

Social interaction, inclusion and community cohesion

GOW: Gibson Street, Otago Street and Westbank Quadrant backcourts, Glasgow

Background

GOW is the collective name for Gibson Street, Otago Street and Westbank Quadrant in Glasgow. The area is an example of Victorian architecture; it is a triangle of tenement buildings designed by two different architects and built over a 10-year period in the 1870s-1880s. Of the 90 flats in the GOW area, 21 are owner occupied, 1 is owned by Charing Cross Housing Association and 68 are rented out by landlords and agencies. The properties vary hugely with some being spacious, well ornamented and with views over Kelvingrove Park, while others are small and not so impressive. Due to this mix in property types and sizes, the area has a diverse community in terms of culture, wealth and background, with students filling most of the rental properties.

The GOW backcourts (shared spaces) were originally fenced off into gardens belonging to particular closes but in 1979 the fences were removed and they became communal. In the 1970s and 1980s, the backcourts fell in to neglect but in the late 1990s a group of students living on Otago Street organised a series of clean-up events, engaging and involving other residents in the area. This was the inspiration for the GOW project in its current form.

History

The students who organised the original clean-ups were, typically, short-term tenants and moved out of the area after a time. Despite their efforts in initiating clean-up events, these soon stopped. The area degenerated and became a dumping ground for waste, with some of the basements being accessed by drug users and the homeless. However, a core group of residents recognised that the area was unsafe, unhealthy and unsightly and in 2002 they revived the clean-ups and enlisted the help of many other residents. Together they managed to clear the backcourts of the build up of waste so that the space could be used again by residents.

Initial impetus had simply been around addressing health and safety concerns and making the area accessible. However, at this stage Kelvin Clyde Greenspace was enlisted to help from a GOW committee to take forward the development of the backcourts and transform it into an attractive green space resource for residents.

A community consultation event was held to establish future priorities and find out what residents thought and felt about the area, and about what changes they wanted to see happen. The responses included: refurbishment of the bin area; closing off public access to the backcourt; the creation of a garden; social space; wildlife areas; recycling facilities; and regular maintenance.

Since then, the GOW project has worked to implement these changes and the area is now landscaped with: a custom-built bin area; secure access; raised beds and planted areas, a seating area with handcrafted and inscribed benches; community artwork; and recycling facilities. The area is no longer a dumping ground and there is less of a need for clean-up events. Priority is now given to maintenance.

The project was initially purely physical but since the above changes were initiated a greater sense of community has started to develop in the area. A core focus of the project is now on enhancing community participation and encouraging individuals to become more involved in their community as a whole. Many activities and events have been held to help facilitate this, including: creativity workshops, a GOW tenement fair, a weekly garden group, the creation of a washhouse museum, and a community newsletter.

Evaluation

An evaluation was carried out in 2006-2007, focusing on how the changes made had improved residents quality of life and investigating how local residents could become more engaged with the project to ensure its sustainability. Baseline data were collected during the community consultation in 2002. Two community events were used to gather data (one pre-arranged and one organised especially for the purposes of the research). Data collection methods used included: questionnaires; semi-structured interviews with local residents, business owners and staff, absentee landlords and the GOW garden group; a focus group with three GOW management committee members; filming of a community-based creative workshop where participants responded to questions on their views and aspirations for the area; and the capturing of anecdotal data throughout the course of the research.

Results

Findings relating to numerous areas were reported. Results here report the key findings most pertinent to social inclusion and community cohesion, based on the interviews and the work of the focus group.

Interview findings

- The top two rated project benefits, in relation to both perceived and actual benefits, were community involvement and feeling better (stress relief, relaxation, sense of pride and achievement). This implies that there may be a link between the two benefits.
- Although sense of community and social networking were stated in the top six project benefits, very few people had been actively involved in community and

social activity in a sustained manner. This may mean that these are largely perceived benefits rather than actual benefits.

Focus group findings

- The findings from the interviews reveal that people can feel like they are part of the community even without actively taking part. People feel involved just by being there, without necessarily getting involved in maintaining that community as a place to live or stay.
- People may feel part of the community because the project gives rise to contact and 'neighbourliness'.
- Many residents benefit from the positive activity that the project brings to the area in terms of social isolation because the GOW members are now familiar faces, and the project newsletter (which interview responses confirm is held in high regard) keeps people in touch with their community.
- There was an increased sense of ownership of the backcourts because of the enhanced maintenance and aesthetic value, with more people using them.
- Some of the interview responses may have been glib with regards to 'sense of community' because the terms can mean different things to different people and there is no common definition.
- More needs to be known about the motivations for people to become involved.

Conclusion

The fundamental finding for the GOW project was that while community involvement is vital to sustain and develop the project, it is difficult to achieve in an inner city area with a sizeable transient population. In modern times, the characteristics of traditional communities have changed and, in areas like GOW, the meaning of 'community' needs to be continuously redefined.

The research report on the evaluation undertaken forms part of a wider body of evidence from across Scotland on the benefits of green space initiatives and the challenges associated with them. GOW intends to use the lessons learned from the evaluation to influence future development and increase community involvement.

Reference

Greenspace Scotland (2007). *Demonstrating the links: action research on greenspace. GOW: Gibson Street, Otago Street and Westbank Quadrant backcourts, Glasgow.* <http://www.greenspacescotland.org.uk/upload/File/GOW%20report.pdf> accessed 21/02/10