

COMMUNITY GARDENS REAP A BOUNTIFUL HARVEST

The first significant study of community gardens in Australia has proven what gardeners have long suspected - green spaces in dense, urban environments give residents a sense of wellbeing, ownership and safety.

The NSW Department of Housing and the University of New South Wales have published a book and CD based on the results of a four-year study of the gardens at the Waterloo Public Housing Estate. Called *A Bountiful Harvest: Community Gardens and Neighbourhood Renewal in Waterloo*, the work was launched at the gardens today by the NSW Minister for Roads and Housing, the Hon. Carl Scully and UNSW's Vice-Chancellor, Professor Rory Hume.

"The benefits of the gardens were beyond even our expectations," says Associate Professor Susan Thompson, a planning specialist in the UNSW Faculty of the Built Environment (FBE) and one of the authors. "The thing that touched me most was how incredibly courageous many of the people were, having come from difficult circumstances, and what a difference the garden made to their lives."

Bountiful Harvest is the work of Thompson and colleagues Ms Linda Bartolomei, Senior Research Associate in the Centre for Refugee Research and Lecturer in the School of Social Work; Ms Linda Corkery, head of FBE's landscape architecture program; and Dr Bruce Judd, director of FBE's Master of Urban Development and Design program.

We had a lot of anecdotal evidence that the gardens created a sense of wellbeing, ownership and safety," says Linda Bartolomei, who was both a researcher and a former community development project co-ordinator on the estate. "To have that validated with some fairly rigorous research is fantastic."

The estate gardens - Cook, Marton and Solander - are surrounded by high-rise towers in Sydney's largest inner-city public housing estate with more than 5,000 residents. Fifteen nationalities are represented in the garden membership but Russian speakers make up 45 per cent, with Vietnamese and English speakers accounting for 11 per cent each and other nationalities represented by one or two members.

The gardens are one of the early initiatives of a partnership between the NSW Department of Housing and UNSW, which, for the past eight years, has run a Community Development Project at Waterloo and Redfern involving students and academics.

It has since been expanded in partnership with the Department of Housing and tenants to include other estates in the Central Sydney region - at South Coogee, Chifley and Menai.

“How universities interact with and support their local communities has been a long-standing interest of mine,” Professor Hume said in co-launching the book. “One vital way they can contribute is through their research and this publication is an excellent example.”

Ms Carol Mills, Executive Director Housing Systems for the NSW Department of Housing says that a study of this significance will go a long way in ensuring the future success of community gardens, and will encourage the Department to continue with its community greening partnerships.

“This study is extremely significant on both the domestic and international scale, as it presents evidence that community garden projects can contribute to building stronger communities and provide many benefits for residents.”

“The report will be available to Councils, associations and State Departments across the nation and internationally through our website encouraging other groups to take up similar community greening projects,” Ms Mills stated.

The book is available from the authors by emailing communitygardens@fbe.unsw.edu.au

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