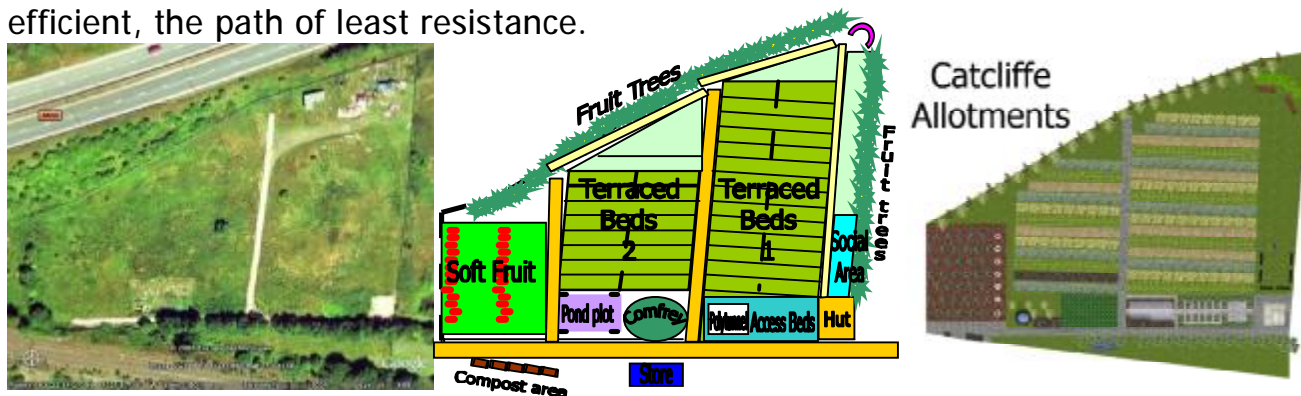


DESIGNING AN ALLOTMENT SITE

I shall remember 2006 as the year I got my dream job, designing a whole allotment site. I've spent the last 20 years working my way up the organic horticultural ladder to the point where I had sufficient experience and wisdom to provide authoritative consultancy to a publicly-funded community partnership.

My unique selling point is that I've always combined genuinely sustainable organic practices with community and therapeutic benefits. My focus has always been on food because this has the greatest potential to engage people in the process of growing.

Approaching the study reminded me of the dozens of plots I've helped to clear and develop over the years. You learn to read the landscape of allotments, their history and archaeology, and know from first-hand experience what techniques are most efficient, the path of least resistance.



Compared to many urban sites, which are often contaminated with glass, rubble, metals and worse, Catcliffe was a greenfield site. This gave considerable scope for optimising the design, but was far from being a complete clean sheet.

Once upon a time the site had been used as allotments before, when the pattern of usage would have been dictated by the necessity of obtaining fresh food and the local patterns of mass employment.

As with many other allotments, industry had dominated the surrounding area in the past and left its mark on the present, both the landscape and the population. This human historical dimension is the factor we cannot learn from books about the theory of Permaculture. Each manifestation of the principles varies according to the specific human context.



It was fascinating to assess the area anthropologically and realise that events that happened a generation ago (i.e. the Miners' Strike) still had a strong influence on the local community. This trauma was never mentioned but was apparent in a contradictory combination of fierce independence and resigned impotence. This sense was actually very familiar and reminded me of the typical impoverished and vulnerable state of most traditional allotment communities over the past two decades.



The Catcliffe site is surrounded by the legacy of four major industries. Oldest of these is the eighteenth century glassworks, which still stands and provides a symbol to define the village. The immense acreage which was once the main railway marshalling yard for Sheffield has been swallowed up and updated into the new airport. The mountainous slag-heaps of Orgreave still dominate the southern skyline and are now being landscaped. And the northern edge of the site is defined by today's dominant industry, transport, in the form of the A57 Parkway motorway. Ironically, but quite typically, the widening of the M1 to 4 lanes increases the chances of funding being available for development of the allotment site. The regeneration of the surrounding economy has included massive public subsidy and incentives for private investment which also justifies investment in this site as a local public asset.

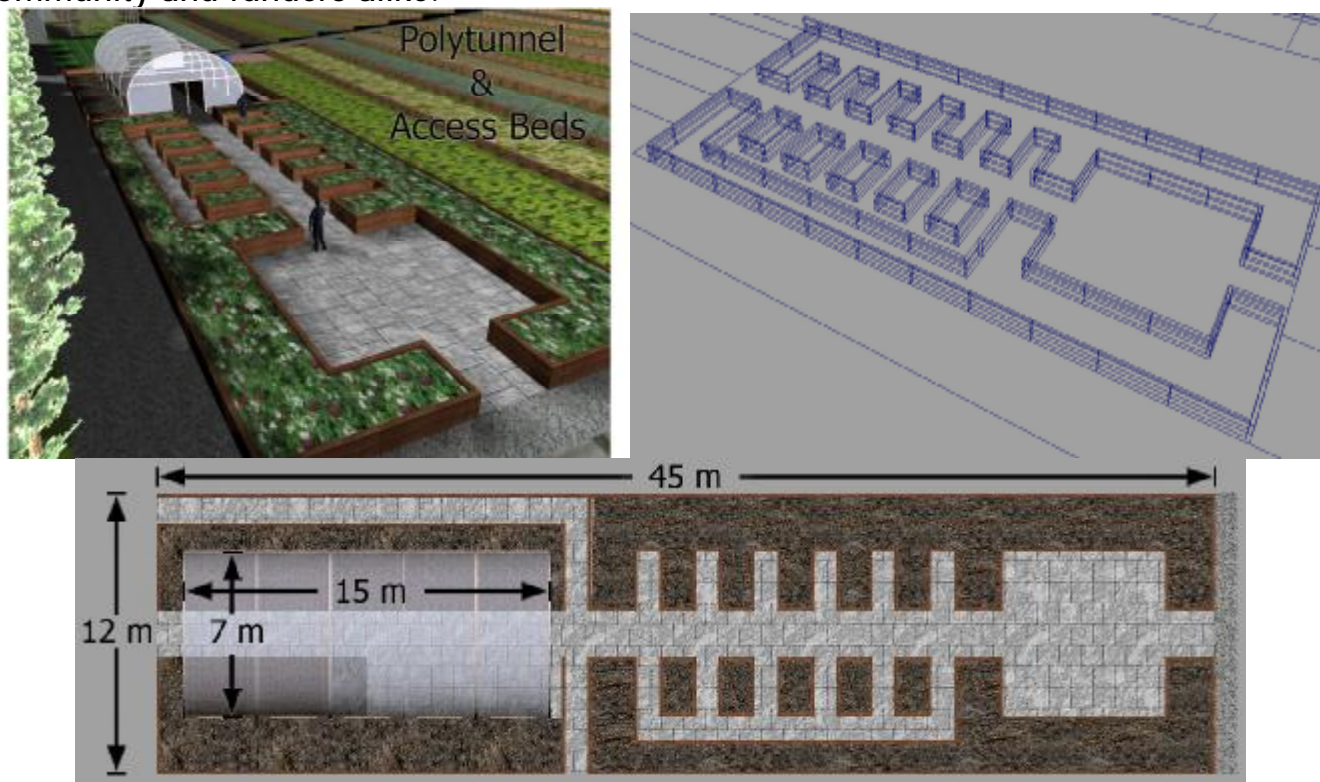
Drawing on my assessment of the requirements for a modern site I suggested a hybrid combination of individual and community provision. Most capable and able-bodied people prefer to cultivate in their own way. But many who are physically or mentally incapable of meeting this challenge alone require the support of a therapeutic facility. A large number of new allotmenters only realise they can benefit from support and collaboration after they have had a go and find out what's actually involved.

The current and ongoing crisis of allotment provision in Sheffield, where hundreds of plots have been derelict and deteriorating for decades and hundreds of people are on long waiting lists, has created a situation where it is now necessary to open up new allotment sites. Attempts have been made to force more people onto viable sites but this caused much disruption to existing communities.

This made me realise that my next customers might be farmers, landowners and developers who could see the actual market opportunity in providing allotment sites. Depending on the level of investment and what people are prepared to pay, I predict that the model for these could range from a caravan site to a country club.

People often compare allotment rents to the cost of housing and are therefore prepared to pay a lot for a plot. The market equivalent can be judged relative to a proportion of people's food budget or what they are prepared to pay for a similar leisure opportunity, such as membership of a gym.

I really appreciated being able to collaborate with specialists such as Elm Farm Organic Research who provide soil testing services. I was also able to employ a 3-D graphic artist to generate a virtual representation of the design and detailed diagrams of features. This helped to realise what was in my imagination and communicate it to community and funders alike.



As a completely new initiative, it would be fascinating to record and study the progress of this site to inform future models of development.