



HARVEST is a free programme organised by Cat Rossi, Charles Holland and Steffi Klenz from UCA Canterbury School of Architecture, Art and Design. Timed to celebrate the end of the Folkestone Triennial 2025 and the changing seasons, it looks at the reconnection with growing and harvesting materials, with resources and seasonality, and with the earth amongst architects, artists, and designers. What do we gather, collect, and give thanks for today? The programme includes a salon conversation and artworks tour scheduled for Harvest Sunday (5th October 2025), and a poster series.

A Gathering Harvest

By Charles Holland and Cat Rossi

On the face of it, a harvest festival is a wholesome, homely celebration of the land and the food that comes from it, one that marks summer's end and the arrival of autumn. Stereotypical images of red-cheeked apples piled up against plaited loaves and sheeves of corn come to mind, gathered in baskets or on long tables around which communities come together, give thanks for the food and those that gathered it, and feast on the year's offerings. While harvest is celebrated differently around the world, the importance of its celebration speaks to a universality.

Yet harvest is not an easy concept in the 2020s, if it has ever been. Climate change saw the UK experienced its driest and warmest spring since the 1890s in 2025, with varying consequences for crop growth and yields. The farming of cereals, pulses, plants, flowers, and fruits is not a stable undertaking, but vulnerable to factors including soil and weather conditions, energy, fuel and fertiliser costs, government policy and geo-political events.

It is too obvious to say that harvest is vital to arable farming and the broader agriculture industry - perhaps less obvious is that it is also important for architecture and design too: crops and their byproducts such as hay and straw are not just vital winter livestock feed but also used as sustainable furniture and building materials, and construction mainstay timber is ultimately a harvested material. These industries understand only too well the uncertainties of harvest; an anxiety that can bring a fear that this year crops won't grow, nature might not be as generous as before, and local livelihoods and ways of life will not be sustained.

Yet such anxiety can seem alien in heavily urbanised and import-reliant contexts such as the UK. Here, the availability of the same food and materials all year round means that harvest and seasonality can seem irrelevant. The earthly origins of food and materials have become an increasingly outsourced abstraction. There is still insufficient understanding – or will to address - the environmental, human and multispecies cost of the year-round availability of beans from Kenya or apples from South Africa, and even less of the ultra-processed foods and materials that increasingly fill shopping baskets.

From City to Country

This disconnect from provenance, between a consuming urban world and a productive rural one, is a recurring trope in cultural representations of harvest. In Thomas Tryon's 1973 novel *Harvest Home*, a New York family escape from the city to an isolated Connecticut village. Their romantic view of this rural idyll is soon challenged by dark undercurrents and strange practices; the villagers' seemingly benign harvest festival masks an un-wholesome secret. To induce a successful harvest, sacrifices have to be made. Literally.

This theme is also present in the classic British cult-horror film *The Wicker Man*, also from 1973. Once again, a city dweller – this time a policeman investigating a mysterious disappearance - arrives on a remote Scottish island where obscure rural practices reveal disturbing truths including the failure of the previous year's harvest. The recent film *Harvest* (2025) – based on a 2013 novel by Jim Crace and set in an obscure and out-of-time English village - brings this fear of malign rural practice and the earth's fragile fertility up to date.

These examples explore a culture clash between city and country in which the urbanite invariably comes off worse. In both *The Wicker Man* and *Harvest*, urban visitors are induced unwittingly into mysterious rural practices they don't understand. In a reversal of common assumptions, it is the city dweller who is revealed as naive. The underlying fear is always the same: we must pay for our ignorance of the real conditions of rural life.

Viewed from the city, the rural is often seen thus: a backwater, a tranquil idyll, but also, potentially, a troubling other to urban life. A place of beauty but also one of myth, ritual and arcane practices. If the city is bound up with modernity and an enlightenment idea of rational, civic life, then the rural is its mirror: a place of escape and a dark world many urban dwellers don't fully understand.

Themes of city dwellers learning to live in unfamiliar natural environments appear elsewhere in fiction, including Daniel Defoe's 18th century novel *Robinson Crusoe*. Here, a castaway arrives at an unknown island and has to develop the skills and knowledge to survive, including building a shelter and growing crops such as barley, rice, and potatoes. Understanding seasonal rhythms becomes paramount, as does attention to local soil and weather conditions. Crusoe develops a harvest literacy, one the city dweller previously lacked. Today, we heed more critical readings of Defoe's novel, but also take lessons from them: the stranded slave-owner's island takeover and his treatment of Man Friday are reminders of the exploited lands and labour required to sustain historic colonialisation, but also contemporary food demand – no island really is an island, not least the UK, which cannot sustain its population on its food production alone.

In reconnecting with the provenance of the food on our tables, with seasonality and soil, we need to rethink this relationship between city and country; a historically persistent gulf that, as the cultural writer Raymond Williams noted in 1973's *The Country and the City*, is always indicative of broader societal crises. As Williams advises, instead of seeing these two conditions as binary opposites or irreconcilable alternatives, we could seek new connections and understand them as something more complex in which each condition exists within the other; just like the interdependencies that define the planet and our existence on it more generally.

How to do this? Are we condemned to be strangers to the specialist processes of modern agribusiness and global supply chains, oblivious to where food and materials come from or how they are produced? Or, is there a real and meaningful relationship that we can have with the earth and with natural cycles and processes that we have become disconnected from? Can we reinvent this relationship, recognise destructive practices and find new rituals that give meaning to how we grow and consume food and construct buildings today? And can we do this without mythologising rural practices, seeing them neither as wholesomely benign nor as alien and potentially malign?

From Radical Rurality to Countercultural Self-Sufficiency

There is a long and instructive history of those rethinking the relationship between the urban and rural, a closer connection to the land, and even self-sufficiency; see late 19th and early 20th century phenomena such as the Woodcraft Folk, or the Arts & Crafts and garden city movements.

Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept – articulated in 1898's *Tomorrow: A Path to Real Reform* – proposed a hybrid urban/rural condition. Instead, the Garden City would combine qualities of both, providing light, space and a connection to nature for the city dweller and improved conditions and access to culture for the rural population. Howard realised his ideas in the form of Letchworth Garden City, founded in 1903, and its influence can be found around the world, in ways both faithful and less so to his original concept. Yet an arguably far more radical fusion of the rural and the urban had already started taking root in the southeast of England in the late 19th century; one which resonates with ideas of harvest today.

The agricultural depression at the end of the Victorian era saw landowners sell off small plots of land to city-dwellers looking to escape London's squalor. These Plotland developments appeared across counties including Kent, Essex, and Sussex and were made of up of self-built, modest bungalows, often recycled from railway carriages and other pre-existing forms of shelter. Gradually they shifted from alternative, weekend escapes to permanent all-year round housing, often in combination with self-sufficient vegetable gardens and small holdings with chickens, pigs and goats. The informal freeform, DIY nature of these off-grid settlements provoked concern about sprawl and un-checked development and would ultimately lead to the implementation of modern planning policy, leading ultimately to their near-wholesale removal in favour of planned new communities. By the 1960's this experiment was largely over and the Plotlands had effectively disappeared.

Reappraising the Plotland communities in the later 20th century in *Arcadia for All: The Legacy of a Makeshift Landscape* (1984) the anarchist writer Colin Ward (with Dennis Hardy) drew attention to their productively hybrid nature. Here was a new conception of rural life; not pretty or sanitised, and not industrialised agriculture either. Instead, Ward saw an informal scattering of gardens, growing, and micro-scale farming akin to an inhabited allotment landscape. Ward read the Plotlands as one answer to the alienation effect of bureaucratic urbanism and the destruction of the landscape via industrialised farming.

Writing in the 1980s Ward was also reacting to a growing ecological consciousness, a dawning alarm at the environmental cost of post-WWII economic growth and mass consumerism. This was being brought to broader public consciousness by publications such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962), which linked the absence of birdsong to the use of pesticides, insecticides and fungicides in agriculture, and The Club of Rome's *The Limits of Growth* (1972), which argued for an end to what British writer John Thackara has since called the modern 'oil-based' myth of progress.

In response, architects, designers and other proponents of alternative living created tools for less destructive ways of inhabiting the earth. The first issue of the American counter-culture bible the *Whole Earth Catalog*, published in 1968, had articles on subjects including foraging, organic gardening, and bee keeping. By the second issue of 1969 it covered solar energy and wind power, soil testing, seed catalogues, and fishing, as well as guidance on 'how to plant, cultivate, fertilize and harvest' in ways that followed Native American land management cultures. These were praised for the 'deep unity' of their relationship to the land, in contrast with 'white Americans' as land 'exploiters and destroyers'. Notably, this argument would become popular over 40 years later in the writings of Pota-watomi scholar Robin Wall Kimmerer, such as 2013's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, where she advocated for the 'Honorable Harvest' and its tenet of reciprocity, asking us to give back to the land when we take from it.

Also important to the post-WWII counterculture was Godfrey Boyle and Peter Harper's *Radical Technology* (1976), a guide to de-centralised, small-scale and renewable technologies. Covering themes from shelter to food, it noted the collaboration between different species required for land stewardship, advising letting hens and pigs onto harvested fields to gobble up crop leftovers. It also identified the importance of paying attention to seasonal rhythms in this way of life and praised the low ecological impact of reed thatched roofs, given the natural occurrence of reed beds and minimal energy expenditure required in sourcing and processing the material.

A Contemporary Harvest

Amidst ever starker warnings of climate breakdown, these countercultural texts have a new relevance and urgency today; particularly when taken alongside other voices advocating for overcoming the anthropocenic rift between humans, the planet and its plant and animal species – voices such as Timothy Morton, Anna Tsing or Kathryn Yusoff. They are also relevant

for a growing harvest consciousness in architecture and design today. This has emerged out of a broader ecologically informed craft turn in the last two decades. Hands-on ways of designing and making and an appetite for regenerative approaches have seen practitioners think ever closer about the origins of materials, concerning themselves not just with which country or factory they are sourced from, but even which field. There is a small but rising number of harvest-like architecture and design practices, such as building with straw, reeds, or other crop by products, cultivating plants for natural dyes, coppicing trees for furniture production, working with self-grown crops, foraging kelp and other alternative building materials, gathering waste materials from construction sites, or creating buildings that work with seasonal changes rather than against them. As the architectural historian Barnabas Calder has noted, all over the world buildings operate 'in the spirit of out-of-season strawberries: squandering fossil energy to fake up the delights of another season'; an aseasonality that needs to be redressed.

It goes without saying that several of these ways of working are centuries if not millennia old, and still common practice in many cultures today. So, if a harvest ethos is to take hold, then architects and designers need to develop their harvest literacy by learning from those working in this way already; this is particularly important given the challenges involved. Loretta Bosence is one half of Local Works, a Sussex based biomaterials and circular economy specialist studio. She recently contributed to *Common Treasures*, the publication of an eponymous new initiative founded by architecture collective Assemble and Wessex Community Assets, where she described how designing, making and building seasonally is at odds with the 24/7 365 culture of global construction. Working seasonally is challenging and risky in its unpredictability, and costly in terms of both time and labour. Yet for Local Works the cost is worth it, given the value of a more ecological, low carbon design and making approach.

Harvest, then is a key concern in the 2020s. As a concept, it is a useful lens to critically understand practitioners who are inviting us to relearn our relationship to nature, the local, and the rural, in ways that reshape the relevance of these terms; even if we recognise that what is on offer are often one-off or small scale interventions that do not, in themselves, make the societal or structural changes ultimately needed. Nevertheless, they have value in their rooted, local nature and the stories of new, different, worlds that they offer. Such work also recognises that returning to a prelapsarian idyll is not open to us. Even, if possible, such a return is always complicit in the 'othering' of nature seen in the various books and films explored earlier in this essay. Instead, we need to invent new connections, ones that accept that our relationship to the earth is not a simple one, neither an escape nor an alternative idyll but a complex ongoing project.

Learning to make, consume and live in a harvest-like way ultimately involves relearning and reconnecting to a different set of knowledge and skills and a renewed relationship with the land; from a recognition of nature's rhythms and respect for its gifts, to the cultivation and gathering of materials. Ultimately, we need to ask ourselves: What do we gather, collect and give thanks for today?

A Gathering This artwork by Charles Holland explores ideas of what a contemporary form of harvest means. Even if such a thing were desirable, a return to a simpler, pre-modern world is not available to us. We cannot unlearn what we know, nor can we reverse the technological advances that have profoundly changed our lives. At the same time, we can no longer ignore the potentially catastrophic effects of human action on the planet.

So, how can we renegotiate our relationship to the earth whilst retaining a commitment to progressive, cultural life? Is there a position between a blind faith in technology or the myth of a prelapsarian idyll? Can we escape both nostalgic rural romanticism and dark apocalyptic imaginings?

What would a landscape where we respected the earth and lived with rather than against nature look like today? This image explores one possible answer, a place both familiar and unknown, one of lives engrained within the earth but also full of strange, new possibilities.

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