

Foodscapes

bankbakegroweattalk share

a collaborative action research project exploring the role and potential for art practices to change discourses around food, sustainability and resilience, particularly within local community environments. During this 9-month initiative we will support and evaluate a co-designed, community-led arts programme engaging disadvantaged and at-risk groups and individuals around themes of food and landscape.

Context: Food (in)Security

To stay alive we must eat. For many of us we encounter no barriers to accessing food. We have money in our pockets to go food shopping. We live in an environment where we can easily shop for reliably fresh, quality foodstuff. Some of us may have the skills to do more than just heat food up, but can also prepare, cook and bake, and even if you can't you can still buy interesting pre-prepared foods – from a loaf of bread to a ready-meal. However our engagement with clients and volunteers at The Matthew Tree Project (TMTP) and at Edible Landscapes Movement (ELM) has alerted us to how food skills like *cooking, baking, sharing and growing* become more value-able when access to food becomes more difficult. We see these food practices as 'techniques of existence' – if a community has these skills then they can be used to support those who have difficulties in accessing food.

Food insecurity or food poverty occurs when people do not have enough food to satisfy hunger, have an insufficient and limited diet, are anxious about having enough food or need to resort to makeshift coping strategies such as begging, scavenging, or relying on emergency assistance programmes. TMTP relies on the generosity of supermarket shoppers and office-workers across the city to donate grocery items from their shopping basket to then be shared-out across the city for those households in food poverty. The community of TMTP clients consists of those who don't have sufficient weekly income to buy food. Food insecurity is closely related to limited household resources and low income but it is not confined to the poorest members of society; low waged workers, particularly without secure housing; people on moderate incomes who have higher than average costs because of mortgage or loan repayments or who experience sudden illness or unemployment, may also experience food insecurity.



Image 1. Matt, a volunteer with TMTP, organizing Foodstore shelves

Food aid for TMTP clients supports their ability to have a balanced, healthy diet. It is recognized that the effects of food insecurity include not only hunger, but also having a diet with inadequate levels of vitamins and minerals, dietary fibre, vegetables and fruit. Food insecurity impacts negatively on health, including child development, maternal depression and all aspects of mental, physical and psychosocial health. Paradoxically, in developed countries the risk of obesity, rather than under-weight, is higher amongst those who experience food insecurity (due to, for example, diets high in fat and sugar). At TMTP, a client selects a basket of tinned and dried food products, across the main food groups, from the Foodstore (see image 1). We should not underestimate the creative effort, cooking confidence and knowledge necessary to make an appetizing meal from a set of basic ingredients. Do you always know what to make with the food in your cupboard/fridge? Do you worry that someone you are cooking for won't like it, or that you are not having a balanced diet?

All indications are that food insecurity in the UK is on the rise with a dramatic increase in the number of people relying on food aid. For example, the Trussell Trust estimates that in the UK, more than 350,000 people turned to food banks in 2012-2013, up from 68,000 only two years earlier. A report by Oxfam and Church Action on Poverty estimates that this figure is actually over 500,000 per year. Here in Bristol, TMTP, one of many food charities operating in the city, supplies food aid to almost 700 individuals a month – a figure which has increased each month since the charity began operation in 2011. However, what organisations such as TMTP recognize is that food aid alone cannot fully address the challenges of food

poverty. By engaging with individuals on a one-to-one basis in what they refer to as a 'whole-person' holistic approach, TMTP gets to know the particular issues and circumstances of each 'client' and provide tailored support to help move them out of poverty. The city of Bristol is also considering how the city's food and food systems can address food poverty and to promote sustainable and resilient communities. For example, the Bristol Food Policy Council's Food Charter outlines ten 'ambitions' including support for community based growing projects, advancing cooking skills, and strengthening the city's ability to meet its own food demands locally in order to provide a healthier and sustainable future for the people of the city.

In the Knowle West area of Bristol (where our partners ELM and the Bread café operate), limited access to fresh food for the community is not due to a shortage of personal income but the lack of a large supermarket within short walking distance. In response, ELM is growing and supplying fresh vegetables, eggs and other products to a local café and the community (see image 2). The Bread Café is regularly baking fresh loaves and buns for sale at the Knowle West Health Café. It is interesting to realize that for the majority of us who have no current anxieties about accessing food, to be able to visit a local grocery store or restaurant and to have money to buy the food on sale ensures our personal food security. In effect *shopping* is the technique of existence for the majority who need not worry about accessing food. Yes, people may also have developed skills in cooking, baking, growing food but the dependency on using these skills everyday is less great.



Image 2: A greenhouse at 'Buried Treasure', part of ELM

In this project we are becoming aware of how food-skills are valued more highly when access to food becomes more difficult. Whether lettuce seeds and soil and water, a loaf of bread and a tin of baked beans, a milk carton and breakfast cereal or a tin of sardines, some fresh tomatoes and some pasta - all need something done to them to create a meal or part of a meal – peeling, chopping, cutting, stirring, measuring, planting, watering... As a community to support our own and each others' food well-being, it is important we don't forget how to 'make' food.

Our approach – arts and participatory methods

In Foodscapes, we have sought to build alliances between researchers, community stakeholders and people dealing with food insecurity. Our outreach and engagement has included a wide range of activities including stakeholder-led field tours and site visits, focus sessions, informal discussions, interviews and volunteering – all of which contributed to the development of our arts programming and research methodologies. What this information told us was that we needed ways of exploring food in meaningful and expressive ways without being obtrusive or interfering with the objectives of our stakeholder partners. First, we used *photovoice* – a participatory research approach in which people use photo images to capture aspects of their environment and experiences for sharing with others (see image 3). The preliminary outputs of this work – produced by clients of TMTP – are currently on display at the parlour showrooms. Secondly, we invited clients to participate in a two-day bread-baking relay during Big Green Week. While this work is on-going, we see it as an experience to draw on and develop techniques of existence collaboratively, in a creative and enjoyable way.



Image 3: A meal cooked by a client of The Matthew Tree Project

Michael Buser (U. of West of England), Emma Roe (U. of Southampton) Liz Dinnie (James Hutton Institute).

Foodscapes is a collaborative effort between researchers at UWE, University of Southampton and the James Hutton Institute, alongside The Matthew Tree Project, Edible Landscapes Movement, the Bread Café, Knowle West Media Centre and Paul Hurley. The work is supported by grants from the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Connected Communities programme and UWE's Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF).

More information can be found on the web: <http://foodscapesbristol.wordpress.com>
Michael.Buser@uwe.ac.uk +44 (0) 11732 83075