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Valuing the Benefits and Enhancing Access: Community and Allotment Gardens in Urban Melbourne, Australia

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Abstract: The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions of the benefits and challenges experienced by community and allotment gardens utilising a broad theoretical analysis, pertaining to the case study of Melbourne, a city in Australia that until recently has been experiencing significant population growth and urban densification. The study involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 23 participants from six urban community and allotment gardens. Interviews identified the perceived benefits of community and allotment gardening, perceived demographic patterns of engagement, challenges faced in relation to secure land access, and the potential offered by community and allotment gardens for social and environmental wellbeing. Findings revealed a range of perceived benefits, perceived demographic patterns, highlighted challenges posed to participation due to insecurity around ongoing land access, and detailed the perceived capacity community and allotment gardens have to contribute to social and environmental wellbeing. This study contributes to existing literature focused on the benefits and potential of community and allotment gardening for personal, social and environmental wellbeing, by offering an original theoretical contribution through carrying out an analysis informed by urban geography, phenomenology, political economy and ecology, and to literature focused on issues of access to land for these amenities.

Keywords: community gardens; allotment gardens; wellbeing; place; environment

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1. Introduction

Quality of urban living is an important area of study that encompasses peoples' perceptions regarding quality of life, as well as issues of proximity to places of employment and recreation [1]. Living within an urban context presents concerns if shaped by disconnection between people and the natural environment [2] in which individuals may experience what has been termed overload and mental fatigue, being exposed to more information and stimulation than can be processed [3,4]. When urban life has "reached a certain level of artifice and complexity", people turn to the environment, appreciating its "relative simplicities" [5] (p. 103). With reference to personal and social wellbeing, Tuan's [5] work has highlighted the dissatisfaction felt through history with urban experiences, and the demotion of nature. Research shows that opportunities to connect with nature can alleviate mental fatigue [3], offer a sense of restoration from daily stressors [6] and provide a range of psychological benefits such as relaxation [7]. Community and belonging are sought when the "stresses and strains of an increasingly fragmented existence" reach their tipping point [8] (p. 174). Community and allotment gardening as activities can be seen to bring together the aforementioned benefits of connecting with nature and community. Community and allotment gardening are reported to have the capacity to enhance quality of life, health, and wellbeing [9–14].

Current literature on community and allotment gardening has not significantly engaged with holistic conceptualisations connecting people and place. As activities that

bring people and place together in potentially meaningful ways, there is potential value in applying this conceptal framing to community and allotment gardening literature, which has perhaps been limited by the influence of dominant dualistic framings separating nature from culture [15,16]. This study aims to contribute to this literature by incorporating a holistic conceptual framing connecting people and place, reflected more broadly by linking the disciplines of urban geography, phenomenology, political economy and ecology. It does so in order to highlight the practices and capacity of place-making in facilitating social and environmental wellbeing.

2. Conceptual Background

2.1. Urban Gardening Benefits

The health and wellbeing benefits of urban gardens are highlighted in a number of studies which identify perceived improvements in physical and mental health, social connectedness, a sense of engagement and responsibility, greater food access and improved nutritional intake [17–23]. Greenery in urban contexts can also encourage individuals to co-inhabit and co-domesticate the streets, enabling people within cities to more easily recognise and engage with nature's cycles [24]. Conceptually, too, there have been increasing calls to replace the dualistic separation between nature and culture with an integrated, holistic conceptualisation in order to facilitate a sense of connectedness and thus environmental accountability [2,25–29]. In the context of New Urbanism, Till [30] highlights the importance of acknowledging the diverse meanings of human-environment relations held by different cultural groups.

Community and allotment gardens have capability to both celebrate cultures and to offer alternative aesthetic and social experiences which do not alienate people from the natural environment or from each other. They can also offer alternative psychological experiences imbued with belonging [31]. Such engagement and belonging respond to the disembedding experienced within urban contexts [32] as well as to urban disinvestment and decay [33].

Research undertaken by Shinew, Glover and Parry [34] and Gebhard, Hagemann, Hensler, Schweizer, and Wember [35] shows that community gardens provide the opportunity for equal status and cooperative relationships between different groups of people. While this possibility is attainable, it is important to note that garden leaders' perception of whether difference is considered 'an obstacle or an asset' can inform the extent of engagement with others, with subsequent effects on participation levels [36]. Outside the community garden setting in cities such as Toronto, opportunities for those living in public housing, in high-rise apartments, for those living outside core areas and new immigrants have not had equal status and have been excluded from local decision making [37]. Stehlin and Tarr [38] (p. 1342) highlight the importance of considering questions of "racism, patriarchy, and class power" within advocacy around improving quality of life, through community and allotment garden initiatives, as neglecting these areas can hamper wider social justice issues and facilitate "uneven geographical development". Community gardens across Toronto have brought together many ethnoculturally diverse people, and within these contexts local people can produce and contest local spaces [37]. Research undertaken by Seaman, Jones, and Ellaway [39] in Glasgow found that the extent to which individuals feel integrated and included can impact the level of engagement with regards to using public green places. In some cases, migrant groups with histories of ethnic conflict have been shown to be able to overcome the barriers of such pasts through forging new relationships and solidarity with old enemies within community garden settings [40]. Harper and Alfonso [41] recognise the opportunity to re-grow community amongst a diverse group within the reclaiming of land for community gardening. Aligned with this is research undertaken by Hondagneau-Sotelo [42], which found that urban community gardens in Los Angeles offer a home-like place for marginalised Lantina/o immigrants, offering inclusion and belonging at a time when United States immigration policy has been shaped by deportations and detentions. Perkins, Adam-Bradford, and Tomkins [43] argue

that engaging in urban agriculture can be of aid for populations such as refugees who have experienced loss. The potential for community gardens to generate urban social resilience has also been identified by McMillen and colleagues [44] through urban environmental stewardship. Cockburn and colleagues [45] (p. 15) propose three social-relational practices to aid collaboration in such contexts, including "belonging while differing", "growing together by interacting regularly and building common knowledge" and "learning and adapting together with humility and empathy". Bringing people and place together, community gardens within urban settings offer opportunities for health and wellbeing benefits, engagement with nature's cycles, a sense of empowerment and belonging, and nurture relationships between people from diverse backgrounds.

2.2. Economic Challenges to Urban Gardening

A significant obstacle to urban gardening is first gaining access to land and subsequently securing ongoing access to land [46]. Securing land for urban gardening within a neoliberal context of selling off community gardens [47] and other green places for development [22,48,49], can prevent many who wish to create urban gardens from doing so. In a survey with over four hundred community gardens across the United States and Canada, key challenges identified included issues pertaining to access to land, funding, and sourcing materials [50]. Eizenberg [31] attributes the erosion of public places in urban areas around the world since the 1970s to property ownership and the influence of private marketisation on government.

There is a need for regulation of the market in order to stem the loss of access to, and variety of green places, including community gardens within urban settings [51]. Drake and Lawson [50] wish for people to recognise community gardens' embeddedness within multiple relationships at the local level, and the need for greater support and resources to facilitate the creation and continuation of urban gardening [50]. The many, embedded relationships within locales highlights the importance of engagement and dialogue with local residents on the part of local governments. Woolrych and Sixsmith [52] found that government urban regeneration initiatives in the United Kingdom have been formulated without local resident engagement and result in changes that negatively impact local residents' wellbeing, identity, familiarity and sense of belonging.

Presently underway are efforts to circumnavigate the forces of neoliberalism shaping new urban relationships with place. Thompson [53] recognises within the practice of guerrilla gardening, an act of commoning facilitating democratic stewardship of place. This alternative method of achieving regeneration moved away from state/market provisions and public/private arrangements. People involved were "reconnecting maker with user, developer with dweller, through collective dweller control" [53] (p. 1038). The adaptability of gardening commons has also been recognised, identifying their persistence within "different political and economic regimes" as a result of "their capacity to accumulate and mobilise informality" within these settings [54] (p. 18). Additionally, Tornaghi [55] identifies the creation and expression of commons initiatives, coming not only from local residents but also from institutions, prevalent across the Global North. These commons initiatives are creating alternatives to urban life that have been informed by capitalist organisation [55]. However, concern surrounds these manifestations due to the perception that they can potentially "undermine ... autonomous community space" [56] (p. 106). Inspired by Marcuse's [57] call for a critical inquiry into the right to the city, Tornaghi [55] argues for a cross-disciplinary theoretical approach that no longer constrains the ability to recognise the capacity urban agriculture has to act as a vector of change. Such a call sits alongside related movements, such as the Global Right to the City Network, which challenges exclusionary effects of neoliberal urbanisation, imploring the rights of citizens to access urban space and culture [58]. Advocating for an alternative framing to neoliberal urbanisation as a starting point, Gibas and Boumová [59] (p. 35) draw on historical aspirations within former Czechoslovakia of achieving an "harmonious environment and ... for nature to become part of a city space that is accessible and available to every citizen in various forms".

A note of caution is urged regarding the ways in which such initiatives may inadvertently consolidate neoliberalism. Rosol's [60] research in Germany explored the extent to which community gardens carry out former responsibilities of government relating to public services and urban infrastructure. Rosol [60] (p. 240) argued that while community gardens represent an alternative to traditional green places provided by government, such as local parks, they serve the "neoliberal idea of self-contained communities and the privatisation of the service sector . . . passing on state responsibilities to civil society". This concern applies to all community organisations involved in addressing the needs and interests of those that policy leaves behind [61]. This tension is highlighted in the work of Ghose and Pettygrove [62] who describe community gardens as simultaneously contesting and reinforcing neoliberal policies. Through participation, previously marginalised groups can challenge power relations, and the presence of these gardens challenge the profit drive within local government. However, the kind of citizenship on offer through participation is limited to those with resources and is conditional to government specifications [62]. Similarly, the research of Crossan, Cumbers, McMaster, and Shaw [63] acknowledges that the work undertaken within community gardens is work that should be undertaken by the State, and concurrently highlights that value is still achievable for local participants. This value manifests through participants forming progressive relationships with each other and with the environment, offering value beyond the provision of respite from urban living [63]. In response to these challenges, perhaps one way forward as outlined by Thompson [53] (p. 1040) is to advocate for:

> inspiring, mobilising, and sustaining the intense political campaign energy and grassroots practices of commoning that are the lifeblood of common ownership institutions; and, on the other, the need for legal definition, professional expertise, and scaling up into institutional structures.

2.3. Theoretical Framing

Theoretically, the act and art of community and allotment gardening entails place-making. This study contributes to the field of urban geography by encompassing a phenomenological, political economy and ecology-based perspective to the community and allotment gardening literature. Two definitions of place are helpful in this study. The first is offered by the geographer Seamon [64] (p. 2) whose work is informed by phenomenology, defining place as "any environmental locus that gathers human experiences, actions, and meanings spatially and temporally". The second definition comes from Escobar [65] (p. 152) who refers to place as "the experience of, and from, a particular location with some sense of boundaries, grounds, and links to everyday practices". Aligned with the importance of a particular location, is the work of Casey [25] who asserts that the concept space, which denotes infinity, facilitates a way of viewing the natural environment as expendable, whereas the concept place encourages meaningful connection and accountability. As such, this paper refers to place, rather than space. An important acknowledgement is offered by Scott and Sohn [66] who acknowledge that place-making in urban settings cannot be aligned with only one narrative, recognising the cycles of creating, re-creating and communicating the identity of place. Theoretically, this study is situated within the geographical work of Relph [67] who asserts that place is the foundation of wellbeing, and that through a sense of place, possibilities for addressing environmental problems can be facilitated. Extending this theoretical framing, this work is informed by a political economy view of place, acknowledging the role of capital and global forces, as well as how places come to be imbued with meaning through cultural construction [65,68]. The latter is explored from a phenomenological perspective, utilising the concept sense experience, which highlights the active and ever-present engagement between a person and their environment generating meaning as outlined by Merleau-Ponty [69]. Informed by the work of Bateson, situating this study within a holistic, rather than dualistic framing, seeking to draw from ecology an understanding of the connection between people and place [16]. This theoretical framing serves to extend existing community and allotment gardening literature and shall be ap-

plied to better understand people's perceptions of community and allotment gardening, and to explore the capacity of place-making in generating change-making.

3. Methods

3.1. Research Design

Six sites across urban Melbourne were selected to form this case study. Ethics clearance was obtained to conduct a qualitative study [70]. Qualitative research offers the opportunity to more deeply understand the ways in which people think of and talk about the places in which they reside, and how people respond at the local level to wider issues that may be faced [71]. While not generalisable, these findings offer insight into the qualitative diversity of experiences present that can inform sustainable urban life [72].

3.2. Research Equipment

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were guided by open-ended questions. These questions related to the extent of participants' gardening background, motivations for involvement [10,13], the perceived values [9–14] and challenges [22,46–51] of participation, and their understanding and experiences of wellbeing [17–23] and belonging [31,40–42,45] through urban gardening. Greater insight was sought in these key areas through applying a broader theoretical analysis to that within existing community and gardening literature. These key areas were chosen for their capacity to identify facilitating factors for involvement, perceptions of benefits and challenges, and the capacity of these gardens to generate wellbeing and belonging.

3.3. Study Area

This case study explored the perceived value, benefits and challenges identified by community and allotment gardeners from within Melbourne's urban gardens. Spanning inner and middle ring metropolitan suburbs to the north, east and west of the city center, the gardens included: Clifton Hill (a neighborhood garden), Condell Street (a small garden with raised beds in a through-fare), FareShare (a volunteer garden for food relief; see Figure 1), Kensington Food Share (a neighborhood garden), Knox (a large allotment garden; see Figure 2) and Happy River (a small garden with raised beds located by a café). Gardens included those with communal beds only, those with both communal and individual allotments, those with individual allotments only and one named FareShare, whose participants grow food voluntarily to provide for those in need.

Figure 1. FareShare Garden, Abbotsford, Victoria.

Figure 2. Knox Garden, Boronia, Victoria.

Within the context of increasing urbanisation, the importance of understanding the meanings, significance, limitations and opportunities of urban gardens grows. In the modern era, urban green places were valued for offering a sense of openness without boundaries, inspired by eighteenth century landscape design. In the postmodern era, this openness turned more towards enclosure and rather than valuing them for providing a pleasing aesthetic, urban green places were considered beneficial when offering some kind of service to the built environment [73]. The services offered through urban green places can be threatened due to urban densification processes associated with compact city development [74]. In 2005, Birrell and colleagues [75] recognised that Melbourne faced particular challenges with regard to balancing sustainability needs with predicted population increases, as part of their assessment of the Victorian Government's Melbourne 2030 policy framework. The then Victorian Government acknowledged the need to engage in higher density, compact city development alongside urban growth boundaries [76]. Buxton, Carey and Phelan [77] identified that with a relaxing of urban growth boundaries, agricultural production in Melbourne's outer fringe had been threatened by urban development, and they called for stronger planning measures to protect peri-urban agricultural land. As identified by Webb and colleagues [78], Melbourne's population is expected to reach 8 million people by 2061, and so the threat to green places both within the urban center and agricultural fringe of Melbourne can be envisaged. Balancing the needs of protecting agricultural land and protecting green places in urban Melbourne is a complex task.

Studies of community and allotment gardens in Melbourne have focused on health and wellbeing benefits [17] and motivations for participation in these settings [10,13]. Additionally, this research questions whether the identified benefits of community and allotment gardens apply to the understudied location of Melbourne, and seeks to identify the perceived values and benefits of these places within an urban setting, as well as to explore the challenges of sustaining the existence of community and allotment gardens in the context of population growth, urban densification [75] and economic considerations. It is argued that places such as Melbourne that are ethnically diverse [79] undergo increasing population growth and urban densification [75] with diminishing access to outdoor and green space [76], it becomes increasingly important to protect the potential benefits of community and allotment gardening [3,5–9,11,12]. This is particularly the case as they may ameliorate identified health and wellbeing concerns of urban living [2–4]. Securing urban green places is important for human health and wellbeing [76] and aligns with the

development of Sustainable Precincts characterised in part by "high quality urban greenery and social infrastructure to create a 'village' feel in a city context" [74] (pp. 220–221).

3.4. Sampling

Gardeners were invited to participate through receiving an information brochure that was distributed to head gardeners by a staff member of 3000 Acres. The organisation 3000 Acres provides a range of information, advice regarding food production, land access and water procurement to local community and allotment gardens located around Melbourne [80]. Informed consent was obtained from each participant. The study included 23 participants in total, who ranged in age from their thirties to seventies. Participants tended to live locally to the gardens themselves, had been long-term gardeners, many had senior levels of involvement in the gardens, and were predominantly of Australian-European background, and within this sample more women (n = 17) were represented than men (n = 6).

3.5. Data Analysis

Interview content was transcribed verbatim and thematically analysed [70] using open coding [81]. Emergent themes, identified through a process of manual open coding ensuring implicit content was identified, were independently formulated into sets by both researchers, and subsequently jointly compared and synthesised to improve the validity of the data. Axial coding was then applied to identify relationships between the consolidated themes [70]. A summary of findings was offered to participants. To protect participants' privacy and internal confidentiality, names have been changed and identifying characteristics have not been referred to [82].

4. Results

The results and discussion sections, outlined thematically, include: (1) the benefits of access to open green places; (2) perceptions of who participates in community and allotment gardening; (3) levels of value and support for community and allotment gardens; and (4) change-making from the ground up. A word cloud encapsulating key areas of these sections is presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Word Cloud formulated from the Results and Discussion sections.

4.1. The Benefits of Access to Open Green Places

Within the urban context, the importance of having access to open green places, including community gardens for people to enjoy, is highlighted by David:

> . . . it's important in modern cities, and in modern society, that there are opportunities for people to have community gardens. I've got a feeling that they're becoming to be seen overseas as very important part of the infrastructure of cities and communities; and that that isn't appreciate as much in Australia . . . the reason for that being is that traditionally people had big backyards where they

> could do a lot of things, and now as land is being subdivided . . . and subdivided again until there's no more land to subdivide anymore, and now people are living in high rises in Melbourne, having these shared spaces will be critically important; and if they're lost they're not going to be able to be introduced in the future because they'll become part of built space . . . now's the time that more places should become available for people to learn the skills to grow their own food; and for governments to provide spaces for people to do that.

Providing opportunities for people to gain greater access to open green places affords the opportunity to experience a sense of belonging. Participants in this study were asked to define the concept of belonging from their perspective. The definition provided by Louise is representative of what the majority of participants said:

> Belonging means feeling connected to people around you, and the environment around you.

Within the community garden setting, an opportunity is presented for people to develop and nurture connections between each other and with the gardens themselves. Participants were asked to reflect upon the extent to which they felt that their experience of community or allotment gardening contributed to their sense of belonging. Bradley's response was similar to that of other participants in its identification of the following points:

> You're immediately involved in a little neighborhood project. And you're meeting people who live locally . . . they definitely foster a better sense of community. Because often people will live within walking distance, you're meeting people who do live nearby, who you wouldn't otherwise have a reason to talk to, or have that much in common with . . . I think just the sense of belonging is kind of nice.

These gardens represent alternative experiences to alienation found in urban contexts, conveyed by Bradley:

> To me it's interesting how people can bond over a shared interest. And it doesn't really take much to bring people together and get them chatting. And get them all pitching in. I mean, I'm helping people I've occasionally never met before. Plumb in water tanks and stuff . . . it's quite cool that people can just come together for a shared goal and put in their time. Especially these days. Everyone is so busy.

These connections between gardeners are valued within the context of a 'busy' way of life. The connections gardeners can feel to the gardens themselves are evidently valued:

> Sitting out in the gardens having a break between digging and seeing the little blue wrens coming around checking out the insects and stuff. And the bush down the back full of bellbirds . . . absolutely beautiful. And just sit and contemplate . . . it's an outdoor space that I can do exercises. I feel good after I've done a hard day's work in the garden or a hard morning's work in the garden . . . it doesn't happen as often as it should at the moment, but that's another issue. So . . . a sense of wellbeing and sometimes I come away from committee meetings not with a sense of wellbeing (Patrick).

The benefits of people being within the garden setting (as distinct from the setting of a committee meeting) appear to include restorative effects enhancing mental health and the facilitation of activity enhancing physical health which contributes to overall wellbeing. The benefits of belonging, a sense of community and enhanced wellbeing do evoke attention and interest from some members of the wider community, however there are many gardens which have lengthy waiting lists:

> And the plots have been in high demand, looking back through past newsletters I see that the waiting time [for plots] has been on average about one year. So for the last 35 years there's been a high demand (David).

4.2. Perceptions of who Participates in Community and Allotment Gardening

The question of who currently benefits from community and allotment gardens is one of importance. The six gardens which were involved in this study ranged from inner-city to suburban. Without being a focus of the interviews, some participants reported their perceptions of demographic patterns of participation in community and allotment gardening. Within one of the volunteer-based gardens involved in donating food, Douglas had the following to say:

> We probably have a lot of reasonably middle class, white, older generation, would probably be our biggest demographic ... the great thing about the corrections people coming in, is it's great to see them come into the garden and intermingle ... a few of them, about half, have really sort of enjoyed it definitely compared to their other community service work that they talk about, they really like this site, and the acceptance they get from this site.

The people referred to above are offenders who have been issued community work orders organised through Community Correctional Services, as part of their Community Work Program. Those involved perceive the divisions of wider society in terms of advantage and disadvantage.

With regard to participation, David from a large suburban garden observed significant diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender and age:

> I'd say half of the people here would have grown up in Australia. But there's also a mixture of people from some Asian countries, Indian, and European. Probably the European are the next biggest group, there's Italians, Spanish and so on. And that's interesting to see their different crops that they grow, and different ways of gardening, producing food. Some people like to just pick things to eat fresh, and some others, like the Italians particularly, grow a lot of things to store, like their tomato sauces, passatas, and the capsicums, and the beans ... that see them throughout the year. So that's interesting to see those differences.

As an individual gardener, David has come to learn about some of the cultural differences around food. When considering the differences in the age of suburban allotment gardeners, it is apparent that a great level of support and care is offered to those who are elderly:

> The ages are from young people through to people that are – there's one lady coming here on a walking stick in her 80's. So there's some people here, they're here until they can't get around anymore; and there's a few (who) ... help some of the older ones in working their plots and doing a bit of physical work, and they're then able to come and really enjoy the garden, and enjoy the social aspect ... they specially come up and sit here and talk a lot; and a couple of people, with that little bit of help, they're able to maintain their garden plots ... And like I was saying over there, the fellow that had a knee operation, we just helped keep his plot weeded for that six months when he couldn't come here. So that's nice too (David).

Skye reflected on a younger cohort of gardeners:

> I personally feel it's getting younger. Some people don't see that ... we're getting more single people for whatever reason.

Skye commented that many of the younger people, including teenagers and children, are occasionally brought to the gardens by their parents. Gender patterns were observed by Skye to be equal among men and women according to the names of plot holders. However, Skye noted that there may be more men than women, as she suspects that many men work on a second plot in their wife's name.

Time availability may significantly shape the composition of people who engage in community or allotment gardening. It is thus conceivable that younger people would have

greater involvement if, for instance, working lifestyles were not so onerous as suggested by Yvette:

> Everybody has different levels of time and energy and willingness to participate and they put that into different things and everybody struggles with the day-to-day demands of modern society with gadgets and work and family and commitments. So even with the best of intentions things can fall by the wayside (Yvette).

Somewhat ironically, those who are busy stand to potentially benefit from spending time in the natural environment, as highlighted by Sarah:

> It makes you slow down, particularly if you're working full-time and you're always thinking about work. I think walking around a natural environment, even if it's manicured, like the Carlton gardens, makes you relax and stop thinking about work, basically (Sarah).

That people who work full-time have such little time to engage in activities that may aid in restoration, health and wellbeing, may be short-sighted.

4.3. Levels of Value and Support for Community and Allotment Gardens

That people's engagement with place is often narrowly defined, restricted and at times costly, reflects the disconnection of people from the natural environment, both practically and symbolically. There is much scope at the local government level to listen to the needs and desires of communities who wish to have greater access to land. Within this study of urban Melbourne, it seems that difficulties in gaining and securing ongoing access to land is a constant and prevalent challenge. As Pearl expressed:

> You need a lot of a good will from the landowners or somebody who has power in that decision-making area to be able to make that happen basically, or … (pragmatically you need to) work with the conditions you get stuck with because usually … it doesn't have all those conditions (you need) available … It also puts pressure on the people's capacity because if it's not full sun, are they going to bother, or if it's only for a few years would they really want to invest in it? … It's acknowledged (by) … gardeners that gardens don't always look good but a community garden in a public space like that has to. So, a bit of the inconsistency with expectations and reality and then you've got that fear of if it doesn't look good maybe we're going to be shut down.

With knowledge of many community and allotment gardens, Pearl articulates the range of issues that can limit and impede the success of urban gardening. The issue of insecure tenure mentioned by Pearl was also discussed by David, who described an uncertain future:

> That's (possibility of council reclaiming the land of their allotment garden for development) created a bit of concern for people here over the last couple of years. A lot of people are very anxious, and people are wondering, well how much effort should I put into developing and maintaining my plot if it's going to be taken away at some time in the near future. So, the problem with that is the anxiety about the unsure future.

The extent to which community and allotment gardens are valued is brought into focus when considering the views of members of the wider community. As raised by Hannah:

> There are some other people who don't like us being here and complain to the council that there are weeds, so there's a mess or whatever. I always walk collecting all the rubbish that other people have left behind … we try to keep it like that, but of course some people probably want more parking space or something.

Several participants, including Sylvia, referred to this issue:

> One of the things that makes me really frustrated is the fact that most of these projects struggled. It's not valued within our community … it's valued in some

> sense. It's acknowledged how much enjoyment it brings and how meaningful it can be. But we don't value it in terms of looking at what the benefits can be and then really supporting that financially.

Pearl highlighted this issue effectively through comparing the level of support offered for sporting facilities, to that of community and allotment gardens:

> Football ovals and cricket grounds receive a huge amount of land, irrigation and funding. I don't play football or cricket. I don't even watch either of those things. I just think that's a huge investment in one small pocket of society that are interested in that and I feel like community gardens should be regarded as another use for open space. I don't know if they'd be valued as highly . . . but I think it's currently disproportionate, the amount of resources that go into those sporting areas and it's always been that way . . . If we were to come into a blank slate now and actually assess what the community's interests were without any preconceived ideas, I don't think that we'd give so much open space to sporting things.

This insight detailing the greater level of land and resources afforded to sporting facilities in comparison to community and allotment gardens raises a number of important questions. Such questions include who in the community benefits most from a local municipality's resources, how responsive to current community needs the outlay of municipal resources is, and how economic interests and community needs are determined.

4.4. Change Making from the Ground Up

When the gardeners in this study were asked why they thought there was interest in community and allotment gardening, their responses revealed the connection made between this local, emplaced activity, with the wider social and environmental change they feel is needed:

> It's just people wanting to be involved with their community . . . Be self-sufficient, know their neighbors . . . you have more independence or freedom by growing your own food . . . Just harnessing that community—people know each other. The main thing is, really, about people taking social issues and environmental issues into their own hands . . . People can feel really disenfranchised and disempowered with what's going on in the world, and you can become quite apathetic, as well - that you don't have any power. Whereas, this gives people power. They can be doing things that they think are good for themselves and other people (Louise).

That community and allotment gardening can offer people who may be concerned with wider social and environmental issues a sense of empowerment is testament to the tangible benefits people experience as a result of their engagement. Appreciation of the importance of connecting with the natural environment (as a child or as an adult) as a fundamental step in generating a sense of environmental care was insightfully conveyed:

> That's kind of the reason actually I got into gardening a little bit, and growing food, because . . . it's one of the best ways to expose kids, not only kids, but anyone to sort of nurturing the soil, growing food, growing plants, connecting to nature, and then hopefully they can form that connection so then they go out of the way to improve outcomes for the natural environment on a larger scale in some ways. That's just getting into some of my beliefs anyway . . . that the grassroots bottom-up approach is really important, and I think people do have to have that sort of tangible connection with the natural environment before they're going to do something for the natural environment (Douglas).

Recognising the capacity within these local connections between people and place, Abigail conveys an important message:

> The relationship with nature is incredibly important for the wellbeing of the planet, actually. And unless people have got some connection and respect for the earth, then we haven't got a hope. You know that you just can't take every resource from the earth and destroy it and expect to have wellbeing as a species.

It is recognised that community and allotment gardening represent opportunities to create connections between people and place, which, in turn, have the potential to enhance social and environmental wellbeing.

5. Discussion

5.1. The Benefits of Access to Open Green Places

Concerns raised by participants regarding ensuring access for community gardens highlights the tension regarding the ever-diminishing room for gardens, and the need to refocus our attention on protecting green places from further development, echoing concerns highlighted by Apostolopoulou and Kotsila [48], Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny [46], Schmelzkopf [49] and Smith and Kurtz [47]. When land in urban contexts is perceived as vacant and available space, it can be perceived as generic, and therefore economically expendable by those looking to gain economically. This stance undermines the importance of listening to community needs [57]. However, if each parcel of land was instead perceived as a particular place within a particular neighborhood in which it was valued, it is more likely to be recognised by others in terms of its potential significance and meaning [25,65]. Additionally, participants' concerns can be understood within a wider rationalist culture shaped by what Plumwood [2] identifies as 'human-self enclosure', which diminishes 'ecological reality'. Within such a context, Plumwood [2] sees the environment as becoming secondary to communities at best, and forgotten altogether at worst, with people focusing upon what they perceive to be feeding them: the economy rather than the environment.

The significance of what is offered through opportunities for connection within community and allotment gardens was highlighted through participants' characterisation of these activities as a form of belonging, which supports use of the term place rather than space, as these gardens become special locations imbued with connection and meaning [25,65]. That participants in this study felt a sense of belonging through their engagement, supports the work of Eizenberg [31] and Kettle [32]. A local community or allotment garden's capacity to help individuals feel more connected to their community is of significant value, particularly when the experience of wider society for many does not offer this [8,32,33,42]. Their value is also shown to be appreciated by participants in the context of the challenges presented by urban living including mental fatigue and overload [3]. Additionally, the community connections forged through urban environmental stewardship can generate social resilience, providing community members a support network in the face of a range of challenges [44]. The restorative effects identified by participants from being within these garden settings offers further support for existing literature identifying these wellbeing benefits [7,9,17,21,83]. Through the application of a phenomenological lens, these findings importantly show that it is the act of engaging with the gardens that begets valuable sense experience [69].

Finally, that many people are waiting for significant periods of time on waiting lists to engage with certain gardens suggests a greater community need for this amenity that local governments have a responsibility to heed [57] as there would be significant benefit derived by dedicating more places in and around urban Melbourne for them.

5.2. Perceptions of Who Participates in Community and Allotment Gardening

While there appears to be an expected profile of a typical community or allotment gardener, there do appear to be variations from this. Within an inner-city food bank garden, past offenders contribute community service by aiding the work of volunteers in growing food for people in need. Of concern in this particular garden is its carrying out of a task to support those in need of food, when such a task, and its underlying causes, may be perceived as the responsibility of government via effective policy and regulation [60,61].

Simultaneously, it is possible to see in such an initiative a challenge to neoliberal policies in terms of the positive relationships taking place between groups who may otherwise be less likely to encounter one another [63]. That said, this is tempered by the potential lack of free volition of those undertaking community service in this case.

In the large allotment-based suburban garden involved in this study, around half of these gardeners were thought to come from overseas. Without being able to ascertain the extent to which these individual gardeners come together, it does seem that such gardens at the very least provide an opportunity for culturally diverse relationships to form [34,35]. This has particular potential for 40% of Greater Melbourne's population who were born overseas [34].

With reference to participation more broadly, Kettle [32] identifies a shift from gardens being comprised predominantly of men and individuals of a lower socio-economic demographic, to more recently being comprised of a greater number of women, younger individuals, and those from a higher socio-economic demographic, aligning with perceptions identified within this study. However, limitations facing younger people's engagement was also identified within this study due to working lifestyle commitments. This aligns with concerns around 'time poverty' identified by Williams, Masuda and Tallis [84] who highlight the adverse impact time poverty has on wellbeing and challenge its lack of acknowledgement within policy and research. If little time is available for activities that have the potential to enhance wellbeing [84], it would seem imperative that the issue of time poverty be discussed, studied and acknowledged within policy.

Serious conversations pertaining to the above could go some distance towards achieving change, bringing forth opportunities for meaningful connections between people and place and for enhancing a sense of belonging, community and wellbeing. Ensuring also that people feel welcome in community and allotment gardens offers individuals the confidence needed to participate fully [39] in order to enjoy these benefits.

5.3. Levels of Value and Support for Community and Allotment Gardens

Concerns around insecure land tenure and access raised by participants reflect those of Wakefield et al. [21], as well as Saldivar-Tanaka and Krasny [46] regarding access to land, and Smith and Kurtz [47] regarding the provision of places for community gardens within a neoliberal context. Additional barriers faced can include bureaucratic resistance, soil contamination, a lack of understanding by decision makers, and a need for greater support and resources [21]. Taken together, these barriers may reveal a perceived lack of value for community and allotment gardens by local government as the identified barriers can be addressed and overcome, if there was a will to do so.

These forms of insecurity that threaten community and allotment gardens can result in some people not bothering to participate and others to become adept environmental activists [71]. Questions regarding who benefits most from local government amenities, how responsive local governments are to community needs, and how economic considerations and community needs are assessed are worthy of further research and government attention, particularly given the health and wellbeing benefits offered by community and allotment gardening, [18–21,85] and the potentially significant contribution that could be achieved in this area at the local government level.

5.4. Change Making from the Ground Up

A significant finding from this research is that the tangible nature of community and allotment gardening appears to offer the participants a personal form of experience and satisfaction, that is recognised as contributing to addressing wider environmental and societal issues. This sentiment reflects the work of Relph [67] who recognises the capacity of generating a sense of place for facilitating environmental action, and McMillen and colleagues [44] who recognised the capacity for generating social resilience through such an activity. This insight echoes the work of Kaltenborn [86], whose research found that people who experienced a sense of place were more likely to address environmental issues

than those who had a weak sense of place, thus highlighting the opportunity for meaning-making through connection [69] to place, that in turn can generate change-making. The connection to place generated through this activity in this way is recognised as being the precursor to bringing about environmental care and accountability [2,25–29,67].

In the context of Melbourne, a city that has been experiencing significant population growth and urban densification, there exists much potential to play a critical role in ensuring that current and future residents have opportunities to experience valuable connections to place and to each other, that are capable of generating social and environmental wellbeing. The data from this study suggest that theoretically, place-making through activities such as community and allotment gardening have the capacity to facilitate social and environmental change-making.

6. Conclusions

This Melbourne-based study contributes to a growing body of research internationally, demonstrating that the perceived benefits of having access to green places in the form of community and allotment gardens include an enhanced sense of wellbeing through the natural environment's restorative effects, and a sense of community and belonging within urban contexts.

Participants' observations regarding patterns of participation in community and allotment gardening in urban Melbourne indicated that some groups within society may be under-represented. It is disappointing that the findings from all but one of these gardens were not perceived to align with experiences of greater cultural integration.

The low level of support participants feel is shown towards these Melbourne-based community and allotment gardens is concerning, as challenges pertaining to gaining and securing ongoing access to land are currently faced. Obtaining data to determine the gap between how much funding is needed and how much is available to community and allotment gardens in Melbourne would be beneficial. Underlying these issues is concern about a lower value being placed upon the activities of community and allotment gardening, compared with the value placed on neoliberal development within the context of urban densification processes, population pressures, and other leisure activities; all of which have tended to dominate local councils' priorities.

Change-making from the ground up is salient within the findings in that community and allotment gardeners appear to recognise the benefits of this activity for their own physical and mental wellbeing. Importantly, the capacity of these garden settings for generating a sense of connection to the natural environment is also recognised by the participants. When connections are made to the natural environment, place-making is enacted, empathy is generated, and environmental care and accountability can be demonstrated. Within the community and allotment gardening literature, this last finding represents a new contribution related to the work of Crossan et al. [63], by applying and supporting the theoretical work of Merleau-Ponty [69], Castells [68], Escobar [65], Bateson [16] and Relph [67] with these empirical findings, as well as supporting and extending upon the findings of place based studies by Kaltenborn [86] and Bailey [85]. Through place-making, community and allotment gardens have the capacity to empower members of local communities to contribute to addressing wider environmental concerns about which they deeply care. Theoretically, a link can be made between place-making and change-making. The benefits of community and allotment gardening for people and place as found in this study are significant and appear to have the capacity to ameliorate some of the health and wellbeing concerns of increasing urbanisation.

Identified limitations at the local government and community level relate to the under-recognised value of community and allotment gardens, and the consequent lack of adequate support and access to land. This research suggests that priority should be given to improving community and allotment gardening access for members of urban communities. This is particularly the case for those who are currently under-represented, and for those whose engagement is insecure or non-existent due to identified limitations of gaining

access and securing ongoing access to land in Melbourne (a city subject to an increasing population and increasing urban densification) [75]. Discussions and further engagement between local communities and governments are required to ensure that community needs and interests are acknowledged and supported through the process of Melbourne's growth and development. Doing so has the capacity to enhance the democracy of such cities, with persistent community efforts to maintain the presence of these gardens demonstrating their challenge to the encroaching development of land. The benefits of community and allotment gardening are found to extend to the health and wellbeing of people, and that of the natural environment.

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