

# Dusty Gedge



**Name:**  
Dusty Gedge

**Position/occupation:**  
Urban Ecologist  
and founder of  
livingroofs.org.

**Residence:**  
Lewisham.

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Dusty has lived in Lewisham for nearly 20 years. His interest in urban ecology eventually led to a career as one of the leading proponents of green or living roofs. He has campaigned for the whole-scale adoption of green roofs in major developments in London and elsewhere in the UK using international best practice as a driver. In 2004, he co-founded livingroofs.org the UK’s independent not for profit green roof organisation that educates and advises on green roof development. In 2006 he co-presented the Channel 4 series ‘Wild Thing I Love You’ with comedian Bill Bailey, looking at solutions to various wildlife problems in the UK.

Originally born in Bromley, he loves the diversity of London, its buzz and its potential to lead change. “How we address issues like climate change in London will really make a difference worldwide – you can’t say that about many cities.” Yet he laments the complexity of London which he sees as a barrier to getting things done, plus a certain tendency to go for style over function. “Too many players, too many decision-makers. You are always dealing with a mishmash of egos. Every building has to be iconic or landmark. It should be about community, not icons.” By 2050 he hopes for a greener London that values its ‘ecosystem services’ of air, land, soil and water. “More functionality: less steel and flash.”

## Sustainability experience

Dusty cites his 1970s childhood as a reason for his environmental roots. “I was always interested in wildlife. My mum tells me I fell out of my high chair when I was 2 chasing a robin. But in the 70s there was political interest in saving the planet.” Always passionate about wildlife, particularly

birds, he decided against doing a degree in ecology and studied theatre instead, becoming a professional street entertainer, circus performer and actor. He even modelled as a punk for postcards in the 1980s. Whilst teaching circus skills to disaffected children in Deptford he was asked to undertake a detailed bird survey of the area, including the Creek. Through this work he became the lead for London Biodiversity Partnership’s black redstart action plan – and his obsession with putting vegetation on buildings began.

Having campaigned for green roofs over the last 15 years it’s a subject he lives and breathes. His initial interest was driven by nature conservation, providing habitats in cities at roof top level for species disappearing from the wider environment. But he sees the benefits of green roofs as much broader. “A green roof cuts the need for air conditioning because the rooms underneath are cooler. It also traps water, where it evaporates instead of going into the drainage system and contributing to potential flooding. There are also benefits for health and amenity.”

Part of his inspiration comes from the challenge of influencing big developers and changing industry status quo. “Initially at Deptford Creek it was a David versus Goliath thing. Local people fighting developers to protect the habitat of a rare bird species, the black redstart.” Being told by industry ‘experts’ that it wasn’t possible to put vegetation on buildings wound Dusty up sufficiently to find a solution. “I travelled the world to look at examples and find out how it could be done, visiting Switzerland, Germany, Sweden and the USA. There’s a reluctance sometimes to do things differently. It’s about challenging entrenched habits and perceptions and changing the mindsets of the ‘we’ve always done it that way’ brigade.” The potential in London is huge. “There’s 24 times the size of Richmond Park in flat roofs in London, which could be green tomorrow. You have all those buildings in out-of-town shopping developments which are grey, dead sheds - they should have green roofs.”

Dusty has played a leading role in many exciting green roof projects, but picks out a couple as key achievements. “The Komodo Dragon House roof at London Zoo has taken about three years to really flourish but is an exemplary design and also sourced materials and aggregates locally from London. Getting Barclays to put a green roof on top of their tower in Canary Wharf was a highlight for me. It’s the highest green roof designed for nature conservation in the world. It’s 160 metres up and I can take people up there to look at it, and you can see right across London. Which is something for a geezer from Deptford.” He is also proud of his work with Global Generation on Grays Inn Road, which involved local school children and young people in the project. “Global Generation have now installed a water recycling system and are looking at a number of other green roofs, green walls and water recycling technologies on other business properties in the London Borough of Camden. This is important as green roofs not only play an environmental role but have the potential to have a social dimension especially in the urban core.”

## Sustainability Challenge

Dusty is a big proponent of taking the holistic view demanded by sustainability. “We have to see the city as an ecosystem, providing services such as land, soil and water.” He warns against the dangers of taking the opposite, reductionist view. “Focussing too much on single issues, even CO<sub>2</sub> reduction, could in the end make us less sustainable if we don’t make the positive links with other environmental and social issues. Part of the challenge is to promote trans-disciplinary approaches involving energy, water, biodiversity and so on.”

He sees London’s biggest challenge as summer over-heating or the ‘urban heat island effect’. “I call it ‘cool poverty’. I know us Brits like it when it’s hot but increasing summer temperatures can kill – look what happened in France in July/August 2003. It’s a real issue particularly for social housing and vulnerable people such as asthma sufferers, as our buildings tend to be designed for winter. There is the potential for London to be hell in 2050 – literally.” Green

space is the solution according to Dusty. “The London’s Warming report predicted an increase in temperature of between 0.5 and 3.5°C. by 2050 as a result of existing climate change. In Toronto modelling has shown that greening up 5% of the urban core would reduce city temperatures by between 1 and 2 °C.” On top of this, Dusty sees air conditioning as a major problem. “Big retailers in London were selling air conditioners every two minutes during the heat wave in July 2006. More air conditioning means more CO<sub>2</sub> – it’s a vicious circle.”

“What can people do? Take responsibility for our impact such as personal energy use and waste output. Get involved – join a local action group or waste recycling club. Get rid of standby TVs. Reduce car journeys. There’s people in my local pub who think they have a human right to drive into London. It’s selfishness really.”