

Glasgow's the drear grey place thanks to all this building

Tom Shields

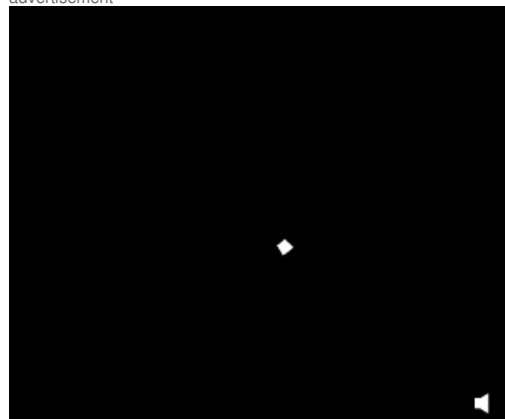
IN AN

exercise reminiscent of Noah's Ark in reverse, Glasgow City Council went to court last week to evict the birds and bees. The flora and fauna were given formal notice to quit. It was two human beings who were actually hauled before Glasgow Sheriff Court. Karen Chung and Douglas Peacock are secretary and treasurer of the North Kelvin Meadow Campaign. Both are members of the species now known as guerrilla gardener.

The North Kelvin meadow is a piece of land in Clouston Street. It is 1.4 hectares in area. It is easier to envisage the area as the size of two football pitches, a tennis court, and some grassy bits besides. In fact, it used to be two football pitches, a tennis court, and some grassy bits besides. The land was bequeathed to the city of Glasgow by a generous citizen way back last century so that children and adults could have somewhere to play.

For decades this was the case. Then the council stopped maintaining the football pitches and tennis court. The land became derelict. The council decided to sell it to a property developer. Or maybe the council first decided to sell the land to a developer, then let it become derelict. That is the natural order.

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This part of Glasgow, on the northern fringe of the west end, is largely populated by citizens of a bohemian nature and a bolshe tendency. They didn't fancy the plan to build 200 flats in their backyard. They got a rotavator and dug up the red blaes. They planted grass seed and wild flowers and called it a meadow. Nature took its course and the land became a haven of green ground. People like Karen Chung and Douglas Peacock kept the meadow clear of rubbish. They started to grow things. Flowers and bushes mostly but also vegetables and herbs. People took to sitting in the sun. Children played in the long grass. Dogs were walked.

The council went to court to stop this kind of subversive activity. Karen and Douglas and the rest of the green space guerrillas were indicted and ordered to "take notice that Glasgow City Council, the heritable owners of the former Clouston Street playing fields, require you to remove yourselves, your dependants, your goods and your property".

The sheriff ruled in the council's favour, granting the continuation of an interdict which prevents Mr Peacock and Mrs Chung from creating new vegetable patches and building bat-boxes on the land. The guerrilla gardeners have

vowed to keep fighting despite facing legal costs of £5000. If the council win the final legal victory, the flower beds and planter barrels will have to go. So too the curly kale. It's thyme up for basil and rosemary in the herb garden. It is in with the bailiffs for the orchids, buddleia and other plants which moved into the meadow without the permission of Glasgow City Council.

The dependants will also have to be removed: the robins, blackbirds, thrushes. And the greater spotted woodpecker, which is about to become the lesser spotted woodpecker. Among the other evictees will be foxes, butterflies, bees and sundry little

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creatures (including the genus Glasgow wean) which scurry about in the undergrowth. It transpires that the latest property development proposed for the former playing fields is smaller, altogether nicer, and more sensitive than the original. Well, about as sensitive as it gets when you are replacing buddleia and butterflies with bricks and mortar. The council chiefs are not villains. They see it as their duty to sell the site for £10 million to boost the city coffers.

But Glasgow cannot go on concreting over every blade of grass. The city loses its very soul as the dear green place becomes a drear grey place. The process appears to be relentless. A green enclave near my backyard is also under threat. It's not nimby. More the view from my front garden. There is an application to build 163 flats and six shops on a small site in Otago Lane. An existing modern block of flats in Otago Street is to be built up from four storeys to seven. It will be massive, with penthouses for those who can afford to live in the clouds. It will cast a darkness over the rest of us mortals below.

The darkness will be even greater for those who live down the lane, which is a nice little cobbled community. It has an old, low-rise building with a few flats. But it is better known for its collection of individual small businesses. The Voltaire & Rousseau bookshop. The Tchai Ovna tearooms. Kenneth Chapelle's clock repair workshop. Mixed Up Records where you can buy vinyl. The lane is on the river Kelvin. The bank is overgrown with trees and bushes but is accessible to intrepid explorers. With more care and attention it could be a riverside retreat.

The plan is to build various seven-storey concrete, glass and steel towers on the river front. Just like the plan to lay waste to the North Kelvin meadow, the flora and fauna will be evicted. The humans who remain will be denied space and light. Planning authorities seem to be moderately vigilant in preserving the green belt. They seem to have less interest in saving the green bits in our cities.

As a town dweller, I say let's get sacrilegious and build in the countryside. There are about 30,000 square miles of it in Scotland. We wouldn't miss a wee bit. Get the farmers to grow their neeps a bit closer together. Get the cows and sheep to huddle in slightly fewer acres. Let people construct a Shangri-la in the forest. A tree house might be nice. We could even dot a few tasteful residences around those ubiquitous golf courses.

On the urban front there is plenty of scope for giving a makeover to those vacant brown areas which abound in post-industrial Glasgow, Dundee, Lanarkshire, West Lothian and elsewhere.

Our glorious Scottish government is doing its bit with the Sustainable Communities Initiative. Craigmillar in Edinburgh used to be a sink estate. Now it's a parc. In Glasgow they are dreaming dreams by the old canal. Speirs Locks will be like London's Camden Village any day now. They might even stop chucking spears at the boats.

Up at Maryhill Locks, a "failed housing estate" (it may have been the people not the houses that failed) is to become a village on the water. With quite a lot of green bits, allotments even. There is enough to be doing without blighting places such as the North Kelvin Meadow and Otago Lane. Save the grass. Save the trees. Save the fauna. Save flora. Save basil and rosemary, too. Let there be places for the children to play and buffers to sit in the sun.

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