‘There grows the neighbourhood’: Green citizenship, creativity and life politics on eco-TV.

The title of this article is drawn from the tag line of an American reality show Living with Ed, which first aired in the US in 2007. In the opening scenes of the show, we are introduced to life in an apparently typical home in suburban Los Angeles. Compact and unassuming, complete with a white picket fence, this, however, is a suburban home with a difference. Inhabited by long term greenie, actor Ed Begley junior, and his not so green wife, Rachelle Carson, the house and lifestyle on display in Living with Ed is in fact a model of sustainable living—the apparently wooden picket fence, for instance, is made of a durable white plastic that will never need to be replaced or painted. A techno-romanticist at heart, Begley has, in a very Zen and the Art of Motor Cycle Maintenance kind of way, also turned the house into a veritable experiment in domestic power generation with its own wind turbine and extensive array of solar panels, while we are frequently treated to images of Ed cycling furiously on his electric bike in order to make enough power to cook his morning toast.

As the editors of this special issue have noted, contemporary representations of Anglo-American suburbia—particularly in the face of growing anxieties around the global impact of ‘affluenza’ in the global north—have increasingly come to caricature suburban lifestyles as spaces of turbo-consumerism and rampant McMansionism. Such representations easily slide into broader assumptions about the dire state of civil
society and citizenship in suburban communities, shored up by Putnamesque visions of alienation, political apathy, and selfish individualism. When it comes to environmental concerns—the focus of this article—suburbia is not surprisingly overwhelmingly positioned as a central part of the problem rather than the solution. As my opening example from *Living with Ed* suggests, though, this article is concerned with popular media representations that complicate these rather moralising caricatures of suburban life. Instead I am interested in understanding eco-lifestyle TV shows like *Living with Ed* as representing forms of social experimentation around green living and citizenship (Marres, 2009), that in turn often reflect a complex negotiation of what it means to live ‘the good life’.

In adopting the term ‘green citizenship’ here the article aims to speak to broader trends in contemporary lifestyle culture and, in particular, the shift towards what Swedish political scientist Michele Micheletti terms ‘a post-political’ environment (2003). For Micheletti, such a shift marks not so much the decline of political culture as its diffusion into every aspect of people’s daily lives, from their domestic lifestyles to their everyday practices and choices around consumption. In the following discussion of eco-lifestyle TV, I use two Australian shows, *Guerilla Gardeners* and *Eco House Challenge*, to foreground some of the different, and at times contradictory, ways in which everyday forms of green citizenship are being played out in suburbia. On the one hand, *Eco House Challenge* illustrates a trend in contemporary late liberal societies towards the weight of global and governmental concerns and responsibilities around environmental issues being increasingly shifted on to individual citizens through a focus on lifestyle and consumption (Miller, 2007). *Guerilla Gardeners*, on the other hand, offers a somewhat different perspective on ‘lifestyle politics’ (Bennett,
framing it not just in terms of privatised rational choices and forms of self-regulation and self-governance but rather linking green citizenship to creativity, community-building and romantic concerns about the art and aesthetics of everyday living. Both shows, I argue, speak to broader trends in late modern suburban nations like Australia where a range of forms of environmentally-oriented consumer and lifestyle-based ‘activism’—from community gardening to organic food co-ops—are currently reshaping the nature and meaning of citizenship.

Eco-creativity on the small screen?

Why look for signs of creative suburbia and green lifestyle practices on television, a medium not usually associated with innovation or sustainability? Television of course is in many ways the most suburban and domesticated of media forms—forming the veritable ‘electronic hearth’ of the suburban home (Tichi, 1991). Historically it developed—both in terms of technology and content—alongside and in dialogue with suburban modernity, in Anglo-American settings at least (Hartley, 1996; Spigel, 2001). Like suburbia itself, television is associated with the banality of everyday life, with (over)consumption and social reproduction, with repetition and seriality rather than creative innovation (Ellis, 1982).

If television typically connotes banality and unoriginality, then lifestyle programming has often traditionally been seen as little more than schedule filling television, or as one Australian TV producer described the genre to me, ‘white bread for the masses’. Against this conventional understanding, I want to suggest that so-called ‘reality-based’ lifestyle programmes, from home renovation to cooking and eco-lifestyle shows, are intensified sites of social ‘play’ and experimentation. A recent
Masterfoods advertisement airing in 2010 alongside the Australian version of *Junior Masterchef* has the tagline ‘why cook when you can create’ reflecting a growing trend on lifestyle TV and lifestyle culture more broadly towards re-enchanting and aestheticising everyday life practices through a focus on creativity and the art of everyday life.

A useful text here for contextualising this trend is Colin Campbell’s *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (1987). Rather than viewing modern consumer capitalism purely as a site of disenchantment and alienation, Campbell argues that romanticism was and continues to be a central force within consumer culture, and that the romantic emphasis on developing one’s moral character through creative hedonism and aestheticism continues to function in the contemporary consumer world with its emphasis on imaginative desires, beauty and endless novelty. Such romantic concerns, I would argue, are particularly prevalent on contemporary lifestyle shows where we often see a focus on re-enchanting modernity through creative identity-shaping practices, such as craft, design and the culinary arts.

Alongside this concern with creative play, these are also spaces that increasingly function as important sites of popular pedagogy, via lifestyle gurus, such as Jamie Oliver, who can be seen to model and promote certain kinds of lifestyles, forms of consumer-citizenship and ethical conduct (Lewis, 2008a). In doing so, they put the spotlight on and raise questions about ways of living and being (as evidenced by reality-style cooking shows, such as *Jamie’s Fowl Dinners*, aimed at educating the public around the health and ethical issues behind globalised and industrialised food production). This pedagogical dimension of lifestyle and reality TV has been read by
a range of scholars as reflecting a broader focus within what has been loosely termed ‘neoliberal’ societies on discourses of self-governance and personal responsibility (Miller, 2007; Palmer, 2003). In a post-welfare setting, as the state passes on responsibility for ‘public health’ concerns like obesity (or global issues such as climate change) onto individuals and communities, lifestyle-oriented reality shows like The Biggest Loser, for example, come to function, in part, as ‘how-to’ guides for the self-regulating consumer-citizen (Ouellette and Hay, 2008).

While I would argue with the assumption that such popular pedagogies inevitably serve the logics of neo- or late liberalism (whatever those logics might be), in noting this overtly educational dimension of lifestyle TV, though, I think it is also important to emphasise the way in which lifestyle advice television functions not just in terms of the transparent transmission of particular ideologies of selfhood but is also rather more subtly implicated in and productive of the social. The green-oriented domestic antics of Ed Begley Junior on Living with Ed (from his daily composting routine to his somewhat hazardous approach to cleaning his solar roof panels), can be read as symbolically laden social rituals, which in this case involve enacting and rehearsing alternative forms of sociality. If social rituals are about symbolism and play, then, as Nick Couldry suggests, writing about Big Brother, ‘television “deepens the play”’ (Dayan and Katz cited in Couldry, 2002), where “play” […] has the serious sense of a process, framed apart from the normal flow of everyday life, in which society can reflect upon itself” (Couldry, 2002: 284).

As I will discuss in relation to the two eco-lifestyle shows under examination here, however, such questions of play and social experimentation are enacted in a variety of
ways across the lifestyle genre. What these televisual experiments all speak to is the broader way in which ‘lifestyle’ has become both a fundamental and problematic category today, a situation we might sum up in terms of a turn to life politics. As I will suggest, however, the lifestyle ‘turn’ is not necessarily marked by a coherent set of shared politics or values. While critics tend to see lifestyle politics as inevitably tied to technologies of neoliberal individualism, my interest here is with reading life politics ‘as a field of action, experience and affect that is both constraining and productive in terms of enabling new forms of political governance and agency’ (Lewis and Potter, 2010b: 21).

Situating the eco-lifestyle turn on TV

Before I go on to discuss the two green lifestyle shows in question, I want to briefly contextualise the rise of this somewhat unlikely format. As I’ve argued elsewhere, the recent eco turn on lifestyle TV has arrived off the back of a broader set of critiques emerging out of popular culture concerned with the impacts and risks of capitalist modernity (Lewis, 2008b). On the small screen, anxieties about the risks of modern living have seen a concern not only with documenting these risks but also with offering transformational ‘solutions’. Borrowing from the popular trope of the makeover, primetime schedules around the world have been populated by a range of popular factual programmes that document and dramatise the transformation of the lifestyle practices and everyday conduct of ‘ordinary’ people, where such ordinary citizens stand in for the over-consuming ‘global north’ as a whole. A number of recent reality-style formats, for instance, have focused on making over the lifestyle and consumption habits of families and individuals, from behavioural makeover
shows like *Honey We’re Killing the Kids* to competitive weight loss shows like *The Biggest Loser*.

This concern with lifestyle transformation has also manifested itself in a growing number of popular factual shows that see ordinary people swapping the pressures of modernity for an alternate lifestyle. New Zealand’s award winning show *Off The Radar*, for instance, documents the experiences of comedian Te Radar when he decides to ‘ditch the city and consumer luxuries in an experiment to see if he can live sustainably, for 10 months on a remote patch of land west of Auckland.’ Similarly in the UK, lifestyle-oriented ‘back to nature’ popular documentaries like the *River Cottage* series and *It’s Not Easy Being Green*—the latter featuring a suburban family uprooting their comfortable middle class lives to live sustainably on a farm—tap into a growing interest in escaping the pressures of modernity through ‘downshifting’ and adopting slow modes of living.

Here my interest, however, is in those shows whose narratives of transformation are routed in everyday suburban existence rather than escapism. And that, in so doing, offer up an ethic of experimentation and play, but within the very real constraints of modern suburban contexts and lives. Various forms of green lifestyle TV—based in suburbia and often drawing on the familiar genre of the domestic makeover show—have recently begun to make inroads into primetime schedules around the world, from the Canadian Broadcasting Company’s competitive eco-renovation show *Code Green Canada* (aired in 2006) to New Zealand’s eco-lifestyle format *Wasted* (first shown in 2007).
Australian TV has also been something of an early adopter in relation to green lifestyle formats (with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation airing the lifestyle-advice/enviro-science show Carbon Cops on primetime in 2007). The two shows that I want to discuss here, Guerilla Gardeners and Eco-house Challenge, were also produced for Australian free-to-air television but were aired on commercial and public television respectively. Both shows speak, albeit in rather different ways, to the notion of suburbia as a space of experimentation and creativity, in the process foregrounding notions of green citizenship and a growing relationship between large-scale global environmental concerns and questions of lifestyle.

Taking it to the (suburban) streets: makeover TV meets lifestyle activism on Guerilla Gardeners

Guerilla Gardeners, which aired on the commercial network, Channel Ten, in 2009, is a somewhat unusual eco-lifestyle format. Aimed at Ten’s ‘youth’ audience (the average age of the Channel Ten viewer is 38 years old), the show’s narrative revolves around a group of six rather attractive young people with horticultural and building expertise, who aim to beautify various ugly spaces in peri-urban and suburban Sydney (and at one site in Melbourne). Described as ‘renegade landscaping’ and ‘hit and run horticulture’, the hybrid makeover/popular factual format initially aired on primetime (Wednesday at 8pm). Receiving middling ratings, which halved when it was moved to a Sunday time slot, it was axed after eleven episodes. Despite its relatively poor ratings compared with other reality shows on Ten (the Ten Network is home, for instance, to the hugely popular MasterChef Australia franchise), it represents an interesting experiment in reality programming, particularly for a commercial channel.
While borrowing from the conventions of makeover-programming, *Guerilla Gardeners* is aimed at transforming neighbourhood land rather than domestic gardens. Rather than purely serving to shore up a privatised and financialised model of suburban life, as is a central feature of many home and garden renovation shows, the show promotes a form of green citizenship through encouraging what might be seen as suburban-based lifestyle activism. The programme of course draws its name and many of its ideas from guerrilla gardening, a global environmental movement concerned with illicitly creating garden spaces on unused public land, often in hit and run operations conducted under the cover of darkness. While the TV show offers a rather staged version of guerrilla gardening, mostly undertaken in the open and in daylight, it attempts to draw upon the street credentials and edgy sub-cultural feel of this underground movement. Thus, the protagonists are described on the show’s website as ‘six young warriors […] armed to the teeth with attitude and gardening tools’, who are tasked with undertaking ‘covert operations that transform the biggest eye-sores into an oasis of greenery and recreation for local communities and families to enjoy’. Their reality TV ‘challenge’: to makeover ‘bleak public spaces, concrete jungles, disused land, roadside wastelands left by councils and developers who just don’t care’.

The traditional instant garden renovation associated with formats such as the UK’s *Ground Force* or Australia’s highly popular show *Backyard Blitz* is taken into very new territory here, with the DIY ethos underpinning such shows put to rather more radical ends (albeit within the logic of commercial television). The team thus (often illegally) creatively renovates a range of sites—from a traffic roundabout to an ‘unloved’ railway platform, inventing various ‘cover’ stories and scenarios to
legitimate their presence. Thus, when the ‘guerillas’ decide to create ‘a drought resistant Alice-in-Wonderland garden’ on a disused piece of land framed by billboards (in Melbourne’s inner bayside suburb, St Kilda), the team wears Google-branded t-shirts with members of the team informing passers by that the garden makeover is part of a promotion for Google Earth. In this Alice-in-Wonderland episode, the guerrillas’ ‘mastermind behind the disguises’, Mickie, extends his creative makeover skills to the billboards on the edge of the site, covering the existing adverts with huge colourful striped banners carrying the words ‘curious and curiouser’ (‘It’s a provocative idea—it could mean he will get charged with damage to private property’). While, in a final act of would-be subversion, as the team departs the scene, they spray a red *Guerilla Gardeners* ‘tag’ onto a council box.

The show thus works hard at trying to link itself to various forms of urban activism, at one point going on a ‘seed bombing mission’ around Melbourne at night with the aim of turning the city into ‘a sea of colour’. Borrowing from anti-consumerist movements such as adbusters and culture jammers, with their inventive appropriation of commercial culture’s materials and imagery, the guerrillas’ playful approach to reclaiming and renovating public space also harks back to the creative anarchy of the French situationists with their focus on integrating art into everyday life (in one episode the guerrillas build a giant troll under a rail bridge). At the same time, the show also speaks to the more ordinary and less spectacular, de Certeau-ian ‘tactics’ increasingly evident in the suburbs of high carbon-emitting nations such as Australia—where, in the face of what is often seen as a lack of federal and state strategies around climate change, ordinary individuals and local communities are increasingly taking sustainability into their own hands (often in contravention of
council laws), through grassroots initiatives such as permablitzing, street food gardens and dumpster diving.

Deliberately aligning itself with such grassroots movements, *Guerilla Gardeners* strives to portray itself as being on the side of ordinary citizens, engaging in tactical manoeuvres for the benefit of the local community (‘If a public eyesore’s offending a street near you, join the guerrilla network and let us know so we can do the wrong thing for the right reasons’). Part of the narrative interest of the show is the team’s various clashes with ‘authorities’ of all forms—councils are portrayed as bureaucratic and bent on stifling the creative impulses of the guerrillas. As the show’s website puts it, the guerillas ‘routinely defy trespass laws and development consent in their quest to beautify our cities’. While the guerrillas usually get away with these acts of ‘renegade’ gardening, in one episode (in which the team planned to makeover a roundabout in the Sydney suburb of Jannali according to a desert island theme, complete with row boat and palm trees), the council intervened to stop the process, digging up the show’s creative installation. After the show aired, the Sutherland Shire (in which the suburb of Jannali is located) instigated their own rather bland renovation of the roundabout, with locals gathering to protest the council’s attempt at beautifying the site and calling for the guerillas’ makeover to be put back.

Throughout the series, the guerrillas counterpose their attempts to subvert council processes with an emphasis on connecting with locals and with the needs of the neighbourhood—we often see the team canvassing the views of locals on their plans for transforming sites and also bringing in various passers by to assist with the process, and in one episode a group of children from a nearby primary school are
recruited to help the team. The guerrillas’ hit-and-run garden activism is thus portrayed on the series as contributing to a politics that is linked to neighbourhood and community, to peoples’ everyday encounters with and in shared public spaces.

Linked to this sense of community building is a focus on labour, with a particular emphasis on the importance of teamwork and on a spirit of collective enterprise (‘with a bit of team spirit and a willingness to compromise we built our largest garden ever’). Suburbia is depicted in particular on the show as a space of potential creative labour with the team’s work figured as both serious and playful, through projects such as the drought-resistant Alice-in-Wonderland garden, which marry questions of sustainability in the suburbs with everyday art and street-based aesthetics. Here the show also brings together the kind of lifestyle skills and expertise usually associated with makeover TV (gardeners, landscapers and builders) with that of ‘creatives’ like Mickie, the team member behind the guerillas’ various cover stories and elaborate disguises. Mickie’s ‘work experience’: ‘I am a street-artist so I have been creatively intervening in people’s everyday lives for over a decade now’.iv

Airing on a commercial channel, Guerilla Gardeners not surprisingly offers a rather more palatable, TV-friendly version of the take-no-prisoners style of ‘direct action’ associated with the guerrilla gardening movement, portraying the team’s activities not only as forms of horticultural activism but also as productive, collaborative work, aimed at bolstering community. Despite the show’s anxieties about grounding its at times controversial message in what might be seen as more mainstream values around work and community, nevertheless the show takes us into what is relatively new
territory for lifestyle TV, extending the creative, romantically-inflected DIY urge celebrated on these shows into the realm of environmental citizenship and politics.

*Green houses: experiments in environmental citizenship on* Eco House Challenge

The second eco-lifestyle show I want to briefly discuss here focuses less on neighbourhoods and more on the lifestyles of individual households. Aired on the Australian public channel SBS (Special Broadcasting Corporation) in 2007, *Eco House Challenge* is at one level a fairly conventional lifestyle format concerned with teaching audiences how ‘we can save the planet’ by encouraging changes in the lifestyles and patterns of consumption of individual households. Following two large middle class families (the Edwards, a family of seven and the Shepherds, an ‘affluent family of six’), whose houses are wired up and monitored over a six-week period, the ‘challenge’ for the *Eco House* families is to ‘radically reduce consumption’ albeit ‘while still leading their normal lives’.

Aimed at a somewhat older audience than Network Ten’s Generation X viewership, *Eco House Challenge* has a rather more overtly public educational focus.

Nevertheless, like *Guerilla Gardeners*, it borrows many of the conventions of reality-based makeover shows, combining a pedagogical agenda with an emphasis on the transformational ‘journey’ undergone by the two families during the ‘challenge’ (assisted by ‘eco-coach’ Tania Ha). Focused on greening the daily domestic lives of the two families, the challenge revolves around four ‘environmental hot spots’—waste, energy, water, and transport—with the families attempting to reduce their consumption in these areas to ‘sustainable levels’. The narrative is ramped up a notch by the two families continually being thrown into crisis by having one of their ‘hot
spots’ shut down (from denying them access to waste disposal to having their cars clamped and their gas, power and water turned off for 24 hours).

Somewhat in the vein of pop doc-style, historical reenactment shows like Colonial House and Frontier House, Eco House Challenge is a blend of ‘fish out of water’ social observation and social experiment television (though heavily scripted and edited). Here the narrative is set, however, in the here and now of contemporary suburbia, although framed by a future-projected scenario of ecological crisis, with the two families standing in for the broader potential prospects of Australia as a whole (as the show’s narrator puts it ‘if they can do it we all can’). The homes of the two families are thus experimental spaces for enacting different possible responses to the call for sustainable living. As eco-expert Tanya Ha tells us—justifying the show’s domestic focus to the audience—environmental change ‘needs to occur at all levels of society including the home’. Given the temporal constraints of a TV series, however, the two families ‘have just weeks to do what we all must do in just a few decades’.

The kinds of emotional and strategic responses and lifestyle changes enacted on screen, then, are framed by the highly artificial temporal, spatial and dramatic narrative logics of reality television; as the narrator sums it up: ‘we’re putting them in a pressure cooker’.

Where Guerilla Gardeners foregrounds creative play and aesthetics, Eco House Challenge offers a rather more prescribed, expert-driven approach to promoting green citizenship and lifestyle change, with Tanya Ha monitoring and commenting on the families’ progress from a separate location, via TV monitors and technology that tracks their consumption. Nevertheless, part of the show’s narrative interest lies in
watching the various creative strategies the families employ to manage the imposed regime of reduced consumption. Early on, however, the show signals to the audience that the two families are likely to have very different responses to the challenge. The Edwards family, ‘led by their ex-army commando father Spike’ (the show’s gender politics are somewhat troublesome), are portrayed as relatively frugal, while the Shepherds, ‘headed’ by Cam, a man used to ‘five star’ living, are tagged as ‘consumer addicts’.

True to type, the Edwards are shown embracing the eco-challenge, and we watch them enthusiastically responding to their lack of transport and utilities by catching buses as a family and going to the beach to bathe, while father Spike somewhat zealously rigs up various apparatuses around the house and garden to deal with water collection and waste management. The Shepherds on the other hand, we are told, ‘are displaying a very different attitude’. Depicted as complaining through much of the challenge, the Shepherd’s ‘creative’ response to having their lifestyles drastically curtailed essentially involves buying their way out of the problem. As Cam’s wife quips, ‘he will find a way, he’s resourceful, he’ll outsource’. Thus, faced with having no car to take six children to the movies for his son’s birthday, Cam decides to pay for a maxi taxi for the children, with his wife drolly observing that ‘walking is usually his very last resort’. Tanya Ha, however, leaves us in no doubt as to which forms of resourcefulness are conducive to good green citizenship. While we are told the Shepherds are having difficulties adjusting to their new circumstances, the Edwards apparently ‘are just getting on with it’. In the face of ecological meltdown, Ha informs us that ‘what we need’ are people who are able to ‘think laterally’ and problem solve, with the show clearly holding up the Edwards here as ideal creative, ethical citizens.
Eco House Challenge’s approach to experimenting with green living is plainly very different from the horticultural interventions of Guerilla Gardeners. On Guerilla Gardeners, the ‘experts’ work hard not to be seen as imposing their concerns on to the neighbourhood. Working closely with the locals in the sites that they ‘make over’, their emphasis is on integrating their horticultural expertise with creative and aesthetic concerns. The guerillas’ playful approach to making over disused sites challenges both civic authorities and suburbanites to rethink the spaces of suburbia as potentially green and sustainable. This is enacted on the show not through the usual focus on reducing consumption and rationalizing one’s lifestyle and behaviour but via an emphasis on romantic concerns around aesthetics, pleasure and the art of everyday living. On Eco House Challenge, in contrast, the expertise—as on many makeover shows—is imposed on the show’s participants (who nonetheless have clearly submitted to this imposition). Rational and scientific in approach, green citizenship is ‘encouraged’ here through rather punitive and moralizing techniques of expertise, with the two families encouraged to engage in critical self-scrutiny and self/mutual-surveillance of their harmful lifestyle habits—an approach that clearly dovetails with neoliberal discourses of individual ‘responsibilisation’ (Rose, 1999). At the same time, both shows are concerned with what ordinary people can do in their daily lives to ‘make a difference’, with Eco House Challenge in particular seeing suburban households as spaces for lifestyle transformation and potentially sustainable living. The focus here, then, is not on the state or on global politics as the primary agents of change but rather on how green concerns might be addressed at a more local level, though Eco House Challenge repeatedly emphasizes the links between the everyday lifestyle practices of the two families and global climate change.
Conclusion: ‘the good life’ revisited

The two eco-lifestyle shows discussed in this article, Guerilla Gardeners and Eco House Challenge, speak in distinctive ways to two broader cultural trends that, in turn, illustrate the growing relationship between lifestyle and citizenship today. Eco House Challenge illustrates the first trend well—and this is the prevalence of discourses of rational self-governance and ethical citizenship in which the homes, bodies and daily living habits of ‘ordinary people’ have increasingly come under scrutiny in the name of community well being. While debates and critiques of this cultural turn, a trend that is seen as synonymous with neoliberal forms of governance, are now well worn (and for some overworked) such arguments have come to the fore for good reason. The resurgence of interest in Foucault’s writings on governmentality, biopolitics and ethics clearly does speak to the fact that the management of populations in late liberal societies is increasingly occurring at the level of everyday life and consumption through a focus on the conduct and lifestyles of individuals.

The second trend I have sought to highlight in this article has been rather less discussed in academic scholarship—the rise or resurgence of what has been a long term but rather more marginal strain within lifestyle culture, that is, the spirit (or ‘ethic’ as Colin Campbell terms it (1987), speaking back to Weber’s arguments about modernity) of romanticism. While this ethic made its appearance in 1960s and 1970s counter-culture, with the turn to various alternative lifestyles and what Sam Binkley calls ‘self-loosening narratives’ (2007), I would suggest it is currently undergoing a resurgence, albeit in such unlikely spaces as the MasterChef kitchen where the
romantic impulse to creative hedonism, novelty and aestheticism is combined with a concomitant emphasis on enterprise and self-branding (Lewis forthcoming, 2011).

Elements of this romantic impulse are also evident in the rise of various creative modes of green and ethical citizenship, from community food markets to the slow food movement, with the latter’s emphasis on ethical living through embracing ‘the sensory and convivial pleasures of food consumption’ (Parkins and Craig, 2010: 315). And as I have suggested, eco-lifestyle shows such as *Guerilla Gardeners* and *Living with Ed* (the latter containing echoes of a much earlier comic portrayal of suburban sustainability, the popular 1970s BBC series *The Good Life*) can be read as offering up romantically-inflected, televisual experiments in greening suburbia.

While *Guerilla Gardeners* didn’t perhaps quite tap into the cultural zeitgeist to the same degree as *MasterChef*, what is interesting about the show is the way it gestures to a form of lifestyle politics and a lifestyle ethic that is not easily reducible to a neoliberal governmental rationale nor readily dismissed as purely a ‘discourse of resistance’ to governmental hegemony. As Campbell points out, romanticism and creativity have been integral to the development of contemporary lifestyle and consumer culture. Such a point is not merely academic but has important implications for how we both conceptualise and put into practice a green suburban politics. Firstly, it involves recognising lifestyle politics as a site of potentially progressive grassroots civic activism and as a space in which legitimate forms of empowering citizenship are played out. Secondly, it suggests that effective, everyday forms of suburban sustainability need to engage with rather than dismiss issues of ‘lifestyle’, recognising that everyday ethical and political practices are seldom purely grounded in the realms
of rational calculative choice but rather are articulated in complex ways to people’s broader lifestyle sensibilities and habits (Hawkins, 2006).

Such an understanding of lifestyle politics involves recognising the centrality of questions of pleasure and affect, and the limitations of the kind of punitive ethic of self-denial and self-flagellation that has often dogged green politics. The work of scholars like Kate Soper, in her writings about consumer-citizenship and ‘alternative hedonism’ (Soper, 2004), and that of a range of other commentators concerned with thinking about lifestyle and consumption more broadly around questions of care, community and a kind of lifestyle ethics (Barnett et al., 2005a; Miller, 2001; Lewis and Potter, 2010a), reflects a growing awareness of the need to think more broadly about effecting grassroots, green political change. As I’ve shown in this article, one place where creative and experimental approaches to alternative, transformative models of living are beginning to be explored is in the suburban streets and houses of eco-lifestyle television.

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ii Ibid.


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References


