



Quality journalism

For just 16p a day you can support the Guardian's independence and our award-winning journalism
Become a supporter from just £5 per month

theguardian

Hands off #OurLand: gifting green space to QPR highlights wider threat to cities

Bradley L Garrett

The 61 acres of public land in west London is another in the growing list of green spaces being taken over by developers. And with the Land Registry likely to get privatised, ownership information is at risk of being obscured

Monday 13 June 2016 09.52 BST

Travellers flying into Heathrow recently may have spotted a carefully stencilled, 60-metre message - #OurLand - stretching across open green space in west London. This giant slogan was spray painted by local campaigners in liquid chalk in response to Ealing council's decision to give away 61 acres of public land - known as Warren Farm and worth £31.5m - to Queens Park Rangers football club.

QPR, who play in the Championship, intend to build a £2m training facility on this metropolitan open land, and in the process will drive off the local community who have used it for decades for lazy weekend strolls, local sporting events and flying model aircraft.

Campaigners consider the "gifting" of this land a final jab by London's former mayor Boris Johnson, who they regard as having had an unwavering commitment to privatising as much of the capital's public spaces as possible before he left office. In a letter to Johnson, outgoing Green party London Assembly member Darren Johnston wrote that "the public will be excluded from two thirds of the existing site that they previously had open access to. The facilities will only be available to the public at the concession of QPR."

Just as public squares in the city are being handed over to private developers, so too are our green and open spaces.

By the time I arrive at Warren Farm on a sunny Saturday morning to fly model planes with Malcolm Weller, a local resident and member of the British Model Flying Association, the white lettering has faded somewhat but is probably still visible from the air. As Weller throws his foam fixed-wing into a gust, I wonder if he is concerned about the aircraft coming in low to Heathrow.

"Oh no not at all, we have permission to fly here," he says. "It's only from our perspective here on the grass that they look close - they're nowhere near each other. Want to have a go?"

Spaces like this are one of the primary reasons we move to, or stay in, London. It is among the

greenest cities of its size in the world, with more than 38% of its land surface designated green and open space. A couple walking their dog and a guy sitting on a berm behind us watch as Weller reaches over and hits the throttle, launching the plane back into the sky.

Open spaces are what we make them - they can be places of escape or encounter, places for hard exercise or pointless play. They are essential components of flexible cities.

In a 2013 comparison of available green and open spaces, Vienna (admittedly a much smaller city than London, with a population of just over 1.7 million compared with London's 8.5 million) trounced every other major city. More than half of Austria's capital is public park, garden, woods and greenbelt, which equates to 120 sq metres for every resident of the city - and new green spaces are still being built.

Josh Grigsby, an urbanist at the University of Vienna, points me in the direction of where I can see this green and public-spirited ethos in action: a 14-mile stretch of public land built in the 1980s between the river Danube and the parallel New Danube (a side channel created to protect the city from flooding).

The Donauinsel (Danube Island) is essentially a linear common and is occupied by people sunbathing, barbecuing, playing games, having open bonfires and cruising past on standing paddle boards and bicycles. After a good hour of walking, I reach the end of the spit where an inviting set of concrete steps descend into the river.

A skyscraper looms over the frigid waters, and it occurs to me that this stretch of land was built about the same time as Canary Wharf - its antithesis in many ways.

While Vienna shows an ongoing commitment to provision of recreational land for all, the story in the UK looks depressingly different. Around the country, common spaces on the edges of cities - Freeman's Wood in Lancaster is another long-cherished example - are coming under threat of development. In city centres, austerity cuts and budget shortfalls are forcing many local councils to consider handing over management of open spaces to private developers, or selling them off entirely.

Of course, to be able to have a healthy debate about the kind of public spaces we want in our cities, we need access to data about land and development deals such as that of Warren Farm. To get this information in Britain, we turn to the Land Registry, the government-owned public record of ownership.

Lamentably, the government has aspirations to privatise the Land Registry, transforming it into a frighteningly Orwellian "private-sector delivery body" known as NewCo.

A public consultation period on the proposal has already closed - despite ministers having only announced the move just before the Easter weekend, then posting a 42-page document for a public consultation that was every bit as difficult to digest as you would imagine.

Yet more than 300,000 people have signed a petition against this bill. It turns out that this is a hot-button issue for many Britons, and as the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn outlined in the House of Commons recently, a previous sell-off attempt was abandoned by the last government after an overwhelmingly negative response to a consultation. Here we are reacting again to the same proposal the British public has already rejected once.

The government insists the sell-off is necessary to cover budget shortfalls, yet the shadow business secretary Angela Eagle has made it clear that the Land Registry ran a surplus of £100m in 2012/13, while the consultation document itself states: "In 2014/15, total costs for Land Registry were £260.5m [and] total revenue for 2014/15 was £297.1m."

Given that the Land Registry is clearly a windfall for taxpayers, one cannot help but wonder whether part of the rationale behind this move is to obscure information about property ownership. One day prime minister David Cameron is hosting an anti-corruption summit, calling for a “concerted effort to get to grips with tax evasion, aggressive tax avoidance and corporate secrecy”. The next, he seeks to hand control over public data about landholding to NewCo.

Which brings us back to that 60-metre message that was briefly visible to passengers flying over west London. The privatisation of open and green spaces, and the privatisation of data, are inseparable. If the public cannot get access to information about land deals, they cannot gather evidence to object to them - whether by consultation, petition or spray can.

And these disputes are not limited to commons; they are also playing out in our public parks.

In Battersea, south London, locals have already experienced the bleeding edge of park privatisation: half of a playground in Battersea Park was given over to the commercial climbing company GoApe, rendering that part of the park inaccessible to anyone who does not pay a £33 admission fee.

According to the council’s own survey, 86% of the public were against the plans; despite protests organised by local residents, the council handed over the play area.

About the same time, Wandsworth council also gave the go-ahead to a Formula E racing event that necessitated ripping up large swathes of grass and installing daunting barriers throughout Battersea Park. Frustrated residents brought a judicial review, and limped away victorious last month after coming to an agreement with the organisers: the event will not return to the park for the 2016/17 season.

It is hard to blame councils who are cash-strapped and looking for ways to get in the black. Park budgets have been cut by 50% in Liverpool, more than 60% in Newcastle, and a 2014 Heritage Lottery Fund report suggests “86% of park managers report cuts to revenue budgets since 2010” and “45% of local authorities are considering either selling parks and green spaces or transferring their management”. Look no further than Bexley, where council chiefs are selling off four open spaces to the private sector to “balance the books”.

London’s new mayor Sadiq Khan, like his predecessor, has made promises to protect green spaces. In his manifesto, he writes: “It is on these green spaces that our city’s biodiversity and wildlife is most concentrated, our children play and learn about nature, and where we Londoners go to relax. With huge pressures on land for housing and other uses, it is essential that we maintain these spaces, and even expand upon them.”

Khan has promised to “strengthen protections for open spaces within the London Plan, including playing fields, metropolitan open land, and our sites of importance for local nature conservation and nature reserves” - but also says he wishes to work with “the private sector to improve our public spaces”.

This slippage is not insignificant, for it is through those deals that we are losing the public city. As public space becomes “public realm”, owned and controlled by private interests, political promises evaporate into opaque clouds of backdoor deals that see flexible spaces such as Warren Farm transitioning into regulated spaces controlled by private interests - green in colour but not in character.

The concerns levelled by local campaigners in Ealing are quite damning, particularly because Warren Farm is designated metropolitan open land, which under the London Plan should prevent any inappropriate development “except in very special circumstances”. Campaigners say no such circumstances have been articulated coherently by Ealing council, leaving them with the sense that this is yet another giveaway of public green space to enrich private interests.

Their twin responses - an online petition and a 60-metre stencilled message - are a desperate plea for us all to pay attention, as London’s green and open spaces are subsumed by creeping privatisation.

Follow Guardian Cities on Twitter and Facebook and join the discussion

**Want a football roundup
direct to your inbox?** ✕

Sign up to the Fiver, our daily email on the world of football

More comment

Topics

Green space Privatisation London Parks and green spaces QPR

Save for later Article saved

Reuse this content