

Matrix - Walworth Garden for Barbican

Resources overview, themes, history and timeline relating to Walworth Garden

Resources for Walworth Garden

- **Walworth Garden Archive** : photographs dating from 1987. Digitised but not catalogued. These include photographs from the Matrix build as well as other activities at the garden over the years. Also plans, some administrative documents from 1987 to 1991, newsletters/annual reports, and a few press clippings. A selection can be seen in this [pdf](#).
- **John Lawler of Nasatyr & Lawler**: project architect following Matrix holds the original drawings and correspondents for their side of the build.
- **Malcolm Orgee** : photographs from Garden Manager | circa 1990.
- **Dawn Saunders** : photographs by co-manager | circa ~1987-1989.
- Interviews (by John Whelan, Steph Haszczyn and Angharad Davies) with founding members, workers, builders and management committee.
- Interview with Ann de Graft Johnson by Maria Venegas | held by Matrix
- Conversation with Barbara Jones (trainee at Lambeth Women's Workshop)
- **Related research** includes documents gathered by Katrina Black, Angharad Davies and Rhianon Morgan Hatch in relation to the garden and related themes.*

*N.B. There are documents held in archives that have been inaccessible due to COVID. These will be reviewed when archives open again (currently understood to be in August / September 2020).

Context

Walworth Garden sits on a 1/3 of an acre site on a wedged-shaped corner block in the resident streets just south of Elephant and Castle, between Kennington and Walworth. In contrast to the large scale corporate developments that have become common in the surrounding area, including the dismantling of the Heygate Estate to make way for Elephant Park, the transformations of the garden have been slow, slight and community driven.

The garden came about due to a specific set of urban conditions set into motion following the Second World War. These were supported by the local and national Labour politics of the 1970s and 80s (including funding from the Department of Education) that advocated for the environmental agenda of local residents who were in turn supported by the activism, energy and experimentation that squatting made space for in the city.

Key Themes

- **Community action, self-organising and active local politics**
- **Women's building cooperatives, building without men, and the construction site as a space for education**
- **Contradictory and complementary narratives, recorded and unrecorded**

These three themes are indicative of some of the nuanced and complex circumstances that Matrix encountered and enacted as a practice. This document outlines how these unrecorded and contradictory narratives - of women working within architecture and manual trades, of the urban

spatial conditions of the 1970s and 80s in London as tempered by local and state politics, can be told through the conception and establishment of Walworth Garden.

Other Matrix projects directly linked to the garden are Lambeth Women's Workshop in West Norwood and Calthorpe Project in Kings Cross.

A nexus of other organisations sit alongside these histories including (but by no means limited to) Women's Building Co-operative, 56a archive, Outshirts Ltd, Southwark Women's Aid, Hilda's Builders, Amazon Nails, StrawWorks, Urban Cycle, Walworth Imprint, Pullens Estate Squats, St Agnes Place Squats, Lambeth Self-Help Housing, 14 Radnor Terrace, South London's Women's Centre, Women's Education in Building, Southwark Women's Training Workshop, Women and Manual Trades, Women in Construction, Strawberry Building Collective, New Architecture Movement and its magazine Slate.

Community action, self-organising and active local politics

The garden's roots were established in the mid-1980's at a time where there was an intensity of **community action, self-organising and active local politics**, coupled with a sustained focus on funding community and minority group projects by the Greater London Council.¹ The site was occupied by a row of Victorian terraces until the late 1970s when these buildings were cleared by Southwark Council to make way for new housing. These new houses were in fact never built, and the land was boarded up and left abandoned. A group of residents (some of whom were local labour party members, some lived in the squatting communities such as the Pullens Estate² and St Agnes Place) were led by an environmental activist group, Urban Cycle, and supported by three local labour councillors to negotiate the lease of the plot from the council. The project relied upon volunteers (as it still does) to offer support and skills as committee members, and to work on-site as gardeners.

The future garden's derelict site reflected a wider condition of vacancy across London. By 1971 Greater London contained 23,100 empty dwellings awaiting demolition³ and, with the highest proportion of council housing stock in the UK, many of these were in Southwark. Numerous squats were established in the streets surrounding the garden. Squatting offered a freedom from the work-to-rent grind. It also necessitated that individuals, sometimes acting as building co-operatives, undertake maintenance and repair work on their homes as a result of the condition that the buildings had been reduced to by the council. These homes ungendered skills which were then taken outside. At the same time a network of women's groups were emerging - members came from (among other places) mixed and single-sex squats, they were builders, architects, activists, environmentalists - and folded in upon one another. This is acutely demonstrated by the Feminist Design Collective of 1978 that split to become Matrix Feminist Design Collective in 1980, who are then invited to build the Walworth farm building in 1988 employing labour from Lambeth Women's Workshop, a workshop set up in 1980 by Women's Building/ers Co-op alongside women from original Feminist Design Collective.

¹ During its four-year reign it disbursed £30m in grants to women's groups; ; the documents it produced on issues like transport and health service provision are still relevant today, and its literature fizzles with an enthusiasm and vigour absent from today's women's movement. [Beyond Red Ken | Politics](#)

² [56a archive](#) an infoshop that is a long-term volunteer-run, 100% unfunded, DIY social centre in Walworth, South London that was founded as part of the squatting community based in the Pullens Estate. They share a collectively run building with Fareshares food co-op and 56a Bikespace.

³ *Sisterhood and Squatting in the 1970s: Feminism, Housing and Urban Change in Hackney* by Christine Wall page 79.

Women's building cooperatives, building without men, and the construction site as a space for education

Matrix Feminist Design Collective contributed to a small but important piece of the garden's history, which until recently was unknown to the garden. In this still evolving story Matrix was commissioned to design and build a permanent classroom and office space in 1988 for the newly established site. This building remains as a teaching space to this day. Their involvement was initiated after the two women involved in founding and clearing the garden site decided they wanted to get more women involved in the development of the project. The construction phase of the farm building, run by Matrix, was purposefully set up as an all-female build, involving women who had been or were currently training at Lambeth Women's Workshop (LWW). LWW, set up in 1980, gave women (predominantly working class) an opportunity to gain skills and eventually find employment in manual trades which was almost exclusively a male environment at the time, and one that remains so. Matrix recognised the need to explore women-led practices – both through design and construction, and were part of a cohort of radical practitioners who were exploring **women's building cooperatives⁴, building without men⁵, and the construction site as a space for education.⁶**

Learning in situ is a philosophy that is also central to all aspects of the garden's activities from the gardening team to the volunteers to the students. The aim from the beginning was to create a space for hands-on education through skills-based horticultural training. The garden itself, reflecting local cultural produce grown with organic gardening methods, was a demonstration of horticulture in action that continues today with training and one-off classes free to southwark residents. This is supported by the on-site landscaping projects including the recent addition of a new wildlife pond and major re-landscaping project that brought the british native hedge to the center of the garden as a way to re-educate the eyes away from annuals and towards planting that supports wildlife year round.

Contradictory and complementary narratives, recorded and unrecorded

As is often the case with projects with complex and overlapping histories such as Walworth Garden, there are **contradictory and complementary narratives, recorded and unrecorded** that circle around the building on the farm site. The garden - with its resources stretched - has never the capacity or inclination to record its own history. This has been further limited by records of people and plants not being kept or being actively discarded. When speaking about the Matrix build, a founding committee member said recently that the feminist group contracting the building rejected the help of experienced men which therefore stymied work, that everyone was being paid equally and that's why the money ran out, and that there were skilled and unskilled women on site some of whom didn't know what they were doing. An alternative narrative, referenced in an issue of Undercurrents Magazine 'Women Co-Ops', explains that in order to experience a different culture of building there was a necessity to build only with women, all get paid equally regardless and skilling on site is a deliberate pedagogical and cultural approach that involves on-tool learning. Setting these two or three or four⁷ narratives alongside one another leaches out the multiple histories and experiences. It shows the complexities and differing perspectives that sit within any ambitious, community-based project, or reside within the alternative cultural practices that incorporate them as a tool for the design and dissemination of space.

⁴ [Undercurrents Issue women in co-ops](#) magazine 1981 references on page 9, 18-19, 34

⁵ [Women in Construction](#) video 1983 Inner London Education Authority

⁶ [On Tools interview with Barbara Jones](#) Sisterhood and After: The Women's Liberation Oral History Project

⁷ Interviews have been, or are in the process of being, recorded with founding members, workers, builders and management committee.

Walworth Garden : a brief and incomplete⁸ history of beginnings

Originally named Walworth City Farm, the garden was established in 1987 with the ambition of providing horticultural skills training for young people from the local area who were seeking employment. As well as being a place to gain formal qualifications, the garden was a space for horticultural based community activities for local volunteers, school groups, and visitors from the Maudsley Hospital who came to the farm for horticultural therapy classes. Other activities included vegetable growing, bee keeping and plant propagation. The garden also sold plants propagated on site. All of these activities continue to this day.

Walworth Garden lies half a mile south of Elephant and Castle on a wedged-shaped corner block in the residential streets between Kennington and Walworth. The 1/3 of an acre site was occupied by a row of Victorian terraces until the late 1970s when these buildings were cleared by Southwark Council to make way for new housing. These new houses were never built and the land was boarded up and left abandoned. At the same time the area played host to numerous communities of squatters who lived adjacent streets, notably on the Pullens Estate to the north and St Agnes Place to the south. It was residents from these surrounding communities along with more permanently housed locals that came together to negotiate the lease of the plot from the council. The idea was initially suggested by environmental group, Urban Cycle. Having gained access to the site, the first months were spent clearing knotweed and needles. Following this, raised vegetable beds and bee hives were installed. A lease was taken for the ground floor premises 200 yards away on Amelia Street, from which the farm would be run in advance of facilities including a classroom, office and toilets being built on site. Matrix Feminist Design Collective were brought in as project architects, and they worked with women from the Lambeth Women's Workshop to construct the new farm building. This timber-framed building had originally been conceived for Calthorpe Project in Kings Cross, but was never built due to lack of funds. Work at Walworth began in July 1989 but by the Autumn the farm found itself in financial straits as the money designated for the build had run out. At this point Matrix's involvement ended and the building project was put on hold until further funding could be found. With the foundations laid and timbers framed the building sat under tarp for over a year.

In October 1989, a management committee was elected and was tasked with finding funding to safeguard the farm. Money was secured that would allow for the completion of the build and running of the organisation over the next two years. Walworth committee member, Robert Hadfield brought in recently established architectural practice, Nasatyr & Lawler to take over and complete the structure. Nasatyr & Lawler had only set up on their own a year earlier, having worked together for the GLC as project architects on the Coin Street development. With the dissolution of the GLC, they became council 'architects in exile'⁹ and made the decision to set up alone. Nasatyr & Lawler were not made aware of Matrix's existing drawings, but drew up designs that took into account the existing structure that Matrix and the Lambeth Women's Workshop had built. The layout, like Matrix design, included an office, classroom, two accessible toilets and kitchen that are still in operation today at the garden.

Thirty-three years on, the classroom and surrounding garden continue to be a place for training and therapy through horticulture. The garden has ten full time employees and is open seven days a week for the local community and visitors alike. It offers horticultural therapy classes to vulnerable and disabled adults, and educational opportunities targeted at unemployed people in Southwark through City & Guilds horticultural training scheme. Its garden maintenance team run contracts across Lambeth and Southwark for both councils as well as offering landscaping services to private clients. Specimens propagated from some of the over 250 species on site can be purchased on site. As with its beginnings the garden continues to rely upon the support of volunteers.

⁸ Interviews and conversations with founding members, volunteers and staff continue.

⁹ Quote from conversation with John Lawler, 4th July 2020

TIMELINE

[Blue for politics](#) | [Green for Walworth Garden](#)

[Yellow for women and building](#) | [Red Nasatyr and Lawler](#)

- 1943/4 Greater London Plan: South Cross ring road proposed through WG site¹⁰
- 1960s GLC ask recently enlarged London Boroughs to draw up community plans in line with GLC's overall strategy¹¹
- 1965 LLC replaced with GLC
- 1975 ref. to LWW by See Red regarding works on 14 Radnor Place¹²
Sex Discrimination Act passed¹³
Women in Construction Women and Manual Trades set up¹⁴
~ Julia Dwyer moves in St Agnes Place squat (circa 1975)
Nasatyr & Lawler make plans for Coin Street development¹⁵
New Architecture Movement founded
- 1977 Nasatyr & Lawler plans for Coin Street approved (to be later revoked)
- 1978 Feminist Design Collective (FDC) founded
- 1979 Artemis, London's first women's building co-op established.
'Women and Space' Conference at Architectural Association
- 1980 6th October Lambeth Women's Workshop opens
Barbara Jones trains at LWW on first course
Feminist Design Collective splits
Matrix Feminist Design Co-operative founded
- 1981 LWW at **Park Hall Trading Estate, Robson Road, West Norwood, SE27**¹⁶
Three TOPS-trained women carpenters¹⁷ and one book keeper employed
Open three days a week
The trainee receives no pay, but the timber is provided
They do have some machine tools, but most of the training is on hand tools¹⁸
They take 12 trainees at any one time (two days a week for 16 weeks)
As a priority they take white and black working class women and women trying to get onto TOPS training courses.
- 1982 Greater London Council set up a Women's Committee in 1982 under Ken Livingston's administration. The first Chair was Valerie Wise appointed 11 May 1982.
- 1982 working party on women in construction set up by the construction union UCATT¹⁹
- 1983 BJ sets up Hilda's Builders
- 1984 Women in Construction Advisory group set up by group of London local authorities²⁰
Making Space published
- 1985 Plans by Stroud, Nullis & Partners for TA Centre details adjacent land as designated to farm

¹⁰ [Abercrombie Road Plan 1943 / Road plans / The Proud City : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming](#)

¹¹ *Victory Villa : challenging the planners in South London* Nick Anning and Jill Simpson in *Squatting the Real Story*, 142.

¹² [See Red Women's Workshop Interview: Suzy Mackie and Pru Stevenson](#)

¹³ Providing a lever for women to access training in government training centres on six-month intensive Training Opportunity Programme courses in skill centres. Joan Payne, *Women Training and the Skills Shortage: The Case for Public Investment*. Policy Studies Institute, London, 1991.

¹⁴ [Sisterhood oral histories](#) by Marguerite Jolly

¹⁵ [Coin Street - Creating an Inspirational Neighbourhood - Coin Street Community Builders](#)

¹⁶ *Building without men* Undercurrents 1981 Women in Co-op article, 34

¹⁷ *Building without men* Undercurrents 1981 Women in Co-op article, 18

¹⁸ *Building without men* Undercurrents 1981 Women in Co-op article, 18

¹⁹ The Union of Construction & Allied Technical Trades

²⁰ *Are women 'not up to' working in construction - at all times and everywhere?* Linda Clarke and Christine Wall p.19

1986	<i>Thatcher's government took over and abolished the GLC including the Womens' Committee. During its four-year reign the Womens' Committee disbursed £30m in grants to women's groups²¹.</i>
1986	The London Women's handbook published by the GLC Women's Committee.
1987 - 2008	LWW on company's house as registered company
1987	WG established; land exchange negotiated with TA Tenancy of 230 Amelia street agreed for farm office
1988	WG connected to drainage WG connected to water WG soil contamination undertaken WG exchange land with TA WG opens to public 15th July (Harriet Harman attends) Matrix designs for WG (originally imagined for Calthorpe Project community garden in Kings Cross), Ann de Graft Johnson project architect 'Women's Realm' conference at University of North London (200 attendees) Nasatyr & Lawler start practice
1989	LWW on site at WG (July) BJ sets up Amazon Nails WG in financial crisis Matrix leave WG site WG new management committee elected (oct)
1990	Robert Hadfield approaches Nasatyr and Lawler to design/finish building Open day to relaunch (5 May) WG drawing submitted by Nasatyr and Lawler
1991	WG building completed by Nasatyr and Lawler WG New boundary fence by Ednie Stroud Nullis for TA boundary WG Nasatyr and Lawler Building completed WG Polytunnel moved WG new polytunnel erected WG pond built
1992	WG Land swap takes place (<i>still to be confirmed</i>) WG funds sort for vehicle for site work WG becomes a registered charity
Early 1990s	Amazon Nails tenders for Southwark Women's Aid Hostel (roofing job)
1998	WG brick path laid WG at Bermondsey carnival WG New green house built
2000	WG pond restored LWW 20 year anniversary celebrations (6th Oct)
2002	WG Jubilee pergola
2009	WG mural painted on tool shed WG removal of polytunnel and glass house erected
2011	WG new front gate by Kevin Boys Butterfly bench by Arther De Mowbray (of then Camberwell Beauty logo)
2012	BJ works on Haringey Eco Hub (Anne Thorne Architects) with Fran Bradshaw
2016	WG Cactus dome installed
2017	WG 30th Birthday
2019/2020	WG Major landscaping project, and new pond

²¹ [Beyond Red Ken | London politics](#)

Contributors

Katrina Black, Angharad Davies and Rhianon Morgan Hatch have been working together on numerous projects related to histories of feminist organising and alternative building practices since January 2019.

Katrina Black is a writer, researcher and dramaturge. She co-runs female-led, non-profit art and research organisation Jupiter Woods.

Angharad Davies is an artist and architectural researcher. She has been a volunteer at Walworth Garden since June 2019.

Rhianon Morgan Hatch is a fully qualified architect and member of the London-based design practice public works. She has undertaken training as a carpenter.