many different groups using the space, Calthorpe Gardens has to try to be all things to all people. There have been territorial disputes in the past, but architect Robert Bishop has put some thought into sharpening the definition of spaces within the garden in order to accommodate multiple functions. Permanent features include attractive gates, a stone bridge over a sunken garden, flower beds and trees, including a rather special Gingko tree, a wild garden, the greenhouse, a community classroom, raised beds and vegetable plots, a small adventure play area, an outdoor gathering space, picnic area, sports pitches, and a decking patio linking the main building to the outdoors. These elements are connected by a network of beautiful mosaic and gravel paths.



Lots for everyone to do

Throughout its history, Calthorpe has been working with local young people, watching them grow up and have children of their own. A range of activities is offered, including sports, arts, crafts, board games and discussions. More recently there has been an increase in the number of environmental workshops taking place, including an opera about genetically modified foods and their effects on humans and the countryside. A favourite activity with the girls' group is pond dipping. The girls have also made a banner 'Our World' which is on display in the foyer of the main building.

Other regular activities include: women's coffee mornings, taken in the open air – weather permitting – once a week; women's fitness evening classes; a community composting scheme; a women's gardening club; kitchen ritual* natural cookery group; an under 8s and families group; a shoppers' crèche; English and Arabic language classes; sewing, embroidery, arts, crafts and music groups; the Bengali music group; Indian classical dance club and Raised Voices choir, who focus on protest songs.

Many varied events take place at the gardens throughout the year, aimed mainly at local people, such as the Spring into Summer festival; International Food Fair; Mexican Day and International Women's Day celebrations. In 2002 an African Festival saw the gardens operating at capacity. It was perhaps too successful attracting as many as 2000 people. Similarly the Bengali festival, which had its home here for two consecutive years, has now moved to nearby Coram Fields where there is more space.

Calthorpe based community groups also participate in a number of external events, such as Bangladesh Mela, Kings Cross Show, the festival of city farms and community gardens; coach trips to the seaside, farm and museum, picnics for homeless families. Raices Latinas Latin American dance classes offer dances from all over Latin America to women and children of all nationalities and the dancers perform at events across London throughout the calendar.



Food Growing Groups

There is a sizeable Bengali community in King's Cross and the Bengali women's gardening group comes once a week (except in the winter) to grow their own herbs and vegetables. They meet on a day of the week when the gardens are not open to the public so they can relax and let the children run around safely without fear of harassment. They first got together when it was recognized that Bengali women were not participating in the keep fit classes. When these women said they were more keen on gardening as a form of healthy exercise, funds were raised to employ a worker. The group visited Spitalfields City Farm where they were very inspired to see what the Coriander Club Bengali women's gardening group had achieved (see web links below)

Another very popular session is the special needs gardening group run by a tutor at Calthorpe for students of Westminster Kingsway College. This multi-cultural group, which gives members a chance to learn gardening over a two year period, has been running now for 10 years, and continues to receive lots of enquiries from organizations working with people with learning difficulties and mental health problems.



Volunteers and Management

An appeal for volunteers goes out in the quarterly newsletter, which is distributed to all households in the area. Dozens of volunteers pass through Calthorpe each year, including school children planting bulbs, groups of employees from local firms engaged on task days and individuals running jumble sales. But not many BME volunteers come forward, for some reason.

Calthorpe's management committee is made up of users, local residents and ex-volunteers who meet eight times per year. Most of the various user groups are represented on the management committee, but in spite of Louise's encouragement, it is difficult to entice people from ethnic communities to participate in running the project - not because of cultural or language barriers, simply because it is rather official and always will be. It can't be avoided. However, an informal sub-group meeting takes place once a month with tea and biscuits, where users can get together to discuss any issues.

Celebrated building

Calthorpe participated in London Open House in September 2000, bringing many visitors to look at the building, which is of special architectural interest being constructed using the Walter Segal Self Build method. The following description of the building is taken from the Walter Segal website.

“The building incorporates an under-fives nursery, meeting room, office, kitchen and large verandahs leading into the landscaped garden area, and was designed in close consultation with the local community, who also helped design and construct the little play building which now adorns the nursery playground.

“The Project is used by many local people, providing a meeting venue for groups and individuals, a day centre for children, café facilities, toy library, a training venue for horticulture, building maintenance and special needs courses, sports facilities, a drop-in centre for parents and children and a venue for community festivals and fairs.

“A local contractor, specialists in site carpentry work, constructed the 260 square metre building in 20 weeks. It boasts high levels of insulation, a wildflower roof, and a tall entrance hall with wonderful clerestory daylighting. Completed in 1992, the Calthorpe Centre is an essential asset for the local community, and sits comfortably within the beautiful community gardens in the heart of the inner city.

“The project was awarded the Gulbenkian Community Building Award by Prince Charles in 1992”

Construction: O'Shea Construction Ltd

Developer: London Wildlife Trust

Architect: Architype

<http://www.segalselfbuild.co.uk/projects/calthorpe.html>



The next phase

The Calthorpe Project now has funding from SureStart for an extension to the building for under 5's. The plan incorporates small windows to the road side to keep down noise and large sliding windows out onto an enclosed garden. It will be built by trainees from Work Directions, a private company who are government funded to provide work for long term unemployed people, who in turn gain a certificate in sustainable construction. The project, which is funded by the Neighbourhood Renewal fund, offers NVQs in Construction in the first year to four trainees on a six month placement. Next year there will be NVQs in Horticulture. At the end of the two-year period the project must become self-sustaining. Ian O'Toole, the construction skills tutor, and Gaven Duffy, the horticulture tutor, will help the trainees to find further contracts.

The building will be a show project, using recycled materials to construct gabion walls using a wire mesh frame filled with rubble, like the sides of motorway. They hope to get the concrete rubble cheap or free from Great Ormond Street Children's Hospital, part of which is being demolished. The project's architect, Robert Bishop, lives opposite the hospital and hopes to negotiate with them to recycle some of the rubble, would otherwise cost money to dump in a landfill site. The building will then have soil piled up against the sides, for growing plants – a bit like a turf roof but more accessible. The roof itself will be made from Macrolon, a strong, light form of Perspex, which has been used before at Calthorpe for construction of an innovative greenhouse. They are keen on promoting the product, in the hope of getting discount in exchange. Water run-off from the roof will be used for watering the garden. There will also be solar panels on the roof to supply the buildings electricity needs. There was mention too of compost toilets – London's first?

Other future plans include a funding bid to employ a community recycling worker to organize an organic vegetable scheme, with people bring their own bags to cut down on packaging waste. Another idea is to have an electric milk float to collect compost materials and to help with the construction work. So there really is a lot to be proud of and a lot look forward to at the Calthorpe Project.

* Kitchen Ritual is dedicated to personal and planetary well-being and offers sessions to small groups in plant-based cooking, ritual, and improvisation with artist-cuisiniere Miche Fabre Lewin whose kitchen passion draws on international gourmet, healing and nutritional cuisines of Europe, Africa and Asia.

For more details call Miche on 01865 511058 or 0773 404 9407 or visit

<http://www.civiccentre.org/SPEAKERS/Artists/M.Lewin.html>

http://www.lgihome.co.uk/v_and_a3.htm

You can find out more about minority ethnic women's food growing at Spitalfields City Farm and other projects at http://www.wen.org.uk/local_food/local_food.htm

London Parks and Garden's Trust, Open Garden Squares weekend
<http://myweb.tiscali.co.uk/london.gardens/squares/home.html>