



Frequently when trying to suggest, promote or inspire we start with the 'what' of a project and towards the end, get to the 'why'. The why is the guiding idea behind a project, it's inspiration and essence. So in the absence of any rules about how enter this competition that is where we will start.

WHY GREEN OUR STREET

Like it or not times are changing. Approaches that functioned in the past will not be sufficient to cope with a rapidly changing world. The Johnson strip isn't just about gardening or beautifying the street. It's real action borne out of the realisation that our current trajectory of increasing consumption, isolation and the assumption that money will provide for all our needs is a flawed one. The rise in the prevalence of mental health issues is a good example of the dangers of isolation whilst our busy lifestyles break our connection with basic needs such as food, friendship and connection; instead leaving us reliant on giant multi-national companies and carefully targeted advertising.

The Johnson strip aims to challenge this through experience and bring about four outcomes

- Community and connection.
- Education and knowledge sharing
- Production of food
- Empowering community

We want everyone who walks down our street to feel like 'us', not 'them'. We want everyone in the street to know their neighbours well enough to have a conversation and ask for help if they need it. Every person in the street should be able to see in practical terms the production of food and understand that food and community, not money, are the basis of a resilient and happy community. Above all we want the practical exercise of planting and sharing food to make everyone aware that this is their street and that they are the agents of change to overcome the challenges of the future.

HOW ARE WE GOING TO DO IT

The Johnson strip in reality started more than two years ago with the first street barbecues. These were very deliberately, and with council support, designed to build community and ownership of shared spaces. Since then there has been an intentional development of contact and collaboration with all the residents, from the 92 year old resident who has been in the street for 30+ years to the renting students and the children that grow and play in the street.

The next stage was to build this involvement into a tangible project and thus started the Johnson Strip. Two neighbourhood meetings and numerous conversations have been had, focussing on what the Johnson strip might look like and what possibilities it could entail. We now have, out of 58 house blocks in the street, active contact with about 1/3 of the residents and readiness from about 5 to reclaim their nature strip to plant a combination of natives, food producing boxes and trees.

We are mindful that these boxes need to be not only productive but also low maintenance so we have been investigating and building wicking boxes to test this. We have built a relationship with the pet food wholesaler around the corner who has provided us the wood in the form of pallets and been experimenting with the best design and dimensions to ensure that these boxes perform. We are also keen that there is ownership of the boxes, so box building assistance and financial contribution to the boxes by the relevant householders is anticipated and in fact desired as another opportunity to build community through collaboration.

WHAT IS THE JOHNSON STRIP

In starting this project we gathered people from the street together. We letter-boxed the entire street, inviting them to a discussion about reclaiming the nature strips and greening the street. To further promote this meeting we took pictures of local nature strips that had been 'blitzed', laminated them and put them on garden stakes the day before the meeting with messages designed to get people thinking about the possibilities.

We used our knowledge of the street to target these at different groups in the street so included statements like:

"When I grew up I used to pick lemons and olives along the side of the road. Could we do that in Johnson street?"

"My children think oregano is something made in a factory for pizza, wouldn't it be great if we could see it growing as we walked to school?"



The meeting was held in the house of a resident with 6 representatives from within the street as well as a couple of local businesses. There was a great deal of excitement about the possibilities. We felt that it was going to be difficult to make the next step though so we decided that we would need to provide a practical vision of what this could be like.

We produced a nature strip proto-type with the help of a number of neighbours (and their children). This nature strip has been inspected and provisionally approved by the Darebin City Council. We gave careful consideration to the councils 'green streets policy' in particular:

- Including 30 cm set backs from footpath and road,
- Ensuring high visibility from street to path
- Minimising height hard structures (boxes)

- Allowing easy access and egress to and from cars,
- Building boxes so that they are movable
- Reducing trip hazards and ensuring boxes are visible to walkers.

We also incorporated voids at the ends of nature strips, near cross-overs. This was designed to ensure that pedestrians and drivers could see each other as they were moving in and out of driveways with particular thought to the many children in the area.

The pallets that were used to construct these boxes were provided (and delivered) by the bulk-pet food store at the end of the street. This business was particularly pleased to be able to find a use for wood that would otherwise be dumped. The original planter boxes were built according to plans from the Urban Bush Carpenters but have since been adapted to reduce the height to improve visibility and also reduce the depth so that they are accessible from only one side to allow for that native planting.



We realised that it was important to not only engage through the construction of the boxes and the growth inside them but also with the aesthetics. As such we have given consideration to creative and artistic aspects of these boxes. Two of the boxes have painted panels



in blackboard paint and these panels are used both by local children and also to promote events. We plan to decorate the final box with handprints from all the local children in the street as not only a practical reference to indigenous art but also to promote



ownership. A yarn bombed 'tree' has also grown around a local stop sign in further artistic expression of street ownership.

At present we have almost completed our own nature strip with three wicking boxes that are growing a range of vegetables including radishes, silverbeet, broccoli, cabbage, lettuce, potatoes, coriander and parsley. We have planted a range of natives (mostly grasses) around these boxes including some rosemary and three varieties of thyme. We have also planted a dwarf lemon tree. Native grasses and low bushes have also been planted in collaboration with the Victorian Indigenous Nursery Cooperative who gave us advice about appropriate planting and species. The Johnson Strip as a group are now members of this nursery.

Whilst it has taken some time for people to get the idea that this garden is not an extension of our private space but more a public asset we are now seeing people using the produce, particularly the silverbeet which is regularly harvested. To this point we have had no vandalism and the only issue that we have had is the disappearance of our chalk but this was remedied by another resident who refilled the box and left us a little note on the blackboard.

The street also has some existing edibles including two plum trees, a bay tree and an olive.

THE FUTURE

We are now moving in to the next stage of the 'Johnson Strip'. We currently have 5 properties who are ready to begin reclaiming their nature strip. We have in principal support from the council who have expressed a willingness to approve plans if they are based on the principals identified about.

The plan is to, by October 2013 (as per the competition rules) have approximately 12 boxes at eight sites up and down the street. These sites will incorporate a mixture of planter boxes and native plantings.



There is also a special site that is the fence of a local pub. Negotiations have begun with this business; with reference to a previous commitment to keep the border greened. If these negotiations go well then site will not only have a further set of planter boxes but will also have an integrated watering system from the business and a row of flower boxes that will sit on an existing low (15cm) wall.

All sites will be encouraged to identify what is growing and also give a small amount of information on what it is and how it can be used. They will also have a generic blurb about the purpose of the Johnson strip and the aim of it to be public food, as well as information about how to get involved. This is crucial as it forms the educative aspect of this project but also challenges the notion of the ownership of food production.

The aim is to 'blitz' these spaces as a combined event to further build community. We will utilise the skills of a local woodworking business who is currently building a community notice board for us and also build up an awareness of skills and tools that can be shared within the street. This box

build/blitz day will be done in collaboration with a number of other groups who we are currently involved in such as the Transition Darebin and Our Apple Tree to further build community. Thought will also be given to a local instance of the 'Fruit Squad' a current initiative of Transition Darebin. This group harvest trees on private property and utilises the food locally. With the added community engagement from the street this could become a regular part of life with residents growing, sharing, bottling and preserving what is grown on and in the street.

WHAT COULD THE JOHNSON STRIP BE

The dream is that in 10 years time we have an alley of fruit trees sheltering productive boxes of vegetables. There is community sharing and seed saving with collaborative thought being given to succession planting and what is planted to ensure a range of produce. By this time the benefits of this approach will be well known and other public land such as the large expanses around the Croxton railway station will equally be productive food producing areas. There will be not only community planting but also harvesting and preserving with home brewing, tomato bottling, olive preserving and jam making common fixtures on the street calendar. Not everyone in the street will get along, and not everyone will want to be part of it, but no one in the street will ever be left short of some salad greens, a lemon or some herbs.



WHAT DO WE NEED



The biggest hurdle for this project is the raw materials. Whilst it is brilliant that pallet wood has been provided, the time requirement to break the pallets and the amount of wastage due to breaking or splitting in the process is significant. In order to bring this project to a more rapid completion this wood would be sourced from a local recovery yard by one of the street residents. This would enable us to produce the boxes over 1-2

days and maximise community engagement and success.

Provisions of tools and subsidy of materials for the wicking boxes would be done by the residents of the street. This would ensure that the boxes are owned by the residents of the street and will work towards guaranteeing their maintenance.

The Johnson Strip is already underway and building community engagement through the growing of community food. We look forward to the day when the success of this project spills to surrounding streets and spaces, when residents become ambassadors for what is possible and when the possibilities for using communal space to grow communal food become obvious not unusual.