



CARROT CITY

CREATING PLACES FOR URBAN AGRICULTURE

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LEADENHALL STREET CITY FARM

MITCHELL TAYLOR WORKSHOP AND BRITISH LAND
LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM



In many cities around the world, prominent central building sites stand empty for years while developers negotiate with planning departments or wait for financing. These wasted spaces are often boarded up or used as temporary parking lots, offering little to the local community. One such site is 122 Leadenhall Street in the City of London, which is destined to hold a forty-seven-story commercial building by Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners architects. The project was mothballed in 2008 due to the poor economy and associated reduced demand for office space, so the site owner, British Land, organized an ideas competition for young architects, challenging them to find a temporary use for the site—with a budget of only £125,000.

This 2009 proposal for a city farm by Mitchell Taylor Workshop was selected from a short list of thirteen as the competition winner. The firm wanted to create a contrast to the “sterile and joyless box designed to keep the seasons out” that characterizes many other buildings near the site. Introducing a living environment to the City is a surprising move perhaps, but the architects questioned why the space, although located in London’s dense financial district, should not benefit

from “the screech of exotic birds, the scent of bougainvillea, the amazing burst of colour in spring from wisteria and flame trees.”³⁰

The project is full of innovative ideas about how urban agriculture and the commercial world of finance can interact and coexist. Rather than staring at a vacant lot, the occupants of the surrounding buildings who overlook the site would instead be exposed to a changing landscape that reflected the seasons,

produced nourishment, and provided an environment for relaxation and contemplation. Lunches made with fresh ingredients grown on-site could be sold at kiosks; locals could also visit chickens or pick up some fresh eggs, vegetables, goats’ milk, or berries.

The proposal divides public space into three distinct growing areas designed around the climatic conditions imposed by the surrounding buildings. Vegetables, soft fruits, herbs, and root vegetables that need the most sunlight would be located in the sunny, northern part of the site. Leafy green crops, such as cabbages, broccoli, and spinach that can cope with partially shaded conditions would occupy the central part of the site. The southern area, cast into perpetual deep shade by adjacent buildings, would hold a log forest of exotic mushrooms interspersed with shade-tolerant crops, such as rhubarb and mint. City workers could escape their offices for a shady lunch,



TOP, RIGHT: Wildflowers growing on a slope of infill provide a visual backdrop for the farm’s vegetable beds.
CENTER, RIGHT: Areas of the site cast into deep shade by surrounding buildings are devoted to shade-loving produce, including mushrooms and rhubarb.
RIGHT: Flower meadows provide office workers respite from the dense urban surroundings.
OPPOSITE: Economic downturns have caused an indefinite delay in proposed new construction on this site in the City of London.

and visiting school groups could learn about food sources and preparation. The architects even discovered that medieval city planning laws still in effect would allow the farm to keep sheep, goats, pigs, and a cow. A south-facing ramp built over the site's existing mound of infill would be used to grow a spring flower meadow for early-season impact.

Leadenhall Street frontage would be enlivened by a series of vegetable-shaped cutouts peeking through an expressively designed perimeter fence made of recycled construction boards that serve as outlets for selling fresh produce grown on-site and take-away meals prepared with local ingredients to pedestrians as they pass by on the way to and from work. The frontage would also create a public face for the farm.

Permanent infrastructure requirements needed to implement the project would have been minimal. Some terracing would be needed, requiring digging equipment and scaffold boards for retaining devices. The proposed installations are all temporary and low-cost; reuse of materials and components from the existing site is highlighted. Four "vertical growing enclosures" constructed by architecture students are suggested for housing chickens and other livestock, and include a wire mesh cladding to serve as supports for berries and other climbing plants. Planters made of standard-size precast concrete drainage channels and construction bags filled with

soil would be configured in many ways, and would be movable and recyclable.

Management of the project would be overseen by a community-supported agriculture organization. Architect Piers Taylor estimates that the project was achievable within the allowed budget and would have been easy to install or to remove should the market change quickly. The architects' hope for the project was to make office workers more aware of the possibilities offered by urban agriculture, in turn become more supportive of this or similar inclusions in the urban fabric and even demand a new urban environment more closely integrated with the natural cycles and systems around them.

British Land ultimately decided not to pursue this project due to perception concerns about sending the wrong message to the City at a time of economic recovery. While this was a missed opportunity, the proposal has, however, stimulated discussion about how other vacant sites can start to engage the public realm. The City of London's head of planning has encouraged developers to consult with architects about temporary makeovers of recession-hit sites to ensure that they do not cause urban blight. At the site of the demolished Middlesex Hospital in Fitzrovia, a campaign by locals to provide temporary allotments and educational activities that would make the space available to the community was successful.



LEADENHALL STREET ELEVATION

ABOVE: Proposed programming for the currently unused site.