

WHAT'S
THIS
PLACE?



STORIES
FROM
RADICAL
SOCIAL
CENTRES
IN THE UK
& IRELAND

WHAT'S THIS PLACE?



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STORIES FROM RADICAL
SOCIAL CENTRES IN
THE UK AND IRELAND



INTRODUCTION

Social centres are a vital part of the infrastructure of radical social movements, and recently in the UK and Ireland struggles in our cities and communities have given energy to a whole network of places.

This is what this booklet is about – the growth of a network of autonomous spaces and social centres. The demand to mark out a place - giving us space to breath, take action and experiment with managing our own lives collectively – is an almost universal desire amongst radical groups today. We are often called anarchists, anti-capitalists and anti-globalisers but these labels don't really do justice to the diversity of the projects we are building and the kinds of connections and networks of solidarity we are making in the places we live.

The idea of an autonomous space or social centre is difficult to pin down and the two labels are often used inter-changeably. The word autonomous is about the demand for self-management (the origins of the word autonomy come from auto-nomos – literally to self-legislate). These autonomous spaces come in many different forms – small info shops and resource centres, radical arts, music and cinema spaces, large centres with meeting spaces and bars, often with housing

co-operatives attached, providing lower cost accommodation. Social centres also have deep roots in struggles for collective, common space throughout history and connections around the world. The most immediate are the occupied *centri sociali* of Italy and the strong tradition of squats across Europe in the Netherlands, Germany, Spain and France where cities like Berlin, Barcelona, Milan and Amsterdam have an impressive array of well established squats and autonomous political spaces which are a visible part of the city's political and cultural life.

Social centres have also both drawn from and given resources to, the big recent movements in the UK and beyond – the squatting and free party scenes, anti-roads camps and the anti-G8, climate action and No Borders movements and their temporary self managed encampments. The squat scene in the UK continues to be an inspiration and important base for activism, especially in London and the bigger cities. But in smaller places and in the face of repeated, often illegal evictions

or a lack of suitable empties, there has been a rise in the number of rented or bought social centres over the last few years. There's also connections to socialist, co-operative, punk, DIY, anti-fascist, peace, vegan, and claimants union movements. It's a rich and diverse political world which defies any clear categories. But it's also important to define what they are not – with autonomous social centres we are not talking about independent cafés (however counter cultural they may seem!), working men's clubs or community centres.

“Having a public space where anti-authoritarian politics are accessible and clearly visible is key to what it's all about”

So what do they aim to do? Social centres come from a demand for spaces for radical political debate and action, meetings, eating together, grass roots music, mutual support and information and skill sharing and collective education. They come from a common desire to build networks, solidarities and movements, make connections and develop our politics with our communities and cities. We have seen endless waves of property speculation, gentrification, dispossession and cuts in welfare services.

And we have seen the need to respond and find strong roots for radical politics in our localities to resist oppression and greed and to create responses and alternatives. Having a public space where anti-authoritarian politics are accessible and clearly visible is key to what it's all about. Social centres are vital hubs where connections can be made in cities which are divided and increasingly controlled by wealth and privilege. As our cities and neighbourhoods face ongoing waves of privatisation and gentrification the opportunities for occupying space becomes both increasingly difficult and necessary.

A huge amount of effort goes into building and maintaining autonomous spaces. Dealing with issues such as openness and cliques, financial pressures and repression, never mind day to running on a voluntary basis, can mean that being involved with social centres is draining and frustrating at times. Social centres are not about high adrenaline activism – they require the more mundane everyday work that often gets overlooked and often relies on a small group of committed individuals. Opening a space also requires a confidence in your collective capabilities, a lot of learning by doing and constant questioning and evolving of the ways we manage them and make them accessible, effective and functioning. Autonomous spaces also face a much more ugly and brutal backdrop of increased European wide repression in the last year or so. A recent flashpoint was the eviction of the long running Ungdomshuset (house of the young) in Denmark in March 2007 which led thousands onto the street to demonstrate for their space, openly expressing their discontent and their willingness to fight for their space. Repression against squats continues to mount in Spain, Germany, France and the UK with concerns over co-

ordinated European police action against the squatting movement. As a response there has been a European wide call out for a day of action in support of squats and autonomous spaces in April 2008 (see page 76).

“As our cities and neighbourhoods face ongoing waves of privatisation and gentrification the opportunities for occupying space becomes both increasingly difficult and necessary”

One of the most discussed aspects of the recent rise of autonomous spaces and social centres has been the validity of whether to squat or go legal in some form (renting, buying). This has been a really important and tough debate for some years. In the summer of 2004 in the UK a booklet called “You can't rent your way out of a social situation” argued that rented or bought spaces would weaken the squatting movement and that the latter was a more radical and urgent priority. No doubt there is much truth in this, but in the face of what seemed like a constant cycle of short term experiments, evictions and

repression, many activists wanted something more permanent and argued that the two approaches were not mutually exclusive. By going permanent through renting or buying it is true in many cases that we have lost the oppositional culture that goes hand in hand with squatting. But we have, in many cases, also built deeper bonds of solidarity locally, especially with those who may not for whatever reason come to a squatted space. Debating the effectiveness of this apparently pragmatic response to rapid expansion of corporate capital and police repression remains vitally important. We should also be wary of creating a false division. There are many examples of really close, productive links between more temporary and permanent spaces where there is mutual support and where they feed off each other's strengths.

A recent turning point in the make up of UK social centres was in 2004 when a large amount of funding was made available to set up (mainly rented) explicitly anti-capitalist social centres as one key element of the Dissent! mobilisation against the G8 in Scotland, 2005. It was hoped that these projects would become self sustaining bases for radical activity and leave a legacy of resources for the UK activist movement. Groups in Manchester, Liverpool, Oxford, Leeds, Newcastle, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Glasgow, all received a considerable sum of money to start up a project. With varying degrees of luck, groups in these cities found and rented spaces – most of them identifying as autonomous social centres. For some groups the money was a blessing and they were able to quickly move into a space they had been wanting for ages, for others it became something of a curse and caused conflicts over how best to spend it. Considering the sums involved, this was

always going to be a controversial injection of money onto a political scene where money is scarce and there is little discussion what the wider strategic priorities for funding are. Several of the pieces in this booklet evaluate the impacts of this money and the projects that they helped initiate. The money for most is long gone and not all the spaces still continue today, but the grants did give a new direction to local political activity and activism which can still be seen today.

“*the aim of this booklet is to open up space for reflection on these radical projects and also to make the wider political project of autonomous spaces and social centres more visible, understandable and do-able*”

Whilst sharing lessons and perspectives is important, every context is different and it's obviously important not to create a 'one size fits all' model for radical, autonomous spaces. There are some pretty specific conditions needed to create an autonomous space - money, skills, empty properties to squat, established groups with energy and commitment. In the last four years or so there has been a conscious effort to move beyond debates over the validity of different approaches and to

build a network of autonomous spaces and social centres - rented, squatted or bought (see www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk). To this end, meetings of an emerging UK Social Centres network have taken place at the annual Anarchist Bookfairs in London and other large political gatherings. Two network wide meetings have been held. The first was in Leeds in January 2006 and the second followed in Bradford in February 2007 where people from around 20 autonomous social centres met to discuss how to support each other and strengthen the network, while also sharing difficulties, strategies and experiences.

What's This Place? is one of the projects which came out of the Bradford gathering. A call-out for articles was made and there has been a great response, which taps into this rich world of autonomous spaces through essays, songs, cartoons, pictures, interviews, song lyrics and stories. Many issues are covered including: long term sustainability (both personal and financial) political strategies and identities, organising styles, effectiveness, the validity of providing welfare style services, outreach and accessibility, and paid versus unpaid work. The booklet contains pieces which simply tell the story of particular autonomous social centres, interspersed with more analytical pieces. As well as aiming to open up space for debate on these radical projects we also wanted to make the wider political project of autonomous spaces and social centres more visible, understandable and do-able. We imagined that many people at social centres around the UK and Ireland may be unaware of the connections with other similar spaces and that this booklet could help to create a broader understanding of what these spaces are all about.

While the original motivation for this publication was the places calling themselves radical or anti-capitalist 'social centres' which

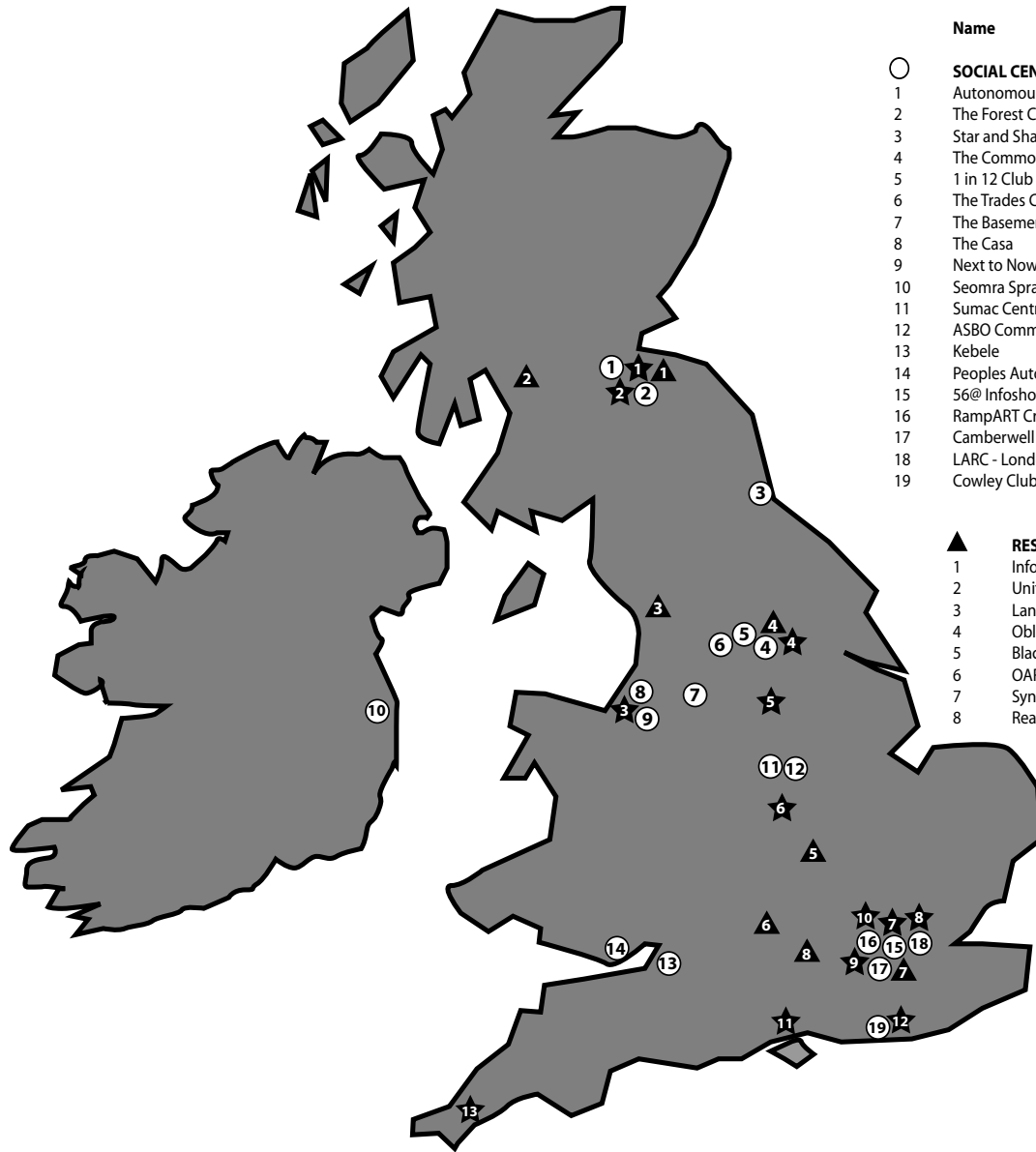
emerged in the early to mid 2000s, the stories in this booklet extend beyond them. It begins with accounts from older centres - the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford, the grand-daddy of the UK scene, coming out of the late 80s radical anarcho-punk scene and tradition of autonomy clubs; the Casa in Liverpool, a solidly socialist inspired club which directly came out of the 1995 - 1998 Dockers strike; and the Trades in Hebden Bridge, another solidly socialist inspired club emerging out of the early 20th century trade union and co-operative movement and maintaining a defiantly socialist outlook to the present day.

Then there are accounts from the more permanent, bought social centres where activists have put down roots in their communities to create stable bases for radical activism - the Kebele Kulture Project in Bristol, the Sumac Centre in Nottingham, the Cowley Club in Brighton, and LARC in London. There is also the recent wave of rented social centres and here we have stories from the Basement in Manchester, which is currently looking to reopen after a fire, the Common Place in Leeds, the now closed George's X Chalkboard in Glasgow, Seoma Sproai in Dublin, and PAD (People's autonomous Destination) in Cardiff. There are also inspiring stories from smaller info shops and resource centres - such as the Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh (ACE) and 56A Info Shop in South London. In terms of more artistic and creative focused centres, the Star and Shadow Collective in Newcastle tell us about their autonomous space and independent cinema, and the Forest Café recount their project in Edinburgh.

Finally, there are a number of squats which continue to be inspirations and close allies for this wider network, the Camberwell Squatted Project in London, the long running RampART squat in east London, which has been having a new lease of life in a new building after a recent eviction, and the inspiring story of

several occupied social centres undertaken by the London Social Centre network. There are several places that we know aren't featured (such as the new Liverpool social centre Next to Nowhere or the Temporary Autonomous Arts squats in Bristol, Manchester and London) and there are many more that we don't even know about. We also had to draw lines around which projects to include and which to exclude - many independent projects are not included here because they didn't have an explicit radical political focus compared to the ones featured here.

What's This Place? is not intended as a comprehensive take on what is happening - it's a fast changing world and so this can only be a snap shot of a wider movement. Places die through evictions or changes in priorities and new ones are born, established, creating opportunities for different types of space. This ebb and flow is what makes this movement both interesting and unpredictable and this biodegradability is essential to any healthy scene. We hope that this booklet will promote debate and action on the need for autonomous spaces in our cities and neighbourhoods. So now we pass over to those involved, to let the stories speak for themselves.



Name	City	Address	Website
○ SOCIAL CENTRES + AUTONOMOUS SPACES			
1	Edinburgh	17 West Montgomery Place, EH7 5HA	www.autonomous.org.uk
2	Edinburgh	3 Bristo Place, EH1 1EY	www.theforest.org.uk
3	Newcastle	Stepney Bank, NE1 2NP	www.starandshadow.org.uk
4	Leeds	23-25 Wharf Street, LS2 7EQ	www.thecommonplace.org.uk
5	Bradford	21 Albion Street, BD1 2LY	www.1in12.go-legend.net
6	Hebden Bridge	Holme Street, HX7 8EE	www.tradesclub.info
7	Manchester	24 Lever Stret, M1 1DZ	www.basementmanchester.org.uk
8	Liverpool	29 Hope Street, L1 9BQ	www.initfactory.gn.apc.org
9	Liverpool	Basement, 96 Bold Street, L1 4HY	www.liverpoolsocialcentre.org
10	Dublin		www.seomraspraoi.org
11	Nottingham	245 Gladstone Street, NG7 6HX	www.veggies.org.uk/sumac
12	Nottingham	33 Burns Street, NG7 4DS	www.asbo.squat.net
13	Bristol	14 Robertson Road, BS5 6JY	www.kebele.org
14	Cardiff	118 Clifton Street, CF24 1LW	www.thepad.wordpress.com
15	London	56 Crampton Street, SE17 3AE	www.56a.org.uk
16	London	15-17 Rampart St, Whitechapel E1 2LA	www.rampart.co.nr
17	London		www.56a.org.uk/warham.html
18	London	62 Fieldgate St, Whitechapel, E1 1ES	www.londonarc.org
19	Brighton	12 London Road, BN1 4JA	www.cowleyclub.org.uk
▲ RESOURCE CENTRES			
1	Edinburgh	Basement, 3 Bristo Place, EH1 1EY	www.infoseed.org
2	Glasgow	30 Ibrox Street, G51 1AQ	www.unitycentreglasgow.org
3	Lancaster	78a Penny Street, LA1 1XN	www.eco-action.org/lancaster
4	Leeds	2 Beulah Mount Leeds LS6 2JZ	www.oblongleeds.org.uk
5	Northampton	24 St Michael's Avenue, NN1 4JQ	www.ofek.com/bca
6	Oxford	Princes St, OX4 1HU	www.theoarc.org.uk
7	London	220 Farmers Road, SE5	www.thesynergycentre.org
8	Reading	35-39 London Street, RG1	admin@isc.org.uk
★ RADICAL BOOKSHOPS / DISTRIBUTION			
1	Edinburgh	43 West Nicolson Street, EH8 9DB	www.word-power.co.uk
2	Edinburgh	PO BOX 12766, EH8 9YE	www.akpress.org
3	Liverpool	96 Bold Street, L1 4HY	www.newsfromnowhere.org.uk
4	Leeds	c/o 23-25 Wharf Street, LS2 7EQ	www.re-pressed.org.uk
5	Sheffield	PO BOX 1251, S11 8XG	www.slendermeans.org.uk
6	Leicester	73 Humberstone Gate, LE1 1WB	
7	London	5 Caledonian Road, N1 9DX	www.housmans.com/books/index.htm
8	London	84b Whitechapel High St, E1 7QX	www.freedompress.org.uk
9	London	13 Leigham Hall Parade, SW16 1DR	
10	London	BM Active, WC1N 3XX	www.activedistribution.org
11	Southampton	243 Portswood Road, SO17 2NG	www.octoberbooks.org
12	Brighton	mail@natterjackpress.co.uk	www.natterjackpress.co.uk
13	Falmouth	Market Strand, TR 11 3DB	archway@riseup.net

For more info see:
www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk

BRADFORD'S RADICAL HUB



The 1 in 12 today is one of the radical north's biggest treasures. In their earliest incarnation, the anarchist collective provoked a hailstorm of controversy as they exposed council corruption, brought out their own music labels, fought racism and raised funds for strike groups.

In 1981, a group formed around Bradford's Claimant Union, intending to generate a new social scene for both the employed and those out of work. They took their name from a report brought out at the time claiming that one in twelve claimants defrauded the state.

The group campaigned actively on a range of subjects, with one of their first causes involving the Bradford 12, a group of Asian lads who had been arrested for making petrol bombs to defend their community against a racist attack they had caught wind of. They were released on the grounds of self defence.

Further anti-racist work followed, along with records, literature and direct action. A magazine, *Knee Deep In Shit*, gained a solid muckraking reputation and exposed corruption in the council and the Freemasons.

The sheer energy and ambition of the founding group eventually manifested in the

creation of its members-only club, the 1 in 12, in 1988 - a building bought with a council grant.

Pete Chapman is one of the group's longest-serving members. He remembers his first experiences of the club persuaded him to get involved in 1983: *"It was running one night a week in a pub called Tickle's then. I went down there and just started to get to know people. A lot of it was around the music."*

"There was a gig on every week but politically it was fighting fascism, and supporting the unions. When I started it was Hindles Gears, which ran for a year - we did some fundraising for them - and then of course it was the Miners' Strike."

A plaque still hangs on the wall at the club to remind members of the long struggle - a thank you from the Nottinghamly Wives' Self Help Group, who they donated their collections to.

Their plans to take over a building, partly inspired by a piece by Albert Meltzer in the *Black Flag* magazine, were as much luck as judgment, according to Pete: *"Somebody found out that this money was available, and it had to be used. Bradford council needed to get rid of it or lose it. This proposal came up, and they accepted it - although strings have been attached."*

The move caused an uproar in the local press, with one journalist accusing the 1 in 12 of a plan to spend the money on bombs and guns. It took three years to open the building, with the police and authorities interfering all the way and lack of enthusiasm nearly killing the project entirely.

Pete remembers: *"It was exciting but when it came down to the boring stuff like sanding down window frames there was only about three or four people working on it, and everyone else was asking 'is it done yet?'"*

Matt, another long-serving member, signed up to help in 1985, just after the building had been bought. A libertarian (with a copy of *Freedom* already in his hand), he gravitated towards the energy of the place: *"To stumble across it - a three-storey derelict warehouse - was very exciting."*

"But just having the building ended up being a huge responsibility. We've never taken any other grants, we decided to stand it up on our own energies. It takes £56,000 a year to keep it open these days."

But the timing of the 1 in 12, in some ways, couldn't have been worse. It coincided with a downturn in political activity in the area. Matt explained: *"We went from being a very politically active city when we started up in '86, and suddenly post '88, apart from*



the Poll Tax a lot of the energies that would have gone into political activities got sucked out and went into keeping the place open.

“It was a lot harder than anyone had thought it would be. It went quite quiet in the early 90’s, Bradford had become depoliticised.” The club staved off the effects of such increasing disengagement by actively reaching out on a community level, Matt thinks: “When we first started we entered a quiz league and it may sound miniscule but it meant we tied in with our local culture, we didn’t lose touch with the city.

“Other examples were that we took on three allotment sites, started a football team, a lot of activity which allowed people with different interests to express themselves. It allowed me to get a handle on what I perceived to be my political aspirations.”

The late 90’s saw another downturn, but the collective continued to innovate. A trip to Barcelona for the 60th anniversary of the Spanish revolution, helped by Albert Meltzer’s extensive contacts book, saw members join in a week of gigs, meetings and rallies. It sparked an idea. “When we came back it dawned on us that the Mayday tradition had died.” Matt explained. “We organised a load of activities in the city when we got back. The local cinema had a series of libertarian films, there was a march through town and it felt good.

“The following year we did one with Class War as they began to close down the paper in ‘98, they held a conference of 300 people as a parting shot, and the club was packed every night.

“The next year Mayday became a hot potato again as it took off in London, so in a small way the 1 in 12 played a part, there is a chain. This year, we’ll be holding another Mayday march along with Bradford TUC, and

there will be lots of gigs.”

At around the same time, two members of the group helped to establish contacts with radical groups in Kosovo and Serbia as the major conflict began to escalate in 1996-98. During the war, the 1 in 12 was active in procuring, and then secretly transporting, much needed aid into Kosovo.

In the last five years there have been more campaigns, but the focus of recent times has again become anti-facism. The far-right’s resurgence has surprised many in the area, Matt believes: “It’s shocking, there has always been a culture of No Platform since 1976 and the Battle of Bradford. The NF got thousands of people out in the city then, and had planned to march into an immigrant district, but the TUC was strong in those days and over 10,000 people responded.

“There was a pitched battle and it was the first time the fascists had been confronted. They hadn’t set foot in Bradford again, and had no success in organising, until now.

“In the last few years they did get four BNP councilors so there has been a lot of stuff organised by the TUC which we have supported. It’s a different kind of fighting now, knocking on doors, I’d say it’s harder because you have to use your brain a bit more.”

The club helped with catering at the G8, and remains an integral support for the region. Today only two of the founding members remain, with another four whose commitment began before the social centre was founded.

But the club continues to survive, and even grow, despite huge financial challenges. Membership currently tops 400, of whom around 50 are thought to be actively involved in 1 in 12-based projects.



Pete seems optimistic for the future, despite a decline of working class resistance and organisation that has continued over the last decade. The club is stable and active, and remains at the forefront of radical activity. He noted: “We host Radical Routes gatherings, music gigs, politics, and some more official sources like the Workers’ Education Association, who come in to do classes.

“It’s quite difficult because the closest residential area has an aging population (it was the first housing estate in the country), but we draw in members from all over Bradford and even the world.

“We have recently got an upsurge in younger people wanting to get involved, which is really encouraging because a lot of us are getting older ourselves.”

Matt concurs: “We started with a very small collective, and have had only four or five people working on it at times. It has been a struggle sometimes and this year again we

are going to struggle to break even - it has been quite demoralising. We have had three or four crises when we have considered closing the building.

“There is a price to pay for doing something so real. Campaigns bleed people dry and this is the same thing. But having said that the positive is the model we have created through the club. It has allowed people to express their leanings in ways that aren’t classically political.

Bradford is struggling as a community, particularly because of Leeds, and it has some really difficult ethnic conditions but in amongst that is a valuable core. The banners may have come down but the positives are that what replaced it is real for people and makes anarchism accessible.”

This article by Rob Ray was first featured in the magazine Freedom in 2005 (www.freedompress.org.uk)



The 1 in 12 Club is at:
21-23 Albion St, Bradford, BD1 2LY

Tel: 01274 734160
and see their website:
www.1in12.com

HEBDEN BRIDGE

TRADES CLUB.

EDUCATION, RECREATION, AGITATION.



In this interview, members of the Trades Club in Hebden Bridge, in the north of England, explain their unique origins in the early twentieth century co-operative, socialist and labour movement. While quite different to many of the other social centres in this booklet, its history and politics give a unique insight into the diversity of ways people have tried to self manage their own political spaces over the decades.

CAN YOU SAY A BIT ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF HOW THE CLUB WAS FOUNDED?

The building itself was built in 1924, and it was built by the trades unions of the Calder Valley. Calder Valley at that time boomed with textiles and obviously the different trades had their unions, and they got together to build a headquarters for the local union branches. It was also to be a place of education and recreation.

The Calder Valley was also very much involved in the development of the cooperative movement; Hebden Bridge was at the heart of that. I've been told that at one point 70% of the property in Hebden Bridge was cooperatively owned, it was one of the biggest in the world. This is the kind of atmosphere that it was built around. So, we are rooted in the labour and trade union and cooperative movement, which goes right back of course to the later 18th and early 19th century as well. The textiles and

tailoring industries virtually disappeared in the 60s and 70s, and the club closed down. The building ended up being owned by the local Labour Party branch.

That was something over a quarter of a century ago, but we are not part of the Labour Party, we are an independent socialist club. So 25 years ago, a group of people got together, and decided to rent the top floor of the trades club as a social and socialist venue, independent of any political party, but with a set of principles which were based on those who built it in 1924, which was commitment to the labour, cooperative, and trades union movement.

Now over the years our constitution has changed a bit because the members have changed, so we've got anti-racist elements, and anti-fascist elements built into the constitution. We've got anti-sexism, pro-equality, so the constitution has evolved to a certain extent.

WHAT ARE THE ACTIVITIES TODAY?

Essentially, the club now is a music venue. It reached the stage where it was doing three live gigs a week, and it needed more and more volunteers. It was entirely volunteer run. They used to have to have a whip-round at the committee meetings to buy another barrel of beer, I mean, that's how hard it was. I mean now the place has got a turnover of a quarter million pounds a year and we're still never free of money problems. We were one of the first music venues in Britain to embrace African music and start becoming a multi-national music venue.

We do a lot of benefit concerts, these can be for purely political causes, or for other good causes that our members want. Every year we have a membership of around 1200. Local political groups, whether it's Calderdale Unite against Racism and Fascism, Calderdale Against the War, Calderdale Palestine Support Group, the local Amnesty International Group - the place hums with those local groups. Up until a couple of years ago we had three BNP councillors in Calderdale. UNITY, Calderdale UNITE, Unite against Racism and Fascism, for who we raise funds, is more or less based here and I'm part of that. There are no bloody BNP councillors in Calderdale now, and a lot of that is down to the group and organisational work that we've done here.

As well as the direct political heavyweight stuff, there's also a lot of day to day community stuff - we've got a chess club, a walking group as well that goes off to the Pennines every Sunday, we have activities for kids. So it's not all big politics, it's day-to-day stuff as well. It's playing, it's political, it's educational, it's agitational, it's organisational as well.

TELL ME ABOUT HOW YOU ORGANISE?

Now, I know about the social centre movement and how it's developing, and we're not like that. I know that a lot of the social centres are more horizontally run, you don't have a structure or a hierarchy, now we do. That we've inherited, you know, that's how it was. You elect a committee, you elect a president and you elect a secretary. We have 14 people who are officers or committee members and they are elected each year, and all members can attend all committee meetings.

But I mean originally like it was just a guy with a long beard that came and stood by the bar who did all the stuff. Until you get to a certain size, a certain scale, and you think we better employ somebody, and then you get an entertainments manager and so on. And then you end up having a committee. So it's not like it's set up as a hierarchy, it just evolves that way. It might change one day to become a co-op, but running it as a co-op would be a massive step, wouldn't it?

Well what we've got is ten members of paid staff, five full-time and five part-time. Bar staff, office staff, a couple work part time running the gigs, a couple who are sound engineers, a manager who has to take responsibility for the whole operation... and then we've got the volunteers. We generally have anything from 20-30 volunteers running the doors, you know charging on the doors, But, the key thing is they've all got this commitment to the place. The Trades is an institution that's fantastically well known.

There are those who have done their couple of years on the committee, and you know, they've done their bit, so they can move on to something else. The thing is, if there is anything that needs doing, there is a fair

few membership and ex membership. We've got works of every skill going represented amongst membership and ex-membership. We've got membership base, you know, on computer. We want something doing we know exactly who to go to.

SO IN TERMS OF POLITICS, WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE TRYING TO ACHIEVE BY BEING HERE OVER THE YEARS?

Helping us to take action. And when I say taking action, I mean, action here, not in Africa. I suppose with issue politics, you know we tend to look at climate change or direct action, with these kind of places there are lot of people in it that would respond to a challenge, you know mobilising for the anti-war movement - that took spontaneity and the trade club played a part in that. When the Iraq invasion happened, there was 120 people in the square out there, and when they had that meeting they came back in here to organise, you know, organise what protests were going to take place.

We are a safe haven aren't we? A non-racist, non-sexist place, you know. There area a couple of the pubs around here that are more racist, some places where you wouldn't want to go into. Here, it's always been a safe place to go. You know, more and more, there have been gay people living in Hebden Bridge. At the roots of that, I mean not so much now, but a lot of those original groups were coming in here.

HOW DO YOU COMMUNICATE ALL THIS STUFF TO THE OUTSIDE WORLD?

No, I think people turn up and like what they find. I think one of the problems we've got is New Labour, people think we are upmarket you know, and the kids are not brought up interested in socialism. So what we do in reality is work with lots of groups that younger people are involved in. We've just got this ethical presence in the community.

WHAT ABOUT PUBLICITY AND OUTREACH?

I mean you're having to explain it yourself, when you're involved in an organisation like this you spend so much bloody time running the place, the physical side of stuff, it's sometimes difficult to find time to sit down and debate, where are we going?

WHAT PLANS HAVE YOU GOT FOR THE FUTURE?

We've got to become financially secure. We have got to make it into a place that is self-financing and secure, for the whole community, and be an asset to the community. Politically, we will go on doing, fighting, the struggles that we have been doing. The BNP are here for a long time, we need to keep it going.

Well, you've been here for a lot of years so you must be doing something right. Thanks.



The Trades Club is at:
Holme Street, Hebden Bridge, HX7 8EE
Tel 01422 845265

www.tradesclub.info
www.myspace.com/tradesclub

“Social Centre” – a working class history

by **Christopher Wellbrook**
Anarchist Federation
(Britain and Ireland)



The reclamation of “social space”, whether in terms of common ground for a community or for one’s own household, has been a clarion call of the oppressed throughout history.

Squatting, expropriation, reclamation (whatever the appropriate term) dates to the imposition of private property rights itself and the struggle for free access to basic resources. Indeed, most industrialised cultures still harbour a traditional belief in “squatters rights”, whether it is recognised in law or not. In England such sentiments stretch as far back as the injustice felt by landless peasants towards massive land relocations following the Norman Conquest.

Industrialisation, however, meant fundamental changes in the nature and purpose of this struggle. Throughout the 1800’s major cities in Britain were subject to campaigns to preserve public space. This time the demands were no longer based on peasant claims to fuel or hunting rights. Rather, there was a desire to save free land as a space to socialise and for fun and games. Working class people were anxious to preserve a social sphere away from the miserable conditions of work in the factories and the oppressive environment of the city. In the 1820’s hundreds rioted in Loughton to

prevent a landowner felling trees in Epping Forest; On Wanstead Flats in 1871, thousands of working people pulled down enclosure fences after the Earl of Cowley enclosed 20 acres of wasteland; And on Leyton Marches, on the 1st August 1892, three thousand people organised through the Leyton Lammas Lands Defence Committee to pull down railings unpopularly erected around common land.

However, in response to the increasing alienation of heavily urbanised and industrialised city’s the working class began to gradually move further afield. The early 1900’s saw a wave of rural squatting with families from the city constructing makeshift communities and self-made resorts on previously unoccupied land in the countryside and on the coast. Tents, old buses, sheds, broken railway carriages were converted into weekend holiday dwellings for the urban poor. Such communities were renowned for their libertarian atmosphere and attracted their own “Bohemian” clientele. Actors and actresses, artists and writers, stars of music halls and early films all spent time at the DIY holiday resorts. Unfortunately, the advent of WWII brought an end to such practices. Most of the coastal dwellings were devastated by the fighting during the war. The war also gave the state the opportunity to heavily legislate against any further violation of landowner property rights.

As a result of war time restrictions on building, large cities in early post-War Britain faced a

severe housing crisis. In the face of the threat of homelessness thousands of empty properties were taken over by squatters, organised by working-class and socialist organisations and with the support of anarchists. The squatters took over churches, hotels, mansion houses and hospitals. Tenement apartments that had been lying vacant for up to ten years were taken over and converted into households. These were very much self-managed affairs with squatters organising their own communities and Defence Committees in reaction to state oppression. The response from property owners and local government was predictable. Many families were forcibly evicted from their homes and key activists were arrested. However, despite heavy legal oppression the movement did not completely fade away. Many activists continued to play a key role in the fight for better housing and against cuts in public services. Local authorities were still trying to evict squatters as late as 1959.

The 1960’s saw the birth of the modern squatter’s movement. In 1968 a group of housing activists formed the London Squatters Campaign and in December of that year they occupied a luxury block of flats that had stood empty for four years. Throughout the 1970’s and 1980’s thousands of working people in major cities moved themselves into empty dwellings. By now, however, the nature and purposes of the social spaces within these reclaimed buildings had become much more ambitious. Large squats were able to facilitate

“ *In a society where it is more acceptable for an empty building or abandoned land to waste than satisfy basic human needs it becomes necessary to take direct action.* ”

community gardens, gig spaces, radical film collectives, bars, coffee shops, libraries and the provision of cheap food. There was also an incorporation of newer political movements with the setting up of free women's, LGBT centres and unemployment unions.

It is in the solidifying of all these trends that has led to the modern “social centre” and social centre movement. The idea of “social centre” shares two fundamental impulses inherent in the struggle of the working class against the conditions of capital. The first is the desire for self-organization, especially in the provision for the very basic needs for shelter. In a society where it is more acceptable for an empty building or abandoned land to waste than satisfy basic human needs it becomes necessary to take direct action. This has led to land being reclaimed by the oppressed and converted into self-managed communities. The second impulse is for leisure, the need for a social space away from the drudgery and boredom of work. Again in a society where our mental health is sacrificed for our productive capacity it becomes necessary to take direct action.

Whether it is rural or urban, the creation and self-management of social space has always been fiercely confronted by the state. The challenge such acts represent not only to sacrosanct liberal notions of private property rights but also in terms of self-organisation of the class, results in an open defiance of oppressive, capitalist relations. It confronts the central purpose of the state - the control and maintenance of inequalities in property. Such confrontation should not be evaded. Social centres need to be combative; they need to be on the frontline of struggle.

The encroachment on common ground by the landowner and the state did not end when industrialisation began. Today, in our advanced capitalist societies social space is still shrinking. Working class space is still shrinking. While the city executives may have their spas and their private clubs, community centres, public baths and libraries are disappearing across the country (or falling into private hands). The free public house and the union clubs of generations before are becoming a rarity. Localities are becoming more and more commercialised as local shop

is replaced by the chain store, high street by the shopping mall. Leisure is no longer “free” time, it is a commodity. Social space is not social at all but bought at the expense of others labour and provides further opportunity to buy and sell. The idea of voluntary association, of communal enjoyment, of free social time is disappearing. It is imperative therefore that the modern social centre movement clings to its class heritage.

Social Centres have the potential to be the face of class struggle, to present an easy point of access to others in the community, to encourage communication, education and confidence within the class. Workingmen's clubs, union clubs and public houses have in the past typically represented a forum for agitation and organisation amongst workers. Commercialisation of these social spheres represents yet another barrier to the self-emancipation and unity of the working class. Social centres have the potential to reclaim this legacy, to act as a focal hub of organisation and struggle. This also represents an important step in taking class struggle out of the confines of the workplace

and into every aspect of community life. It has the potential to act as a source of class power outside of the industrial relationship, to unify struggles under a broader banner and fight for the extension of self-managed space into every community and workplace. Social centres must seek to destroy as much as they hope to create.

If they are to do this then efforts must be made to reach out to the community, to be involved intimately in the concerns of working people and to win their support. Insularity must be avoided at all costs; centres must be welcoming places and efforts must be made to steer clear of the activist ghetto. Most importantly, if they are to be successful they must satisfy a need. “Social” is after all the key term in social centre. They must allow for the reproduction of unconstrained social life for all. Social centres should reflect the need to fulfil a desire to be a human being, rather than simply a consumer. To give workers a safe place to relax, to kick back and to have fun.



The Anarchist Federation is an organisation of class struggle anarchists that aims to abolish Capitalism and all oppression to create a free and equal society. The Anarchist Federation has members across the British Isles.

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THE CASA, LIVERPOOL

The Casa Club in the heart of Liverpool and emerging out of the political heat of the 90s Dockers strike, has for the last decade been developing a space to support grassroots, workers and socialist activity. A member of the Club explains what they have been trying to achieve.



HOW DID IT ALL START?

The Dockers dispute lasted from 1995 to 1998 and drew in many groups of supporters. Normally that type of dispute would have been limited to maybe a thousand people at the most, even in the biggest industries. But what the Dockers achieved though, they achieved a network of support that went way outside of Liverpool, it went all over the UK. We had support groups in London, Wales, Scotland, and I mean not just support groups in name I mean active support groups. Social Justice rallies, two of them down in London, two of the biggest demos ever seen. They were organised by the London support group. In Liverpool we had six of the biggest demonstrations marches and rallies that our city's ever seen since the poll tax and before that, the right to work marches. So it was a massive network that built up.

No one knew exactly what was going to happen when we started it, because our view at the time was that we were going to be left isolated, there'd be five hundred Dockers and their families, after that it would be a massive struggle. So the support we got was something which was unbelievable. Internationally it went all over the world. On

one international solidarity day of action, I think we had 52 countries all over the world doing something in terms of either solidarity action or going to embassies in various countries to make their protest.

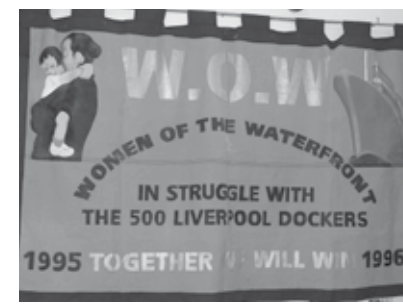
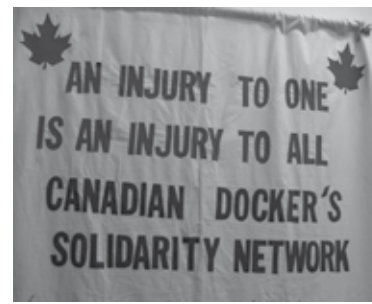
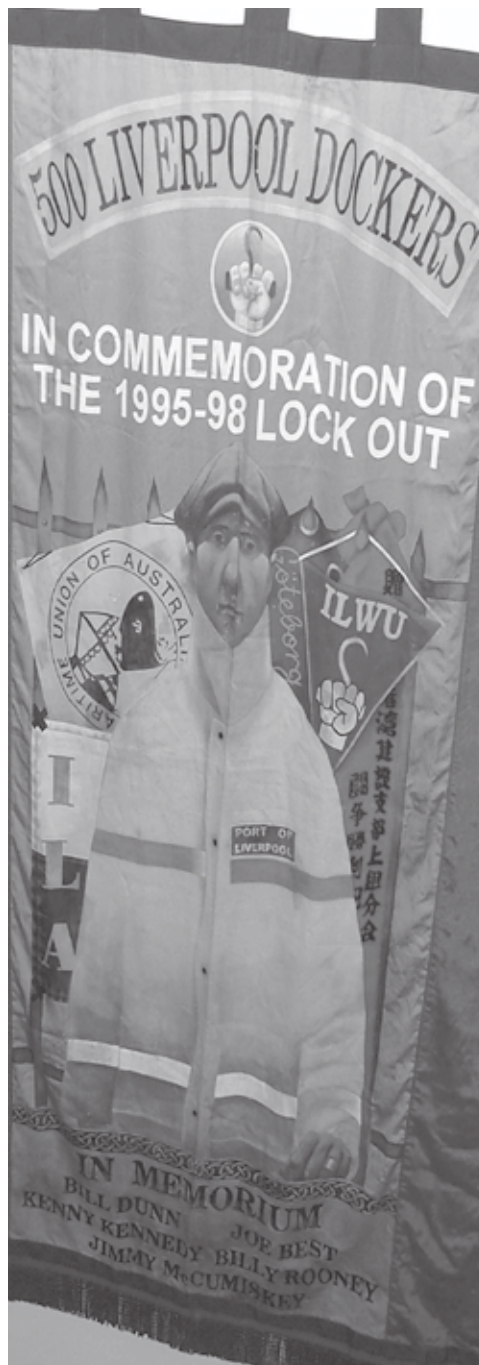
So when it all ended it was a massive shock to your system, one day you're part of this big global movement, the next day you've called it off, some people agreed others disagreed and you're left trying to pick up the pieces. But there was one thing we always said, and that was for all the good people that supported us, and they came from all walks of life it wasn't just industrial workers it was the musicians, the comedians who set up down in London, it was the church, everyone from within society helped us at some point. So we said we needed to leave something, a lasting memorial to everything that was achieved during that dispute, So we said look, we need to be doing something, we need to set up something which is tangible, which is always going to be there, and it will reflect on the two and a half years of struggle.

So we set on an idea of having a building, the idea of the building was that it would be run on socialist ideas. It would be run

for the benefit of people, a not for profit organisation, and it would be an open house, no barriers for anything, an open house. So it's easy putting that down on paper, it's actually being able to find, in a city like Liverpool, finding that type of property. And not just finding it, but to upkeep it. So we'd had the unemployed centre in Liverpool, which was a great landmark, that was in the throes of collapsing because of no financial support and we'd seen community centres start and finish. A friend of ours gave us a lot of great business advice. He said first and foremost you've got all your ideas, I mean he didn't need to tell us about ideas and how we were going to work those ideas out and put them into practice. He said first and foremost what you do need is to be able to consolidate your building once you've got it. Because we did have the money to buy it, the money to purchase the building came from what I was talking to you before about the Dockers film. That was a Channel 4 joint production that went out on Channel 4 and all over the world. That raised about £150,000, and with that this was bought. This has been open now, it was December, Christmas eve in 2000 although we bought the building in 1998 when the dispute ended, but it was two years in the making.



THE CASA



WHAT WAS THE BUILDING LIKE?

It was nowhere near like this it was just a shell of a building; it had been derelict for many many years and all our money had gone on the building. So we moved in and you got the shock of your life, you think well that's all problem solved, and then you move in and you couldn't even switch the light on it was pitch black. So we had enough money to get a good architect in and a planner. He designed an idea which we wanted, which was downstairs, the basement would be the bistro, what it is now, it could also be used for other functions such as meetings etc. Entrance floor would be the bar, because you need what they call a cash cow. If you're going to run community based ventures and projects and ventures you're not going to get any money from them, they're your non profit side of it, your non commercial. So you do need a form of income coming in all the time. So that's where we based all our entertainment and all that, was based the bar, that we'd get people coming in, socialising for drinks, socialising for food. The plan was to be open for, community groups trade unions, pensioners anyone in need, but again it would be multi functional, multi purpose. We could have private functions such as, like Wednesday, the first Gay Marriage in Liverpool took place here. The charges that we put on it are very small, If its an organisation, such as the socials

forum, they get it for nothing. So we've maintained our socialist roots on that. So the idea is that we'd have the first floor and the basement would be used for a trading side. So we set up the Initiative Factory trading company to run the Bar, the Bistro.

Then you've got the first floor which we walked past, originally that was set up as a computer suite but no-one could pay for the upkeep of the room. So we made a big decision two years ago that we had to finish with the computer lessons. Now that's the only part of the building that we have a tenancy on, there's a trade union that's moved in there. Sticking with our aims and objectives, sticking with our principles, to me it's the most radical trade union in the country and that's the RMT. We had Bob Crow come down to open that, he's a regular visitor here, so it keeps us tied in with what's going on in the trade union movement, the problems the workers are facing today. And then the hub of the organisation was upstairs here, what we run from here is general welfare guidance and advice - the Casa advice and guidance service. That will cover everything, benefits advice, lone parent advice debt advice, computer maintenance

SO HOW IS THE PLACE LEGALLY ORGANISED?

It was set up as an industrial and provident society. Within the Initiative Factory there's

also a charitable arm called the Waterfront trust. One of our trustees on that is Ken Loach. You know when you go out to seek funding a lot of funders won't pay anything into an organisation that doesn't have a charity. Every year we have an AGM because we're a membership based organisation, we still have the original membership base of 150 former sacked dock workers. Anyone who scabbed it or anyone who was anti the Dockers would never have been allowed into that. Then we have the affiliation, the membership affiliation, that's about 50 or 60 now, mainly trade unions, community groups.

DID YOU SET UP AN INITIATIVE TO RETRAIN UNEMPLOYED DOCKERS?

It's just that it never took off really. What we had was the Liverpool Dockers and Stevedores and that was to try to help people who didn't want to retrain in computers or clerical skills. That's why we set up the Liverpool Dockers and Stevedores to retrain people to get back into the industry. Our idea was to start training our sons and daughters and other family members who didn't have jobs to get back on the docks because there's a tradition on the docks that Father follows son. But again finance and funding and the overheads just crippled us. So what we've done is we've concentrated now purely on this multi functional centre.



WHAT OTHER ADVICE DO YOU OFFER?

Legals for Workers, they've set up a system where they'll come here for an initial health test, general interview advice, and if there is an illness or injury related to where they've worked then the solicitors will take up that claim for them no fee whatsoever attached to that. So that's going quite well.

DO YOU HAVE A POLICY ABOUT SETTING WAGES AND STUFF?

Basically it's no more than the minimum wage at the moment because of funding. There's 3 workers and another 4 volunteers; we pay them expenses and three core workers in the trading bit and they've got 25 or 20 other casual workers who do the bar rota and stuff.

CAN I ASK YOU ABOUT THE GROUPS THAT USE THE PLACE?

Take this week. So, Monday we have the Transport and General Workers Union, they're in the big room, the venue. Then where you were last night the chess club was in there. Tuesday, which was last night you had the social forum which was in the basement then that belly dancing was in the venue. Tonight Cuban solidarity, they'll be in the venue tonight. Socialist party will be in

on Thursday and they'll be finishing at seven then the salsa will take over till late. And then on Friday there's a sixtieth birthday and we've got a presentation of a character, a big character from Liverpool who passed away, we've got a presentation with his family.

CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT HOW YOU ORGANISE WITH SOCIALIST PRINCIPLES?

Anyone who comes in with racist behaviour or anything like that, they're automatically thrown out, they'll never ever be invited back in, and they're told there and then. And you don't need bouncers to do that for you either. And we've had these few flash points, coz the Palestinian organisations were using it about six or seven months ago planning for one of their demos. The next minute a crowd came in, broke into the meeting in the back of the venue, coming in supposed to be their supporters but they were Zionists who'd come in and were out to cause as much trouble and commotion as possible. They were removed and told never to come back again. We won't allow any scabs. Sadly there was a lot of people in Liverpool who did scab the docks, and they'll never be allowed to ever get a sniff of the door.

Well, the guiding principles are that we've never shirked the fact that we're a socialist organisation, our principles are founded out of the struggle of workers. So that will

never change. It's to help people in poverty, promote education for workers and for people in need. If we ever had to move away from that, I certainly wouldn't stay here, and I don't think others would either. I think the place would actually collapse, you'd have to make a big landmark decision because it would be a big change in the whole of the organisation. If it ever reached that point you may as well say 'well let's sell it lock, stock and barrel to some big commercial concern' and make whatever money you want. But it's not our view, our view is that we've kept it, a lot of these places set up on the idea of that they're going to maintain a socialist belief, social values, but they don't do it. We've actually gone more so. We've discovered other things in terms of helping people out, people in need. Our principles are for the GMB pensioner groups to be here, general and municipal workers pensioner groups. The Granby Toxteth Liverpool Ainsley Law Society, let them use the place, no money attached to it, people who need it.

HAVE YOU GOT ANY MORE PROJECTS IN MIND?

The main one is to try and get funding to build this welfare advice and guidance service, its to really expand on that coz thats a service that will bring in even more people from Liverpool 8, which is one of the poorest parts of Liverpool.

We're looking all the time to set up new projects. One of the ideas was to get some films that have real meaning in them, socialist meaning in them, community backed films and that. Start showing one or two but not just saying 'here's the film, watch it then go home' is to finish it up then to start to get into a debate. Things like that could help this organisation, certainly help this part of Liverpool because they might find out, you know there's many problems we face in the world, but some of the problems could actually be solved by people watching a film and then talking about them.



The Casa is at:
29 Hope St,
Liverpool, L1 9BQ

Tel 0151 709 2148.
Website: www.initfactory.gn.apc.org

THE KEBELE,

BRISTOL



SITUATIONS VACANT

- "Co-operative members"

*An all too rare opportunity for enthusiastic social revolutionaries in Bristol!
Radical collective seeks new members!
Live now the change you want to see!*

YOU: Fun-loving and serious; optimistic and realistic; sensitive and firm, dedicated and available; hard-working with time to spare.

US: Cutting-edge social centre on a mission to change the world...well East Bristol for starters.

JOB PURPOSE: To take collective responsibility for the running of the community co-operative and its facilities at Kebele social center on a sustainable basis, and our involvement with the local community.

HOURS: All that you've got free.

SALARY: Unquantifiable.

ESSENTIAL SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE,

(or the ability to obtain them):

1. Meeting etiquette within a non-hierarchical environment.
2. Internal conflict resolution, external conflict incitement.
3. Networking & flyposting.
4. Permanent social revolution.
5. Time management & the avoidance of burnout.
6. Customer service and the ability to say no.
7. At least 3 from - chopping/cooking/washing-up for 50 persons, building maintenance, events organising, meeting facilitation, minute-taking, typing, admin systems, finance systems, urban permaculture, bicycle maintenance, website maintenance, DTP, writing political propaganda, activism, buying & selling but not-for-profit, hosting, banner-making, DJ'ing, using a film projector.

DESIRABLE SKILLS/KNOWLEDGE:

1. At least 2 more from no.7 above.
2. The verbal promotion of anarchism.
3. Fundraising by any means necessary.
4. The procurement of useful tat to order.
5. Knowing someone who knows someone who has or can do what we want.
6. Welding.
7. Building security.
8. Weapons training.
9. How to avoid cynicism.

How to apply: Send a copy of your CV and police record by post to Kebele community co-op, 14 Robertson Rd, Bristol, BS5 6JY; or by email to kebelesocialcentre@riseup.net. Alternatively hour-long interrogations of prospective new members start promptly at 7pm on the last Wednesday of the month, at Kebele.

For more information see www.kebelecoop.org

KEBELE HISTORY

Kebele is based in Easton, Bristol, and for over twelve years has provided space for the development of radical ideas and activities, community campaigns, and international solidarity.

Kebele means 'community place' in Amharic, an Ethiopian language. The term refers to community institutions, which dealt with their own needs and concerns, such as justice, health and community democracy.

During the revolution in Grenada in 1979, Rastafarians involved in the struggle used the term 'kebele' to refer to the community centres in each neighbourhood from which, in theory at least, the revolution was based. In 1983 the USA invaded the tiny island of Grenada to crush the rebellion.

The founders of Kebele were inspired by these meanings of the word, and current members are too.

KEBELE KULTURE PROJEKT

Kebele started as an empty building that was squatted in September 1995 to provide housing for homeless activists. It quickly mutated into something bigger, out of a need to defy the owners (a bank) and authorities

seeking to evict them, and from a desire to create a self-managed space for local individuals, campaigns and projects.

Based on anarchist principles of opposing all forms of authority, and organising collectively without leaders, Kebele's premises became the base for many activities: the regular, cheap vegan cafés; bike workshops; a DJ, sound system & party network; an allotment; many forms of art; radical info and publications; and numerous events & meetings featuring local and international speakers and artists. The Kulture Projekt took on the self-management of the activities that take place on the ground floor of the building.

KEBELE HOUSING CO-OP

Through resisting certain eviction and after negotiations with the owners, the Housing Co-op was formed to buy the building with a mortgage. Frantic fundraising ensured a significant deposit. By providing secure affordable housing for its resident members, the Housing Co-op was able to cover the mortgage repayments. This has ensured the continuation of Kebele as a secure space ever since, and saw the mortgage paid off in the summer of 2006 - yes, we own the place outright!

KEBELE SOCIAL CENTRE

The last decade has seen a growth of radical social centres across the UK, and Kebele is a part of this network now. Such centres recognise we can make fundamental changes here and now, in the ways we organise, communicate, interact and take action. This is the every day revolution. We don't rely on bosses, politicians or community leaders to tell us what to do and think. Social centres provide a space for people to explore and practice what they believe in, free from interference from the state and capitalism (for most of the time!). They also act as a portal into the wider movement.

KEBELE COMMUNITY CO-OP

Currently the activists & volunteers who keep Kebele going are engaged in the process of reorganising themselves by merging together the housing co-op and kulture project. Our chosen future format is to become a legally constituted Community Co-op, but this is proving unbelievably complicated. This decision to evolve has come about after very long and detailed discussion looking at what we are trying to achieve, how we are going to do it, improving open democracy amongst people involved in Kebele, and opening Kebele up to wider involvement with and from the local community.

compiled by Tim from the Kebele



The doors are open...

by Ben @ Kebele

(and singer of Spanner - www.spannerintheworks.net)

Can't shake the feeling we've been here before
If I could just get closer to the door
Does anyone else feel the need to scream
Now we've spent two hours on the colour scheme
So, twelve more items we've got to discuss
Well if this is anarchy, what's the fuss?
Trapped in meetings with no end
Talking round in circles, going round the bend

But stay calm! Reality check! What the fuck did you expect?
There's no short cuts and time flies, learning to self organise
With no leaders we have equal say, we're trying a different way

My time disappears clearing other people's mess
I'd get a "proper job" if I needed this stress
If we really wanna see the collapse of the state
We're gonna have to learn to wash our own plate
Of doing battle with the chaos I've had my quota
And there has to be life beyond the rota
And why if we're so many and they are few
Are our sub-collectives made up of two?

But here's kids coming through the door
They say they've never been in before
They've heard about the place and like the idea
Right up for it, they wanna volunteer
So much to do but our time we'll give
Working together in collectives

Sometimes it seems we can never agree
And it doesn't look good for our autonomy
All the hours we have spent in stupid, pointless arguments
Oh no, here we go, it's kicking off again
This bickering's driving me insane
Egos clash and ideas collide
It's easy to forget we're on the same side

But there's friends for life who'll meet up here
And many more who'll lose their fear
No more living in isolation
Building trust and cooperation
An open space to communicate
No limits to what we can create

Our city's dominated by corporate shit
Everywhere they're getting away with it
Every last corner privatised
Dragging us down with high rise
More supermarkets and luxury flats
To line the pockets of the fat cats
And we're priced out and pushed aside
Then they whinge about why has the community died

But this place is for everyone
We've seen what can be done
With nothing but our energy
Ideas and strength of community
Giving for free as much as we can
This is where make our stand



The Kebele is at:
14 Robertson Road,
Bristol BS5 6JY

Tel: 0117 9399469
Website: www.kebelecoop.org

“SO,
WHAT'S
THIS
PLACE?”

“so, what’s this place?”
 “it’s a social centre”
 “what’s a social centre?”
 “it’s a non-heirarchical anti-capitalist autonomous space”
 “what’s that mean?”
 “erm... .. .”

WARNING!

*opening a social centre can be really bad for your health.
 you may think that it's going to be a wonderful adventure,
 you may think that it's going to bring people together,
 you may think that you are creating a different model of society,
 a place where everyone is equal, noone is denigrated or bullied and good triumphs over evil at every turn.
 but what you may get is a cliquy, narrow-minded, intimidating old-boys club.
 what you may get is people claiming ownership of the space because they flourished a paintbrush more than you.
 what you may get is accusations and counter-accusations,
 patriarchy vs matriarchy,
 bullies who claim they are being bullied when someone finally stands up to them,
 the sound of tumbleweed as the collective collectively turns away and examines their navels when the difficult issues
 rear their head.
 the crashing sound made when the resepect you once held for people tumbles from the rafters.
 the puffing up of inflatable egos that seem to draw breath from the apparent safety of behind a computer screen.
 being reminded that the personal is political, then attacked for bringing personal issues into the space.
 volunteers claiming thousands of pounds in wages.
 having to work with liberals.
 watching the same people dance the same circle of going nowhere whilst kidding ourselves that we are being
 successful....*

*so, before you open a social centre,
 before you commence on a journey that will undoubetdly cause you to question your very existence on this planet,
STOP,
LOOK,
LISTEN...
 but most of all
TALK to the people who are with you,
 find out just what they think a social centre is,
 cos, even the slightest difference of opinion can cause schisms that mean someone is going to lose out.
 can you guess what side of the schism i ended up on?*



*to have free minds, we
must have free tea!*



THE ANARCHIST TEAPOT WAS THE NAME OF A SERIES OF SQUATTED CAFÉS IN BRIGHTON BETWEEN EARLY 1997-1999. A BUNCH OF US WOULD OCCUPY AN EMPTY SHOP IN TOWN, AND OPEN IT UP AS A CAFÉ, STAFFING IT ON A VOLUNTEER ROTA, HOSTING EVENTS AND MEETINGS, AND THEN GET EVICTED AFTER ANYTHING FROM 3 WEEKS TO 4 MONTHS.

ALL THIS INVOLVED A LOT OF MOVING TAT BACK & FORTH AND STORING IT IN OUR OWN HOUSES/ SQUATS AT TIMES (OUR KITCHEN

WAS REDUCED TO A NARROW CORRIDOR AT ONE POINT). THEN WE'D FIND A NEW BUILDING, MOVE IN, AND START OVER AGAIN. THE SQUATS WERE OUR "COLLECTIVE FRONT ROOM", A PLACE TO HANG OUT, SHARE BOOKS WITH OUR LIBRARY, PLAN ACTIONS, TALK SHIT, AND DRINK LOTS OF TEA.



WE MOVED THROUGH 8 BUILDINGS, WITH EACH SQUAT SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT DEPENDING ON THE BUILDING, ITS STATE, AND LOCATION. WE HAD AN UNDERTAKERS' STILL FITTED WITH HOOKS IN THE CEILING, A STUPIDLY LARGE PLACE WITH NO ELECTRICITY, A SHOP NEXT TO MCDONALDS, AND AN EX-DONUT SHOP STILL FITTED WITH ALL ITS CAFÉ EQUIPMENT. THEN WE GOT TIRED OF BEING MOVED ON, SOME OF US SET



UP A MOBILE KITCHEN INSTEAD, AS WE'D HAD A LOT OF FUN COOKING IN THE SQUATS, AND WE ALSO TOYED WITH THE IDEA OF BUYING A BUILDING TO ACHIEVE MORE PERMANENCE... AS WE'D SEEN WITH THE TEAPOT, COMMUNITY SPACES WERE VALUABLE AND DESIRED. NOW WE HAVE THE COWLEY CLUB TO FULFILL THESE NEEDS.



SOMETIMES THIS WAS MORE AMONGST FRIENDS, SOMETIMES STRANGERS MADE IT THEIR OWN - FROM BACKPACKING ANARCHOPUNKS TO LIL OLD LONELY LADIES TO TEENAGE TRUANTS. SOMETIMES WE MADE NEW FRIENDS.



BY 154. WWW.MORGENMUFFEL.CO.UK

THE COWLEY CLUB

BRIGHTON

“The Cowley Club is a social centre/co-operative named after a local grassroots organiser and chimney sweep who lived in Brighton called Harry Cowley. We bought a building on a Brighton high street with loans and mortgages in 2001, and it’s financed through renting out the flat above it, running a bar, café and radical bookshop, and room hire. It’s a diverse space, re-created on a daily basis depending on what it’s being used for and who is using it.”



BUY NOTHING DAY

The 24th November is Buy Nothing Day, a globally promoted day for anti-consumerism. So the Cowley Club is a hive of activity - there’s a free shop at the back including a big bag of bay leaves with a sign saying “freebay” in the appropriate font, and a section for ‘bookcrossing’ i.e. free books handed on. A bunch of kids and adults are crowded around a table making candles, some people are deftly creating more tetrapak wallets than anyone could ever need, and others are sitting around drinking free tea from a choice of nettle and other wild herbs, and others yet are debating the impact of peak oil around the free info table.

“Buy Nothing Day illustrated beautifully what I mean when I talk about the need to rebuild community. Children taught adults how to make things they’d just learned to do themselves, a needle-shy man planned his own sewing project and a fifty-year old woman munching on a cheese straw mused aloud, “so, you really get this food from skips? What a terrible waste to throw it all away!”

GIG NIGHT

The fire regs limit on capacity at the Cowley is 100, and we have definitely reached that. The band are playing in the far corner of the room which serves as the ‘stage’ (although you need to squeeze past to get to the toilet or the back yard) with a lamp on the floor providing some dramatic uplighting. Throngs of young punks are passionately rockin out and the bar volunteers are ignoring potential customers as they stand on chairs getting absorbed in the music. When the bands are finished, people file out, taking leaflets as they go and some people lend a hand to clear up, while cheesy 80s rock tunes take over.

“Most of the bands that I have organised gigs for say that the Cowley Club has a very special atmosphere, because everyone involved is there because they want to be and not because they are being paid. It’s great to be able to put on gigs at a venue where nobody is making any profit.”

PRISONER SOLIDARITY BREKKIE

It’s a Saturday before Xmas so the streets are busy and people are coming in to check out the Cowley Bookshop. The menu offers full vegan breakfast and a few variations, the proceeds of which will go to prisoner support. Some Anarchist Black Cross members are frying away and burning themselves repeatedly in the kitchen, while others are encouraging people to sign Xmas cards to political prisoners (“Don’t let the bastards grind you down!”) or pick up leaflets. A large group of people who have been having a meeting in the backbuilding come in wanting to have some lunch and other smaller groups are sitting around chatting, most of them obviously nursing hangovers. The fundraising goes well, and the cards are posted with lots of messages of support from Brighton people.



WOMEN'S SELF DEFENCE

The tables and chairs are piled up in a corner to make space to run around. Five women are shouting and hitting pads, while some people working in the office are slightly afraid to pass through to go to the toilet. Then they stretch off, sit down and discuss when and how to tell someone to stop doing something, whether it's staring at them, groping them or asking to borrow money.

THE COWLEY CAFE

There's Carrot and Coriander Soup, Butternut squash risotto or Empanadas with rice and salsa on the menu, all vegan and homemade of course, and the prices range from £1.50 for the soup to £3, which is less than half price of most trendy veggie cafés in Brighton. It's pretty busy. There's people smoking, drinking coffee and chatting in the backyard, and the front is somewhat dominated by a group of small children who made friends a few minutes earlier and are now tearing back and forth, tripping up the volunteer cooks as they walk through calling out the order numbers.

MEP MIGRANT ENGLISH PROJECT

New students are welcomed at door and given a basic assessment and wait to be matched with a teacher for one to one free English class. Regular teachers and students who know each other well get a cup of tea and a biscuit and sit down to work, or chat. Some students are cooking today, making a lovely curry and everyone shares food midway through. "It's great to make a connection with someone and be able to help with really practical stuff and local information. We don't follow a syllabus but the students can ask for what they want that day. For some, they don't want a lesson at all but would rather just have a natter or get help to fill in a form."

A TALK

About 50 people are sat in untidy rows, as the DVD of parts of Spike Lee's film 'When the Levees Broke' comes to an end. A woman stands up and starts explaining how she is learning to be a herbalist, and went to New Orleans to work as a volunteer in a free clinic that was set up there to help address the needs of the many people affected by Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath.

"What happened there, who was affected and how people responded is a very political issue. And really inspiring to hear these thoughts straight from a fellow member of our community, who made a direct connection with this community across the ocean."

GAMES NIGHT ON SUNDAYS

"Games night is a chance for people to interact socially with people they may have never met in a light-hearted atmosphere. In an effort to recreate the days before an evil monster called television ate the brains of the general population, we've played everything from Scrabble to Twister and Guess Who to Guess who can drink the most shots before they fall over... Well, I always wanted to play that one anyway."

COCKTAIL & KARAOKE NIGHT

Some people have bothered to dress up as befits the occasion of a cocktail and karaoke night, although most people of course haven't. Cocktails on offer are called Black Makhnovist instead of Black Russian, Queer Sex on the Beach, or of course Molotov, and should encourage people to get going on the karaoke, which as yet remains untouched in the corner... It's DIY karaoke so who will be the first brave soul to have a go??? "I can't liiive... liiive without yooouuuu..."

THE ALLOTMENT

There's a lot of weeding to do, so some people get on with that while one person cuts leaves off the wildly growing salads in the polytunnel and fills a large bag. The allotment has been turned into a small scale community garden, with some Cowley Club volunteers giving the owners a hand to grow things both for themselves, and for the Cowley Cafe. Salad leaves and maybe other surpluses such as herbs or courgettes are taken down every week during the summer so the cafe can dish up properly organic and locally grown greens.



compiled by Isy from the Cowley Club
artwork: www.stevelarder.co.uk

When I sat down and thought about the biggest debates in during my time involved at the Cowley Club, four big questions which really stood out:

1. Can we run places for the long term without having paid 'volunteers' who make sure everything keeps running?
2. Are we more a stop gap in social services than a radical solution to society's problems?
3. How do we cope with violent or aggressive behaviour?
4. Does the Cowley Club suck energy away from "real" activism?

These responses are based on conversations with other people.

1. CAN WE RUN PLACES FOR THE LONG TERM WITHOUT HAVING PAID 'VOLUNTEERS' WHO MAKE SURE EVERYTHING KEEPS RUNNING?

Every so often things appear like they may be falling apart a bit, the regular cleaning angels are away on holiday and things are looking shabby. The plumbing system is old and leaks sometimes, the beer or food order doesn't arrive or the electric is about to be cut off. Who takes responsibility for these random but essential maintenance and behind the scenes jobs? There are no bosses, remember? So, who wants to give up their weekend to try and fix things up?

At the end of summer 2006, the Cowley was going through one of these rough patches. Someone proposed that we needed a funded bar manager. This person would not get paid much more than being on benefits but would take responsibility for getting things done like checking rota and paying bills. A big "crisis" meeting was called. Although there were good reasons and arguments for paid staff, ultimately the proposal was rejected. Not purely on idealistic or political grounds but because of some important practical considerations too. If we started paying

one person, then what about all the others? There are probably about twenty people who regularly or occasionally take on what in other places would be seen as managerial roles, whether they like it or not. This work often falls to the people who know the ropes, but also can be anyone who sticks their head up and takes on responsibility for stuff. In the meeting we discussed how paying one person would quite possibly mean that people wouldn't feel called upon to take on responsibility, and that all these others would not be around to fill gaps. Basically in that loose group of twenty or so people there are a huge wealth of skills, contacts and experience which could never be met by one person.

In reality just a handful of people take a big amount of responsibility, and I shudder to think what will happen when these people hand in their keys and resign from their unpaid and often unnoticed role. One of the worst things is that these people are not thanked or acknowledged by the vast majority of the club's users. And worse than that they get blamed when things don't work, accused of being cliquey, or fascist bureaucrats for enforcing the legal requirements of the club license. To pay people is not a way out of this problem in my view. It would only deepen the underlying problem which is that

a lot of people do not really want to take responsibility for having a collectively run space but are happy to use it. It's important to remember that most projects - anarchist or not - are often organised this way with a few people taking on responsibility and ultimately making sure things happen, and others along for the ride and helping out on a less committed basis. This is just how things pan out, and its important to openly acknowledge these dynamics, and continuously keep the avenues open where people can step up to take responsibility rather than confining this to one or two paid jobs.

Sure there are times when energy is low, but as the big meeting showed, when people hear that there is a crisis point being reached, often a new spurt of enthusiasm is found. Just like in any long term project which demands daily input, it can burn people out, people get bored or frustrated and move on from a social centre. But if there is a real core value and belief in the project then either new people will come along or some other metamorphosis will occur.



2. ARE WE MORE A STOP GAP IN SOCIAL SERVICES THAN A RADICAL SOLUTION TO SOCIETY'S PROBLEMS?

There can be a dynamic in the club, where the regular volunteers feel like they are supporting the regular customers who, spend most of their money in the club but can not, for whatever reason take on much volunteering responsibility, (busy with jobs, young kids, mental health problems etc.) The Cowley Club is not just a self organised space but does also provide services, such as cheap meals, English classes, advice and a social space. About a year ago we discovered that the local mental health services were encouraging people to come to the club when they were discharged from a period in hospital. In a lot of ways this seems a good idea, after all having a regular, cheap, healthy meal can be really important when you're trying to get yourself back on your feet. At the same time it raised some questions about the way that untrained volunteers were somehow being expected to support some really quite vulnerable people, by recommendation of their health professionals. We contacted the mental health team and they were quite indignant and informed us that we are, according to our website, open to everyone. They are probably desperate to find something to recommend to their clients, and the Cowley Club offers itself as an inclusive space - however, the reality is that situations arose in the club that volunteers found hard to deal with as a result, and that we felt a bit used.

However, over the last few months, two groups have begun to use the club regularly. One is the Inner Visions self help group. The other is a support group for people using the drug and alcohol services. While these initiatives will not solve the issues involved,

its really fantastic to see that there are self organised responses to the gaps in the so called health system, and that there is a cheap space where these groups can develop.

This same question arose for the teachers working at the Migrant English Project also at the club as the government announced huge cuts in ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages.) While the project is rightly proud of its autonomy from government funding and its resulting freedom, an already stretched service of one to one English classes and advice is further pressured.

The relationship between us as an "autonomous" space and the state social services is a complex one. Taxes are collected, nominally to pay for this provision, but the volunteer sector ends up supplementing cuts in services while more and more money goes to private companies, military spending etc. Our capacity to support people, with little training or money is limited but it's fundamental to my politics that we need grass roots projects which try and do things ourselves, away from the state. Charities and so called NGOs are often funded directly by governments and can not be too critical for fear of losing funding. Having solid spaces in which to do this is one of the great things about somewhere like the Cowley Club.

3. HOW DO WE COPE WITH VIOLENT OR AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOUR?

Violence, aggressive, sexist, racist, homophobic behaviour are all pretty common in your average British pub of a weekend. Of course social centres are not somehow magically immune to these although it is hopefully the exception rather than the rule. One of the biggest struggles in

collectively managed spaces can be working out proportionate and fair responses when incidents do happen. Many of us want to actively work against this sort of thing, in our lives in general. How does this work in our collectively run spaces? When problems occur, late at night in the bar for example, who can a volunteer turn to? Although often enough, a group of regular users successfully deal with the odd idiot when it's all straightforward. But, there is no manager or bouncers to come and chuck out drunken arseholes and anyway, why should anyone put up with this sort of thing, especially when you're not even being paid? Conflicts or issues can be brought to the General Meeting, but that might not be for another 3 weeks, and then what would happen? Would you feel further victimised by having to repeat it all in front of all those people? And what would happen to the drunk guy anyway? He has been coming to the club much longer than you.

We have got a mediation group who are the first point of contact for if there is a problem. Anyone can contact them and ask for them to be an intermediary in any dispute, or for them to bring a situation to a general meeting on their behalf. I asked someone from the mediation group to explain how we ended up with a medication group and how does it work?



"While day to day running has always been done by cafe, bar, entertainment collectives and we also have monthly general meetings where all other decisions are made, we also started off with a 'management committee', which what we legally had to have on paper. This group was a core group of mainly 'original members' who'd thought up the plan of the club and were pretty committed. I came along later. We met fortnightly and dealt with the boring issues of post, bills, drains, etc. Looking back we had already set up a hierarchy by having this group called the 'management committee'. And although these meetings were always meant to have an open door, people tended to look at us as though we were the decision makers. We were also the group which met most regularly, so when incidents happened they often came to us. From time to time we had various issues about members / volunteers / users of the club that would be brought to our attention. So we would fumble around trying to sort stuff out and invariably, I feel, got it wrong or would be over-authoritarian. (Probably due to the invested interest we had in the club and feeling protective about it.) This fed in to the idea that we were the behind the scene managers which wasn't good for the openness of the club in general.

The climax of these tricky situations came about a poster which gave guidelines for behaviour or good conduct in the club. This is a recurring theme and it sparks lots of debate

and seems to get a lot of people very het up about safety, cliques, etc. At one point this dispute ended up with a volunteer being hit by someone in the club. The management committee decided to ban that person, give them a letter telling them and invite them to a general meeting. This was an infamous meeting, (amusingly it was also probably our largest ever!), where a dreadful court-martial style thing happened and we all floundered around trying to work out what to do. I do not even remember what the exact outcome was, but I think we decided to form the mediation group soon after this.

So we disbanded the management committee and formed an admin group to carry on with bill paying etc and a mediation group to try and resolve inter-personal conflicts and issues. Various characters of varying needs / behaviours crop up on the grapevine, or at meetings. We have decided to take each 'case' individually as there does not seem to be any clear formula for dealing with conflict. Over a couple of years now, we have tried to build up a culture of trying to get support from other members, or people bringing issues to the mediation group. There are 5 or 6 of us and when an issue comes up then we first tell all the others by email. We have a quick email discussion over a few days and then decide what to do.

Generally it's best to act as quickly as possible. We can do various things and it's usually one or two of us who take this on,

- Talk to the person who is concerned / complaining.
- Talk to the person who's been complained about
- Bring the issue to a general meeting
- Explore the issue by asking others what went on and what they think we need to do

After all this, the whole thing can be left. Or the parties involved can be met individually, or they could be brought together to talk stuff out. The general meeting can decide what needs to be done if there's no resolution. The general meeting can decide to ban people and often does. This is usually with the option that if the person concerned wants to be 'unbanned' then they can approach either the general meeting or the mediation group to start a dialogue but the onus is on them. We still don't have all the answers and dealing with all this stuff takes time. But I do think that this approach means that people are heard and we don't have any draconian laws (yet) in the club. I hope people feel safe also. We did have a mediation / personal safety training day a while ago which was positive. I hope we get it together to have another soon."



4. DOES THE COWLEY CLUB SUCK ENERGY AWAY FROM REAL ACTIVISM?

This is perhaps the most thorny question. Are we all wasting our time running a space when we could be focussing on more urgent struggles? And do people get involved with the social centre as their contribution and so not create more confrontational actions or projects? Behind this we have to ask what is the relationship between having the social centre and the movement/activist activity in the area? What is real activism and do people get distracted from it or drawn to it by a social centre? I have heard the argument that the social centre is an unproven experiment in "movement building" which was imported from other European contexts in to the UK. People are waiting to see the evidence that its working. Certainly in Spain, Italy, Germany and many other European countries, social centres are a very visible and common thread of political struggle. The fight for autonomous spaces in Barcelona and other cities, is seen as a really front line and squatted spaces are fiercely defended. In my experience these spaces are not so much about welcoming new people, and more of a resource for an established anarcho scene where anti-speculation and struggles for housing are really important. In Catalonia, this comes from a tradition of 'ateneus' or community centres with a long radical tradition but also as places for providing social space for music, food and political meetings.

The UK context is very different in the size and visibility of the anarchist movement. Here there is not a network of social centres in any one city, even London struggles. There has been a conscious attempt to build up a UK network of places which fulfil both the solid base function and operate as a some sort of outreach project.

Although I wasn't around at the time, I understand that that the Cowley grew out of these general aims and over the years being open as much as possible to the general public has been important. Amongst UK social centres, the Cowley is unusual in the way that it is open 3 days a week to anyone for the cafe and although other things are often "members and their guests only," joining or signing in as a guest is easy enough. Neither veganism, feminism nor anarchism are explicitly forced on people, but its certainly the best stocked book store and info on all three things you could find on the south coast. So, does it work, are there more or less people involved in the scene since the Cowley opened five years ago? I am not personally one to hold much by statistics. How can we judge the success or failure of a particular project? There are so many other things to take in to account, what impact has the recent raft of anti freedom to protest legislation and crackdown on civil

liberties had? What other factors influence whether or not to get involved, such as the political situation, other campaigns and the NGO/charity sector, the cost of living etc? Sometimes it feels like we are fighting a losing battle, and only a few people turn up to advertised events and the energy is really low. But I also think that its impossible to underestimate the powerful influence that finding information, and a different non consumerist space can have on people's ability to take action and challenge the corporate crap we are all sold and to have a visible example that it's possible.

In what is a quite a small and limited scene, I think its often a matter of engaging with what's there. If I waited to find the perfect thing for me to put my energy into I could end up never doing anything. There is a school of thought that social centres are an easy option and somehow people who would otherwise be involved in campaigning or direct action

are tied up with the washing up. Another way of looking at it, is that everyone has different things they are happy/comfortable doing and having as many ways of possible for people to get involved is a good thing. I have had some incredible conversations with many many types of different people in the cafe over the past two years, (young people doing work experience, single mums from local rehab houses, out of work documentary film makers, people travelling through, etc.) Of course, not all of them have gone on to lock onto some gate or other or even been that interested in what a libertarian social centre was all about, but it has been important nonetheless. I have worked with people for whom it was the first time they had got out of the house to do some work since a breakdown, or learned how to make homous, or work in a place without a boss and get trusted to go out to the shop with a club money without having to have a full CRB check. Dedicated "activists" have to

take on responsibility, learn to negotiate difficult personal challenges and act out of solidarity.

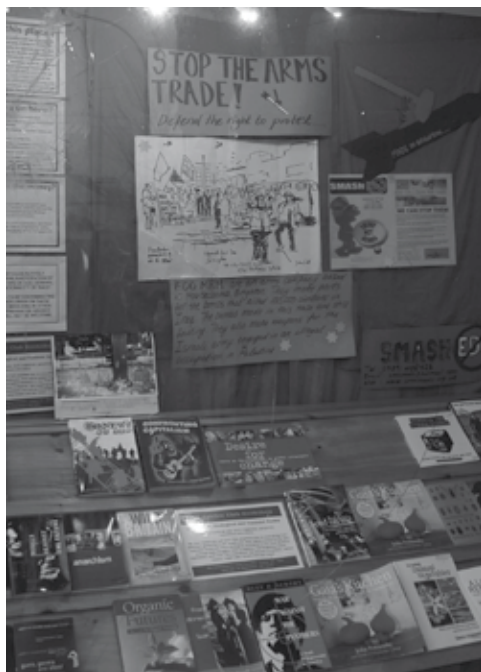
Working at the Cowley regularly challenges me, I have to deal with nitty gritty of how not to work in a hierarchical way. It brings me in to contact with many people that I would not otherwise meet and helps breaks down the idea of activists and everyone else. There is no guaranteed path from one thing to other but being part of working in the club can be a really valuable part of the mundane, everyday revolution.

If the project is failing and its not an inspirational place anymore then it will end. A bigger question may be about how we use the space to support our long term campaigns and actions. A place to meet, distribute publicity from, cross pollinate ideas with other groups, raise money, get post, store banners, put on film or info nights etc. How would groups do without it now?

Perhaps we don't use the space to ever really discuss all these big questions. We don't really have any political forums for debate, its all practical organising meetings really and informal chats between people which probably isn't the best. Reading the other contributions to this mag has made us think about doing another rebel alliance, or some sort of thing to bring the political motivations and direct action right in to the space on a regular basis. Sometimes you feel like a muppet working for free for some well paid person to get a cheap lunch. But overall these long term projects are an important

way of trying things out, reflecting on what we do. Again and again the questions comes up of how the fuck do we deal with society's - people's problems in our space? I don't have any clear answers, but I'd certainly like to discuss these things further and work out how to be more effective and sustainable.

Compiled by Alice with input from other members of the Cowley Club.



The
COWLEY CLUB
12 LONDON ROAD, BRIGHTON
BRIGHTON'S RADICAL SOCIAL CENTRE

The Cowley Club is at:
Cowley Club, 12 London Road, Brighton, BN1 4JA
Website: www.cowleyclub.org.uk

THE SUMAC CENTRE

- A PLACE WHERE PEOPLE CAN MEET AND TALK AND PLAN AND CHANGE THE WORLD!



The Sumac Centre is nestled in a community in inner city Nottingham. It's been open as a community and activist resource and social centre for 5 years. It grew out of a smaller rented space called the Rainbow Centre (established 1985) when the organising crew decided they wanted more control over the centre and to own their own space.

The Sumac is run as a co-operative through a series of smaller collectives (such as the Bar and Garden Collectives). All the collectives are open for anyone to get involved, and run using the principles of non-hierarchy. The whole centre is run by volunteers, which can be a challenge, but makes a very rewarding and relaxed working environment.

During the week, the Sumac is mainly used as an activist resource centre. The Sumac has provided essential support for many grassroots social and environmental justice campaigns through its facilities such as meeting spaces, radical library, gathering-hosting and a printing press. These are groups like the Camp for Climate Action, Nottingham Defy-ID or Nottingham Animal Rights. It also provides our local community with access to radical literature and ideas

through the radical library, film showings and speaker events. The space is also used regularly by a home education kids group, and has also seen kids gardening sessions and community craft fairs.

On the weekend, the Sumac transforms into a social hub for the local and activist community. The Sumac is a friendly non-corporate space that the community frequent to meet, eat, drink and conspire! There is a popular bar stocking local real ales and other quality drinks. It hosts gigs by local bands and a kids' night every Thursday where local families are able to come and socialise. Cheap, healthy evening community meals are cooked up every Saturday, and often on Friday by a refugee group, or on Wednesdays if there is a film or talk. Many people say these are the only decent meals they get all week!

Veganism is something of great importance to the Sumac Centre, which has a long history of supporting the animal rights movement, and everything that is sold in the centre is 100% vegan. We are the only 100% vegan venue in Nottingham, and are even brewed special vegan beers by our local brewery, Springhead.

Recently, the Sumac has been branching out into community popular education. Every Saturday sees a 'Sumac Skillshare' event, where a member of the local community runs a workshop on a skill they can share. This 'school' is being run to empower and reskill the local community, as well as to prepare us for the twin challenges of peak oil and climate change. Workshops so far have included food preservation, basic electrics, mass catering, bike maintenance and planning direct action. The skillshare has been a really inspiring success - get in touch if you want to know more!

Veggies are an integral part of the Sumac Centre and of the Rainbow Centre before that. They are a vegan catering campaign that sets up burger vans at festivals and protests, feeding the hungry without exploiting animals since 1984! They are to be found lurking in

the Sumac basement making sosages and burgers or rushing in and out loading and unloading vans as they get ready for their 3 events that weekend! They have also built up an excellent field kitchen and with volunteers from the Sumac, they have fed up to 300 people a meal at events like Camp for Climate Action or the eco-village at Stirling during the protests against the G8 in 2005.

So where now for the Sumac? Nottingham currently has a flourishing activist scene, which the Sumac has helped grow and support. Hopefully this will go from strength to strength! Having recently done some major refurbishments, we are now thinking about rebuilding the outbuildings using eco-building techniques to extend our resource centre.

Written by Eleanor from the Sumac Centre.



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Sustaining Social Centres in the long term

by Max Gastone



Over the last few years there has been a growth in the number of social centres being established by activists' communities along the lines of mutual aid. This is a positive step forwards, but it needs to be accepted that they are also having an impact on activism as a whole. While they have helped boost activism by bringing much needed focal points and links with the local community, they are also responsible for the burn out of activists and of sucking up a lot of energy. In the initial period of setting up, it is an exciting time and volunteers are plenty. The long term problems get swept under the carpet and this is leading to problems in social centres once they are established.

The main problem is that, despite all the good intentions and hopes, the day to day running of social centres inevitably falls on the shoulders of a few. They are expected to see through the dull and boring back-of-house stuff such as bringing in the beer, doing all the phonecalls to chivy volunteers into signing up, sort out the finances, and so on. And when there are not enough volunteers, the burden of responsibility falls on them so they feel obliged to do extra work to maintain the project. They are so busy holding things together that they never get a chance to relax and enjoy the space. In the end these people

eventually burn out and walk away, from both the social centre and activism in general. A social centre which is burning people out is not functioning on the lines of mutual aid. Resorting to regular call-outs and appeals is simply tackling the symptoms and not managing the root of the problem. The result remains the same, with out the energy of key people, any project such as this heads into terminal decline.

“A social centre which is burning people out is not functioning on the lines of mutual aid.”

In effect, activists are becoming managers of social centres (though naturally we don't have them because we don't believe in that sort of language...) without the back up and support they need. What breaks people in this position is the constant pressure to ensure that things are actually being sorted, having

to deal with other people lurching them out and so on. The pleasure of being involved in a social centre soon wears off when you are carrying that sort of responsibility.

So where is the heart of the problem – well, it is founded on the basic assumption that people have time and energy to sustain such a space. Social centres are set up with the best of intentions, an oasis of mutual aid and support in a desert of capitalism, but whether we like it or not, they are far from utopian. There are the pressures on activists to have jobs, and on the social centre to pay the bills. This causes rot around the edges and if we have not proofed the heart of the project then the rot takes its toll as volunteering inevitably drops off. If a couple or even one person is holding the fort, then what actually is being expected of them is to hold down a second job for free! The politically correct answer is to say that everyone should be sharing the burden so no-one ends up with all the boring managerial jobs, and in an ideal anarchist world that is what would be happening. It is blatantly not happening in reality because the world we live in is not geared to supporting it, and no amount of preaching is going to change that. The model for the most part is failing.

The question remains though, how do we maintain the long term sustainability of social centres? The answer to this is to challenge a second assumption of the movement – that everything should be done for free. Why? The proposal is that social centres should be employing people to do the necessary day-to-day work as there are significant advantages to be gained.

Firstly, it helps stop burn out by giving an activist a paid job to do the boring stuff that has to be done. If they need to work, then why not in a job that is doing helping create social change? This in turn will ease pressure on volunteers who on the whole hate doing the managerial back-room stuff, and retains them longer. It is far easier to find people who want to do the occasional bar shift than find people prepared to manage an event for the entire night. It means that necessary jobs do not get lunched out, thus avoiding soul-destroying meetings which attempt to resolve the perennial crises that social centres often drift into as a result.

A second advantage is that of continuity and promotion. A person who is looking after a centre and providing a central point of contact will actually encourage people to use the place; it is likely to become a self-sustaining

position financially as there is in place a solid basis for growth.

This is about having realistic expectations of what volunteers will contribute in the long term. Avoiding the energy destroying stuff means those involved can focus on why they got involved in the project in the first place, the front-of-house stuff and help it develop further. Too often social centres do not have time to sort this out as they are too busy dealing with the behind the scenes management, and the project becomes static and fails to fulfil its potential. If this state is not checked, then you are in a slow decline as problems invariably mount up elsewhere (degrading building/decoration, increased mess and disempowerment which all leads to a declining volunteer base as the vicious circle begins).

Often the response at this point is that employing someone is “selling out” our anarchist principles. I disagree strongly. Social centres are projects with one foot in the capitalist world and the incredible pressures in running a professional centre needs to be recognised. They are a useful stepping stone on the way to achieving the society that we desire, but still a long way from it so it is wrong to develop their business models on a world we don't live in yet.

What actually matters is the long term survival of social centres, and just as importantly the people helping to run them, so that they remain bases for promoting social change. And it is hard to create social

change in a space that is burning people out, or unable to sustain itself. If a social centre has people acting as de facto managers and that is not explicitly recognised, then again this a failure of principle. Anarchism does not reject people acting in a managerial role where they are responsible to the collective as

“ *Social centres are projects with one foot in the capitalist world and the incredible pressures of running a professional centre need to be recognised.* ”

a whole through an agreed system. However, an ad hoc development of that system has no accountability and thus ceases to be about mutual aid. The employee is a manager only in the limited sense that they over see the day to day running, the maintenance, doing the dray, etc., not that they manage the entire project. It is an important distinction to be recognised in this debate, though depending on the project other job descriptions might be more appropriate which do not carry the same baggage.

A key point to remember is that employing someone is not an absolving of responsibility by the remaining volunteers or an abdication of power into that person's hands. The accepted model is that the volunteer committee runs the project and the employee is answerable to them. This happens in cooperatives such as Radical Routes where there is a paid finance worker to ensure that difficult job is done properly, but the control remains firmly in the hands of the cooperative as a whole.

The model can be adjusted so that collectives take on the job contract guaranteeing to perform the jobs in return for the ‘wages’. In one case in a community centre, one of the user groups paid for their rent on their action centre by looking after the social club bar located in the same building. Thus the job was actually collectivised and gave the collective an incentive to look after a community based project. The problem with this type of approach is that it depends on the collective remaining cohesive and there being enough collectives actually interested in doing it.

One final point on this, if you are considering employing someone, a useful lesson learned is that letting your mates do it because they are your mates is liable to backfire. For it to work, the criteria has to be someone who cares about the project, is capable of doing the boring stuff and reliable. Without all three you will become unstuck, but never be afraid to fire someone. What matters, as ever, is that it does not become another footnote in a history full of footnotes on nice ideas that did not quite make it.

The author has a number of years experience in helping to run social centres and squat based projects including OARC in Oxford. He has burnt out badly as a result. A number of discussions with others involved in social centres have helped develop some of these ideas.



L A R C L O N D O N A C T I O N R E S O U R C E C E N T R E



ORIGINS AND EARLY HISTORY

In the late summer of 1999, a small group of people with a collective history of involvement in direct action organising got together to discuss buying a building for use as a resource centre and meeting space for London's direct action and radical groups. The need for such a permanent space had been felt for some time, and as fortune would literally have it, a participant had part of a large inheritance to dispose of. A few meetings and building visits later, 'Fieldgate' as it was initially known was bought.

Part of the reason for settling on this particular building, alongside its central(ish) location, was the area's radical history. One of the group lived nearby, having been part of the earlier upsurge in squatting in the area and eventually gaining tenancy. Opposite was the derelict Tower House, an infamous London 'doss-house' where Jack London, Stalin, and Orwell had stayed (now being remade as yuppie flats), and round the corner was Freedom, Britain's oldest anarchist bookshop. The area - one of the poorest in the UK - has been home to successive migrant communities and the

collective were aware that it was now home to a large Muslim community, which most of them had had very little contact with before. It was later discovered from a local historian that the LARC building itself had a radical history, having it seems been home in the 1920's to one of the last 'International Modern Schools' initiated by a local group of Jewish anarchists and dedicated to 'bringing up children in the spirit of freedom'.

In 1999, when the collective bought it, the building was a storage lock-up for a 'rag trade' business and was in need of extensive repair. Part of the cash had been set aside for renovation, and the group hoped to have the space done up and fully running as quick as possible, anticipating it may take over a year. In the end it took around 3 years to fully plan and finish rebuilding, in that time some of the founding collective left, new participants arrived, and the wider 'movement' moved in often unanticipated directions. There were extensive meetings to decide on the centre's aims, objectives, structure and rebuilding and lots of workdays to tear out the old plaster, asbestos, rebuild the walls and ceilings, plumb in a disabled toilet, change the doors, lower the floor in

the mezzanine library-to-be, plaster, paint, sand and cement, to name just a few of the jobs. A lot of the building and refurbishment work was carried out by paid professionals, but some was done by the group, learning new skills as they went along, and helped by friends and volunteers. An environmental ethos ran throughout this renovation, recycling and reusing stuff where possible, and using ecological paints, plaster and other building materials. During most of this, sometimes with buckets to catch the rain in the main hall, the building was being used informally for meetings, banner and prop making, for action planning, for Mayday and DSEi organising, and many other events.

These years were also an "arduous and horrible process of becoming legal": applying for discretionary rate relief, insurance, setting up a company limited by guarantee and other officious tediums. The soon to be London Action Resource Centre or LARC (pronounced 'lark') was unofficially open as soon as it was bought in '99, but its fully renovated and official launch had to wait until summer 2002.

AIMS AND IDENTITY

“J-18 was a high watermark for this movement. There was a huge surge in interest and involvement. We really needed a long-term place where we could be seen, put down roots, be visible, hold meetings and have some of the resources needed for action.” (from interview)

“As the police repression following demonstrations escalated and squatting became increasingly difficult, we wanted to create a safe space and resource for London’s direct action groups. Because of London’s size, our social movement has always been very dispersed. We wanted a building with resources that would be a catalyst for the different direct action groups in London to meet face to face, to discuss ideas and strategies together and to build up new affinity networks that would contribute to strengthening London’s and the UK’s direct action networks.” (from the LARC history page on the website).

For some of the LARC collective, as well as in name, LARC is “an action resource centre, not a social centre”. This could be explained by the fact that LARC was set up before ‘social centre’ or ‘occupied social centre’ from the Italian and Spanish movements became the common term for such spaces. Press one or two further and you might get the reply that more than socialising is required for a successful revolutionary movement. Such a tongue-halfway-in-cheek distinction seems to be a partly polemical response to the recent promotion of ‘social centres’ in the UK. LARC clearly does see itself as part of a growing network of social centres and autonomous spaces, publicising them and supporting them where possible. Some of the collective have been and continue to be actively involved in helping set up more such spaces - squatted, rented, or bought - and strengthen links between them. Whatever

the terminology (and ‘social centre’ is often shorthand for a number of spaces, clubs and centres that don’t explicitly call themselves that), LARC also shares many similarities with spaces that do call themselves social centres, such as the stipulation that political parties, religious groups, racism, sexism are not welcome and an identification with, and attempt to practise, self-organised, non-hierarchical, anti-capitalist politics. While the collective are obviously aware of the ‘unusual’ financial situation that led to LARC’s existence and therefore keen for the place to be a wider resource, LARCers have also had lots of involvement with running squatted places - from the St Johns Street ‘squat centre’ in Islington in 1997 to the Atherdon Road ‘community centre’ in Hackney in 2003 and beyond. The dichotomy between providing resources or a centre for some imaginary community ‘out there’ and looking at how we could provide space and resources to strengthen our own ‘political community’ has been a recurrent issue. But as squatted and community social centres appear and disappear, LARC provides a stable base for everything from storage to providing meeting space for the groups who have just been made homeless from eviction and a place to use the phone and internet to coordinate ongoing campaigns, actions and the occupation of new social centres.

FACILITIES, ACTIVITIES AND USERS

LARC’s size and structure lends itself more to some activities and facilities than others. The front shop window is used to display info on actions, events and other goings on - and lots of local Muslims stand outside and read stuff on the way to the Mosque just up the road, as do other locals and restaurant-goers. The ground floor contains a meeting space for around 40-50 people, which includes a tea kitchen for drinks and making snacks. The lobby displays leaflets, posters and

information about radical events in London and the rest of the world, and there is also a beautifully camp disabled toilet with baby changing facilities. The mezzanine contains an extensive radical library with a fantastic collection of books, pamphlets, DVD’s and an archive of the last 15 years of (mostly) UK direct action history, it is wo(manned) by several enthusiastic librarians. The library also offers free internet and DVD copying. On the second floor is the office which apart from the administration desk houses five computers with free internet for the use of groups and individuals, it is also used for meetings and last but not least contains two open fireplaces to provide that extra meeting ambience. The office opens up to an organic food roof garden where meetings are held amongst the vegetables and fruit in the summer. The basement provides the space for banner-making, sewing and prop-making and adds an additional meeting space at busy times. LARC also provides a duplicator and a film-projector which is frequently lent out to other social centres. New refurbishments are still happening - an environmentally friendly wood burning central heating system is being installed, also a larger kitchen for the basement.

The building is used for meetings, socials, talks, film screenings, benefits, acoustic music making, and banner/prop making for a variety of actions and events. Over the years, LARC has been used by many different political groups and campaigns. One of the success stories being the birth and blossoming of London Rising Tide, a creative direct action group aiming to tackle the root causes of climate chaos, and to promote socially just, ecological alternatives to the fossil fuel madness. Other more recent initiatives that have found a home there include Infousurpa, a weekly social centre activity news sheet, and a monthly anti-war forum. Groups who use LARC regularly include Queeruption, Indymedia





London, Semilla Rebelde Zapatista support group, Anti-Olympics campaign, Voices in the Wilderness, while other groups and networks who have met at LARC include No Borders, School Students Against War, Seeds for Change, The Wombles, Legal Defence and Monitoring Group, Disarm DSEi, CIRCA, Resist Bush, London Social Centres Network, and Rhythms of Resistance, amongst many others.

LARC is also an infopoint for the grassroots network Peoples' Global Action (PGA), whose 'hallmarks' have become the basic agreement for many social centres and initiatives in the UK such as the Dissent! network against the 2005 Gleneagles G8 conference. Through the PGA network LARC has made links with similar spaces and radical groups in Europe and elsewhere and helped organise tours such as the Argentinian Piqueteros tour of 2003, one of the earlier co-ordinated activities of UK 'social centres'. LARC has also provided the protected legal space and entity that has enabled groups to get visas for political refugees, and to get grassroots organisers in from outside fortress Europe.

ORGANISATION, DECISION-MAKING AND RESOURCES

LARC is essentially a co-op in how it is legally set up and run. It's a non-profit limited company and its articles of association are drawn largely from stock co-op paperwork. It is not though, like many housing and workers 'co-ops', an 'industrial provident society' which for a fee legalises it as a co-operative. There are directors, a chair, secretary and treasurer, who can be rotated or changed at the legally required Annual General Meeting (AGM) and are answerable to that meeting as well as the open monthly meeting of the LARC collective. Generally it is understood that, *"the space is collectively owned for the use of direct action groups working on projects for radical social change. Within*

this shared framework all the users of the building can contribute to shaping the future of the LARC project." (from LARC website history)

When the building was first bought, it was hoped that the original collective would eventually grow and diversify into practical and autonomous workgroups such as: office, finance/fundraising, building maintenance, roof garden, library and events/outreach, which would be open to all users of the building. In practise (apart from the active library group), this hasn't quite worked out and the essential running and maintenance of LARC relies on the few people - aka the LARC collective - who feel responsible for the space. The main decisions regarding LARC are taken at monthly meetings with all the regular user groups of the building invited (or delegates from groups using the building). Consensus or getting general agreement is how decisions are usually made though there have been exceptions, and while user collectives are encouraged to participate or send a delegate this seldom really happens. The AGM's though have been well attended and individuals from user groups and from the wider scene do come along to have a say on the sometimes major issues that the AGM decides upon. The LARC collective is no monolith and apart from a few stalwarts, has changed composition a lot since its early days, while the open nature of the meetings ensure it is always possible for people to get involved. Financially, as the money for the building was donated, there is no mortgage to a bank but LARC still has to fundraise to pay the incoming bills.

LESSONS LEARNT AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

One of the major problems LARC has faced over the years has been the volunteering aspect: *"...it has been a really big struggle to*

get users of LARC to make the leap from consumers of the space to maintainers/producers - there is still a divide between a core of people who do everything and a wider group of people who use the space. If you are around a lot, people assume you are getting paid and so defer to authority. This hits on a wider problem of the insider-outsider divide - there is the perception that some of us run the space so people act as if we do. This is where the DIY politics falls down and a form of service provision kicks in. On the other hand, volunteers can become proprietorial and resent having to let go of power. Getting people to donate for using coffee, tea, meetings, computers has also been difficult and it is really annoying when groups don't think about recycling and tidying up." (from interview and personal opinion).

LARC is a long term project, one of the first of its kind in London. Running LARC might not be particularly sexy but, it is seen as (a) movement building and more realistic than short term bursts of energy associated with 'spectacular action' or short term social centres. Although the group sometimes detect a consumerist attitude with people using LARC, they also know that it is difficult to change an attitude that has been indoctrinated in us by capitalism from birth. Immediate gratification is, well, gratifying and washing cups after a meeting is a lot more tedious than going to the pub for a drink or five. The really positive lesson learnt by the collective after years of running LARC is that people contribute in all sorts of unexpected ways, from organising free bike workshops for local kids, donating resources, developing the library, making soup and bringing wine for the monthly meeting, providing amusing facilitation so that the meetings become bearable, clearing the computers of 100's of viruses for the 50th time, watering the plants, doing the website, welcoming people, cleaning

the toilets, doing the accounts, paying the bills, organising workdays, publicising the space, keeping the building open, organising exhibitions - the list could go on, but the point is that people contribute their time and energy for free because self-organising, however frustrating, is seen as important, (potentially) revolutionary and occasionally even fun.

LARC participants can also be self-critical when it comes to accessibility and involvement:

"How welcoming are we? It is really hard to delineate between public and private openings - we have public opening hours but we also want it to be a resource centre for existing groups. The public-private issue is an ongoing unresolved and legal tension. Our community relations are good but community participation in LARC is weak. Getting a balance creates tensions." (interview)

Needless to say it hasn't always been very fascinating for a bunch of 'anarchos' to deal with the bureaucracy of 'normal society'. One of the more frustrating points was that we were unable to begin setting up the office and the library straight away because of disagreements with the council building control. We are also a group of people who are used to working on short term goals (like a sexy day of action), and at times it has been difficult to keep the enthusiasm on top. Several of the initiators have moved on to other good projects, moved to other cities and so on. So LARC is facing the same problem as everywhere else - too few people trying to do too much. (from LARC history webpage)

"We are a resource centre and we really want to develop the resources: to improve the computers and internet access, possibly regenerate the basement, bring in a printing press, create a social space with a café..." (interview)

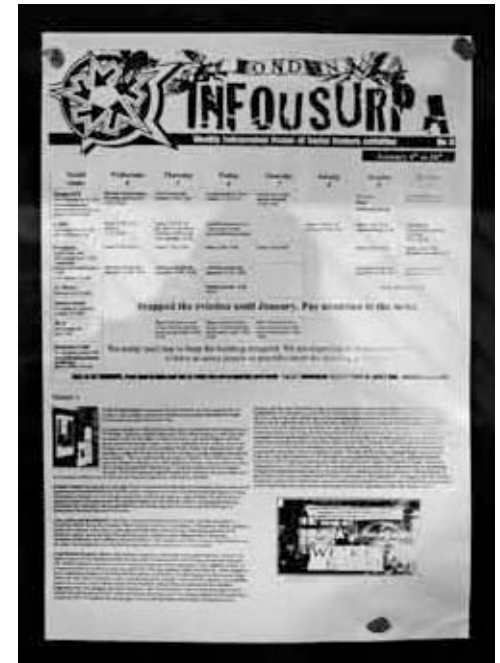
It's acknowledged that it's not always clear just how someone can get involved, what it is they can do, beyond using the space for what they're already doing. But it's also said that in some ways LARC is not being used to its full potential or opened more often by those already involved. Over 20 sets of keys exist for the building, held by as many groups and individuals. These are loaned when groups use the space for meetings or events and theoretically at least guidelines are followed in the building and the keys are handed in or passed on to other users when the group or person is no longer using the place regularly. In practise it's more chaotic, with sets being lost, and sometimes the wider responsibilities of 'keyholding' get forgotten.

There are other 'ongoing issues' such as alcohol and music. LARC doesn't have an alcohol or music license but you can have a drink and hear a few tunes there now and again at its or its users open 'private events' - which is a blurred line it may not be able to sustain indefinitely. Other 'guidelines', such as no smoking (other than on the OK of the usergroup), or washing up, or donating, are often difficult to maintain. LARC is also not always perceived as a family or kids-friendly place locally simply because it is routinely harassed by the police around any demo or action time - London FIT team will often be outside taking pictures. On the other hand,

having the police outside on a regular basis does give the place a certain street cred amongst the local community, especially the youth, who themselves are routinely harassed by the police. LARC has had a number of kids' playdays, and activities such as bike fixing out on the street with local kids, as well as film nights, jumbles and free shops to 'de-exoticise' itself locally, but like many similar spaces and the wider movement generally its make-up and dress sense tends to be of a particular age and type. A collective political project involving the local community is something that some in LARC are waiting for the chance to be involved in.

Tentatively though, the London Action Resource Centre has been a success: the big jam-packed events, the collective projects where people have worked together, the garden, the occasional diversity of people who do come through the doors - LARC is well used and has been a useful and important resource for action over the past 5-6 years. Those involved certainly feel that "a wider, more connected social centres network would be a definite bonus" for a radical movement, and have been excited to see the existing network growing massively in recent years. They are also aware of the difficulties ahead in sustaining a place like LARC, and trying to help maintain, as the LARC website puts it, "a useful resource in the growing struggle against capitalism, centralised power, environmental destruction and war; and a shared tool on the way to creating a truly free and ecological community."

Written by Del and Natja from LARC with contributions and input from many people at LARC.



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The Spring of Social Centres

by Alessio L

Social centres have increasingly become an integral part of anarchist and anti-capitalist activity in the UK. At present there are around fifteen such places which operate as public, political and social centres. Some were formed from situations way back in the early eighties, like Bradford's 1 in 12, while others came into being recently, through the anti-G8 mobilisations in Scotland (2005). In London there has been a very active "push" for social centres largely developed on the initiative of the anarchist collective WOMBLES starting in 2002. Squatting has always been associated with radical politics and there has been a long history of occupied political spaces mainly functioning as "squat cafes" and other resource centres. There has, however, been an attempt to move away from the "squatter" image of these places and move towards a more engaging aesthetic based on experiences from around Europe and especially Italy. The ideas which have developed around occupying private space and turning them into political and cultural hubs has come through the experimenting and experiences of those involved. A certain genealogy of social centres in London has been formed over the last few years, to include the Radical Dairy (Stoke Newington), Occupied Social Centre (Kentish Town), Ex-GrandBanks (Tufnell Park), Institute For Autonomy (Bloomsbury), The Square (Bloomsbury) and most recently, the Vortex (Stoke Newington). Despite the unavoidably short life span of each of these

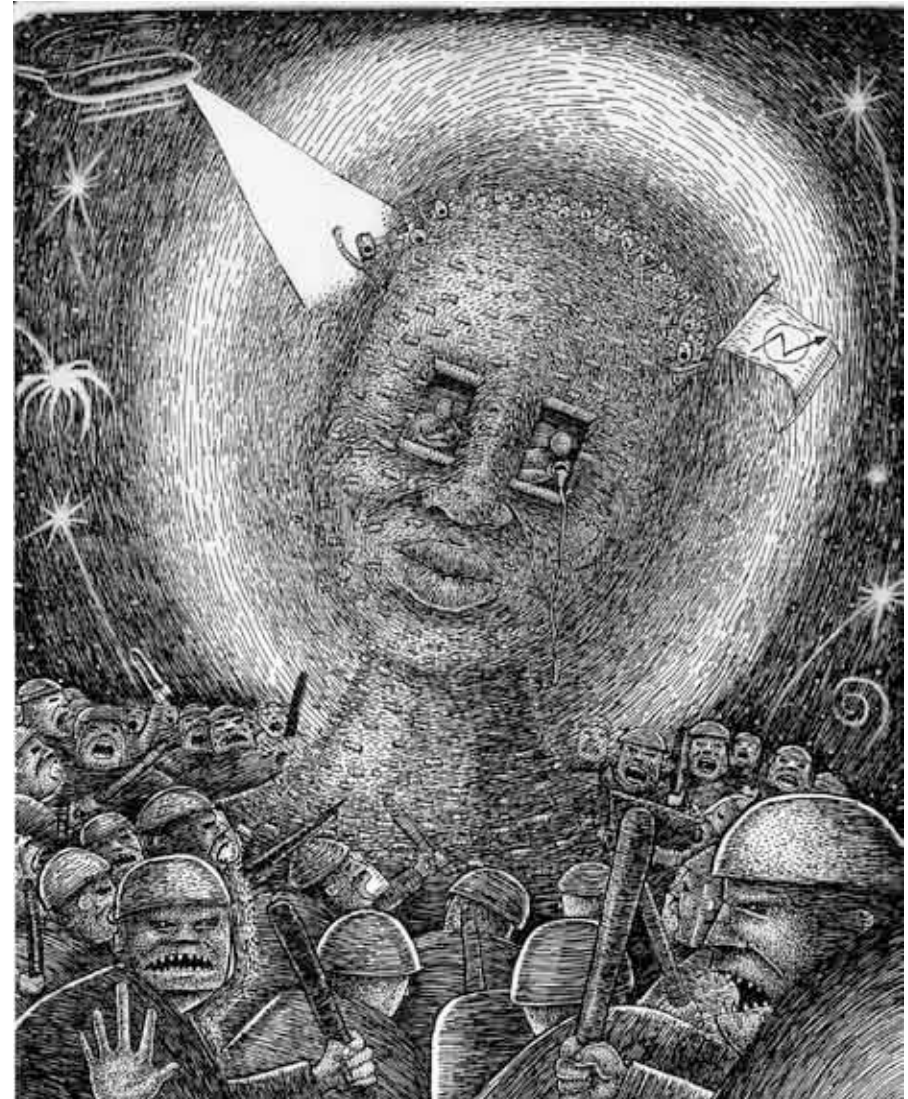
projects, knowledge and experience have been built upon and mistakes, on the whole, been learnt from.

“With every occupation there is a willingness to go beyond the limitations of the last, to attempt to answer the critiques or lack of radicalisation that certain activities contain.”

What social centre projects have managed to do in a relatively short time span is to intensify the political activation and the scope of interaction of those that dwell through them: Thousands of people have passed through social centres attending hundreds of film showings, discussions, events, concerts and cultural events. Presence, in most cases, is guaranteed. If we build it they will come and if

we present ourselves as open, inviting and our spaces as clean and accessible, the diversity of people quickly expands. Almost gone are the days of the pissed up punk drinking special brew whilst his/her stereotyped dreadlocked brethren rolls another joint. In come mother and baby groups, packed out cinemas, good quality food, well organised concerts and political mobilisations. This

consistency becomes easier as more people become involved, not looking for a subculture to indulge in, but a place of social interaction that presents and communicates ideas. With every occupation there is a willingness to go beyond the limitations of the last, to attempt to answer the critiques or lack of radicalisation that certain activities contain. This dynamic of constant self-critique and analysis becomes



Credit: Mac McGill (mac@stealthisemail.com)

the driving force of developing new politics to face up to the changing nature of a society which is less concerned with anti-systemic change and more interested in surviving within the schemas of capitalism. To many, social centres become a first “port of call” - their first interaction with ordinary people who want to fully participate in reshaping and re-imaging their environment. Interaction with anarchists becomes normalised and barriers fall.

London is an odd place. Highly urbanised and commercialised, with thousands of interweaving communities, gentrified by the spoils of war – the immense financial capital that passes through it on a daily basis. Property prices have risen to historically high levels forcing many out to the urban periphery. Due to this upsurge in highly priced property and its commodification we see a terrain of struggle which has come to dictate and cascade through other areas of life. The control over property has become a major battleground even more so as the neo-liberal doctrine permeates all areas of “public” spaces and services. The mass sell-offs and takeovers have spurred conflicts not only in London but all over the UK. Gentrification has been the most widely used term and accurately describes a process of transformation based on the new material conditions generated both by the integration of telecommunications technologies within the economy and the break-down of the social democratic contract.

The idea of public and common space is fast being undermined as the limitless demand of profit takes over. Everyday experiences become increasingly mediated by our relationship to capital while our ability to impose our own desires and autonomy is increasingly undermined. With each generation, the struggles and defeats of the previous one are embodied and reflected

within our social reality. Public spaces once existing and able to create elements of autonomy outside the market logic are now where the state surveys and controls – by use of surveillance cameras, privatisation, commercialisation and intrusions by the police.

“If we are to re-imagine and give meaning to revolutionary praxis in the 21st Century we would need to reconnect with not just ourselves and others like us who oppose capitalism but also the multitude of people who are not satisfied with a private existence.”

There is nowhere that we can socialise and exist without being exploited or expected to participate in a certain level of capitalist consumption. Social need is constructed through the systemic denials of capitalist society. Our needs and the needs of capital diverge and therefore what we are offered leaves a lot to be desired, literally! Our

needs are social in that they are part of a social fabric that makes us human. Alas, rather than being met by the economy, our needs are subservient to it, manipulated and directed into consumer demands and fashion trends. Our real needs become marginalised and shaped into commodified needs, readily equated with commodified products. Our alienation leads to increased uncertainties and insecurities reducing our potential for public participation.

Within this context of the social reality that we experience, occupation/expropriation becomes a choice in participating on our own terms. Self-organisation becomes a mode of inclusion, anti-hierarchy both a political rejection of the present order and a way to maximise the human potential that already exists. Anti-capitalist as a process of basing our real existence on individual and collective needs without the distortions for the abstract push for profit. These form our “platform” to open up space in London.

Developing the network of Social Centres

In January 2007 the second nationwide gathering of social centres was held at Bradford's 1in12. Around forty people from fifteen different collectives attended the meeting to discuss how the various spaces could connect and organise between each other. The discussions veered from the predictable “technical” discussions around “how we organise our small corner of the world”, to much wider, deeper discussions on why we need to do so. The “how” question has become a particularly annoying fetishisation and specialisation much seen in the UK activists’ “scene”: If we don't know how, then we don't know anything... but it's the “why” which gives doing the “how” meaning, and it's this meaning that we are trying to produce. A project was unveiled, put together by the

author of this piece in the form of an enquiry. This initial “taster” was in the form of a survey with questions attempting to gather some basic information about each social centre. The survey focussed on quantifying the scope of this embryonic movement. Social centres were asked how many people were involved in their collective, how many events are organised per month on average, how many visitors they get. Though a “guestimate”, I am sure there is constant monitoring of who turns up when and what is organised so I take these responses to be more legitimate than other similar reflections. The results show that between the fifteen spaces, there are around 350-400 people involved in social centres around the country - organising around 250 events per month and gaining the presence of 4,000 to 6,000 people. Not bad for a political minority! By making this data visible and presenting it back to those of us involved in such projects the aim is to expand the knowledge of what we do, and with whom. We have these resources, we have this presence, we need to transform it and develop it. It is up to us from that start point to attempt to strategise the future developments of social centres as a political project. Are we content on where we are? Is it enough? Ideology is dead, and with it the dogma of both the left and traditional anarchists. If we are to re-imagine and give meaning to revolutionary praxis in the 21st Century we would need to reconnect with not just ourselves and others like us who oppose capitalism but also the multitude of people who are not satisfied with a private existence. Only through this process are we truly going to get to a level where we are asking the right questions, let alone providing the right answers.

This article first appeared in the magazine ‘Occupied London’ in March 2007.

See: www.occupiedlondon.org

THE COMMON PLACE.

LEEDS' RADICAL, INDEPENDENT SOCIAL CENTRE



The Common Place - social centre, idea, and chaotic, ever changing grassroots, political project - recently celebrated its third anniversary. For at least a year before it opened a dozen or so people sat around in a nearby church café every Thursday evening in a group called Leeds Action for Radical Change to analyse, organise and take action against what we saw as the ills of our world - capitalism, money, shit jobs, ecological destruction, the plight of asylum seekers and poverty in our city - you name it. We also talked a lot about the need to have our own space - as a base for political organising and grassroots politics. In those early days we wanted somewhere with an affordable café, meeting and gig space, art space, a garden, bar, open access computers, a radical library and bookshop, a free shop, oh yes and a swimming pool. It was in these conversations, amongst the tea urns, church pews, stained glass windows and wipe clean tables of the Holy Trinity Church café, that the idea of the Common Place was born.

We were lucky enough to get a large grant from a wealthy wing of the UK direct action movement in the run up to the 2005 meeting of the G8 in Scotland, and so we got busy scouring the city looking for a home for the project. The answer came by looking through a letter box of a rambling old woollen mill in the heart of Leeds' rapidly gentrified and yuppified docklands. It hadn't been used for years and the owners, failed textile magnates, were keen to extract some extra cash in the twilight years of this early Victorian dark satanic mill. Sitting around in 'Wharf Chambers' the first night, impersonating the 'Kids from Fame' with what was left of the 80s knitwear, the name of our new baby came easily. 'It's a common place isn't it?' said one person. 'It's a place for everyone, where we can all meet whatever our backgrounds and build a new world together.' We smiled, we liked it. The project was named.

Three years on is a good time to reflect. This piece of writing prompted several conversations about what the hell we are trying to do, and what this place is for.

SO WHAT HAPPENS AT THE COMMON PLACE?

Looking back over the last three years, what strikes us is that the Common Place has become a very durable convergence point. - we are still here and continually evolving and questioning ourselves. We are now on at least our third generation of committed volunteers and members, and there has been an impressive handover between different groups that have come in and out of the space. The fact that people still come down suggests that we are doing something right. One of the great things about the space which people comment on is that it's a great place to meet people, hang out and attend cheap (but good quality!) entertainment and events.

Leeds has become a bit of a corporate hell hole (obsessed with Harvey Nichols, big brand boozers and boutique shopping for the nouveaux riche), and so we really fill a gap in Leeds' grassroots scene in the city centre. It's difficult to define what we are and what we offer. We are a bit of an intentional hybrid that is constantly evolving in an organic way. What the Centre offers has changed a lot - over the three years so far it has included: meetings (endless meetings), our weekly (now bi monthly) organising meetings, gigs, cinema, workshops, language classes, open access computers, talks, film and zine making festivals, free schools and a free shop, an action planning event called 'Action Central', national gatherings, cooking courses, skill shares, self defence classes, exhibitions, and the growth of a beautiful garden space and BBQs. The swimming pool was never built!

COMMON CONVERSATION

Common Conversation takes place at the Common Place every Saturday and offers free conversational English lessons for asylum seekers and refugees, followed by a shared meal. It has been running since April 2006 and currently about 45 students attend each week as well as 10 to 15 volunteers. Everyone who comes really values it as a social space where they can meet and make friends and also help out with teaching, cooking and helping to organise socials and trips. It's really great that the students like to get involved in the project as well as coming to the lessons. It happens across two rooms, with one room for beginners lessons, people cooking and eating and kids playing, and the other packed with people in the intermediate class. Everyone makes good use of the computers too. It would probably be really difficult to find anywhere else as central as the Common Place to hold this, not to mention having to pay venue hire, and it's a great, informal space where everyone can feel comfortable and happy amongst lots of other friendly people.

Some quotes from the students really sum it up for us:

"It is a social and friendly place. I can meet and talk with my friends - local people and other refugees and asylum seekers. Common Conversation is like my second family and Common Place is like my second home."

"When we are together we forget that we are asylum seekers with a number. We feel like human beings again and we feel like we are alive. You can't forget that happiness. When we are here sitting and learning we forget where we are from and we are all united. We help each other, we make friends with each other and we are the Common Conversation group."

OUR VALUES

So what are our values? One night, a student from the local art college put a tape recorder under our noses and asked 'what are the five main values that are most important to this place? We all looked at each other and shifted uncomfortably in our seats. After a minute, we had a go at an answer.

'Autonomy' came the first offer.

'Self-management', said another.

'Treating people with consideration,' came another, 'and not for profit'.

'Creativity and using consensus', followed.

'Anti-capitalist, that's an interesting one. That might be a difficult one,' was the final one as we all laughed nervously.

'I think it's strongly anti-capitalist just by creating a space that is outside the rules of capital'.

'Certainly dirty enough to be anti-capitalist!', came the rebuff.

The values of the place continue to be pretty much implicit rather than explicit. They are always changing according to what happens, and we are always keen to have more conversations about our changing values. The reluctance, however, stems from the fact that it is difficult for the Common Place to have one particular set of aspirations or values - its too diffuse and used by too many different groups to say we subscribe to this 'ism' or that theory. In this way it's more like a resource centre that lots of different groups access. It has less of a common identity although initially it had more of a common aim in that many of us got together with the idea of going to the G8 in Scotland in 2005 and getting involved in anti-capitalist organising. We literally took the whole centre (its sinks, cinema, chairs and books) up to Scotland to a squatted field cum temporary autonomous village called the Hori-zone from where we made our





night-time incursions against this unelected club of global elites. Many of us cut our political teeth there and developed a strong desire for horizontal political organising. That focus has now shifted and dispersed, and it's not necessarily a bad thing that we don't have that common focus anymore. It's great that there is lots of diversity and the feeling now is that it is more a place that people use rather than it being a space for a particular group and its ideas.



Since late 2007 there has been a working group at the Common Place called 'Open Up!' and we've been looking at inclusivity. As part of this we wanted to get people's thoughts on how effectively various values that are important to the Common Place are actually upheld. We wanted to try and do this in a pictorial way, to try and encourage



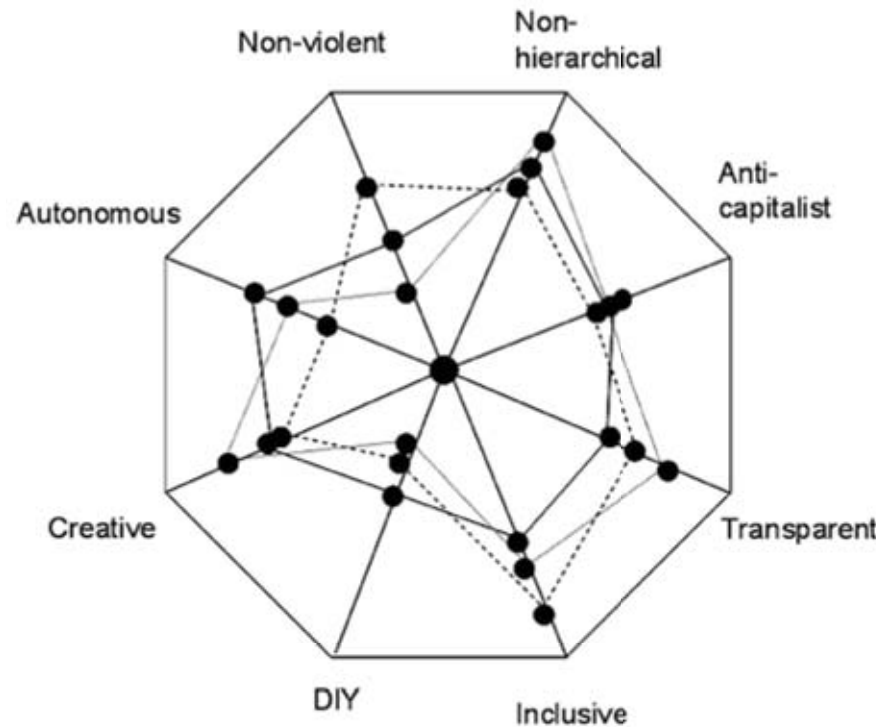
more creative thinking around the topic. We also wanted to have something visual we can display on the wall rather than just words. At a meeting we asked everyone to shout out different 'values' and wrote these up on a board. Everyone then split into smaller groups and each were given some coloured crayons and a sheet of paper with the diagram on (see the picture below). First they had to choose 8 values from the board, and each spoke represented one of these. Each person then had to put a mark on each spoke according to how effectively they thought the Common Place fulfilled that value. The closer to the middle the more effective. We then had a discussion about the results and we'll hopefully be able to use it as a way of getting people thinking about what works well in the Common Place, what works less well, and what we can do about it.

ORGANISING THE COMMON PLACE WAY...

Down the Common Place, we live by contradictions, strung up between the pragmatic and the ideological. At the end of the month we have to pay the rent, but at the same time we are trying to build another world. But one of the strengths of this place is that we are good at being pragmatic about our politics. We try and live by our principles, but we are happy to reconsider them when they don't work and we make compromises when we have to. Renting this building for example is one compromise we were happy to make to get a social centre and a semi-permanent base for political activity in Leeds.

So we are comfortable with trial and error and if something doesn't work we move on. Trial and error is a useful principle and in general we're not fixed in dogmatic ways of doing stuff. We are always open to learning new ways of doing things. We also feel we are quite good at figuring out stuff through crisis, so when things go wrong it gives us an opportunity to fix them.

We often say that our politics are pre-figurative, as Ghandi said, 'be the change you want to see'. We don't have all the answers or a blueprint but that's one of our strengths. We're both experimental and creative and we are good at creating rules and recreating them when they don't work. At the end of the day we hope that the Common Place provides a critical example of how we can do things differently in our society.



A HUB FOR ACTION

The Common Place works as a hub and focal point for action. There's a lot of crossover between the different groups involved. People come here and meet for a particular reason then go off in different directions. They meet other groups and get something new out of that, and new things happen out of that. There's an amazing range of cross-pollination of actions and ideas. It works well in spite of the disconnectedness of all the different bits that make up the centre.

Although it is like a hub, there is often a lack of a feeling of a hang out space like a café or a pub, where a lot more conversation about who we are would happen. Very often we are here busily doing things, talking about the projects and events we are doing, but not talking about what this place is. It is a good platform, a base for non-hierarchical politics, but there is still a lack of mixing of different people that use the building and knowing what each other is doing.

One big organisational issue for us is the feel of the building. Sure it's not a good 'hanging out space' and this is because of the coldness of the building - both literally and often emotionally/socially. This often leads us to talking lots about the physical layout of the space rather than politics. And one of the really interesting questions is: what kind of space and layout maximises that hanging out?

STRATEGIES AND SUCCESSES

So how can we gauge the success of this place? We use this place to find ways out of the parts of the world that we don't like. We certainly talk about some of the problems we face with capitalism and work - and this is one of the few places we can do that in our lives. But we have to acknowledge that we are not necessarily in open conflict with the system, If we were we'd probably be more ghettoised. But we chose to develop something more accessible and inclusive which would both bring people together but also act as a resource for existing activist groups. The point for us is that we don't feel we have lost just because capitalism still exists. We need to set ourselves smaller aims or at least see the change happening in different ways than 'bringing the system down tomorrow'.

Another big question is whether this place is a means to an end or an end in itself? Is it just a means of achieving the world we want to see or something worthwhile in itself? Of course we would like more control over the building, and not be at the mercy of a landlord. But even by renting, the Common Place gives us glimpses of the world we want to see. But is this enough? Are glimpses enough when we passionately want a different future to begin - to break out of some of the shit that seems to hold us fixed forever. We do get glimpses of the world we dream about - where we can manage our cities, based upon need, joy and freedom and not profit. So this journey is probably as useful as any end point.

We sometimes wonder if we have become too distracted running this place to take on 'capitalism' head on - whatever that means.

But maybe we are choosing our battles more carefully - ones that are worthwhile (like supporting asylum seekers, grassroots music, political education, skill sharing, learning consensus, self management) and can teach us lessons. So we need to see what we actually have achieved. We make the future we want seem more attainable by simply having this building. It opens up increasing possibilities for people to organise themselves. It does have a wider impact, as one member said:

"I mean the thing I like about it is people know it and identify it as an alternative - like complete strangers. I went to a festival once and a complete stranger said on the microphone: 'Get down to The Common Place, support you local social centre. It's a great place.' It's putting it out there that there is this alternative. So, it's become this thing that people speak about and refer to, to give you a sense of hope, which is brilliant".

We continue to ask ourselves 'what is the best way to get the world we want?' Maybe the best route to radical social change might be to close the Common Place and do something completely different. If the Common Place is a means to an end and it stops being something that promotes radical transformation and instead inhibits it and becomes institutionalised then let's lock the doors and throw away the key. For this reason, it is always crucial to review what we do, and all the things that happen in the building, how it's run and how that pushes forward the ideas we want to advance.



REFUGE the common
 an open mic night
FRIDAY 2 JUNE
 DOORS OPEN 7PM FIRST ACT 8:30PM

It could be awesome, it could be awful, that's why it's open mic. All sorts of performers welcome, be it acoustic guitar, spoken word or barbershop quartet. 15 minute slots are available: turn up early to sign up for a slot, or text 0777 214 68 62 to book yours...

LICENSED BAR & CAFE
 £2 ENTRY (PERFORMERS FREE)

All profit from this night will go directly to support the women's asylum seeker and refugee project held each Thursday at the Common Place

23-25 Wharf Street
 Leeds LS2 7EQ

www.thecommonplace.org.uk



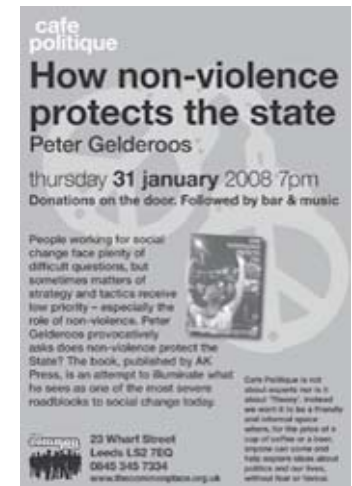
AND OF COURSE THE PROBLEMS...

Yes we aren't perfect. Problems range from the perpetual mess to big political bust ups. Both are equally difficult to resolve. We have tried the 'Ministry of Filth' for the former, and a fairly robust consensus meeting for the latter. Recently, we had a fall out over whether to allow the place to host some visiting Cuban speakers. In the end, a couple of members used their block to stop this event suggesting this event breached our anti-authoritarian stance. From such tensions come solutions - we are setting up a mediation group to look at such conflicts and are revisiting our bookings policy and the very difficult issue of who we include and exclude from the building. Where do we draw a line around who is in and out of our political world? What is an event consistent with our politics and what isn't? This is a really tough question and one that can't be ignored.

Inclusivity is constantly brought up as an issue (and we are addressing this through an inclusivity group). In terms of volunteers, it is still quite hard to get involved. Wandering in off the street for the first time you are confronted by a large room, people stood around, on computers, maybe cooking. There isn't anything, or anyone, that immediately welcomes you, allows you to hide, or integrate slowly. You are thrown in at the deep end, as everyone turns around and says 'yes?' So we need to work on that. We need better structures, times and tasks to get people involved. The bigger problem is that there isn't really enough of us that have the time and will to run a social centre for more hours, especially through the day. Many of us have thought that it would be really good if it was open all the time, even if that involved a paid worker or a running the café as a workers co-op.

There is also a crucial issue of on going gender imbalances. How many men cook and wash up! Who always talks the most at meetings! Some of us are aware that there are women who don't come, especially to meetings, for a specific reason and it is essential to do something about that. But we hope we are open and flexible enough to tackle these problems as they come up and find ways - to turn problems into potential solutions and keep developing the Common Place political project.

This article was compiled by Paul using interviews, extracts and contributions from several members of the Common Place Social Centre.



The Common Place is at:
23-25 Wharf St, Leeds, LS2 7EQ.

www.thecommonplace.org.uk

THE BASEMENT, MANCHESTER.

INITIAL IDEA AND POLITICAL AIMS

The Basement grew from various activities and events that had been happening in Manchester in the previous few years: the Okasional Café squatted social centres, various radical art projects including NATO's Blitz Festival and the Priceless Exhibition, Beyond TV, the dilapidated EF bookstall in a suitcase, an Anti-Macdonalds burger bar etc. etc.!

What these things had all done was to bring together activist cliques and networks and made them more open, more accessible to people not "in the know", but unfortunately they were all impermanent, transient operations. Late night discussions were often had about how great it would be if we had something that wasn't always moving on, if people who were interested in getting involved wouldn't turn up somewhere and find the door barred and nowhere to go.

Originally the social centre group was very small. A couple of us wrote down on a bit of paper what we would like to have in a space - a café, a bookshop, computing facilities, a bar (this never materialised), an exhibition space, meeting and event space, film nights, and then we got together the 12-15 people we knew who had been organising these kinds of things and suggested we work together on making something happen.

So we started small; for the first 9 months about 4 or 5 of us looked around Manchester at buildings full of pigeons, rain water and other unsavoury things trying to find something suitable. Eventually we found a run down space in the Northern Quarter of Manchester that we were able to get cheaply.

TIME SPENT AS A VERY SMALL GROUP

One of the things that being a relatively small group meant was that we were able to work together on planning a more open structure. We never intended that the closed core group would remain, but felt that in the setting up period it meant we wouldn't have meetings attended by people who just like meetings!

We were there to work; the meetings were always about the practicalities of the project. We knew that once we had started the project running we would need to open up the social centre - it wasn't "our" project to keep. We thought a lot about how this would work, about how to have an open and autonomous space, but one in which one individual couldn't wreck a whole project.

We had several long meetings dedicated to how this could happen. The space (now known as "the disease" due to the asbestos

we found) was planned as lots of several parts making up a whole. After a long, long meeting we eventually came up with a working group structure.

Essentially each group was open and had autonomy over that part of the project and were to meet to arrange and organise that part. Any issues that would affect other part of the space had to go to the general meeting, which was composed of anyone from any of the working groups.

THE WORKING GROUPS - HOW IT WORKED IN PRACTICE - PROBLEMS AND SUCCESSES

There were working groups for the café, the bookshop, the IT space, the exhibition space, a meeting and events group and also the legal/logistical group which is what the original core group tried to morph into. This remained a closed group although entry was not particularly restricted - anyone with a burning design to do admin and deal with the rates was eagerly dragged in!

The events groups soon fell by the wayside and other groups came and went as the need arose - publicity, fundraising. Some were successful and some not. The arts group never really had more than about 4





people in it, whilst the café and book groups tended to have larger and more coherent meetings. Sometimes minutes of meetings were distributed to the general group and reportbacks made, and sometimes not. Information distribution became a problem at times. All of this probably affected the overall democracy of the project as only people in the know about working group meetings and prepared to know about them would know about or be involved in decision making.

The general group functioned well for most of the time. The minutes for these meetings did get out to everyone on the general group e-list, and as this included most people in the Basement Collective, people usually got to find out what was going on if they could be bothered to come to the meeting. Contentious issues usually resulted in big attendance at general group meetings. However, sadly, when things were just ticking over or going well the general group meetings got smaller and smaller. This naturally led to a small core of people not only making a lot of decisions, but taking on a lot of responsibilities, not necessarily sought after! This led to a situation where people would not feel comfortable making day to day decisions but would always refer

to these “core” people, and this perhaps prevented less assertive people from feeling that they had ownership of the project. This may have led to people not seeing a need to get involved - especially other activists. Sometimes, after a long day, we felt like we were no longer activists ourselves but providing a service for activists, with our users being perhaps the most demanding people in existence!

However this all sounds rather negative and it is more of a personal reflection on the way that we tried to have a successful and democratic structure for the project and how sometimes it was really successful and sometimes not. On the whole - it worked when people remembered to follow the structure, and problems tended to arise when people forgot to confer or share information or do things that did not respect the other people in the space. Perhaps we learnt that to have a successful non-hierarchical project of this size you need to be constantly vigilant - not just of others but your own tendencies to autocracy (or maybe that is just me and my monarchical tendencies!)

Really I think the Basement was a big success! We always complained about the lack of volunteers and problems with

opening up but we ran a really efficient operation and had very high expectations. As we had a focus on attracting people in off the street who were not already interested in anti-capitalism, politics and activism, we had to be open when we said we would and be a relatively clean and tidy space. In the main we managed this. We had a lot of volunteers - we needed them in order to be able to open 6 hours a day, 5 days a week plus evening meetings and events. I think perhaps we were overly ambitious in our opening times but there is nothing wrong with being over ambitious. People did come in off the streets, like it, and get involved! So in this we were successful.

As an activist space the Basement was also hugely successful. Groups and campaigns had space to network and chat both formally and informally. This is probably not the time for a long list! But gradually we reached a situation where to book a meeting in the space (in a somewhat confused and crossed out book) became almost impossible as so many groups and people wanted to use the space.

As well as formal meetings the space also was used for films, for fundraising events and socials. People met to chat and bumped into

people not in their normal social/activist circles.

It was a really important networking space for Manchester and I think had a huge effect on the levels of activism happening in Manchester.

For example the Manchester No Borders group and related migrant and refugee groups and organisations benefited hugely from the social centre, and it was interesting to see how important having a space was to this type of campaigning. From somewhere to have campaign meetings, to make banners, have English lessons or simply a space where refugees could come for tea and free internet without being moved on. Other refugee organisations have spoken about how important the Basement (and other social centres) was to what they were trying to do.

PHOENIX FROM THE FLAMES

I have used the past tense to talk about the Basement - perhaps I should not have. In May 2007 a massive fire in the Northern Quarter damaged the building the Basement is in. The Basement suffered a lot of water damage. We rescued a lot of stuff but the computers, sofas and many of the books were wrecked. Various people have cellars and garages with fridges and library books squirrelled away. We initially hoped that a quick clear up would ensue and we would be back. This has not been the case. Since May the Basement space has been getting mouldier and we have been getting more fed up as we wait for various issues with our landlord and the safety of the space to get sorted out (you could say this is one of the disadvantages of a rented space!)

However what has happened since the closure has been the realisation by Manchester's activist community that having a social centre or a collective space is hugely important to what we do.

Groups and individuals who had used the space but not perhaps been involved in the running of the social centre are all coming into the collective. People have realised how important it was now it is gone. This has led to a feeling that Manchester needs a social centre - no matter whether it is in the old Basement space or not, or whether it is formed in exactly the same way as the old Basement. This commitment is perhaps the most important thing of all. A physical space

is important to what we are doing. It makes us visible to others but also helps us break out of our cliques and work with each other in a more constructive way. I would also say that some of the most important political discussions I have ever had were over the washing up in the Basement!

So - the collective is re-grouping. In the next few months we will either have our old space back or be working on a new space. Manchester will have a social centre. Watch this space.

This is a very personal reflection on what I have experienced and felt over the last four and a half years. It is not in anyway an official history and critique of The Basement. There is a lot I have not spoken about: both problems and successes. I have tried to give a broad feeling of how it has seemed to me to have worked and what having a social space has meant to us in Manchester. I have not meant to seem negative although I have maybe been critical. The Basement has been one of the most important and rewarding things I have done and taught me a lot. I have also made some of the best friends of my life there as well as learning to make vegan cakes - some might think this is the most important thing I have learnt!

Written by Eleanor from the Basement.



The Basement is at:
24 Lever Street, Manchester, M1 1DW

To keep updated with what's happening at the Basement check out:
www.thebasement.clearerchannel.org/new

THE PAD

(PEOPLE'S AUTONOMOUS DESTINATION).



“I’ve only been a few times to Pad but it fills me with excitement as this area of Cardiff is lacking a sense of community and Pad is the antithesis of this. I am looking forward to seeing what I can share and what I can learn from the random bunch of people sitting on Pad’s eclectic furniture.”

***“P for PAD,
P for Patience,
P for perse-fucking-verance”.***

After our initial flurry of activity in the autumn and winter of 2005 we remained a group but found ourselves slipping into a repetitive pattern of meeting after meeting with the same agenda - website, money and building. We dwindled in numbers but eventually got ourselves a space in the spring of 2007. Perseverance paid off. And we paid - too much, but better to spend money on somewhere rather than nothing. Next, the lesson of patience. I wanted people to come flooding out of the proverbial wood work. Instead they seeped. But every drop adds something and the space we made was used more and more and the tide was rising. We noticed one day, when we were wondering whether we could continue to justify our rent, if enough people came through our door. We looked around us and saw how much growth had happened. The seed we planted two years ago, watered by energy and enthusiasm, and friends and strangers, is still going, still growing.



Here’s what people have said about us:

“Well what can in say. Yummy food, nice people. Since getting involved with the PAD I’ve become more empowered, more motivated and more ready to Fuck the system. Lots of Fun.”

“Once upon a time I was walking back home and I found a copy of Gagged (a South Wales anarchist newsletter) on the floor in my street. After reading it I went on to the internet to check the website links that appeared on it. I checked where the social centre was and realized it was just in my own street!! I’d passed by it so many times but thought it was something private. As I was an activist in the Basque country and I knew about how social centres work in Britain (I was involved in ACE in Edinburgh before) I immediately joined it in it’s different activities. It has been an amazing experience until now and I feel I am growing personally as well as politically, fucking loads. Long live the PAD!”

“Not bad - ain’t been kicked out yet.”

“It was cool getting the new pad together... best converted butchers I’ve ever seen.”

“Nice to be somewhere that doesn’t rely on government or local council funding leading

to bureaucracy, red tape, conditions, excess health and safety regs and the hiring of ‘well meaning’ paid community workers with an agenda of their own.”

“We always said PAD was a way of working together or a concept rather than a physical space, hence the name “people’s autonomous destination”.

“It’s an idea that’s constantly changing and developing and I think that’s why it’s exciting to be a part of it. Over the past couple of years the PAD has manifested itself in squats, in a Quaker meeting house, on Cardiff’s main high street and now exists more permanently in a rented space that used to be a butchers. Although the physical space we’re in seems to change, the PAD is always somewhere people can come together to plot, create, debate, learn, share, cry, laugh and dream for a world free from corporate or governmental control.”

“The PAD - grannies, vegan fry ups, meetings, gas bottles, meetings, tea and coffee, dogs, anarchist politics, meetings, posh nosh, organic whole foods, meetings, local kids, meetings, friends, principles, values, fun.”

Compiled by several members of PAD.



The PAD is at:
118 Clifton Street, Cardiff, CF24 1LW

See the website at:
www.thepad.wordpress.com

CHALKBOARD

- THE SUCCESSES AND FAILURES OF A MARYHILL COMMUNITY TENDENCY.



TIMELINE

1. The centre opened with an exhibition. Thousands of leaflets were distributed around Woodside and Possil. The centre, for the space of a weekend, was opened with a montage of local historical information, some of it from a radical and socialist perspective (such historical antecedents, often up to the very local, are really not very hard to find in places like Glasgow).

2. From the beginning, a local tenants association, Cedar Tenants Association (which had been recently started following anger over an out-of-action lift in one of the three tower blocks) met in the new centre. During the first few months the centre was used primarily to allow people to meet with those involved with it and discuss questions relating to the local area.

3. Several months in, the Chalkboard started to develop a community newspaper, calling it the Burgh Angel.

4. Attempts were made to move beyond merely operating the centre as part of a strategy for opposing gentrification. Some of the volunteers got involved with Woodside Community Council, which, it is thought, maintains a seat on Glasgow City Council's North West Area Committee (an administrative unit in charge of the day-to-day running of the North West of the city). Their aim was to win the Community Council to a position of opposing gentrification.

5. From the beginning of the year the centre started to be used by bored local kids as a place to spend time in. The 'café' had not proven effective at bringing in lots of other sections of the community.

6. In January attempts to broaden the outreach of the centre started to come together. The first edition of the Burgh Angel

was published and attempts to get a public meeting together for the nearby Hamiltonhill estate, which suffers from a great deal of planned deprivation and is being prepared to be demolished: "Today I chaired (or tried to chair) an incredibly rowdy meeting of almost 70 people on my estate. A neighbour and myself called it. With help from three comrades from the neighbouring estate and a pair of visiting lefties (I think anarchos?) from Leeds we leafleted 900-950 households of the 1000ish on the estate. The leafleting was meant to be total, but there was confusion and some places got leafleted twice. This took several hours over three days, although only three people did the bulk of the leafleting. Lots of people talked to the leafleters, one of the Leeds guys had to wing it." [Posted: Submitted by AnarchoAl on Fri, 24/02/2006]

7. A community campaign, consisting of Speirs Wharf Residents Committee and Cedar Tenants Association began to push for a public local inquiry into the development of a 17 storey, £15 million tower block at the far end of the canal. The tower block was to be the first development project of a 15 year masterplan to develop and gentrify the canal side. The campaign began to put pressure on various authorities and agencies.

8. This initial success in Hamiltonhill at starting new groups spurred the group on to work with others in the St George's Estate to develop two further associations in these areas. By late March small groups in the rest of the St George's Estate had been established.

9. With around 4 local associations, on two estates, within the boundaries of one Local Housing Office of the Glasgow Housing association, activists involved with the Chalkboard became involved in trying to develop a federation of residents associations for the whole city



"Hey guys, This looks amazing! We need to start doing this where I stay, there are no youth clubs where I stay, and no decent transport links for young people to get about! Always keep fighting for what you want - don't let them hand you anything on a plate cos there will always be something wrong with it!"

Joe Pearce [Posted by Anonymous to George's X Chalkboard at 8/17/2006]

This short overview is part of a series of three essays looking at the future of Maryhill, previous attempts at community organisation, and what could be done to improve things in this area to advance working class control, power and influence, and how this relates to the goals of libertarian socialism.

The George's X Chalkboard ran from September 2005 to September 2006. On one level it was a small office and drop in centre ("social centre"), ran collectively by a membership group, organised legally through a fully-mutual co-op. On another level it was a community tendency, organising campaigns and trying to kick-start local organisations and fight against the gentrification of the neighbourhood in which the centre was based. Briefly here is a short chronology of the project as it took shape.

Glasgow Tenants and Home owners Networking Conference

Glasgow Caledonian University,
Cowcaddens Road,
Saturday 8th April, 9am-4pm.

- Discussions of higher rents and less services
- Rising costs for right to buy owners
- Plans of the Glasgow Housing Association Ltd to demolish thousands of structurally sound homes
- The future of Glasgow's social housing
- Getting landlords to curb their dictatorial tendencies
- What action can we take
- Come and have your say
- For independent thought
- Rejuvenate our communities
- Unite today

For more information call 07976718111
Sponsored by STO, City Strolls, The Georges X Chalkboard



10. The success of members working with Woodside Community Council over this period led to a large public meeting in April for the whole community on the issue of anti-social behaviour. This was significant in terms of numbers in attendance (around 200), although it was taken over and the Chalkboard speaker was not able to address the situation. Following on from previous discussions it was decided to use this public meeting to start the official launch of a youth club campaign.

11. Following on from the Community Council public meeting, certain divisions in the tactics and strategy used at the centre, which had always existed, started to deepen. Some wanted the centre to be focused on a more developmental role - providing a training and coaching resource for people in the local

community to launch initiatives off their own bat. This NGO approach was shared and hotly disputed by the same people within the organising group at different times. Others in the centre felt that there should be a more proactive approach with individuals acting like a tendency or a political organisation consciously getting local groups off the ground and then supporting their development, in order to build working class power in local communities. There was also no coherent codified strategy. Some felt both approaches could be adopted and run together.

12. At around the same time the Scottish Socialist Party, whose activists locally had begun to get involved with the centre and some of the other activities, faced an internal crisis in their political party - most then had a lot less time to devote to the activities of the centre.

13. There was a public meeting held on the housing situation throughout the area to build for a conference of tenants and residents aimed at establishing a network of tenants and right-to-buy homeowners from across the city.

14. Following on from this public meeting there was a citywide conference. Following that conference contact was made with some tenants in other parts of Maryhill. Various attempts to form residents associations were made, with which the Chalkboard had some contact.

15. A group of Chalkboard activists attempted unsuccessfully to prevent an eviction in Cumlodden Estate, Maryhill. This issue and that of anti-social behaviour make up the bulk of the next edition of the Burgh Angel, which now spreads to Milton in terms of distribution.

16. The city council attempts to form a 'community association' to undermine the tenants association activity in the St George's Cross area.

17. A public local inquiry is called to investigate the canal tower block plans.

18. The Youth Club Campaign has an abortive march, after a police gala day is hastily arranged to clash with it. The event however draws a lot of press attention.

19. Attempts are made to develop a network of "Friends of" groups for local parks and green spaces.

20. Serious discussions about the future of the centre begin, as it becomes difficult to sustain the centre through volunteers. A number of the local tenants organisations have begun to collapse as Chalkboard and SSP activists have moved onto other things.

21. By August the centre is effectively closed.

ORGANISATIONAL INFLUENCES AND IDEAS

The group which developed the Chalkboard grew out of the attempts to set up an anarchist social centre in 2004, which culminated in the Printworks Social Centre. This was a failed project which led to a year of introspection and group development, where the Glasgow Autonomous Project (the group which was to be the Chalkboard) organised events and coffee mornings out of a community centre in Govan. In a precursor to the Chalkboard centre, the group was involved in supporting a creative initiative in the Saltmarket, which ran as a drop-in space

for locals following weeks of community surveys, and was funded as an art project. The Chalkboard group also became a member of the co-operative lending group Radical Routes.

The group had a constitution, a vision statement and a statement on perspectives and aims. Without going into too much detail it's worth quoting these latter sections.

ARTICLE 1 – FOUNDING STATEMENT – VISION STATEMENT

1) We strive for a sustainable society where all people are free to live their lives as they see fit without fear of oppression, persecution or marginalisation insofar as this does not prevent others from doing the same. We see this fulfilled through a society built upon principles of co-operation, solidarity, mutual-aid, direct democracy and freedom of association.

2) To achieve this world we need radical social change.

3A) Against all hierarchies. In order to achieve radical social change and not repeat the mistakes of the past we need to avoid recreating hierarchies which could lead to a new class division in society in the future.

3B) What this means in practice is that we have to be actively promoting equality by providing a safe, anti-discriminatory space. We recognise that people are discriminated against because of their class, sex, race, sexual preference, accent, physical ability, religion and mental health and in a variety of other ways. The struggle for a world without hierarchy includes the need to challenge all prejudice wherever it occurs.

3C) It also means running on a directly democratic basis because we know that we don't need managers to tell us how to run our places of work or our communities - this is another form of disempowering hierarchy. We know we are capable of doing this ourselves, given the resources.

4A) We recognise in the forefront of our minds that there is a class struggle going on. We are on the side of the poor, the landless, the jobless, the waged labourers, the working class, the oppressed people of the planet. We are against those who have disenfranchised us, who make our decisions for us, on the wealth of the world that we have produced, which they are plundering from and damaging, exclusively for their benefit.

4B) In order to fulfil our part in the class struggle, we have to contribute to building a mass movement to resist oppression and challenge the interests of the ruling class, with the ultimate goal of abolishing all classes and the class system.

4C) In order to play our part in this struggle against hierarchies we must spread our ideas in accessible ways.

4D) We consider it important to host a space which can be used for tap roots activism, activism which empowers and teaches people, so that they have the tools and confidence to take part in this struggle.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

1] To provide a welcoming, clean and tidy, anti-discriminatory space for tap roots groups to organise out of and hold workshops. This is to be a drug free space (where "drugs" includes alcohol and tobacco, but excludes caffeine and medication).

2] To provide a space that will:

- Serve as a free drop in centre which is a useful forum for the spreading of our ideas.

- To reach out to and involve significant numbers of new people in this project and in groups and projects which use our centre, without compromising on our principles, but nevertheless by remaining attached to the real world.

- To spread anarchist tactics of direct action and direct control amongst the wider Glasgow community, and by such means win better conditions for the Glaswegian working class to live under so that we all can continue and extend the struggle."

Clearly then, the group, while containing initially a minority for whom "class" constituted just another form of oppression, had a majority perspective that the primary aim of the centre was to engage in the class struggle by spreading ideas and developing the consciousness of workers. This perspective set the centre and the group around it apart from similar types of "social centre" groups throughout the UK.

Informal links too had been developed with the groups Hackney Independent and Haringey Solidarity Group at the London, 2005, Community Action Gathering. This had provided the group with a lot of inspiration and ideas for future activities, particularly in relation to the interplay of forces with municipal authorities, fighting for an extension of the local social wage and fighting gentrification. One member also had been involved in community politics in the neighbourhood for years, and as the group around the centre grew it brought in experienced community campaigners. One of the leading activists had been heavily

influenced by the ideas of Murray Bookchin and his writings on Libertarian Municipalism, and many were also drawing inspiration from the Independent Working Class Association. A number of activists involved with the centre though were not influenced by any of these thinkers or ideas, and came to the project having been influenced by groups such as the Wombles, and the anti-capitalist movement more generally. Others too took inspiration from more general grassroots 'community development' ideas, such as those of Alistair MacIntosh and Colin McLeod, of the Galgael Trust, and the campaign against the Harris Superquarry, as well as the radical land reform ideas of Andy Wightman.

The group was coming from different places, and although a certain base unity was agreed around the aims and principles of the organisation, ideas tended to be very fluid and the organisation often pulled ideologically in different directions.

PROJECTS

The Chalkboard could roughly be said to have had six main projects (although there were a number of other smaller or more limited projects devised):

1) Create a drop in centre which functioned as a café / social space where people could meet up and discuss the local community and come into contact with radical ideas.

2) Build up collective representation in the area through tenants associations and other civic and civil society groups, women's forums, classes, lectures and general civic engagement.

3) Develop a community newspaper.

4) Try to build dual power for the community

and the organs of collective representation in opposition to the power of the local council and the Glasgow Housing Association.

5) Fight for improvements and investment in the local area.

6) Generalise local struggles into wider tenant campaigns and develop a citywide tenants movement.

There was an overarching idea shared by most that trying to develop in these ways would make residents more inclined to fight for the area and make the area harder to gentrify through demolitions as people would put up more of a fight.

STRATEGIC PERSPECTIVES?

It would be fair to say that there was no agreement over which projects constituted the most important activity of the centre and the centre groups. For some people numbers 1 and 2 constituted the most important activities of the centre. For a couple of individuals the most important contribution was the Burgh Angel newspaper (which continues to exist). For most of the rest - which created some tension - the most important aspect of the centre was to work consciously and politically to develop a counter-power based in local mass organisations. That counter-power would consist of tenants associations started up and consciously structured to mirror the nature of local housing administrative areas, and that attempts should be made to make local LHO committees of the GHA subordinate to local tenants associations. These bodies would then work with the local community council (where some attempts were made to take this body over) which has a delegated seat at the administrative meetings of the council's North West Area Committee (the

local government executive in most matters). Pressure would be brought to bear on these institutions and these mass organisations would start to seize aspects of state power, coming up with local architectural schema for the estates that they represented, or holding community patrols to try and tackle anti-social behaviour.

There were, it could be fair to say, two or three separate 'plans' or strategic perspectives on how to take the centre forward, some of which were not contradictory, some of which were.

ACHIEVEMENTS OVERVIEW

The Chalkboard and the tendency clustered around it, working in tandem with local residents groups, was a major factor in achieving:

** Defeat of an unwanted local yuppy development worth around £15 million*

** New lifting mechanisms for lifts in three local tower blocks on the St George's Estate, worth - it's estimated - around £700,000*

** A meeting with the deputy government minister for education on the issue of a youth club*

** Investment in youth facilities (estimated at being worth around £300,000)*

** A lot of local corruption was also exposed, and people in the area are now a good deal more cynical towards certain local politicians and local 'committee people'.*

ASSESSMENT

Of the three main organisational perspectives of what the Chalkboard could have achieved, the author believes that the most ambitious was the aim to build a community counter-power.

Certainly in terms of creating a café or social space the Chalkboard was more or less a failure. The centre became a magnet for local kids which was both good and bad for the centre. The idea of getting involved and campaigning for a youth club came directly out of this, as it was clear that local kids were very bored with little to amuse them, however it also refracted the fact that the centre by this point was not buzzing with adults coming to sample Woodside's most famous social venue. We were perhaps beholden to our premises for that (a converted shopfront) in that it was difficult to construct on a budget anything other than a clean and presentable office. Over time the excitement for a café venue waned somewhat and the centre became slightly more instrumental.

As far as the centre being used as a hive of local news, the window for the centre was always full of relevant local information and was increasingly well used. The newspaper too, though slow to start and not regular enough, has provided some focus for information and socialist ideas to be spread in a non-threatening way. This continues to this day.

As far as developing a real counter-power goes, it is perhaps telling that at the height of the project (when there were four tenants associations, the community council was threatened with takeover and there

were some efforts to co-ordinate activity in LHO committees, as well as to undermine vested interests through the Burgh Angel) the local Area Committee of the city council approved funding for a team from the social work department to start to develop a parallel yellow tenants association for the St George's Estate. At the same time strenuous efforts were made to maintain control of the community council with public meetings being gerrymandered. Pressure was also exerted on the local youth project further up the road to avoid contact with us by a number of politicians. The local community police also paid several visits to the centre following the involvement of the centre group in a short running campaign on anti-social behaviour. All of this low level state antagonism or monitoring is a reflection not necessarily that the group was beginning to be dangerous to the authorities, but perhaps that we might become so. The most telling factor of all was when the group attempted to rally some people to resist and eviction for rent arrears. At almost no point in recent history have these kind of routine evictions been attended by police. There were five in attendance on this occasion - the anti-eviction posse being rounded up the night before via phonecalls. When one of the activists involved was arrested, the police wanted to know if this had anything to do with the G8 or Faslane Peacecamp, despite the activity clearly having nothing to do with that, and the individual involved being a clean shaven type who had never so much as visited Faslane or been involved in G8 protests. This is not testament to any success, but the obvious concern from the authorities for information is testament that we were starting to get noticed.



POST CHALKBOARD

Following the closure of the Chalkboard centre a number of ideas were mooted as ways ahead. One concept (enclosed in the appendix) was for a kind of anti-parliamentary front aiming to push citizen involvement and referenda in the run up to the Holyrood and Council elections of the following year. This idea was not taken up however.

Another concept was to create a 'social forum' of various activist groups which could at some point sustain a centre project (the centre closed not through lack of funds but lack of volunteers to keep it open, following the internal schisms in the SSP which led many volunteers to abandon the project for their internal SSP party business).

In reality neither came to the fore, but a decision was taken that the remaining finances would be distributed to any serious project that appeared to have a solid core group and a business plan and constitution to develop a social centre in future. That money remains to be claimed by anyone and so far no projects have come to the fore in Glasgow.

In the meantime the Burgh Angel continued, as did much of the community activity, particularly on a citywide level.

LESSONS LEARNED

The Chalkboard project was a massive learning curve for the participants. It caused around £16 million worth of damage to the local ruling class, won some major investment in the community, and laid the grounds for a future tendency to be developed across Maryhill. There were lots of things we did wrong, but hopefully those reading this and interested in similar projects will not repeat those. The author believes it is not enough simply to develop a unity around some vague common platform. At no point did the Chalkboard group number actively more than a dozen people, but there was enough strategic differences in how we saw the centre and how to develop things to cause us to fail to all pull in the same direction and realise our organisational capacity. In terms of the counter-power type activity, this was only really being attempted by about half of the group at any one time and it was often at loggerheads strategically with some of the other ideas about how the group might develop. This led to a significant degree of organisational confusion and faffing about, when there ought really to have been more focus on building up the tenants associations and fighting to win and exerting control over our community. A successful example of a real community counter-power developing would have been a tremendous catalysing example and would have quickly been able to be generalised across the city in other communities. Fortunately there are

now others interested in this, and there appears to be some attempts to have a more concerted attempt to develop that kind of municipalist politics in the area, but this is now one year on from the closure of the centre, and it could have been done then if there had been greater agreement on this point to concentrate our resources on this.

The other major lesson from the practice of the Chalkboard is that there was no real attempts to develop a workplace strategy, and it is not enough to 'leave that work to other socialists'. If you cannot see many other comrades engaged in that way in your local area, that's probably because there aren't many. The Chalkboard completely failed to do outreach to workers or to link workplace struggles to community organisation. This is in spite of the awareness by most of the membership that those kind of linkages are so seminally important. The organisation often cited the example of combined tenant and trade union action as being vital in the defeat of plans, just before the opening of the Chalkboard, to do away with 24 hour concierge provision. Such links have proven vital for the victory of community campaigns in the past, and they will do in the future. Workplace struggles too are stronger with community backing, it therefore stands as an enormous oversight, and one of its major failings, that the Chalkboard did not attempt to develop some sort of local workplace strategy.

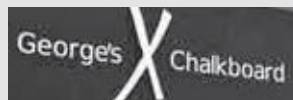
WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS

Many of the lessons surrounding the lack of common agreement appear to have been learnt. During the Chalkboard there were calls by some members to develop a specific libertarian socialist political organisation to be able to push the counter-power style activities. This came to nothing at the time, but the failure of the centre appears to have concentrated the minds of those who were involved, and a new strategically minded libertarian socialist organisation is being created which will be based on shared strategic ideas and shared theoretical background, which will work to specific local action plans with assessable goals. That organisation, Praxis, aims to carry forward much of the work that the Chalkboard was aiming to do in its partial and confused way, but the greater unity of Praxis is likely to grant more organisational capacity. Details on Praxis and what it is working on will be found online at:

www.praxisglasgow.wordpress.com

Members of Praxis have also recently been involved with the successful Save Crichton Campus Campaign, which was won with combined IWW (International Workers of the World)/UCU (University and College Union) union activity and through linking this up to community organisation, so perhaps some of the more difficult lessons from the Chalkboard have been started to be drawn.

Written by Nick from George's X Chalkboard



For information about on going projects see:
www.georgesxchalkboard.blogspot.com

- PUBLIC - MEETING -

[Thurs 16th March - 7:30PM @ the Woodside Halls]
SECOND STAGE TRANSFER - WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF YOUR HOME AND YOUR COMMUNITY?

- What does GHA's business plan mean for you?
- Is your home under threat of demolition, and if so why?
- What is second stage transfer and what does it mean for Woodside?
- What is the future of GHA rental guarantees - will rents go up?
- GHA's planned doubling of charges for homeowners, what does it mean for you? Are you already being charged too much?



Whether you are a tenant of the GHA or a homeowner GHA's latest business plan is likely to have implications for you. This is a joint meeting being held by the Save Our Homes Campaign and the George's X Chalkboard.

Invited speakers include:-

- **Sean Clerkin** (Save Our Homes Campaign, Chair)
- **The George's X Chalkboard**

Thurs, 16th March, 7:30 PM @ the Woodside Halls

For more information contact: 'The George's X Chalkboard', 34 Clarendon Place, Woodside, Glasgow, G20 7PZ
telephone: 0141 332 2902 - email: info@chalkboard.org.uk

Kyoto - Global Warming - Social Inclusion
Who Cares

M74

Heading in the wrong direction

A film by Neil Gray showing at the George's X Chalkboard

No one wants the M74 motorway.
Most of the citizens of Glasgow don't want it...
No one who studies the logic of it, think it's a good idea.
Other countries are ripping theirs down.
The only people who will benefit are banks and big business
The rest of us will suffer for their profits



Critical Mass George Square
5: 30 last Friday of the month.

After Critical Mass this Friday 28 July (Around 7.30) the above film at :

The George's X Chalkboard 34 Clarendon Place
Near George's Cross underground



THE SEOMRA SPRAOI SOCIAL CENTRE



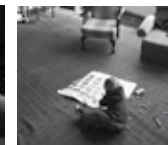
The Seomra Spraoi project to create an autonomous social centre in Dublin came directly out of the experiences of people working under the banner of Dublin Grassroots Network. DGN was loose, anarchist/libertarian alliance, which facilitated the Mayday 2004 mobilisation against the EU summit, 'celebrating' the expansion of the European neoliberal project. Whilst relatively small in comparison to most other summit mobilisation across Europe, it was the biggest single mobilisation by anarchists and unaligned individuals in the history of the state.

The experience of being involved in organising these mobilisation showed many of us the necessity of having a stable space to use as a political resource. Some folks involved in the Seomra Spraoi collective were part of the Magpie collective, who squatted a building in the plush surroundings of Leeson Street in Dublin. It was here that many of us met for the first time, as it hosted most of the organising meetings for the Mayday protest. The squat got evicted a few weeks before the summit, but its resonance continued. The genuine sense of community that was felt, as well as the potential that autonomously organised activity suggested within us, was key in motivating people to

get proactive and look towards creating a social center in Dublin. Whilst most of our sense of what social centers 'are' was formed by either visits to or being somewhat involved with social centers in the UK or across Europe and beyond, we also wanted to make our own thing and to bring to bear what we had collectively experienced and learnt, both positive and negative.

From the outset we decided that if our social center was to be public and open, squatting was not a realistic medium term strategy. As a tactic it can be useful to do squatting actions to raise issues but with the knowledge that at the time it couldn't be a sustainable way of creating social and political resources, we opted to rent a space. We called a meeting in November 2004 to "organise a social center" and sure enough the only folks who turn up where the ten or so people who animatedly (repeatedly and over pints) reckoned that a social center would give Dublin the kick in the ass we felt it sorely needed. We weren't put off and knew that meetings aren't always where things happen. The wind was in our sail given the year we had had. Our first public event was to host a screening of films about social centers put together by the Direct Action Against Apathy collective. After cooking dinner for the hundred or so

people who turned up in the community hall of St Nick's it was clear that there was an energy and desire for what we wanted to do. It gave us more impetus and a real sense that even though we were just a few people, that we had the support and active interest of a much wider base. We initially found a room in an ambiguously squatted residence of a well known radical artist in the city centre. Three years on and we then we have become 'home' to most of the radical, non-hierarchical campaigns in the city, provided resources and respite for many groups and individuals, and also seemed to become the hottest place to get you late nite dance off in the city. Much of these well and other activities are well documented and can be found on www.indymedia.ie. Along the way we were complete media tarts, doing interview in print and radio, in local press and national magazines. Most, if not all, of the coverage was sympathetic, and it was clear to us that there are spaces to exploit to get our voices out there for short term gains. Although it wasn't all rosy. Much of the problems and major obstacles Seomra Spraoi has faced since its beginnings are also to do with the pragmatic choice of renting. In short, landlords generally ARE bastards!!!





THE POETICS IN THE PHYSICAL

Developing an explicit political orientation as a collective is a process. Like any imagined participatory democracy we may wish for, its basis is on founded upon discussion. Unlike almost all 'P'olitical organisation, Seomra has no defined membership, (turn up to three meetings and you're in) and as such has posed challenges. Whilst we grew out of the experiences of activism and anarchist tendencies, as more people got involved so to did the range of visions. In itself this is a positive thing. But its no easy task either for a bunch of people to explicitly attempt to define its collective politics when we come from differing backgrounds, political experiences. To some extent we all, as individuals, continue to tease out our own understandings of the world around us and our roles within and upon it. This is as true for the sub-paying class struggle anarchists of Seomra Spraoi as it is for others coming from arts background.

Given what it takes to organise and work at events, prepare workshops, clean toilets, fix the motor to the glitter ball or the other day to day buearocracy of social centers, we found that its really helps to create structures and make space for these conversations. Initially there were quite a few groans whenever we tried to shape political conversations and sometimes there has been a kind of tension, often unspoken, just from a sense of impending conflict that might somehow damage the collective. But now these discussions are now very much part of Seomra Spraoi and how we function. Whilst we still don't label the collective with any particular ideology, its strongest

tendencies are radical left, libertarian, autonomist, anarchist, and still figuring it all out, if you catch my drift.

Our reason for being was not to be a solely political organisation, but our desire and motivation were not just abstractly creative. As is prevalent within much of the 'movement of movements', particularly in the West, it's always much easier to declare what we are against than what we stand for. But by setting out aims and principles, we discovered that there is a massive amount of common ground within the collective, and that revolutionary desires reside very deeply within us once we talk about it in ways that resonate, and break down the fossilised rhetoric of much of the authoritarian left and reclaim ideas of revolutionary activity. Like democracy itself, the process of achieving common agreement is often more important than the words themselves, in terms of creating spaces for educating each other and appreciating the subtle distinction of our politics even within the self selecting collectives of social centres

In the midst of this there was also a constant desire not to recreate some of the problems that we felt other social centers across Europe encountered. We wanted to avoid creating an 'activist ghetto' and challenge the provider/consumer barriers. Whilst the anti authoritarian, anti capitalist movement is quite numerically small in Ireland, we still wanted to anticipate the problems associated with becoming a 'sub cultural' phenomenon within the city. Some practical things we did to preempt this were doing workshops

on 'welcoming' and working gig nights. We found that by running these we not only increased the pool of people taking on some of the work, but also enabled people to feel an empowered part organising, and we always had at least one person in the space who took responsibility for helping new visitors orientate themselves, and be able to give a background to how the space was run, what it was all about etc. I think this definitely helps shape a culture of openness and inclusiveness, that enables people to feel more part of what was surrounding them and much more likely to bring there own ideas and creativity.

As we are currently 'centreless' there has been an opportunity to assess what we have achieved, on our own terms, over the past few years. The collective itself is stronger, more cohesive and more confident that it has ever been. Plans are afoot to host a social center gathering, looking at the experience of past collectives and attempting to shape further the role of social centers in creating, nuturing and sustaining a growing movement of autonomous anti-capitalist activity, in all its variety of forms. On a personal note, I've found being part of this collective one of the most inspiring and sustaining ways of being and feeling productive. We have, in the here and now, shown forms of work and ways of working together, that really are not very prevalent in the city. Our last space created

a buzz about it that Dublin hasn't seen in a decade. Within all that there have been many mistakes made and lessons learnt.

One thing that was brought up by an Italian friend at her last Seomra Spraoi meeting stuck with me. She said that when we continually discuss spaces and processes (which I do myself all the time), we(I) often forget that it is people that are central to making things happen, and it is by engaging people that we engender trust, friendships and solidarities. It is us (and you?) that are the backbone of all our collective endeavours. Whether teaching in the kitchen, helping kids find something fun in the freeshop, fighting over what government actually means, or sorting out the double booking between WSM and Animal Liberation, people are the one constant. Ultimately, it is what we carry within ourselves and see in each other that makes collective organising more than a good idea, but the genuine source of revolutionary change. Even the term 'collective' doesn't do justice to reality and the very fluid borders between organisers and participants. In affording us spaces for learning and honing the ways we not only work together, but also describe that activity itself, self managed social centers offer us all the opportunity to put flesh to our idealisms.

Written by Mark from Seomra Spraoi

seomraspraoi
an autonomous social centre for dublin

To keep updated with the Seomra Spraoi social centre project visit:
www.seomraspraoi.org
www.seomraspraoi.blogspot.com



THE AUTONOMOUS CENTRE OF EDINBURGH.



TELL US SOME BACKGROUND ABOUT ACE

ACE dates back to the Council funded Edinburgh Unemployed Workers' Centre in the 1980s. The Centre had been prominent in the movement of non-payment of poll tax and other sorts of direct action. In 1992 the Council cut off all funding. So the Centre users took it over and ran it collectively.

In Summer 1994, the council issued an eviction notice and then we occupied the building twenty four hours a day until 5am 1st December, when police and sheriff officers sledgehammered the door in. But we had an emergency phone tree and people turned up to resist the eviction. Police reinforcements were brought from all around the Lothians. It took them hours to finally evict the building, and 23 of us were arrested.

But the group stayed together without the building. It was a time of resistance to the Criminal Justice bill and the Claimants Group

was very active because it was when the Job Seekers Allowance was being introduced. There were a lot of occupations at Job Centres and so on. Then early in 1997 we found this building and we have been here ever since.

For years the premises have been pretty run-down, but through the Social Centre Network someone generously gave us a donation, and in 2006 we completely renovated ACE, mainly doing the work ourselves, plus with the generous help of some friends with particular skills. As you see its really nice now, sometimes people who haven't been here a while walk in and think they're in the wrong place!

Now Leith Wholefoods sells good organic food here at a reasonable price, that's brought a lot of new people in. Leith Wholefoods has as our tag line "run by skint people

for skint people" and we are committed to helping making organic food affordable for everyone. Organic food is basically just food that isn't toxic, both to the people who eat it and the people who grow and handle it. All food should be organic. The irony is that because organic food has this 'luxury' status that sometimes we can't afford to buy our own goods! Most of us can only afford to have part of our diet organic but at least this helps us do that. We also try to raise awareness about the politics of food production and consumption.

We show films every Sunday, followed by discussion and socialising, one of the recent showings had Jan Nimmo from Glasgow speaking about her films on the struggles of banana workers in South America, and it was packed out.

WHAT SOCIAL AND POLITICAL MOVEMENTS IS ACE A PART OF NOW?

There are women's collectives, for example Women's Health Workshops who encourage women's autonomy in health care. The recent Forum event on Queer History was really successful, and the recently formed Queer Mutiny group hold meetings at ACE. There is now also a Women's Caff that runs on the last Friday of every month and is there both for women simply to meet each other and hopefully get some solidarity, and also for anyone who wants to plot and plan different projects, events etc. together.

Edinburgh Claimants have held our advice sessions here ever since 1997. People drop in every Tuesday afternoon for support and solidarity over benefits, housing and debt problems.

Then there is the Chiapas Solidarity Group which is twinned with zapatista villages in Mexico. ACE sells zapatista coffee and handicrafts. Some folk are really involved in the struggle over climate change and a group went down to the climate camp at Heathrow, using ACE as a base. More recently a local Plane Stupid group started meeting at ACE, and have already blockaded a private jet company at Edinburgh airport.

The revolutionary union the IWW meets here, and more groups are starting to use our facilities, like LETS, Leith Permaculture and Indymedia Scotland, it's not only great to see the space well-used but hopefully it will lead to groups making connections with each other and encourage the idea and practice of a community of struggle.

ACE is about people organising to take control over their own lives and you know, I think that just about all of us see it as something that is revolutionary. It is about fundamental change, even though the way into it is through more immediate issues. The issues can be joined up together - peoples' needs can only be met by revolutionary change from the bottom.

COULD YOU SAY A BIT MORE ABOUT WHAT THE WOMEN'S HEALTH WORKSHOPS ARE ALL ABOUT?

We have run health workshops for women which are continuing in the spirit of feminist self-organising. We have a quote from the introduction to Rina Nissim's book 'Natural Healing in Gynecology' on our section of ACE website which says:

'In developing the kind of health care that meets women's needs, the self-help movement uses a model of health care which differs from that of modern medicine, one which borrows extensively from the approach of natural healing. One difference is in the concepts themselves of illness, health and health care.

For modern western medicine, disease is caused by germs, bacteria and viruses, and health care consists of combating enemy microbes with chemicals, and interrupting the course of the disease. The natural healing approach, on the other hand, is a holistic one which recognises the emotional, social and environmental factors in disease, and which treats the person as a whole being. Moreover, symptoms (disease) are regarded as an expression of the body's attempts to

return to a certain equilibrium. Treatment of these symptoms, then, lies in helping the system concerned to do its work. For example fasting or eating lightly when you have a fever helps the body by allowing it to focus on ridding itself of toxins already present, and not overburdening it further. Natural Healing is also a more preventative, or health oriented, style of medicine, stressing how one stays in good health - for example through diet - rather than focusing solely on treating each illness as it occurs.

Another difference lies in modern western medicine's profit orientation. In addition to spawning the pharmaceutical industry (not a few of whose products are - although expensive - ineffective if not downright dangerous), this means quality health care is sometimes available only to those who can afford to pay -and pay dearly - for it. In contrast to the passive consumerism encouraged by modern medicine, and the information-for-sale (to be jealously guarded) attitude of modern medical practitioners, self-help seeks to encourage autonomy through information sharing'.

We think this sums up a fair bit of our thoughts. We have also developed a women's health reference library which is available for women to come in and use whenever ACE is open.



WHAT DIRECTION IS ACE TAKING?

We are trying to broaden the Edinburgh Claimants work by starting a Solidarity Network where anybody that's up against the authorities can get direct practical solidarity, whether it's about housing, work, benefits, debt or whatever.

Often we are able to sort things out by pressurising the benefits manager or the electricity company or whatever, but sometimes they just dig their heels in. The Network would contact people so they could turn up, say at the benefits office or workplace, stage some kind of direct action and basically not budge until the thing is sorted out. Networks like this are already working well in Ontario and, more recently, in London. As well as Edinburgh Claimants, ACE itself and the local IWW have committed to the new network, Edinburgh Coalition Against Poverty.

One of the folk in ACE was very involved in the opposition to the privatising of social housing in Edinburgh. Against all the odds, council tenants voted to reject the privatisation that the council had spent millions on pushing. But there is a real need for a movement over more social housing. That movement doesn't really exist at present, though there are people interested in getting something going.

WHAT ARE THE OTHER ISSUES JUST NOW?

In 2007 Edinburgh Council published a huge list of cutbacks, They wanted to close down over 20 schools, nurseries and community centres. This was met by complete outrage on behalf of everyone in the community, including workers threatened with redundancies. There was a lot of really

encouraging self activity, for example we met a school student involved in setting up a web site that drew together school students from different schools.

The main closure program was stopped, but they are still pressing ahead with cutbacks, so that is the sort of thing that we hope to link up with local people over.

Another important struggle in the city is about local people in the Old Town fighting for community control over development. They are resisting a business-dominated development plan, known as "Caltongate". Already some of us have some involvement and contact with that struggle, and we hope to take that further, especially as it seems direct action may ultimately be the only way to continue opposition to the development.

THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT IS WITHIN WALKING DISTANCE FROM HERE. WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT?

It isn't something that we have a collective ACE statement on! Personally, though I would never argue that it is better to just have a UK parliament and not a Scottish Parliament, at the same time I think that in terms of real change there is very little difference.

One very good practical example of that was the Scottish Parliament passing a law inspired by Tommy Sheridan that was supposed to abolish warrant sales. This came out of a real social movement of non-payment but the passing of this law was presented as in itself a great victory. But what we find here is that we still have loads of people coming to us for support who are being harassed severely by the sheriff officers using other types of threatening methods, like bankruptcy.

What this really shows to me is that you can't actually effect real change just by legislation because if the people in power still have the possibility of doing so they can still attack you, just in a different way.

In short the Scottish Parliament just shows that there isn't really a parliamentary way to change things. It is self activity and direct action that is most important.

HOW ARE PEOPLE GOING TO START RECONNECTING WITH POLITICS?

I think in the end it has got to come out of people's every day lives. But, sometimes things happen in an unexpected way, for example in recent years one of the most hopeful upsurges was the school students strikes against the Iraq War in 2003 which spread like wild fire all over Britain. Here in Edinburgh we were involved with school students who occupied Edinburgh Castle!

A lot of people don't have a fixed long term workplace any more, so there needs to be a way of organising that reflects the fact that people are in a more precarious position, moving in and out of work and maybe also moving about a bit, so this where the idea of the Solidarity Network comes in.

And one thing that struck me from going to Chiapas and Zapatista villages is that politics there isn't something separate from everyday life; everyone is involved, it is their lives.

We also have to realise that when struggles break out, the people who are directly involved in them, whether they consider themselves to be revolutionaries or not, are often practically in advance of what long term activists would have thought possible. This was very true of a struggle we supported, against the creation of a rubbish disposal site in Gartocher Terrace in the east end of Glasgow a few years back. The



residents' self-organisation was incredible, they devised the most ingenious blockades and at one stage even occupied the local police station!

I think that somehow we have got to get away from politics being seen as the preserve of a few activists and sort of encourage it to be seen as a part of life.

Well, we've kept the most difficult questions to the end!

WHAT DO YOU SEE AS THE MAIN PROBLEMS OR DANGERS THAT SOCIAL CENTRES FACE? AND ON THE OTHER HAND, WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT POSITIVE CONTRIBUTIONS SOCIAL CENTRES LIKE ACE CAN MAKE TO THE STRUGGLE?

Hmmm, tricky! Well, I think social centres can play an important positive role in the struggle.

But of course there are problems and dangers. This is just my personal view but I feel that one of the main potential dangers is that a centre can be a kind of ghetto, a kind of club mainly just for a certain kind of people, maybe often young and without kids and maybe often belonging to a particular "sub-culture". And of course, like almost all political projects - and all of society - it is easy for them to become male-dominated.

Related to this problem of becoming a ghetto, I think there's a danger a social centre can become an end in itself, rather than its participants seeing the centre as part of a wider struggle. I think it's always vital to be involved in and give solidarity to struggles in the community and in workplaces, struggles against racism and gender-based oppression, wherever and whenever people are standing up for their needs and rights.

Another problem, living in a money-based society, especially if you are renting a

building or paying a mortgage, rather than squatting, then there are usually high costs to be met, and bureaucratic procedures to comply with, and fund-raising and admin-type tasks can take up a lot of energy and time that maybe could have been used for something more productive (though we have had ace fund-raising socials that have been great fun - and very positive expressions of creativity!)

But, ok there are these potential problems and dangers, but there are so many positive things social centres can do. One important thing, social centres can be a relatively accessible way new people can see what the movement is about. Somewhere like ACE, it's set up as a shop - an Info Shop and a Wholefood shop, and we also have free broadband internet and a library - so people can pop in without committing themselves, they can browse, see what's going on, read and take away different kinds of information, if they want they can start chatting to the folk staffing ACE to know more.

Then, another thing, social centres can help bring together different groups and networks of resistance, because they are all meeting in or using facilities in the social centre. I think this is really important, because to my mind there aren't any "single issues",

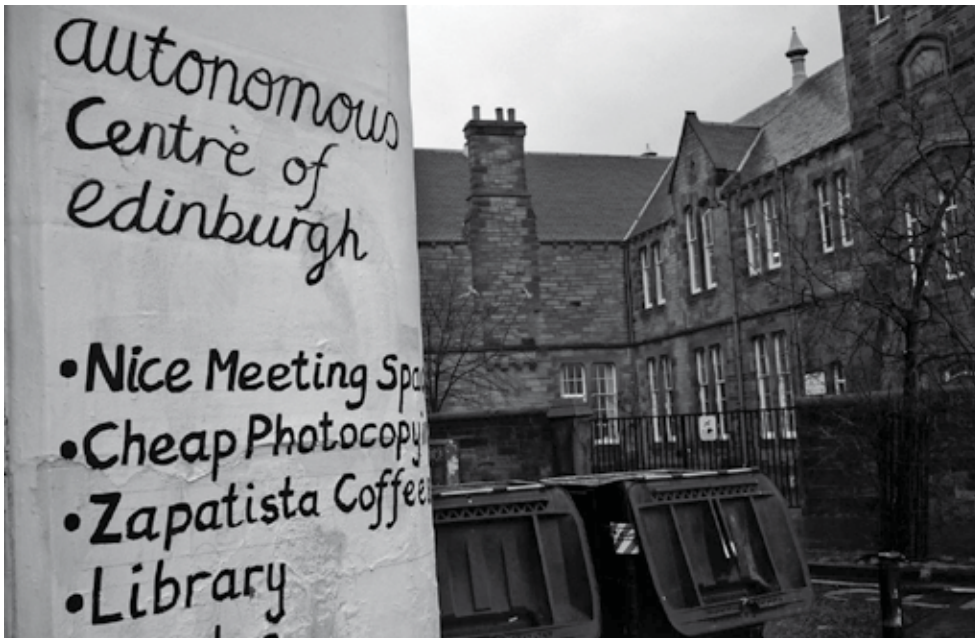
everything's connected, we're facing a whole system of capitalism and patriarchy.

Then some kinds of important activity just needs a stable base, for example for the Edinburgh Claimants work we need a phone to ring up the benefits offices or the sheriff officers, we need a space for our benefits guidebooks and information, we need a place that people with these problems can come and find us every week. Without ACE it would be really difficult for us to carry on our activity.

Sometimes in a crisis a social centre can be really important to help bring people together. For example in March 2003, just before and just at the start of the Iraq war, ACE played a big role in bringing people together to take direct action against the war, immediately having somewhere we could meet for free, and whenever we wanted, was very important.

I'm sure there are lots of other positive things to stress, like people getting moral support and friendship in an often atomised society. ACE has come a long way in a positive direction in the last couple of years, and we can be hopeful about the future I think.

Much of this piece is based on an article by Sarah Young, which first appeared in *Peace News* in 2007. Thanks to both Sarah and *Peace News*.

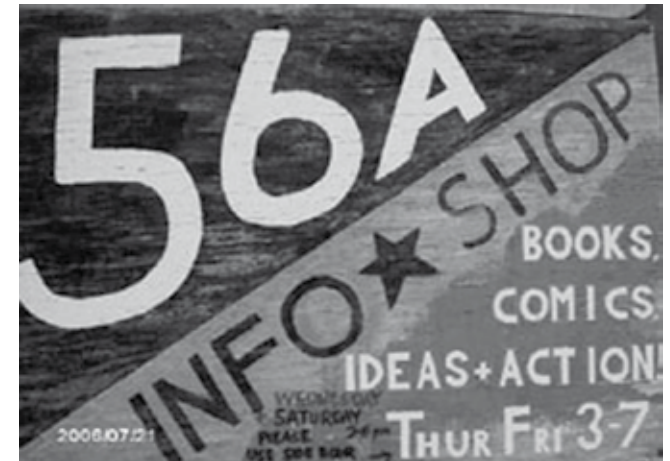


The Autonomous Centre of Edinburgh is at:
17 West Montgomery Place, Edinburgh EH7 5HA
www.autonomous.org.uk
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Tel: 0131 557 6242

LOCAL TRADITION, LOCAL
TRAJECTORIES AND US:

56A INFOSHOP,

**BLACK FROG AND MORE
IN SOUTH LONDON**



‘Working Men!!

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Leaflet late 20th Century, South London

The story of 80’s and 90’s squatting and its sociability in South London has yet to be written. That’s a shame as it’s a fascinatingly dense and dynamic story of the formation of micro-communities in search of a wider network. You could really read that last line as being the search for the possibility to live in a more authentic fashion than the one capitalism offers us. So in as much as squatting has been described as a ‘survival tactic’, it still remains a tactic that offers much more than merely getting by. The trajectory of 56a Infoshop, of why and where it came to be, is intimately linked to this almost forgotten history of the desire to occupy space and your environment as autonomously as possible within the obvious limitations of the wider social relations. This history needless to say also contains the desire to transcend these social relations and make the world our own.

LOOKING AHEAD AT THE PAST

56a Infoshop was brought into being in June 1991 by a bunch of local anarchists who were all squatting in the London Borough of Southwark. It’s location is in the back room in Fareshares Food Co-op, a squatted ex-grocers shop on the Pullens Estate in Walworth, South London. The co-op had been occupied in 1988 by squatters to serve as a craft workshop. When the nearby Domville Grove squatted terraces were finally evicted the displaced Rabbit Food co-op moved into the front part of the ex-grocers and Fareshares was born. Strictly not-for profit, volunteer run it remains in operation today selling cheap organic wholefoods to local (and not so local) people.

The Infoshop came into being spurred on by two main inspirations. Firstly, friendly connections to the large radical autonomist scenes in Germany and Holland with a bit of late 80’s early riot tourism thrown in. Here we discovered what were called ‘Infoshops’, basically squatted or rented social spaces that functioned as meeting points for

information about what was going on but more importantly as a place to meet people, make alliances and do stuff. There was also the regular Euro-wide International Infoshop meetings which we attended (and hilariously hosted in London in 1994 probably killing it off). The second energy behind 56a was our activities in the local squatting scenes in London. Our main experience came from involvement with the then famous 121 Centre in Railton Rd, Brixton. Squatted in 1981 (and finally evicted in 1999), this anarchist hothouse of subversion went through numerous identities in its time but always kept the local scene alive via its gigs, cafes, print room, bookshop, meeting space, squatters aid etc.

Further experience for some of us came via the Squatters Network of Walworth, an amazing organization that represented what can be done when thousands of empty council properties meet a determined locally organized and highly practical squatting group. Result was 3000+ squats, a fortnightly squatters paper 'The Wire' and tons of victories in court against useless Council legal officers. From the 80's onwards this area saw many prototype social centres in operation: (1980's) Ambulance Station, Walworth; Dickie Dirts, Camberwell; (1990's) The Dole House, Peckham; Labour Club, Camberwell; (2000's) Use Yr Loaf, Deptford; Button Factory, Brixton; as well as dozens of squatted gig and rave spaces.

To demonstrate some more of the local trajectories, it worth looking at the Pullens Estate where the Infoshop is located. By 1986, the estate had a reasonably strong tenants and squatters alliance with a squatted café on one block, an annual free festival on vacant land nearby and numerous bands and activities in operation. In June 1986, the Council tried to hold a mass eviction but the police were outnumbered by local people and after a day long struggle in the streets

and stairwells all the evicted flats were re-squatted that very night. It's against this backdrop that both Fareshares and 56a are a continuation of both a counter culture tradition on this (must be said fairly unique) council estate and also the determination and vision of a few locals to keep both of these spaces open, despite the pressures of these times - privatisation of council housing, gentrification and speculation, community atomisation etc.

YOU ARE HERE BUT WHY?

But what is the Infoshop and what does it do? Really, it does the same as it's always done. We sell books. Cds, t-shirts, papers cheap. We run a book exchange, a free bike workshop, host a regular practical squatters meeting, offer meeting space and have a massive open-access archive. We also hold useful information - useful for thought, research/publishing and activity to change things. With all of these things in operation we still primarily happily continue the tradition of radical spaces where people can meet each other. That seems the most radical thing possible. For people to meet and talk and to argue and to agree or not. After the talking, activity might happen. That's what we want, That's we encourage here.

We have managed to be neither terribly dogmatic about the space and what goes on there. We feel the success and longevity of the centre is due in part to this insistence of what we want the place to be (and hence what we don't want it to be). This means primarily to feel welcoming, open and inclusive for anyone who arrives at the door who seems curious, excited or nervous. We try to get people to see that it is as much their space as 'ours' and thus we are open to new ideas and projects. However we also want the Infoshop to active without being a purely activist hang-out or a place that's dominated by liberals, middle-class academics or pseudo-radicals. In this sense, we are less excited about

abstract and possibly alienated activism and more into doing stuff that's inherently community focused. For example, in 2005 we had a choice to go to the G8 protests in Gleneagles and close the shop for a week. We stayed home and kept the Infoshop open. It seemed better for us to do what we like to do here. Support the anti-G8 struggles locally by just keeping an alternative London space going. Act local, think global, as they used to say. Nowadays they probably just say Be Glocal! Exactly!

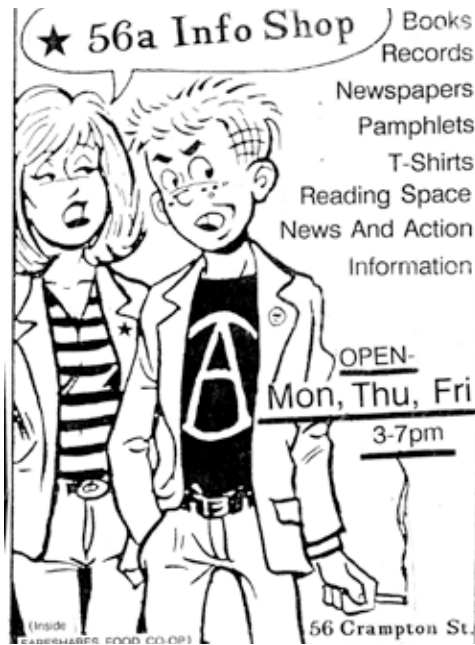
If we use the word 'community', we really mean a series of communities that use the space - punks, anarchists, communists, fellow (international) travellers, radical historians, queer folks, self-defined mad people, hippies, etc. Mostly these are local South London people. We get asked all the time by activists if 'normal people' come in as if this odd yardstick would somehow legitimise politically what we do. Well, here we are none of us normal but we are all of us people.

FROGSPAWN: A BIOLOGICAL MODEL FOR SQUATTED SOCIAL CENTRES?

The collective work we do at 56a recently inspired some of us (alongside others) to squat a new centre to do stuff that we just don't have space to do in the small and cramped Infoshop. This became known as the Black Frog squat but was formally called the Camberwell Squatted Centre. From March to September 2007 we ran a weekly café, a weekly film night and hosted dozens of other meetings, talks, discos, gigs, seed swaps etc. We also met every Monday night for the duration of the squat for collective discussion of running the place. It was a brilliant time for all of us.

It was here that we discussed the question 'Are we a social centre or are we a squatted centre?'. Showing our age and/or showing





our politics, we had deliberately avoided using 'social centre' in our publicity. This was down to two things.

1) We liked the continuation of the local tradition of squatted centres (such as the 121 Centre and 56a Infoshop, as was). It was important we decided to be a 'squatted' centre rather than a 'squat' centre. Important that the outward focus is more on the 'centre' project than the 'squat' tag even though the act of occupying the space is initially important. This is what we attempted. Sometimes it went well with an Open Day and open door policy at all times. Sometimes, it went less well with no time or energy to keep publicizing locally everything that was going on at the space.

2) A few individuals in the Black Frog and at 56a had some criticisms of some very particular aspects of the more recent London social centre model. These aspects are well represented in the article 'The Spring of Social Centres' (in *Occupied London*, Issue 1, 2007) although we bear in mind that it was written by one very active participant in those centres from 2002 onwards.

The article, although it gives a nod to 'a long history of occupied political spaces', tends to stereotype pre-2002 centres as 'squatter' spaces characterised by subcultural disrepair and dogma ('pissed up punks drinking Special Brew', 'dreadlocked brethren'). There are many examples of places that were like this but maybe as many places consciously tried to not be like this: Mutual Aid Centre in Liverpool, A.C.E in Edinburgh, Use Yr Loaf in South London to name a few only. Maybe it's useful to say that just as pissed punks and trustafarians may be alienating to others, the anarchist militant, the anti-capitalist activist, the social centre type etc

can be just as off-putting. We had fun at one recent social centre when we got told off for putting leaflets down on the leaflet table. 'Sorry', we mumbled. 'Can we leave some flyers here?', we asked. 'What is it?', he said with a tone. 'It's about 56a Infoshop, a social centre', we said. 'Never heard of it!', he grunted. What can you do?

When the anarchist collective The Wombles began to initiate the recent London spaces, it was consciously modeled on the Italian social centre experience. We have always felt that although that Euro inspiration is often good (local political work around work, racism, gentrification etc but also the willingness to debate theory useful for activity), the politics of many Italian centres remain tied to an outdated Leftist project that often seeks alliances with reformist unions or local municipal power and is comfortable with social centre movement 'leaders' and hierarchies.

It seems important then that instead of dismissing earlier U.K centres for faults, it would be better to recognize commonalities between them and the European social centre model and work with that. Those old enough to have been active in and around the 80's and 90's centres could tell of very useful, creative and strong work in and around dole struggles, Poll Tax, Miner's Strike, anti-fascism, elections, housing and squatting struggles etc. It was then that these centres seemed to come into their own (albeit often only temporarily and that's a lesson worth living through for some kind of perspective of how political movement seems to be). It's also good to remember that many of us were regular visitors to in/famous centres in Holland, Germany, Spain and Italy and were just as inspired then as The Wombles would later be. It doesn't seem to us like the 'new'

social centre model is so much different from the old squatted centre one. The problems we focus on are the same: work, not-working, housing, policing, racism, war etc.

What seems a bit skewed to us is the imagined effects of these newer centres on what's described as 'political activation': 'Thousands of people have passed through' these new centres. Acting as 'political and cultural hubs' and as a 'first port of call' for 'ordinary people', magically 'interaction with anarchists becomes normalized and barriers fall'. Later in the article there is some attempt to 'quantify the scope of this embryonic movement' with some guesstimation about numbers passing through the post-2005 nationwide social centres. Although a figure of 4000 - 6000 people attending U.K centres over a period of time is great, there is no real sense of what this means for the people running centres, the people that come to the spaces or wider political resistance itself. In London, a vast city space with a whole different range of local and territorial communities that rarely overlap, it's really difficult these days to see what goes on, what sustains and grows and what is a waste of time. (Of course we aren't saying that a networked mass of social centers in loads of parts of London wouldn't be great if they could bring into effect something dynamic, angry and useful and with this in mind we were often inspired by meetings and events at the recent London centres).

BACK AND FORTH, ROUND AND ROUND

At 56a (and this was true for the Black Frog) we see again and again different people come by, be excited but never return. At the same time we have a regular small coterie of annoying people who are draining. Happily we also have a small steady band of regulars who came by at least once every week. With this in mind we aren't interested in numbers, in 'quantity'. We are interested in working together, at all stages of our common experience and knowledge, be that 100 people or only 20, or only 5 people. In the end, just before the eviction of the Black Frog, we felt that we had moved to a new stage in the centre's existence, that of being a growing local hang-out for self-defined rebels, disgruntled local people and interested people who had not come across anything like this before. This state of affairs did not come about through 'ordinary people' meeting some anarchists who happened to have all the cool and great ideas. It just flowed from spending time around each other and seeing what we had in common. Listening, learning, laughing, being pissed off about things together etc. It was shame we got kicked out at that point when it seemed like there was a possibility to open out the centre even further and to begin to initiate other projects outside of the space (The better part of 'The Spring of Social Centres' article talks about this seemingly inevitable process).

On being evicted, something crucial is always lost in the unavoidable move from one area to another and that is the sense of locality, of neighbours, of immediacy and the draining effect and burn out this cycle can produce on those who establish new places. It's interesting that of the three original squatters of the Black Frog, none of them felt like opening up a new space. What was desired was time to recover from the experience, from tiredness and to actually get back to a former life that had been neglected despite this 6 month adventure that had been a positive 'rejuvenation' (as one said). It remains to be seen if a rump of later Black Frog people will spawn a new place. So far, six months later, there has been one failed attempt to open up a new place but this was unfortunately neither very well thought out nor long-lasting. Rumours abound of emerging crews up for opening up a new space, so things are bubbling up. Whatever happens, the tradition continues here in South London from 19th Century Walworth Reading Rooms, free thought institutes and radical clubs to the 56a Infoshop to Black Frog to whatever is next. Sometimes it dies down. Sometimes it flares up. You have to live with that. Social centres are not the next big thing. They're better than that. They are always the next old thing. Wherever there are people there is the desire for the social. Long may the tradition continue...

SOME NOTES, INIT!

We give up! This piece is a bit all over the place. Sorry! Despite hours and hours of tinkering and trying to edit it, we still couldn't make it as succinct and focused as we wanted it. It tries to deal with too much in a short space. Maybe this messyness gives the arguments some space to breathe and opens up possibility for debate. Politics gives rise to and reflects personal and collective feelings. We aren't interested in representing the 'truth' as we see it, give or take a few actual facts. We are more interested in a wider process of communal working out what might be true for all of us and what might be useful to be said towards our collective resistance to capitalism.

So, it's also impossible for us to represent in so short a piece something as complicated as a history of 56a, let alone the untold story of squatting in South London. Over 100 people have been 'workers' at the Infoshop since 1991. Most of them were different, engaged and (how do you measure this?) radical. What would any of them say about the place? We have undergone miserable periods here as well as more dynamic and exciting times. If we seem to blow our own trumpet, it's done with a genuine pride and love for the project and all the people we've met. If we seem critical, it's because we try to speak with open hearts and minds towards changing the world. Seventeen years is a long time to

observe the changes and nuances of London's political culture. Surprisingly, we think it's possible to argue that it is better now, more openminded, than when we started! (Ahem! Mail us for proof, ok!!)

There's criticism to be made of 56a for sure and we welcome it. Our own rigorous self-criticism did not make it into this article, comrades, but we do reflect and try to process what goes well and what goes wrong here. Similarly there's loads more to say about the experience of running the Black Frog centre. There were often many conflicts and disagreements, contradictions and political battles. Yet in the end, it all worked amazingly. I hope someone writes something substantial about this place.

AND FINALLY...

Fareshares and 56a Infoshop squatted their building from 1988 to 2003. Then we were forced to negotiate a tenancy with the Council or face eviction. We now pay reduced rent and rates and pretty much do what have done all along. In 2008, we will have to re-negotiate the terms of the tenancy. Where we were once on a local backstreet next to an industrial estate, that has now been demolished and expensive flats have been built there. The area is changing fast. We hope things go okay for us. The struggle continues. Sounds good? Get involved!!

Written by one. Edited by all. (Kind of!).



56a Info Shop is at:
56 Crampton Street, Walworth, South London SE17 3AE
Check out the websites at:
www.56a.org.uk
www.theblackfrog.org.uk

THE FOREST CAFE.

EDINBURGH



WHAT IS THE FOREST? WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

The story of the Forest began about eight years ago when a group of friends, bored and unimpressed with Edinburgh's overpriced, commercialised entertainment and cultural options, decided to do it themselves. Basically, they wanted a cool place to meet and socialise when none existed. The idea was to pitch in some money, find a one month lease and create a space to show films, play and listen to music, make and look at art, discuss things, dance, learn skills - anything that anyone wanted to make happen. A vegetarian café would pay the rent. All of this was to happen alongside the manic chaos that is Edinburgh during Festival time. Perhaps most importantly: all of the events would be free to see and free to put on. Much to the group's surprise, other people came along and wanted to help. Even more to their surprise, the experiment was a success. Soon they set out to do it again.

Since then the Forest has moved buildings twice, published books and put out a record, thrown street parties, hosted more than a hundred exhibitions, built a darkroom,

offered workshops from Arabic to crocheting, transformed from organising as a closed group to a committee to a working group system, battled exploding toilets, grown a garden, nourished a free shop, given out grants, built a practice studio, started a swap library, made friends, battled the bureaucracy, hired out free bikes and too much more to remember. People have come, gone and sometimes they even return. Thousands of people have participated, volunteered, created and enjoyed the Forest as an alternative to the grim entertainment prospects and corporate art and culture scene elsewhere in the city. The Forest excites and inspires people. So many times I have been told "I just can't believe this place exists!" At its best, it provides an example of how things could be; of how to do things differently. I hope that it encourages people to take control over their own lives: to develop ideas, to create, to talk, to act. It is a community hub and a place to hang out, free from the pressure to buy and consume, right in the middle of the city. Our space stands in stark contrast to our neighbours: chain pubs, up scale hotels and multi-million pound retail-housing developments. Whilst privatisation and corporate hijinks rage on, we have

carved out our own autonomous space and a different way of doing things.

What follows are a few of my personal reflections. It is not the official Forest narrative and you'd likely get quite a different interpretation depending on which collective member or user of the space you ask. Actually, you'd probably get a different story from me depending on whether I've been taking care of the rubbish and recycling (again), or whether I've just attended an amazing new exhibition opening in the gallery. Regardless, this article is an account of some of Forest's challenges and successes. Hopefully it contains a few tips to pass onto others collectively organising spaces, as well.

COMMUNITY ARTS AND EVENTS SPACE? ALTERNATIVE CAFE? SOCIAL CENTRE?

Early last year I attended the gathering of the UK Social Centres Network in Bradford. It was a good weekend and great to meet other people in the network, but I was surprised to find Forest had been taken off

the Network's map. Reading the mailing list later on, I realised just how much debate existed about the inclusion of spaces which are not explicitly anti-capitalist.

The Social Centre Network's information and publicity tends to emphasise self-management, autonomy and independence in describing what makes it different from state and NGO sponsored community spaces. In this regard, the Forest fits well. We are fiercely independent and entirely self-financed. A few projects have received grant funding, but never the space itself. Money for rent, equipment and projects comes from food and drink sales in the cafe. Each day there is one paid kitchen manager and up to eight volunteers making this happen (more on the contentious pay issue later). Of course, we are also not-for-profit.

We strive to be as participatory and non-hierarchical as possible, whilst still managing to keep the space alive and thriving. We make decisions by consensus and we use a working group model. Five working groups organise the various aspects of Forest. A sixth group made up of members of the other five makes decisions on budgeting





and issues that affect the entire collective. Anyone who has been involved in one of the five open working groups for at least three months has the opportunity to become part of this final closed working group.

The group isn't meant to be a glamorous cabal, but more like spokes coming together from various aspects to make decisions that reflect the space as a whole. The group is made up of about 20-25 people right now. Also, it's worth pointing out that there are some decisions and issues that benefit from being dealt with in a more closed environment. We don't want building security (or insecurity) being discussed in an open forum with minutes posted on the website. At the Forest people know where these decisions are being made, by whom, and how to get involved. So far, this method is the best balance we've found between openness and keeping up with the more tedious, and sometimes sensitive, bits of administration that need to get done.

But there is also an argument that only spaces which explicitly state their opposition to capitalism have a place in this network. While other groups might provide similar services and resources, the network is about facilitating communication and links between radical, anti-capitalist social centres. I have

some sympathy with this line of thought, but I also believe it is unnecessarily limiting.

For example, I cannot imagine the collective at the Forest coming together to publicly admonish capitalism any time soon. In part, this is because the Forest began in order to create an arts space and a community space. Generally, this involves quite a radical political outlook, and many radical projects and events have taken place in the space, but political activism per se is not the *raison d'être*. So I can put on a Zapatista solidarity night by marking it down in the events book, and we'll give out small grants for things like CIRCA (Clandestine Insurgent Rebel Clown Army) training, but I can't assume that everyone involved will agree with anarchist or anti-capitalist principles.

In many ways, this is one of the Forest's greatest strengths. The diversity of happenings means a huge diversity of people using the space. Breaking out of the activist (or artist!) ghetto is not so much of a problem here. People may be drawn in by the gallery or free internet, but they can leave with a working group schedule and some trousers from the free shop. Volunteers in the café range from school kids, to asylum seekers; travellers to retirees. For many, the Forest is their first engagement with a self-managed,

autonomous space. I believe that without its diversity, many would never venture to check it out in the first place. I like to think that some of them look at things in a different way once they've experienced it.

PAID STAFF

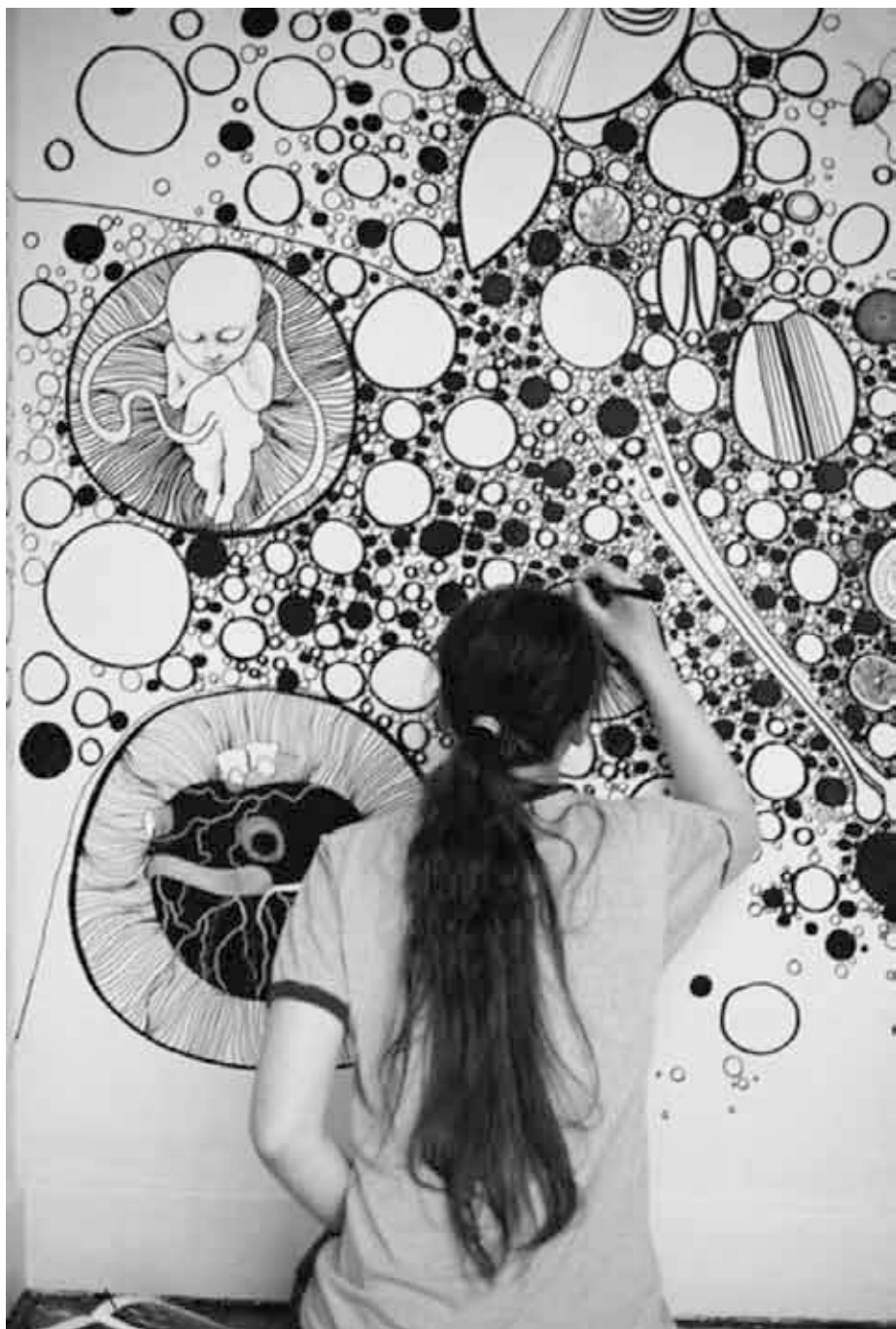
When the Forest first opened no one got paid. However, the kitchen (aka the rent paying machine) heavily relied on one individual to continue its proper functioning. This was only sustainable as long as he was on the dole, and being on the dole was not sustainable for him. So, very early on the collective had to decide whether or not it was acceptable to pay staff. I wasn't involved, but I'm told it was a time consuming and difficult decision. In the end, there was agreement that it was better to pay someone to help coordinate the tasks which were absolutely vital to paying the rent and keeping the project afloat, rather than to not have a project at all. Over the years, the discussion has cropped up every so often, and this is usually the principle referred back to.

It's probably important to point out that the Forest relies primarily on food and drink sales, rather than booze, to pay the rent. Sometimes we have managed to get

a temporary alcohol license for August, but otherwise it's a fairly cheap café that keeps us running the rest of the year.

Also, the space has quite ambitious opening hours. For as long as I've been involved we've been open seven days/week, from around 10am-11pm. On occasion we have to close early because there's no one around to be responsible for locking up, but we almost always keep the hours regular. Then there's the huge amount of volunteer turnover. With upwards of eight volunteers staffing the café in any day there is always someone new to show around. Often English isn't their first language and they've never used an espresso machine or made hummus. Without some sort of consistency it's a recipe for utter chaos.

The responsibility and time commitment involved in making the kitchen work requires a paid role. We all have rent to pay, mouths to feed, etc. It's unrealistic to expect anyone to sacrifice the amount of time necessary to make it happen for free. So, we have a paid 'kitchen manager' in the building from 10am-7pm each day. From 7pm an experienced volunteer takes over to make sure doors get locked and everything is sorted at the end of the night.



THE FUTURE

Of course, there is then the slippery slope to deal with. To keep things together we also need accounts and year end done - and now payroll! At times we have offered some compensation for this job. What about the fire alarms? We'll get shut down without them. How about grant applications or cleaning? When does it cease to be a volunteer organised, self-managed project? As we get bigger, there are more jobs that seem to be like the kitchen manager role, further blurring the lines.

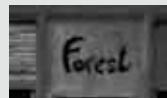
Personally, I've been very resistant to the idea of more people getting paid (creating hierarchies, losing volunteer initiative, selling out...), but I'm beginning to give it real consideration. Negotiating what is and isn't a paid job is difficult, but that doesn't mean the only solution is to pay no one. Consistency has been crucial to keeping the Forest going over the years and paying someone enables them to give their full attention to the project longer term. It would be great if everyone had the freedom to commit as much time as they'd like to the Forest, without the business of food and shelter getting in the way. Until there is a mutual-aid based solution to this wider problem, some form of compromise is necessary. In the meantime, we're still trying to figure out what the best answer is for us.

Over the years the Forest has evolved from a small shop front venue organised by a few friends, to a sprawling multi-purpose space with participants from most parts of the world. Along with new opportunities, this growth has created many new questions. One of the biggest is probably whether or not the Forest would be best served by downsizing.

The project thrives on new crazy ideas and constant creative output. This inspires people to get involved and stay involved. It prevents things from getting stale. However, a bigger building means more administration and management, and less time to implement our ideas and dreams. Most of us did not get involved simply to become service providers for others. Then again, limited space means we might not be able to house all the resources we'd like. Do we sacrifice the darkroom or practice studio or the meeting space?

This is even more relevant now that it looks like we will soon be moving buildings again. What do we want in a new space? Where do we go next? Thinking about another move can be both scary and exciting. It's hard not to get sentimental about a place we've devoted so much and time and energy to building, but the process of coming together to prepare a new building can also be an inspiration and catalyst. After all, change is the opposite of death.

Compiled by Shanon from the Forest Café.



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PARTICIPATORAMA

- THE NEWEST DEVELOPMENT TO HIT CINEMA IN YEARS, ONLY AT STAR AND SHADOW CINEMA, NEWCASTLE.



The Star and Shadow Cinema is a radically alternative open-access cultural organisation and venue in Newcastle upon Tyne in the north of England. While it has cinema in the title, it consists of much more - bar, meeting and workshop spaces, gigs, parties, film/art/music/publicity resources etc. We are mostly known as The Star and Shadow, without the 'cinema' bit, a name which was bodged together out of other suggestions, and in a sense reflects the ambiguity and multiplicity of our organisation and work. It perhaps makes us differ from the other centres in this pamphlet. Our identity is not explicitly anti-capitalist or confrontational, however it is very clear that our aims, working practices and a lot of what goes on in the building are centred around mutual aid, D.I.Y. processes and self-empowerment in the face of the capitalist system. Our politics is largely implicit rather than explicit, which means that people have less prejudices about considering to come along or take part. We don't have leaders, bosses or 'staff'. We are run by volunteers, try to share skills, and operate through consensus.

ROOTS

While there is no over-arching ideal that binds us together, it is fair to say we all wanted a collective space that we could take collective responsibility for and feel the collective benefits of, while allowing individuals to express themselves fully. As such, behaviour isn't proscribed. We wanted to create something that moved away from the traditional market relationships of the entertainment and cultural industries: from supplier/consumer to participator. This is perhaps problematised by the fact that we still operate to some degree in the former paradigm - we sell drinks at the bar, charge ticket prices for cinema and gig admission, but redeemed by the fact that anyone can participate in the programming or organisation of the venue, and we are volunteer run and not-for-profit. We wanted to create an environment that is non-hierarchical on entry. One experiences the inherent power dynamics in public art galleries, concert halls, museums, libraries and other loci of culture, (especially the cinema multiplex) where the audience is meant to fall in line and consume what is on offer according to a set of unwritten rules and codes of etiquette with no fuss please, no matter how hard institutions try to make

themselves more accessible. We wanted a place that is grass roots, where everyone meets each other on eye-level, and there is potential for genuine personal liberation.

The historical roots of the cinema are in two film groups who hired another small cinema down the road for four and a half years to show respectively; a) political and b) alternative/ historical/art films. We couldn't have an office or bar on the same site, so we moved to the larger old warehouse in the Ouseburn area. Part of the vision came from experiencing our emotional sister cinema, The Cube, in Bristol, and other inspiring squats, self-organized venues and cinemas in Europe. Equally, the call out for the G8 Camp at Gleneagles encouraged us to organise our own 'Building Festival' where people came with their skills and labour to transform a plain warehouse into cinema, bar, and the rest.

The building used to be part of Tyne Tees TV's production studios. We found it with help from the City Council in a terrible state of disrepair, and renovated it from TV set building workshops (somewhat poetically, considering the devastating impact TV had on cinema in the 1950's and 60's) into a multi-purpose environment that was dryish,

warmish and lit. Since then, gradually people have put their creative energies into it making it cosier and more visually and spatially imaginative, a process that will continue as long as we are here.

We organized the 'building festival' in April 2006 and invited people from all over the UK, through networks in Europe and of course mainly in our home city to come and help build our place. Over 50 people came for a fortnight, helped demolish and then construct, using materials which were recycled wherever we could find stuff to recycle (carpet tiles from an old snooker hall, insulation and plaster board from an art exhibition, timber from a salvage yard etc.) We cooked and ate together, and had film screenings, parties and drinks in the pub together. The aim of this exercise was to skill share, get a decent way into the building of the cinema, make new friends from similar collectives elsewhere, and benefit from their experience and enthusiasm for the DIY approach. The festival lasted 2 weeks, followed by another 6 months of smaller groups building, and by the time the venue opened about 150 people had helped in some way or another: 150 people who felt ownership over the building and would therefore consider it theirs to put stuff on.



This process was done entirely legitimately and legally: our building meets all the building regulations, licensing and environmental standards that applied in November 2006, when we officially opened. While this conformity to the bureaucratic requirements of the state is nothing to necessarily brag about, it does give us a sense of long-term sustainability than something less legit might have allowed. Ultimately, many of those issues we had to deal with were empowering, common sense and in the public interest (like accessibility and dealing with emergencies like fires).

ACTIVITIES AND PROGRAMMING

Content-wise, the programming of the Star and Shadow is very varied, by-and-large presenting things normal profit-centred cultural centres would ignore. Freed from that economic pressure, we are able to offer culture for contemplation and criticism, not just consumption. We operate an open-programming policy, unlike any other cultural organization we know of. Anyone can come along with an idea for a film, gig, workshop, performance, exhibition or way to use the space and discuss it with a group using consensus decision-making.

Film screenings range from political documentaries followed by discussions, to screening experimental artists work, to

showing films from the history of cinema. There is a very strong focus on enjoyment and having a good time, and we all strive to create a programme and an atmosphere to enable that. On close analysis, we could generally argue that the anti-spectacular context (D.I.Y. home-made cinema, friendly open-minded volunteers) combined with the approach to programming, encourages reflection on current and previous struggles, as communicated through journalism or art, and further revealing latent meanings in otherwise ignored genres (politics in sci-fi films, queer analyses of b-movies and melodramas, deconstructing propaganda in seemingly innocuous Hollywood cinema). Gigs tend to be put on by local bands or promoters on the DIY scene, and incorporate the diverse styles that exist in the highly varied musical sub-cultures internationally. There is no emphasis really on one over another. We have space for workshops and exhibitions by local or visiting artists, again which try to circumvent the 'art-world guided by the market' relationship. The space is flexible and anyone can ask to exhibit. There is plenty of space for organizing meetings, planning projects and running workshops, and many resources to facilitate those processes too (from photocopiers and screen printing to high quality video cameras and a DIY 8/16mm film lab for home processing and printing). The bar is stocked ethically, with local pints, fair-trade and environmentally sustainable drinks, food and cleaning stuff.

At the core of the management are open, weekly organizing meetings, which are regularly devoted to publicity and the programme, and normally attended by 5-20 people. An online wiki website has really helped people collaborate on shared ideas, and information (like this article). Developing the wiki has pre-empted a lot of long and tedious meetings, and significantly helps prevent individuals from overburdening themselves with all the knowledge ;-). Using a wiki has meant that most information about how to do something, where something is, how far we are along with something, or whatever, is centralized onto an openly accessible website which anyone who has registered can adapt or improve. This is used most effectively in the programming of the building, where anyone can register and book an event on the calendar. This procedure is protected by the fact that any programming suggestion on the wiki is accountable to the weekly meetings.

By far the biggest contribution to the sustainability of the Star & Shadow is our own labour. We have perhaps 200 people who have volunteered at one point or another, and receive about 3-4 emails a week from people interested in helping out, which compensates for the alarming turnover of volunteers. This turnover needs to be looked at, and is slightly baffling, because no one as yet has complained about volunteering being difficult or unpleasant! Perhaps it is just peoples priorities are in constant flux.

The continuity of people taking larger responsibility seems to be getting better too (we need to have key holders, people to do specific time consuming jobs etc.) Financially, bar sales contribute the most and we might one day be able to survive off them. On top of that, the place is kept going by the grants we get from the City Council, and Arts Council and very occasionally the Film Council, which helps with programming special things and the £19,000 annual rent. The conditions attached to this money are relatively minor. There are different opinions about how quickly, or if at all, we should be trying to become self-sufficient. Broadly speaking people would be happy to be entirely self-financed, but some think we should take state money if it doesn't stop us operating in the way we want to.

The standard entry charges are pretty low (£4 & £3) but no one is turned away because they don't have enough money. We advertise that entry is free to people seeking asylum. Of course people who volunteer on the door, bar or projecting get in free. True to our recognition that the place is 'only as good as the people involved', we have adapted the Brazilian local government process of Participatory Budgeting. This lays bare the past budget and gives anyone who comes along to an annual process the awareness and tools to say how we should raise and spend the money to keep the place great.



GLIMPSES OF AUTONOMY

Each month there is a gathering of activists to plan direct action as groups and individuals. Often there is food and a film as well, to inform ourselves. This forum 'Glimpses Of Autonomy' is an essential resource to anti-capitalist politics on Tyneside. The activist scene in North East England has never been that linked with others because it is almost 100 miles to any other major city.

Way before the G8 in Scotland in 2005 activists were given some money to set up a Social Centre on Tyneside. This proved to play into the hands of "the enemy" because we spent ages and ages looking for good buildings and talking instead of taking down the systems that get us down. It's a pity because this demoralising process followed three brilliant squatted social centres. But the transient nature of the squats enthused us to use new money to try to create a social centre that would be around for a long time. After lots of arguing and involvement in the Star & Shadow most of us think we now have many of the things we wanted from a Social Centre, here in the Cinema. Not quite everyone thinks that, though.

For the last four years an associated collective has organized the Projectile Festival of Anarchist Film & Culture (www.projectile.org.uk). People have travelled from across Britain to take part in the workshops and see an internationally unique festival. It has

proved to be a more friendly, less dogmatic and more cultural alternative to the London Anarchist Book fair. The festival has been a space to talk about our differences rather than shout at each other.

THE FUTURE

So far the activities at the Star and Shadow have not been that child-focused or even child-friendly, for that matter. Kids have been to lots of events but none have been organised by them. A working group has just been set up to try and fill this gap, so fingers crossed. Whilst the Cinema is inevitably part of the cultural gentrification of this part of the city, we offer an alternative take on it, and are respected for that. A Trust made up of volunteers (unrelated to our project) oversees the 'regeneration' of the Ouseburn area, and is actually quite powerful in resisting acutely negative changes, most obviously the building of high-rise expensive apartments. We are at the stage where we must consider what to do when our lease runs out - doing a community buy-out or moving on are two options.

There is an ongoing debate about what we programme, how we market ourselves and who exactly we are talking to. Do we programme and publicise in a way which some assume is more populist, in the hope of attracting a more diverse, or as some might perceive it "unconverted" audience? Or do we embody our politics in the programme and publicity

itself? A prosaic example of this is: should we keep a consistent sense of branding in our publicity, or should we continue to deviate for every piece of publicity we create, in an act of resistance against the psychology of capitalist advertising? Maybe we should be radical in our approaches and strategies if we want the end result to have a radical impact. In reality, we go for a varied and multiple approach, but frequently don't get our shit together quick enough to let people know what is going on with enough notice! One area that there is always room for improvement is how much we share our skills. Lots of people have tried doing new things, but there are some jobs and roles that don't have a varied personnel.

The flexibility of the Star and Shadow - as opposed to a 'concrete position' concerning content and how it is organised - is very important. It does however open us up to exploitation by people who just want a free space to do their thing, and then go home again. We have some pretty satisfactory systems in place to limit that form of

exploitation, through working groups and confirmations for most things only being made in open meetings. Equally, the notion of creating a liberatory space is kind of esoteric and hard to evaluate ("Did you feel, madam/sir, that you really had a transformational experience tonight?!"). On bad nights, it can feel that we are providing (with free labour) a service to people wanting a nice, cheap place to hang out and drink beer. On good nights it feels like the opposite.

The Star and Shadow is therefore an open-minded free space (as in libre not as in beer, to borrow the term from the Open Source paradigm), not constricted to a totalising set of principles. A space where people are able to experience and critically engage with the world around us: to work out how we ended up living this way, what should be changed, how to feel mutually fulfilled, and where we focus on our shared strengths rather than allow our differences to divide us.

Written by TonTon and Tha Visible Choirboy from the Star and Shadow Cinema.



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THE RAMPART.

CREATIVE CENTRE AND SOCIAL SPACE, LONDON



PART I. RAMPART

The rampART social centre was established in a derelict building in Rampart Street, which had been previously used as an Islamic girls school. It had been empty for two years before being squatted along with the vacant houses in the block during May 2004. We didn't want to spend ages in meetings discussing a name so we took it from the street. People often pick names which don't stick as ultimately it's what other people call the place that gives it its name. For example, there are a group of kids using the place that call it Sly Street (which is the little street directly next to the building). Anyway, we capitalised ART in Rampart for a bit of style - something different. It suggests the place is some kind of art project although it's not really, or not much, and it helps to generate a veneer of respectability. There is an 'art room' but it's mostly used for painting banners. We have had some art exhibitions but they are certainly the minority of events.

The block is in a conservation zone which means planning consent is a little tighter than some other places and that affects how easy and attractive it is for developers. There is actually a long history of this block



escaping from redevelopment - a builder who does stuff for the owners says he was here when it was all evicted 30 years ago but the redevelopment never happened.

The community served by the rampART has generally not been a local one, but a community of politically motivated people from around the capital and beyond. There have also been hundreds of guests from all over the world enjoying free crash space while attending events in London - seventy Bolivians stayed earlier this summer. Regular users include the samba band, the radical theory reading group, the women's cafe, 'food not bombs' and the cinema collective. The 24/7 rampART radio stream that started with coverage of the European Social Forum has expired a long time ago, and is resurrected occasionally for live coverage of major mobilisation like the G8 or DSEi. Other radio collectives now use the space to broadcast their weekly live shows - including Wireless FM which came from St Agnes Place and Dissident Island Disks.

The building is always bursting at the seams with stuff collected from the street and was regularly used for meetings, film screenings, benefit gigs and other performances. Many

people may have passed through for gigs or meetings and been unaware of all the structural work done to transform it over the years, to create a larger space for banner painting, and the addition of a wheelchair accessible toilet which was created by PeaceNews volunteers, modifications to improve the layout of kitchen, a permanent serving area, fire exit, building a modular stage, sound desk, a covered roof garden-smoking den, and knocking through walls on the first floor to create a room for meetings of around 60 people.

Throughout its existence, the proximity to the London Action Resource Centre (LARC) greatly affected the way rampART was used. For example, there has been virtual no interest in office space at the rampART with groups preferring the long term security offered by LARC. Groups have tended to prefer using LARC for regular meetings while larger one-off meetings often end up at rampART along with benefit gigs and screenings. Its strength as a gig venue has led to a bit of a party culture in terms of proposals, something that the collective is keen to keep in balance.



There have been many large public meetings and weekend long gatherings at the rampART. Last summer for example there have been public meetings relating to Diasarm DSEi arms fair and organising meetings and gatherings relating to both the No Border and Climate Camps. The space has also been used for street medic and direct action training. These types of events often attract the police and their attempts to intimidate exiting activists and newcomers. During DSEi week, poor intelligence resulted in embarrassed police staking out queer bingo instead of a convergence space. Having said this, the RampArt doesn't seem to suffer much surveillance compared to some other spaces. Perhaps it's because of the word ART in the name ;-). We do get police photographers during big London mobilisations and some big public meetings but there have been many things we expect surveillance for and don't get. Personally I don't see it as surveillance anyway - it's purely intimidation and that is the aim. I imagine the internet and phone lines are monitored but I doubt it would provide much use as people aren't completely stupid. I doubt the place is physically bugged but people assume that it is.

Problems we have had over the years include the fact that we routinely got the blame for the fly tipping occurring across the street. This is somewhat ironic as the vast majority of the content of the building has come from the streets in the first place leading to suggestions that the rampART should claim

land fill tax credits from the Council. A series of risk assessments and visits from the fire brigade meant we installed emergency lighting, smoke alarms, extinguishers and safety notices around the building. The biggest job was the construction of a fire exit built in the hall, as previously there had been only one exit from the whole building. Sadly the new fire exit messed up the sound proofing and we had several noise abatement orders and all events had to finish earlier.

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD FOR THE RAMPART?

Since the Camp for Climate Action there have been suggestions that the rampART should have an eco refit with rainwater harvesting, grey water flushes, perhaps even compost toilets and renewable energy. The current collective is keen to get more input and regular involvement from groups that use or would like to use the building and are planning a users meeting. Rather than the day-to-day practical organising and decision-making that takes place at the weekly Monday meetings, this gathering would be more of a consultation and visioning exercise. It would be an opportunity for the collective to analyse the current and potential role of the rampART to different groups and campaigns, as well as giving chance for people not familiar with the collective to gain greater understanding of the decision-making processes, practical issues and problems related to project.

Also planned is an assembly of as many different campaigning groups as possible, along the lines of the long defunct 'London Underground' or 'Radical assemblies' that used to take place in London, Brighton and elsewhere at various times. The general format would be a go-round in which each group has a couple of minutes to say what they are currently up to and what people can do to get involved. After the go-round there might be some discussion to help link up collaborations or spin off meetings and actions, followed by a quiet social evening, food and drink in order to allow informal networking. The aim is to help create a greater sense of unity between disparate groups, link up individuals to others working in their location or area of interest, reduce duplication of efforts and avoidable clashes and generally help to strengthen 'the movement'. Initially this would be a one-off event although the hope is that it will prove useful and generate momentum to become a regular assembly, perhaps hosted on rotation in different parts of London.

PART II. LONDON'S SECRET SOCIAL CENTRE...

When a possession order was granted to the owners of the squatted block of properties in rampart street that houses the rampART social centre, a scurry of activity began to secure a new building to act as a backup social centre during the uncertain period prior to eviction. A suitable property was found and entered for the first time on new

year's eve and occupied a couple of days later.

Only a few minutes walk from the rampART, the new building was also a commercial building with three floors. While the area of each floor was only about two thirds of that enjoyed at the rampART, the new building benefited from the addition of a basement which looked like it could make a great gig space. The ground floor had a tiny kitchen but with a bit of work it would clearly make a good space for a café and free shop. The first floor was mostly open plan, a good place for large meeting. Meanwhile the upper floor had been subdivided into offices and planned to use it for residential accommodation. The most exciting thing about the new space however was the yard which gave us potential to do things we could never do a rampART.

Despite all it's potential, the place was a mess. The owners had completely trashed every floor. Wiring had been cut, light switches smashed, false ceiling and lights pulled down, partition walls torn down or holed. Additionally, the only two toilets in the building had been smashed to pieces. However, we didn't think it would take long to put in shape. We took over a load of bedding and cushions, fold up table and chairs, water, wind up torches, candles, smoke alarms and fire extinguishers and settled in. Now split between occupying two spaces we put a call out for help occupying both buildings and preparing the new building to become a social centre.



Our priorities included sorting out toilet facilities and this led us to consider the use of dry compost toilets and ultimately to deciding that we'd try to implement stuff we'd only talked about doing with the rampART, making the place as eco-friendly and sustainable as possible. As well as setting up dry composting toilets we also planned to do rain water harvesting and install wood burning stoves. More ambitious, we aimed to generate our own electricity using wind, solar and a waste vegetable oil fuelled combined heat and power system.

Deep cycle batteries and inverters provided power for our lights and radio while we worked and a white board contained our plans and to do lists. We'd soon expanded the kitchen area massively and replaced one of the smashed flushing toilets. Three 200 litre plastic water butts were obtained and one was prepared for use as a rain water harvesting tank that would provide water for the flush. The basement was opened right up by taking down the partition walls and all the materials taken to the top floor where the first of four bedrooms was constructed. A hidden stairwell was discovered behind a partition wall and a bricked up doorway was reopened to provide access to the outbuilding and yard.

It all seemed to be going great apart from problems maintaining permanent occupation of the Rampart street properties and some of us expressed concern that it had been a mistake to commit to work in the new space before we knew when the appeal for the rampART would take place. It was fairly easy to find people to commit to the occupation rota at the new place but not for Rampart street and already people were asking about doing events in the new space as the excitement drew energy away from rampART. This was not what we intended, the new space was simply meant to be a backup to allow things to continue as normal at rampART without the worry that resources and events there would suddenly be left with nowhere to go.

The work that had been done at the new place in the first ten days or so meant that we could open it up as a social centre very quickly when we lost the rampART. It seemed like the pressure was off but then we stumbled across some bad news. Our original research had indicated that there was no planning consent granted and application pending. There had been an application last year but it had been withdrawn. However, whoever did the original research had been unaware that the withdrawn application had

been resubmitted and granted in October 2007. The owners had full permission to knock down the building and build a six story block of apartments in it's place!

Discussing the bad news we decided we might as well contact the owners and ask when they planned to start work and attempt to negotiate a stay but we never got round to it and later decided not to open negotiation till we were sure the owners knew we were in occupation. Instead, work progressed as before as if nothing had changed. A couple of leaks discovered in the roof were fixed and the damaged ceiling plaster replaced. All the doors and radiators that had been taken off by the owners were refitted and new doors fitted at the bottom of the hidden basement stairwell and out to the outbuilding. In the basement, the waste pipe from the toilet was boxed up so drunk idiots didn't try to swing on it.

By Feb 9th we'd had meetings to discuss our aquaculture plan and had been doing lots of work in the yard enjoying the unseasonal warm weather. The massive task of clearing the out building began with all the rubble removed from the brick up doorway now removed and piled up in the yard forming the starting point for raised beds. While

working in the outbuilding we also removed the boards from the windows to let in some light and re-glazed them with clear plastic sheeting. One of the 200 litre plastic drums had been converted into a rat proof compost tumbler. The raised beds in the yard had progress well and we'd rescued quite a bit of top soil from skips along with plenty of pigeon shit from the outbuilding. Inside, a four drawer filing cabinet had been converted into a wood burning stove and installed. The kitchen had been freshly painted, along with the basement floor and some of the walls.

The mast for the wind generator we'd last put up at the camp for climate action was bought over from rampART and hoisted up onto the roof. Holes were drilled and chains bolted through roof joists to provide mounting points for the guy wires before the generator was assembled and erected. Solar panel followed shortly after.

We purchased a Rayburn wood/oil fired cooking range for just 50 quid off ebay. It had a back boiler so could of been used to heat water/ radiators as well. We were going to see if it would run OK off waste veg oil but if not we'd just revert it to a solid fuel burn and use waste wood dumped in local skips. We also won an ebay auction for a Lister



CS stationary diesel engine. These classic water cooled diesels make wonderful veg oil powered combined heat and power system and we calculated it would provide all our electricity and most of our heating needs when run for just 4 hours each evening and use only a gallon of waste veg oil each time.

Every thing was progressing really well and then came the bomb shell, a set of papers taped to the front door informing us that we'd been served court notice of a interim possession hearing on the 21st Feb, just one week away. Ironically, that evening the building was hosting a meeting of a radicle bike group, a spin off from bicycology. They were to look at the outbuilding and discuss using it as a space for a free bike workshop but obviously they dropped. A few month before a similar thing had happened at rampART. The Bicycology group were having a weekend long gathering, part of which was planned to be them renovating the bike workshop at rampART but just before the weekend we learned about the planning application to demolish the building so they dropped the idea. Seems like the bike workshop is cursed!

Anyway, all work on the new place came to a halt and our ebay purchases left uncollected and unpaid for as it became clear that all our work and plans for the place were going to come to nothing. We considered last minute relocation of a party taking place at rampART so we'd at least have had some events at the new place before we lost it but the logistics quickly made us drop that idea. We visited the Advisory Service for Squatters who drafted a very slim defence for us but we knew there was very little hope. The best we could hope for if that the a normal possession order would be granted instead of the IPO as otherwise we could have just 24 hours to pack up and leave.

A letter was sent to the owners in a rather belated attempt to initiate negotiation and we started moving stuff back to rampART. It was impossible for us not to be aware of the irony that we'd opened the new space as a backup to move stuff to in the event of eviction. Instead we now found that not only were we moving stuff back but we'd also accumulated more stuff at the new place that would now need storing.

A day of resistance was planned for the day after the court hearing starting 24 hours from the court case with a café and continuing with an all night party to see off the bailiffs. We set up lights and a suicide rig in the basement and started to look forward to using the place for the first time.

The day of the hearing arrived and a small posse headed off to court to present our pathetic defence while others hung back to continue to prepare for the party. A few hours later the news spread like wild fire, the hearing had been adjourned as the claimants had not turned up. For the time being, the building was safe and it was decided that the events planned for the day of resistance should go ahead as a celebration 'not an eviction party'.

Written by Ben from RampArt.



To follow activity at the rampART see their website at: www.therampart.wordpress.com

Occupied London. The London Social Centre movement.

The following interview charts the recent story of occupied social centres which emerged in London from 2002-2006 drawing on the Italian *'centri sociali'*. One participant explains their involvement, their aims and what they tried to achieve.

What were the origins of what you were doing in London?

It was after MayDay 2001 and we occupied the Radical Dairy December, January. It was a small shopfront-cum-house with a basement, very small on the corner of a sort of residential area. There were about 20 of us that were involved, and the reason we occupied it was because a lot of people had been to Italy and seen the social centres there before that. Before people went to Italy they didn't actually know what social centres were. Everyone was completely new to any sort of political involvement, it was a first entry point, the sort of anti-capitalist movement in London. I mean I came from Reclaim the Streets and Wombles had been formed for about seven, eight months before we were involved in MayDay 2001, then, Genoa, Gothenburg. A quite intense period of summit mobilisation.

Some of us had been to Italy in March for a People's Global Action Conference which was held in Milan, near...and saw the sort of diversity of people involved in it. The scale of stuff was a complete contrast to what we were doing, and people wanted more than just that, they wanted, you know, a connection with people and ideally to be involved in political intervention on a daily basis, and so the Radical Dairy was a chance to do that.

But the Radical Dairy was a conscious effort to bring together what we thought or felt the Italians were doing with social centres and what we wanted to do with social centres. So we made a really strong effort, you know, for ourselves, not to call it a squat, but to call it a social centre, really bigging it up, and that was a really conscious effort to break that sort of insular squat political culture.



Why were you doing it? Because you wanted a social centre like in Italy?

We wanted a social centre as a solution to the problem that anti-capitalism had a lot of people who turned out, but there were a lot of scare stories. We wanted to have a public connection with people and re-root ourselves with radical politics within a certain geographical locality, basically transform an area, look at what sort of social needs there were in an area.

The centres are like a beacon for people within an area that would have sympathies with them or would actually learn about how we viewed the world and what was going on and to see what we can do with them. And I felt at the same time that there was no sort of separation. There wasn't like a sort of Maoism where we were going to root ourselves in the community then build an army.

But what was it about social centres that would meet social needs?

Firstly, they didn't last for just one day. Going down to the Reclaim the Streets demonstrations, or street parties, June 18th in 1999 in London or anything else I really felt it was that kind of an alternative social relationship, away from the logic of capitalism as I saw it anyway. That is what inspired us - to create a space that had that kind of inspirational element but on a much more daily basis. At the same time I felt that there was the problem with the anti-capitalist movement, basically that it mobilised once every six months...we were serious about changing the world, so how do you do that if you are only communicating to one section of society?

We knew about the squat culture in London, even though no-one at the time in the Wombles

was squatting. Everyone was renting or living in halls or whatever, most people had jobs and stuff. And it was never a thing that we wanted to set up a commune or anything. I was completely against that kind of thing. We wanted to be part of society so Radical Dairy was just like an experimentation in trying to realise that. No one normal would go into a squat, it is just the same old crusty types that go in squats.

I think the Radical Dairy was quite a limited place, very small but in the main it looked really excellent, really inviting. We linked up with loads of anti-gentrification campaigns in Hackney, because 'Hackney Not for Sale' had an office there. We had a massive library with about 700 books that were contributed by people. We had internet access and we had a bar. We had teas and coffees all day, we had musical events, sound systems in the basement and we noticed that when we actually started doing that, there was a lot of interest from people in the street, a lot of families wandered in. We had tables and chairs outside and people would come from shopping on Saturday morning and they would be sitting outside on our tables and chairs and asking for a tea and I was sitting down with them and chatting. Just ordinary working class men and women of all ages, different races as well. There were a lot of black and Asian people that would come to the place quite often, it made a real presence in the area. We had Indymedia film nights and a lot of the times on a weekend we had loads of kids. And some of the time we had so many kids running around, you would get their parents coming in at about six o'clock in the evening, and saying 'have you seen Andy or little Charlie?'

Were there any negative reactions?

There was half a dozen odd situations which got really nasty, fights and smackheads and

the rest of it. But on the whole they were dealt with quite well because we made every incident a situation to mobilise people and to actually discuss that. How do we deal with crackheads? How do we deal with drugdealers trying to take over the place? How do we combat this? From that we learned that it wasn't actually a problem, it was a way of developing us. If someone turns up at the door who is like a 50 year old working class woman with three kids who has just come back from the market, who says well what are you about then? You explain. You know you have to develop a language to communicate with people and that was the most exciting thing that we were talking to the most random people you could imagine on so many different issues, and that was the best thing about it.

What about connections with local struggles?

So yeah there were demands made on us to support stuff, and we didn't support them as much as we could have done. We were doing so much to maintain the place and to present the whole thing that we didn't have time to actually concentrate on other stuff. That was the massive failings of it. Keeping the space and like, you know, cleaning the space up and making sure it was always presentable, and people were always in the building.

How did the political activity of the Wombles affect the Radical Dairy?

We had May 2002 which we organised through Radical Dairy. During that time, we got raided by police. Before that, our electricity got cut, there were about 50 riot cops who raided the place, computers got seized, that galvanised support in the area as well because people saw it. Then we started seeing people's true relationship to the place. Residents came out on the streets that morning shouting at the police. I remember



this woman saying 'my kid goes to that place, he can't go to the park where there's too many fucking crackheads, why aren't you concerned with the crackheads?'

What were relationships like with the community?

There were a lot of locals that would come in and cook once a week, there were a lot of teenagers, teenage girls that would come and use the computers to do their home work. They actually wrote letters to the police after we got raided saying, we need this space, we need our computers because we do our GCSEs on them and stuff, and would completely understand the idea of self organisation and say well you know it is an excellent thing you are doing, we want to contribute. So they would come one night and cook for us.



What were the things at that time that struck you that weren't right?

It was hard for a lot of people to realise that we were not there to project our lifestyles, our politics onto a place. Instead we were there to work in conjunction with people. Very much trying to have a dialogue with people, create things basically out of that. And also this thing of people not prioritising those kind of struggles that have been emerging in the area and responding to them. That was the biggest thing. I mean some of us felt that that was what we needed to do, but how to do that was something else.

How long did it last for?

It lasted for about 13 months, which is quite a good run, until February 2003.



What happened next?

After the European Social Forum in Paris in November 2003 we had made a lot of good connections and developed a bit and then decided we wanted to open another social centre. We wanted a social centre because we thought it was the thing that created a meaning to and expand what we were doing. At that point our idea of social centres got a bit more sophisticated. There was a No Borders night we had which was our main reason for occupying the place.



Where was this?

This was in Kentish Town in London, January 2004. We had a meeting with about 30 people to discuss what we wanted from a social centre, what we wanted to happen and why, and everything else we learned from the mistakes of the Radical Dairy; occupied the place on Fortress Road, resisted eviction, put a call out trying to make this kind of impression that we wanted to create a movement around social centres. It lasted about six weeks and then Grand Banks got occupied just down the road.



Now that started off a completely public space. It was a truly public space; we had a relationship with the kids in the local area and a school, it was an excellent place. We wanted to have more political meetings, be a bit more politically developed, more events that were really like popular in the area, a good perception by people that weren't 'us' about the place. Lots more people, families and kids came to the place. Lots of kids getting involved, a lot of kids taking on the place and managing it. We also had a lot of events happening there, we started getting involved in the European Social Forum in London and used that as a place to organise. So yeah, we decided to do a social centre again as a way to resolve issues around how you actually create a movement. So we occupied, and then also



at the same time we wanted to be involved in migration issues, through No Borders.

Considering it was quite a limited space it worked pretty well and we tried to make it as professionally looking as possible, you know we bought a coffee machine. We were doing various sorts of discussions and trying to make the place look nice. We had exhibitions up. We started an anti copyright cinema for which we did a lot of flyposting. Each time we had an event on we leafleted literally 400 houses around the area constantly, and for the anti copyright cinema we had the most busiest night with about 120, 130 people. We were basically premiering Hollywood films.

We also wanted to revitalise the social centre network. At that point there was another social centre, 'Use your Loaf', which had been going for about a year. With Grand Banks there was this thing because it was so essential to the area, so visible and stuff, as soon as we occupied it we had people from the area coming down before we even opened, asking if we wanted furniture. When we opened up I think the first day we had about 60 or 70 kids just walk in at lunchtime and it just you know, overwhelmed us basically. It was a case of, well we don't really need to publicise what we are doing. A lot of them were like 15 or 16 and we asked them 'what do you want out of the place?' And they said, 'oh, we have been banned from the shops here, and, you know, there is nowhere to eat'. So we said, 'ok, we will start doing food'. So we started doing food everyday and it got busier because people came down for lunch. It was a public space basically. People were meeting there on the Friday evening before they went clubbing. What were the major problems?

The major problem was that it had been dominated by non political activists, so there were a lot of burnt out people saying why are we doing it? Why as anarchists are we cooking food for middle class kids? For them

they didn't engage with the fact of trying. The most productive thing we can do is create an accessible place where people are engaging in an analytical dialogue with us and then developing from that point onwards. Also not patronising people. They create their own sort of political engagement as well rather than some sort of factory thing where they come in non political and they come out as anarchists. And stuff doesn't work like that.

How long were you there for Grand Banks?

Mid February to August 2004. It was quite a short time. Then we got evicted, and then we did the Beyond ESF stuff in November 2004 (at the London European Social Forum). We had the initial eviction on May 19th. We had about 200 people for the eviction. People came out of school for it and it was really successful and a lot of kids who used the place were interviewed in the local paper which made it a big story in the area, and then obviously we got evicted in August.

So the eviction day we had the doors open and we just had small barricades outside and a sound system and the bailiffs came and went. The police came to us and said we are not going to support the eviction saying 'we want to end this peacefully', and stuff like that and 'we all think you are doing great work here and we have got no problems with Grand Banks.' That was kind of reiterated teachers and stuff like that, parents, and then the raid in August was like Scotland Yard, there was all the Forward Intelligence Team, there was riot police and about 30 bailiffs.

What would you say were the main achievements?

The Camden Daily Journal is quite a good local newspaper and there were people writing to it and quoting Grand Banks

basically, quoting our newsletters not from mainly political perspectives but really about use of space. Why don't we open up all the empty buildings? Why don't the Council reappropriate any empty buildings and give it over to people who want to do social projects in it, and people writing that sort of stuff. Also after the first eviction there was an actual editorial saying there was this massive thing about political apathy amongst young people and someone said 'how come you have got hundreds of kids walking out of school to support their social centre?' It was a social centre not a squat. Everybody knew about the place basically. I mean even the pub across the road, an Irish pub, they came over to us because we were doing screen printing and we were selling like hundreds of t-shirts.

I mean this is the thing. We want to get to a stage where our ideal situation is where we want to give the building back to people, to this community that is created there, and say 'right you run the place now'.

Was there any intimidation against the kids to stop them using Grand Banks?

There were certain kids that had a lot of problems. They were violent. They would go out violent, they had a lot of problems like you would see their dad coming out of the Irish pub at one o'clock in the morning completely pissed and dragging their kids out and giving them like a punch in the face and stuff. You would talk to like 13 year old girls saying 'I don't want to go home because my dad will just beat me up.' You know all this stuff, and you had a faction within the Wombles saying we are not social workers. Fucking hell, it is like the reason people don't engage in politics is because they have got so much shit in their lives. That is a bigger issue, whether they are being beaten up by their parents or being

attacked on the streets by gangs or whatever. Other forms of domination beyond capitalism that result from capitalism aren't seen as political, which a few of us did see as very political. We had managed to create a space that we were part controlling and you have got the whole of society there. And it is a dream isn't it - a dialogue between different sections of society about loads of other things.

What happened after the ESF in London?

In something like November or December we formed a small collective that was going to occupy a place. It was an initiative within the context of this new student group and only two of us in that collective were involved in Grand Banks. We occupied a building in January 2005, which we were kicked out of within seven or eight hours by police on Huntley Street. Two days later we found the other place on Gower Street which became the 'Institute for Autonomy'. Everything seemed fine, a massive place and we set the place up as being both living accommodation and a social space. So the first and second floor and the ground floor and the basement and the garden were social spaces and there were three floors of accommodation. There was a lot of enthusiasm. There was a hacklab that actually worked, computers and stuff like that. There was a screen printing lab. There was a café which was really popular which was mainly in the afternoons. And we also had a whole room which was an infoshop.

What was the relationship between this space and the previous occupied spaces?

I think a lot of people had heard of the other places, some had been to it. A lot of the students had been to 'Beyond the ESF' as well so we had some sort of connection with

them and they knew our politics anyway. It started off quite organically. It was like we are in the university area, it is called the Institute of Autonomy, let's start relating to our immediate community which is students and people who work in the area. Let's do activities that might bring them in. So we had the radical theory forum every week. The thing about the Institute for Autonomy is that the preparations for the 2005 G8 (meeting in Scotland) about March to April dominated it. The G8 dominated it and made it sort of like a G8 social centre at that point. It became a place where we could distribute propoganda about the G8 and stuff, sell train tickets.

How did the Institute of Autonomy end?

We sent people down to Senate house, the University of London offices basically and had a discussion with them about what we were doing. They were saying 'ok, how long are you going to be there' and stuff like that, we said 'July' because we knew we were going to be in Scotland in July at the G8 and basically it worked. And so July 7th 2005 they had the eviction date which was excellent for us anyway. In 2006 we went on to open up 'The Square' on Russell Square but that's another story. A big focus there was to support the No Borders network and raise money for it.

How many people have been involved in all these projects?

It seems like each time we occupy a place we make different connections with different sets of people. I was saying about Radical Dsairy, there were all the old Reclaim the Streets, samba band, critical mass people, squatters, class war people and that was the first time we met them basically. The same with Grand Banks and then the Institute of Autonomy and the Square, a lot of students and lecturers

as well that we have got connections with now. You could say that it went from nothing to a network of two or three thousand people maybe even more who have an affinity with social centres. We have had social centres since 2004 making these links. People are still around. They haven't disappeared. There is a political network that manifests itself each time we occupy a building and speak in the same language and put out the same kind of propoganda. People come down and they get to hear about it and that is a really interesting thing, because obviously we want to develop it even further and further and further.



CAMBERWELL

SQUATTED

CENTRE

YES, WE ARE DREAMERS...



“People become dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don’t know what is real until they begin to dream.”

- Helon Habila ‘Waiting For An Angel’

we fix, we build...
occupied

against speculation
against gentrification

This building had been left to fall down by developers. Eventually it would be expensive flats that most local people cannot afford. A small group of mainly local people have begun to repair it, re-use it and recycle it for a free space for those who wish to take back a little freedom into their lives. We occupy and use the space without needing tons of money to enable us to enjoy a free social space. But we occupy to share the space with those who are a little bit tired of how things are.

Come along and get involved. Be occupied!

192 WARHAM ST OFF CAMBERWELL NEW RD LONDON SE5
www.56a.org.uk/warham.html
Oval Tube - Buses 38, 436 (we are opposite Union Tavern)

CAMBERWELL SQUATTED CENTRE
INFO-SPACE
CAFE
FILMS
BOOKS
MEETING PLACE

AN INVITATION.

On the 10th March 2007, we climbed a high ladder and entered the empty building at 190-192 Warham St in Camberwell, South London. It took five minutes to put life back into a building that had been left empty for 9 months.

As we descended the stairs, we began to put a reality to the dream we had all dreamed as we watched the building sit lifeless for all those months. We dreamed of opening up the dead lifeless space and bringing in living bodies. Bodies that could talk, have ideas, disagree, learn how to fix up and build a living space. Bodies that could share the space and enjoy it and extend an open invitation to others to be part of the new life in the building. Bodies to cook and eat together. To get drunk on what possibilities we can create here.

What’s the point of a fridge without any food in it? What’s the point of a bowl without any soup in it? Exactly, So, what’s the point of a building without anybody in it? Well, actually we know the answer to that one. It looks like this: Make ££££££. Well we choose another answer. Our answer: Make life. Surely that must be the point.

That is our experiment here. That is our occupation.

OCCUPYING OURSELVES

So the reality we found was one of carefully speculated abandon and ruin. The water pipes were open leaving water to run through two floors. Everything was soaked and stained with mould. The toilets and shower were smashed. The wiring was ripped out and walls were smashed. No-one cared about the place. There was only one thing they cared

about. Standing in midst of the debris that early Saturday morning, we almost turned back. We almost abandoned our dream. We breathed in mould and looked at each other for a number of minutes. In silence. But we are dreamers...and what is the point of a dream that cannot be turned into something real? With a passion we put our backs into the work. Others soon got involved and we fixed up the building. We brought fresh air and human warmth back inside. It's a work in progress. There are always two questions - What needs doing? What can you do? Actually, there is a third more vital question: Are you enjoying yourself?

WHAT IS NORMAL IN THESE DAYS?

Early on, we had the unfortunate presence of two policemen inside the place with all their usual prejudices: squatters are junkies, squatters are all unemployed, squatters are this, squatters are that. They made it clear that they thought we were just rats. But who cares what they think!

'Why can't you live like normal people?', they asked. But what is normal in these days? Speculating on a ruined building whilst others are homeless or can't afford a decent place? Does it seem normal surviving another round of the working week? Labouring - commuting - shopping - resting - back to work. Some money but no time. A little time but no real enthusiasm. A two week holiday as some kind of escape. Yes, this is the normality of ourselves too! It was at this end point of the policeman's questioning, that one bright burning spirit amongst us replied: 'We are dreamers...'

and the words hung there, in silence, with nothing else needing to be added. Neither seeking approval nor apologising for what we are, this was a moment that we could have almost let go of but instead our good friend had let something loose amongst us all. Something that remains in the air. It pervades the building. It inspires. It fixes. It rebels.

As dreamers, we try to refuse what passes for being 'normal' because no-one is 'normal'. We try to make alternatives to the daily grind. We try to open up escape routes here, now. Everyone knows that this grind cannot continue. We are all looking for a way out. For us, it cannot be an individual solution as we are all in this together. So the dream we dream is a collective one.

WE TRIED IT AND WE DIDN'T LIKE IT...

None of us wish any longer to slump exhausted in front of TV because that's all our body can do at that point. None of us wish any longer to drink ourselves senseless in lonely isolation. None of us wish to feel any longer the crushing despair of the lives we are supposed to lead in 21st century London. None of us wish any longer to substitute our passions and our dreams or our desires for things, objects or trinkets. No more!

We are no longer interested in the decisions made elsewhere by waste of space politicians because we have our own decisions to make. We are no longer interested in the lives of rich celebrities because we have our own lives to be interested in.

WE DREAM BUT WE NEVER SLEEP!

In less than two weeks, we have created a beautiful living breathing alive space once more. What else could we do?

We put in floorboards. We dried out rooms for people to sleep soundly in. We scraped off mould and put up paint. We built a kitchen. Built a café space. Put in toilets. Put in sinks. Put in ideas.

We might have exhausted ourselves, some of us working 9-5, some of us working precariously but we always found more energy to keep building. What we discovered (once again), is that far from there being a scarcity of energy, knowledge, ideas, there is always a beautiful surplus available when we make our own decisions. We didn't need a shop-bought plan nor a foreman. There was no book to tell us what to do. There was only our imagination and the fantastic possibilities that dreamers tend come up with.

We know that one day, near or far, we will be forced out of here and the building will once again be sealed off from light fresh air we bring in. We know that but it does not stop us working hard for the dream. Here now. And again. And again...And...

As one of our posters says: 'As everyone knows, the dream is dead. The dream, the desire, the hope for a better world. And yet we are dreamers. We too should be dead, then. But if we are not mistaken...HERE WE ARE'.

benefit night for
Ritz Cinema workers

Paid £5.35 an hour... fighting for a living wage... owners City Screen are refusing to negotiate... Long hours, crap pay, all at South London's trendiest cinema!

with the

- **no frills band.**

brixton's finest acoustic maestros
plus: strikers talk about the dispute, bar, food, and more!

at **Camberwell Squat Centre**
192 Warham Street, London, SE5
tube: Oval... buses: P5, 36, 185, 436
Camberwell Squat Centre: email blackfrog@alphabettthreat.co.uk
contact the Ritz: strikers: ritzstaff@yahoo.co.uk

FRIDAY 15TH JUNE
7.30 pm

occupation?

(1) job (2) colonisation (3) using a building

What is our state of occupation?
Well, we work hard but it's not a job! Its a joy.

If empty buildings can be said to need invading, it can only be for the best.

For if a building remains lifeless purely to make money then where have we arrived at?

After six months of occupation we have created something that feels like real community.

We occupy, we build.
We act. Get involved

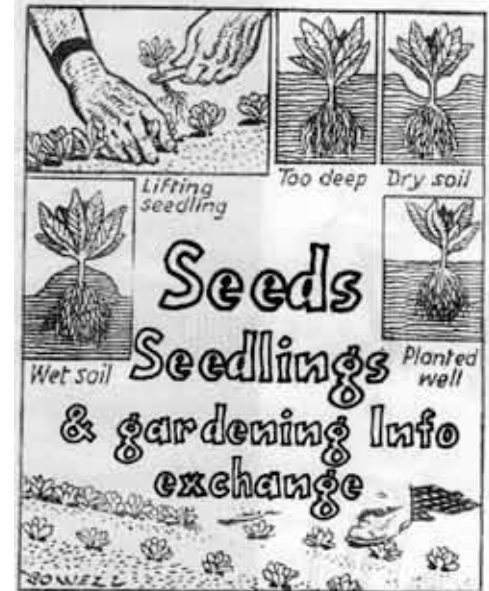
**CAFE
BAR
FILMS
MUSIC
MAKING
THINGS
HAPPEN...**

**camberwell
squatted
centre**
190 WARHAM ST
off CAMBERWELL NEW RD
LONDON SE5
www.56a.org.uk/warham.html

As everyone knows, the dream is dead. The dream, the desire, the hope for a better world. And yet we are dreamers. We too should be dead, then But if we are not mistaken... **HERE WE ARE!**



CAMBERWELL SQUATED CENTRE
192 Warham St, off Camberwell New Rd SE5
www.56a.org.uk/warham.html



Camberwell Squatted Centre, 192 Warham St, SE5
Bring Some...
Take Some... from Midday Sunday April 22nd

But it is very much an open dream. Be here too. It is every dreamer's space. Be occupied! This has been your invitation.

FREE EVICTION

Oh there is something inevitable about squatting and that is the free rude awakening you can get at 4am one Thursday morning on 30th August after losing legal 'possession' of the place. So yeah the Black Frog residents were turfed out by bailiffs in the end, as is the end of most squatting centre stories. What can we say? There just isn't space here to go into everything that feels like it should be said. How can we answer those great questions that came up: Are you free

to do whatever you like in a free space? Why do people make a dogma out of the number of 'local' people coming in, or worse, what some activists call 'normal' people? (ho ho ho). Is it a social centre or a squatted centre? Words on a page cannot do justice to what we felt and lived at the Black Frog and we all know there's no justice in the world. Face to face is better, so maybe we will have these discussions at the next Black Frog... see you there! Or better still squat your own place and we will pop round for a cuppa!!

We fix. We build. We occupy. TOGETHER. Some bodies



Written by members of Camberwell Squatted Centre aka the Black Frog, which was evicted in August 2007.
More info at: www.56a.org.uk/warham.html
Email: blackfrog@alphabettthreat.co.uk

Squats and Spaces Solidarity Day: The Globe as a Temporary Autonomous Zone

by Ye Olde Finch

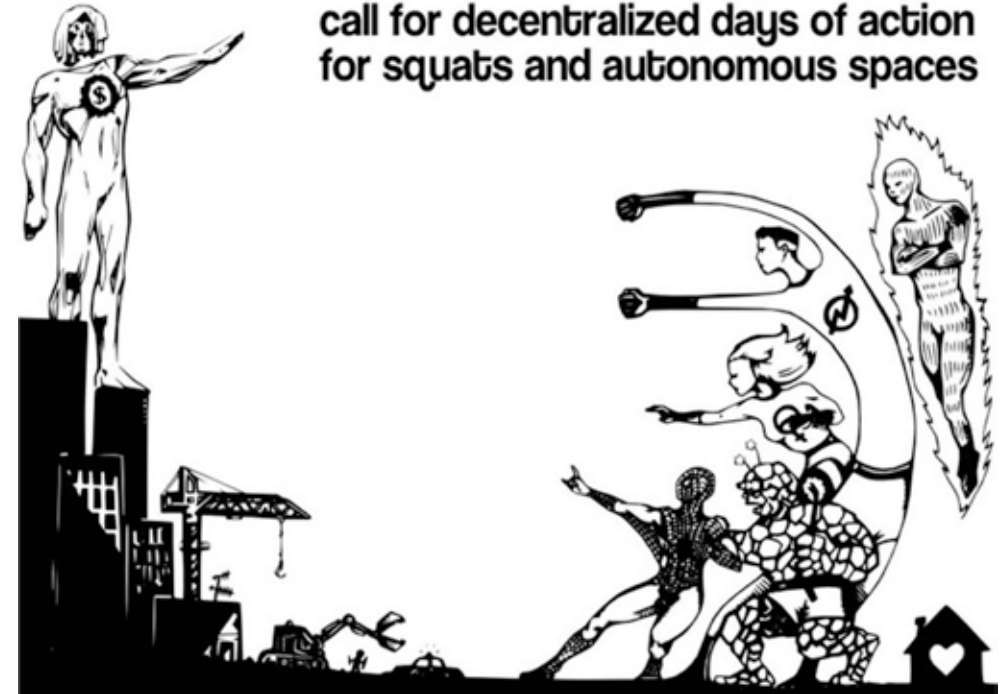
The 11th and 12th of April 2008, saw the 'Decentralised Day of Action for Squats and Autonomous Spaces'. UK social centres and spaces for the first time had a visible opportunity to show their knitted and interweaving solidarity, a chance to demonstrate to those unfamiliar with the movement, that it is indeed an international interconnectedness of energy that means business. The very notion of the spaces themselves shapes them as autonomous from the dominant claw of capitalism, speculation and gentrification that percolate through our lives. The idea that each of these spaces can come together and display their linkages and histories in harmony, has great historical resonance, and one that could possibly determine a public catalyst for the future of the movement.

This piece aims to introduce what the decentralised days of action are all about and highlight the main reasons for organising such events. The purpose of the article is therefore to propose the days as a soldering opportunity for the social centre movement, and how positive this can be specifically for the UK scene.

Social Spaces What are Social Spaces?

It is perhaps not entirely necessary to give a lengthy introduction to the spaces themselves, as there are many other articles within this booklet that will do this more than satisfactorily. However, it might be an idea to give a brief gloss over what these centres are, their history, and what they are in opposition to.

Social centres, or 'autonomous spaces', are communally-run buildings which are either



11th and 12th of April 2008
call for decentralized days of action
for squats and autonomous spaces

occupied, rented or owned. Each of the spaces are run non-hierarchically by individuals on a completely voluntary basis. There are varying concerns that shape the make-up and activities within the centres, but these can be described as all propelled by premises of community-based activity, creativity, inclusion, and autonomy from the command of the dominant culture. They are basically there to serve the community in which the building has been located, alongside the beliefs of those that run the centres, and therefore the goals are moulded around the needs and wants of those that use the facilities within. Activities that take place within the spaces are very varied – I had a look on one space's website the other day and there was a Foucault Reading Group. Whether you wish to entertain your philosophical delectations, utilise the free access to computers and the internet available, eat some delicious vegan food, attend the weekly meetings for the

running of the centres, fix your bike at a bike repair workshop, or meet up with your local group cause in order to make plans for direct action – you can do any of these within the social centre community in the UK. Depending upon whether there is rising gentrification to be highlighted, local immigration issues or the very fact that the spaces may be contested in themselves through squatting, this is reflected in the activities and general ethos of the centres.

And squats?

As for squats themselves, whether these are centres or general communal living spaces, these are of course buildings that are lived in and are neither owned, rented, nor do the occupants' have express permission to reside there. In the UK, this is not a criminal but civil offence. Squatting takes place for many reasons, mainly for cheap housing, but can

also be the symbolic contesting of a space, and a complete opposition to the capitalist machine of private property and speculation that forces individuals to squat in the first place. Check out the ‘Squatter’s Handbook’ which can tell you everything you need about squatting and the mesh of legality that goes with it.

And the History?

The form that social centres have taken over recent decades can be traced back to the 1970s and the Italian ‘Autonomia’ workerist movement that evolved out of social deprivation and the appropriation of disused factories and warehouses for communal living and general usage. This has spread throughout Europe, influencing the development of social centres in the UK today, and indeed those throughout the rest of the world. The heritage of the reclaiming of public space, the ‘commons’ themselves, can be found much further back in British history, to a group of radicalised landless commoners who occupied St. George’s Hill outside London in 1649. These were the ‘True Levellers’ or ‘Diggers’, and can be seen as the first ideological and symbolic re-appropriators of ‘enclosed’ land, in the words of leader Gerrard Winstanley, so that “... earth should be made a common treasury of livelihood to the whole of mankind, without respect of persons.”

And what are the spaces and squats opposing?

What can be said that squats and spaces are opposing, is indeed a myriad of things, however they all swarm around some central ideas and beliefs. Going back to the Diggers and the Levellers, you can see that the freeing of the commons is something that resonates now, in fact moreso, as we still have enclosures

- we have privatisation. The idea that the planet is carved up into little segments, some bigger than others, and individuals own each of these pieces of the earth’s great crust, is the central issue of contention. The only manner in which this myth survives and flourishes today is due to capitalism – all social centres and squats can be described as anti-capitalist in one way or another. In order to remain

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‘autonomous’ from this system of private property and unchecked accumulation, the land is taken back from being sold and exploited. This is becoming more and more obvious and integral to our daily lives, and it is not a local phenomenon. The global financial markets are all interlinked, the system of capitalism hinges and impinges right down to the individual, and back up again to the inter- and trans-national. This is why days that galvanise the social centres and squats together is so important – a global response to a global phenomenon.

The Solidarity Days

The decentralised days of action were proposed by a collective formed of representatives from the squatting and social centre scene throughout Europe and beyond, and convened to discuss the preliminaries of the actions at ‘Les Tannieres’ in Dijon, France, in the November of 2007. Whether or not you are involved in the activities and running of a self-managed centre in the UK, or are a follower of the movement, you cannot have avoided the almighty eviction of 1,000 individuals from the ‘Ungdomshuset’ free space in Copenhagen in the spring of 2007. The media coverage was not just that of the independent nature with regards to the eviction, as would normally be. The crack-down on squats and social centres that has taken place over 2007 has meant although the movement is increasingly repressed, so too is it more radicalised – hence the call that brought these days of action into being. As a UK-wide response to the call and Dijon, the ‘National Squatters Meeting’ was organised in Leeds in February 2008 to discuss what would be happening on the British scene. The meeting was rendered a great success and a great example of the movement gathering itself into action.

What can be achieved through these days of action?

There are roughly four objectives which the decentralised days hoped to achieve. The first is to create more visibility for squats and spaces, particularly to demonstrate the political maneuvers and strengths that the movement holds as part of a global political resistance. The second is to develop and again, illustrate the links already there, between the squats and autonomous spaces – there are obviously differences in approach to the practicalities of space maintenance,

and therefore this can be seen as an opportunity to meld these experiences together, and build upon the residing solidarity. This is what the creation of movements is all about. Thirdly, one of the most outstanding needs of the community is to spread its reach, and gather new people from new places, inspire and conspire on an international level in order to make the movement grow even bigger and in unexpected nooks and crannies. The fourth, is to make sure the oppressive measures that have been taken against squats and social centres, are overcome and kept at bay in the future.

So aren’t the UK spaces interlinked anyway?

The answer to this is ‘yes’. UK social centres and spaces have been intertwined in cyberspace for a number of years through the ‘Social Centre Network’, a network hosted on the internet as a portal for all independent social and community centres in the UK. In their own words, their aim has been to link up the “the growing number of autonomous spaces to share resources, ideas and information”. The SCN was conceived of in order to cater for the growing number of legal social centres, alongside those of the squatted tradition, as the movement had clearly increased in pace over recent years. There is also a clear distinction between the kind of social and community centres that have been supported by the platform, and those that are state sponsored or of an NGO nature, that have not. There are local networks within the movement that operate both on a regional level, for instance the East London Network, and interlinking with the larger network hubs of the national. The community, both squats and spaces, are linked too by the Social Centre Network email list hosted by Riseup.net. However, not only has there been somewhat of an ‘official’ site and linkages for the autonomous zones, but

there is a subtle, and yet at the same time, well-established interlinking in other forms over the internet. What has been of wonder and of such great impetus for the gathering of movements and causes across the world is of course the impact of the internet, not least its incredible influence in other arenas aswell. So not only is there a specific SCN, but so too are all the social centres, autonomous and free spaces and squats of all colours and creeds, connected through the links on their

“As unaligned and ungovernable islands of uncontrolled freedom we want to continue to act in solidarity, and strengthen our international links, no matter how many kilometres there are between us.”

webpages. Quite what this network would look like if it were to be digitally mapped out – possibly resembling the construction of a movement - but it would quite clearly be a cyber-expression of the philosophy behind the days in April 2008. This is where the UK social centres can be clearly seen as part of a wider ‘electronic fabric of struggle’. The interconnectedness of the scene here is already alive and real, in its virtual format.

Not only have the social centres been connected between themselves, but so too have they been in touch with larger political objectives and projects through their involvement in and support of activist groups and causes. As an example, the London Action Resource Centre (LARC) has not only been a hub of independent information, but so too a meeting point for the likes of People’s Global Action and London Rising Tide. This adds further nodes to the spider-like web that the UK social centres have been part of all along, and indicates the relevance of action days such as those in April for the future reach of the movement. Such a force of connectedness can be found in the words of those who initiated the actions, in their call before the events: “We are motivated by the same passions, we feel the same determination, face a common enemy in repression, and are united across borders by our desire to build a world of equality and self-determination. As unaligned and ungovernable islands of uncontrolled freedom we want to continue to act in solidarity, and strengthen our international links, no matter how many kilometres there are between us”.

So what does all this mean for the UK social centre movement?

For the UK social centres, there are those representatives of autonomous spaces who attended the meeting that took place in Dijon, and those in Leeds in February, to plan the days. There were of course those who chose not to. There were possible points of conflict that might have arisen over the idea of such decentralised days. The fact that there was a collective that developed these ideas independently could be seen as a nexus of contention, the basic notions of non-hierarchical and disorganised organisation that pervade the social centre ethos as perceived as compromised. Not least, in addition, the fact that this is a step beyond the walls of the social centres, beyond the local

community hubs that they provide for, may also be appreciated by some of the members of the UK community, as likewise with those of scenes across Europe and the remainder of the global autonomous and squatting community. These are issues that can be brought up over meetings in the future, and discussed in a democratic manner in order to achieve consensus on all levels.

As one of the richest heritages of alternative culture within Europe, the partaking in such a day is clearly an extension of this refreshing transgression. The differences that arise, undoubtedly, through the choice of space as occupied, rented or owned, are

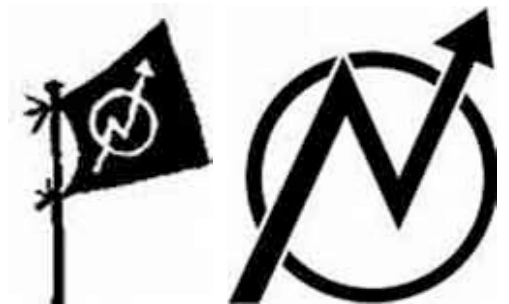
“The crack-down on squats and social centres that has taken place over 2007 has meant although the movement is increasingly repressed, so too is it more radicalised”

seen by a number within the community as divisive. This is very clearly a chance to display the bonds of solidarity and to solder the community together as a subset of a wider enterprise. The visibility is an objective, and judging from the continued vibrancy that is obviously being exuded from the UK scene, alongside the subversive, creative residue of the anti-roads movement and protests of the 1990s, the days are exciting sparks of momentum echoing from within four walls,

onto the international stage. This can only be positive for the UK scene: the knowledge-sharing and networking ensuring the movement as an intrinsic cog in the wheel of the movement of movements.

Global T. A. Z.

There is a seminal work by Hakim Bey that influences the concept of the ‘autonomous zone’ a great deal. What Bey has termed as a ‘Temporary Autonomous Zone’ is perhaps the closest written formulation to be found that resembles the social centre phenomenon. A ‘T. A. Z.’ is “like an uprising which does not engage directly with the State, a guerrilla operation which liberates an area (of land, of time, of imagination) and then dissolves itself to re-form elsewhere/elsewhen, before the State can crush it”. This is quite a familiar description I suspect: the freeing of a building from the greed that keeps it from being put to good use – an oasis in the middle of a desert of avarice. Perhaps what stands out from these days of decentralised action is the idea of a temporary autonomous zone created on an international plane, one which could suspend the participants and the spaces in a consensus of resistance for a brief interlude. This is perhaps quite utopian but also proved possible through the days of action, and for days of similar inspiration in the future.



Autonomous Spaces & Social Centres.

So what does it mean to be anti-capitalist?

by Paul Chatterton

“The reason why governments want to destroy socialisation is because they realise that they can get really fucked over by it. People start talking to each other and think ‘Hang on; we don’t actually have to live like this.’”



A huge amount of people get involved in what are called ‘autonomous social centres’ – cooking food, putting on film nights, teaching English, making banners, planning actions – the list goes on and on. But what are they all about politically and what are the hopes and dreams of people involved in them? Why are they there at all? How do they organise and strategise? These are the questions that were on my mind when I set off to talk to people involved in social centres up and down the UK in 2006. I talked to people who told their stories about their social centres and their politics – as they saw it. This article tells these stories using their own words. I use direct quotes from people so you get a more direct idea of what people were actually saying and I’ve changed the names to protect their identities. I’ve put my own interpretation

on what I think this all means for a political movement of autonomous social centres in the UK.

I’ve used the term ‘anti-capitalism’ in the title with good reason. In less than ten years since its media appearance in 1999 in Seattle and in the ‘Carnivals Against Capitalism’ on June 18th, anti-capitalism has become a widely debated and identifiable movement. Whether acknowledged or not, social centres are part of the building of this anti-capitalist politics. Ok, the way they do it and the way they talk about it is different in each place. But a real desire to make some kind of politics beyond, and against, capitalism begin, right here and now, rather than waiting for some hoped for revolution the future, is what keeps people involved and inspired.

So what is anti-capitalism?

It's a movement as old as capitalism itself which rejects or disrupts the normal workings of 'capital' and 'capitalism' - competitive accumulation, private ownership of production, wage labour, and market exchange. It's often interchangeable with anti-global, anti-neoliberal, anti-corporate and anti-imperial movements. It is defined through many ideas and the main ones include:

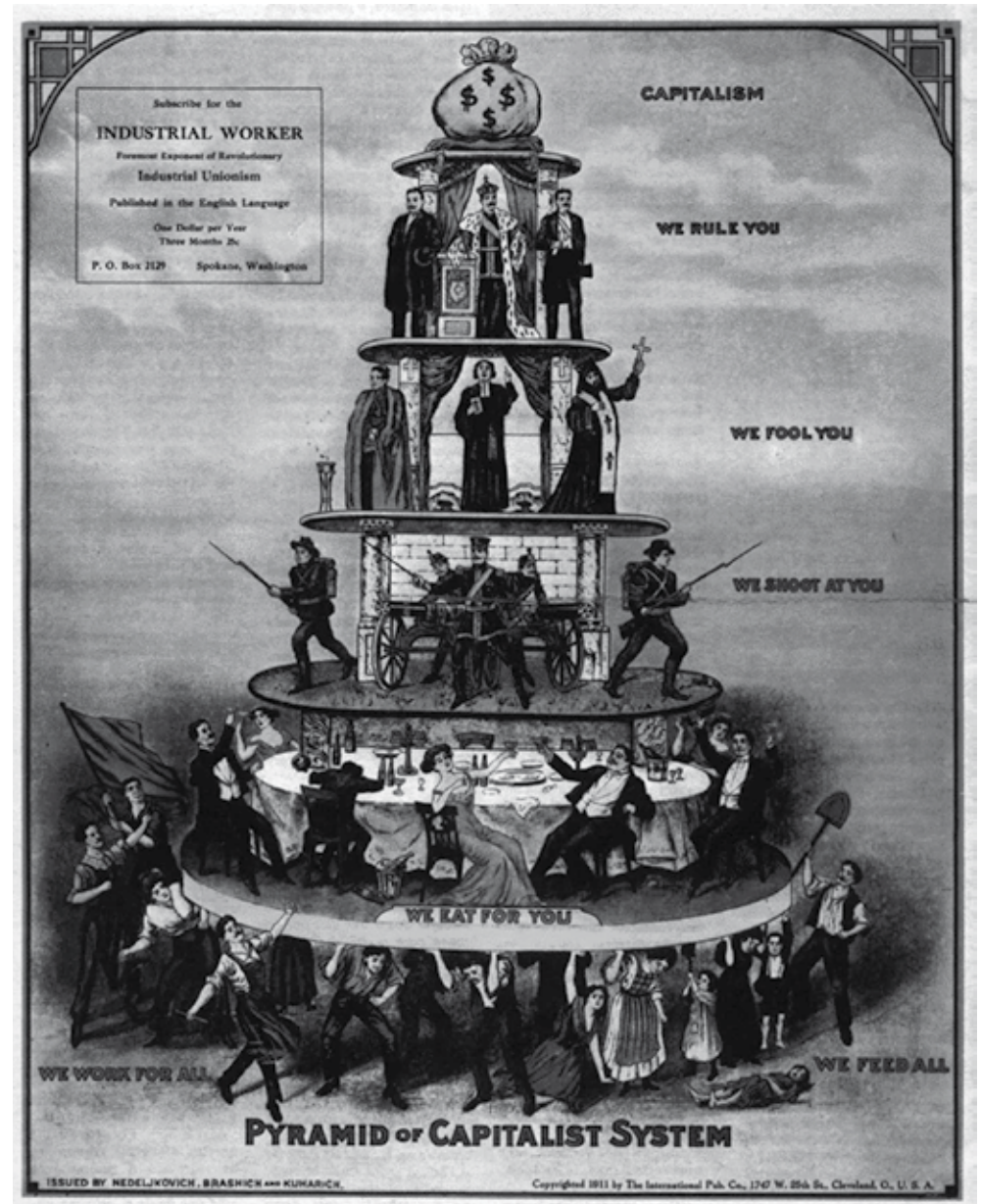
It is a dis-organisation, often called a 'movement of movements' characterized by ideological and organizational diversity;

It is a fundamental challenge to the meaning of revolution that doesn't aim at seizing state power but instead makes the revolution everyday;

It is an extra-parliamentary movement outside the mainstream political process and a clear break with more vanguardist/Trotskyite revolutionary socialist movements;

It sees direct democracy, participation and horizontal organizing as key organizational values;

It is locally grounded but also internationalist, making connections with other struggles.





As I talked to people involved in social centres, it became clear that anti-capitalism meant a number of really important things: that they want to create political projects grounded in their communities; they are comfortable with politics which was messy and impure; they want to build strong relationships between people; the way they organise them is experimental and promotes self management; and they develop political strategies which attempt to break outside the activist ghetto. In the next few pages I want to explain what these mean in more detail.

Politics is all about place

Anti-capitalism needs to happen somewhere – to come together and be visible. Social centres allow this to happen – they create something like an ‘urban commons’ (like the village commons) which is self managed

and open to all who respect it. Social centres respond to a very basic need – independent, not for profit, politically plural spaces where groups outside of the status quo can meet, discuss and respond and plan away from direct policing and surveillance. Social centres fill the gap left by the decline of traditional political places such as working men’s clubs, trades clubs and workplaces that provided a resource base.

People describe social centres in many ways – using words like platforms, safe spaces, bases, incubators, ground territory and shelters – all of these provide safety in our turbulent times. One person in London put it this way:

‘And in a sense that means this place has become a bit of a hawk in the storm I suppose. Things flourish and wax and wane and we kind of stay in the midst of it.’

People want to mix more mobile, confrontational and short-lived politics around direct action in smaller affinity groups or mobilisations at summit sieges with something more permanent. John from one London social centre said:

‘We could really do with some kind of a long term, permanent place where we can put down some roots and be seen and be visible and be proud of what we were doing, and not to be seen to be hiding or actually hiding.’

Putting down roots through renting or buying also reflects that squatting is more and more difficult in the UK. Many permanent social centre collectives did emerge out of the strong UK squatter culture of the 1990s realizing that squatted spaces are short lived and can be an energy drain. Loss of space is a constant frustration when you want to start to engage on a longer basis.

But securing space also has a wider role. They are a key organising tool for political education within communities and movements. Julie from Newcastle says:

‘And a lot of that is to do with using a social centre as a platform or a space where you can develop other things that would mean you could take control of your life. So it’s basically creating space where you’re allowed to develop that analysis and discuss and socialise and, really, increase your understanding of what’s happening in the world and what you can do about it. People want to develop and they want to analyse and identify as part of a bigger thing and whatever. I think it’s still important because there’s nothing like that in the city...’

The impure, messy politics of the possible

‘Say we all passed a resolution saying that this place is now against capitalism, which

I always assumed it was, what the fuck does that mean? I am an anti-capitalist, I will completely say this now right, but I have no idea what that means; I have no little blue plan in my bedroom about how society should be run. It is meaningless; it is like, what we do now basically.’

What are the political identities of social centres?

Anti-capitalism is pretty elusive as the quote from Steve from Leeds highlights. It means different things to different people. There’s often general reference to being not for profit, rejecting hierarchy and domination, or embracing equality. People often express it through a unity of resistance and creativity within our everyday lives – blending a confrontational attitude with living solutions. Michael from Newcastle put it this way:

‘What I think I try to do when I look at my life, is that I try to destroy systems that corrupt and dominate, and create alternatives that are mutual, and so all the time trying to destroy and create.’

But when you scratch the surface you find that there is a reluctance to be pinned down – the whole point of the politics of the place is that they are open, complex and messy. James from Leeds said:

‘I think one of the wonderful things about this place is that it holds together, it’s a really open, complicated space that accommodates really very different people, which I think is amazing. The people who congregate round here are people who want to get their hands dirty basically. They want to get involved in all the complexities of something, they don’t want pure things. It makes you face up to loads of stuff all the time.’

This impure politics opens up debate so that conflicts and differences can be acknowledged

and resolved. It's not easy - it's a politics that needs constant work as different views and backgrounds bash together. Time and again people use the word 'possibility', in contrast to lack of possibility of the hum drum of parliamentary politics. And it is this possibility that our dreaming means something. David from Newcastle put it this way:

'You know, that's what I think it contributes towards - showing alternatives and contributing therefore to alternative realities. It's like a window of possibility and that's where I think its validity comes from, but in terms of like achievableness.'

This kind of hope and possibility is made all the time, as Sarah from Leeds said:

'I think it is also important to maybe not ask the big 'Why are we here?' question; maybe there doesn't need to be a big reason, and to think, as you say, that it is just a big exercise to see what we can get away with and what we can do - what the collective imagination can dream up. A process with no kind of aims or destinations, its kind of what you develop along the way.'

But don't expect quick results. The timescale of this impure politics of the possible is much slower. Social centres offer a steadiness, longevity, a sense of history and 'something gentler to hold a position from' as one person put it. It's this stability and openness together that can allow some really amazing and powerful politics to emerge.

Rebuilding the social collective

Anti-capitalist politics are not just about bricks and mortar. They are also about the hidden work of rebuilding social relationships around emotions, solidarity and trust. While bread and butter issues such as housing struggles or ecological damage are important so too are our basic emotional connections

and responses to one another. This is invisible essential political work, and if ignored erodes the bedrock for affinity, understanding, tolerance and consensus. Social bonds that ties us together are often more important than the roof and the walls. A member of the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford said:

'The 1 in 12 is beyond the building anyway, it is about relationships. It won't go if the building goes, even though the building is very important.'

Creating these social bonds is really crucial especially in cities that are becoming dominated by corporate bars, offices and restaurants. Ed from Leeds commented on the value of these bonds:

'It's like trying to recreate society almost, because the whole focus of gentrification is like as if government and business are trying to create atomised individuals and trying to really destroy any social setting, so the best you get is going down the pub. The idea of doing this, of creating a space where it's not to do with conforming to certain norms, it's somewhere where we can actually come down and have a social co-experience. The reason why governments want to destroy socialisation is because they realise that they can get really fucked over by it. People start talking to each other and think 'Hang on; we don't actually have to live like this.'

Creating these bonds can transform people so they can understand themselves, their situations, their relationship to others and those with more power, and begin the task of political awakening.

Self-management and the art of experimental organising

Ok, social centres might be militantly self-managed, but a huge amount of effort is put into organizing them. They are, in effect,

a programme for expanding and making real self-management and a commitment to direct democracy, consensus decision-making, direct participation and a rejection of hierarchical organisations, as well as various forms of discrimination. One of the trickiest issues faced by social centres is developing a collective understanding of what self-management actually means, and how to get people to take this on. This politics of self-management contrasts with the disempowerment and alienation of our lives at school, work and home.

Overall, organisationally, social centres are defined by their flexibility and pragmatism, choosing minimum formal legalities and, in parallel, developing their own forms of direct democracy. Trial and error feature large as well as a willingness to accept mistakes and try new avenues when things don't work. This flows naturally from the fairly widespread distrust of institution building, hierarchy and bureaucratic organisations within anti-capitalist, anarchist movements. Sarah from Leeds, put it this way about the origins of their social centre:

'I remember sitting down with somebody and writing a potential budget to see if we could afford... what we could afford, like if we had a bar how much money you'd make from a bar, how much money you'd make from a café - figures plucked out of the sky. All of those debates we've had ever since, more or less. We had no idea what we wanted to do, no experience of it and no idea how to do it.'

This informality and pragmatism is about the importance of deeds rather than propaganda. Decision-making structures are also highly inventive and flexible. Consensus decision-making, a tool for promoting direct democracy between individuals based upon an equality of participation and the incorporation of many voices, is used almost universally as a tool for making decisions. Inevitably, such flexible,





experimental ways of doing things can go badly wrong. They are far from perfect. But working out how to make decisions means that we also resolve problems and sharpen models for direct democracy. Andy from London put it this way:

'We made every incident a situation to mobilise people and to actually discuss those situations. How do we deal with crackheads? How do we deal with drug dealers trying to take over the place? How do we, you know, combat this? So it was actually seen, from that we learned that it wasn't actually seen as being a problem it was a way of like developing us. The problems aren't the problem I mean its just situations. It is how you solve them you know?'

But lets remember that self-managing a space is a form of direct action in itself, especially through its rejection of paid labour and hierarchical structures. It is this that keeps inspiring new generations of people to get involved. Working together and running a building collectively and independently is a political project of self education, where people

learn how to work collectively, manage their lives, and come to realize that different ways of organizing social welfare and economic exchange do exist and are doable.

Lots of challenges still remain – the tensions between consumers/service users and maintainers/carers, gender divisions which are made worse when they are simply brushed under the carpet, the tricky and unresolved issues around paid work, the lack of time that people can commit to projects, the problems and limitations of informal self discipline and teaching others about collectively agreed rules, inclusivity and accessibility. This final point is a really important one. Inclusivity is key to the politics of self management as it both extends radical politics to newer groups but also sustains new energy and attracts new generations of people to manage and nourish the project.

Developing political strategies outside the activist ghetto

So what about political strategies? Well there's no blueprint, nor should there be. There's a

rejection of fixed leadership and committees, in favour of more flexible, experimental and participatory strategic priorities to achieving radical social change. An important part of the debate is whether social centres are a means to a broader political end, or whether they are

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an end in themselves. Are they facilitators, containers or catalysts for political activity, or are they actually confrontational political strategies in themselves? Often, so much work goes into running and cleaning social centres and autonomous spaces that there is little time left for what is seen as the real stuff of activism - political meetings, demonstrations and actions, organising, building social movements. Many activists, used to being mobile, are anxious about fixing themselves to a place too firmly. These fears - creating a self managed safe space that is too inward looking and comfortable – are important and need addressing, especially if social centres start to become trendy cafés, bars or alternative shops.

So what is their effectiveness as political projects?

On one level, they make new worlds seem more achievable and increase the possibility of politics based on self-organising and

collectivity. They are also a crucial entry point for a largely depoliticised generation due to the lack of visible, active radical alternatives in their workplaces, schools and communities. But gauging effectiveness is an illusive and probably pointless task. One person's effectiveness is another person's failure. Success is also often externally and negatively defined - when such radical projects are seen as an effective opposition they provoke repressive responses from the state and police. A nice double-edged sword. And who do social centres aim at? On the one hand, they look inward – as resource centres and safe bases for those involved in developing and deepening anti-capitalist resistance and direct action. On the other hand, they look out beyond the comfort zone of known activists and like-minded politicians into the wider community, and connect and support local struggles. Ultimately, these are not separate strategies and there needs to be a desire to build a broader base of support for anti-capitalist ideas and practices locality by locality.

But the relationship between social centre activists and the local community remains largely unresolved. There is a tendency to assume, as one person put it, that 'they' (the 'non-political' public) have a conservative way of looking at things. In general, there is a strong push to overcome these perceptions. First, people want to reach out through actions and deeds, through living examples that inspire people, rather than through the use of propaganda words and slogans. Second, people value the largely unknown views of the local community in their own right. So social centres reject the 'sausage factory' route to social change where 'non-activists' are processed and indoctrinated to think in particular ways – in you come Mr and Mrs non-political, and out you come ready for the struggle! As one member of the London Social Centre collective put it:

'The most productive thing we can do is create an accessible place where people are engaging in an analytical dialogue with us and then developing from that point onwards. Also not patronising people.... they create their own sort of political engagement as well rather than some sort of factory thing where they come in non political and they come out as anarchists and stuff doesn't work like that.'

These days social centres really try to avoid looking like 'ghettoised anarchist squat spaces' as one person told me, preferring to be professional looking, using familiar signs such as coffee machines, art exhibitions, and reading areas to be part of 'normal society'. Being welcoming is also seen as crucial. Gary from London explained:

'When you walk through the door what is the first the first thing that happens to you, the first person you talk to what is that interaction like? Does someone smile at you, do you get a gentle non-judgmental interaction with somebody, on an architectural level, what's the place like when you come into it - you know, how can you make the place as welcoming as possible?'

Reaching out is a result of the self-critique and discussions about political tactics within the anti-capitalist movement. It is a reflection of a perceived failure of autonomous, anti-capitalist groups to capture substantial ground and spread ideas within mainstream society, especially since the heyday of Seattle. Geoff from the London Vortex Collective said:

'The problem with the anticapitalist movement was basically that it mobilised once every six months....we were serious

about changing the world, so how do you do that if you are only communicating to one section of society?'

Activities in social centres, then, often try to attract people to engage in debate, analysis and socializing, through public talks, film screenings, reading areas, café and bar spaces, gigs. These activities create social centres as hubs for sparking debate and action on key issues in that locality. This isn't to say that there is consensus about reaching out. Doing it is often seen as a sure-fire way of diluting important political imperatives and strategies for working towards insurrectionary and confrontational politics. In one social centre, for example, participants became divided over the issue of whether or not it was 'anarchist' to give local people food.

“ Reaching out is a result of the self-critique and discussions about political tactics within the anti-capitalist movement ”

Closing salvos. Reflections on building anti-capitalist strategy

What are the strategic prospects for these kinds of anti-capitalist projects? The table below summarises some of the ways that social centres resist and promote. There are a number of strategic issues I want to end on. The first refer to priorities for growth. What is needed to promote more individual radical, self managed place projects committed to anti-capitalist practice as well as a network to support such spaces? Progress has already been made through network meetings and a dedicated website and social centres continue to support a range of anti-capitalist projects and host national meetings for movements such as No Borders and the Camp for Climate Action. There is a need, and probably enough desire, for a stronger sense of a collectively functioning network that can mutually support the wider movement as well as individual projects. We also need to ask ourselves if the network is fighting on the right issues, and if not how does it define wider areas that social centres are well placed to address? An obvious starting point is land and property speculation and wider struggles over urban gentrification and privatisation.

There could also be a stronger push to support an anti-capitalist politics in the UK, and through this identify which parts of a wider infrastructure of resistance and creation could be supported and developed (for example, independent media, health, production, prisoner support, outreach). Social centres could also state more forcefully what they are for and against and contribute to stating feasible alternatives locally. Many do this through, for example, workers co-operatives, not for profit entertainment, and free libraries and meeting spaces.



Second is the issue of growing these kinds of projects into a more connected, coherent and politically effective movement. Are they just defensively local projects or can, and should, they have wider meaning, and provide models for the benefit of our society? What is their role in a wider parallel, externally oriented, growing infrastructure which meets our desires and needs right here and now, but which also genuinely represent non capitalist values? This is not to suggest creating a comfort zone in which activists can circulate, but rather promoting an ever-expanding set of activities that can start to genuinely create parallel opportunities for housing, leisure, work and food. It is about making a post-capitalist future begin that seems feasible exciting and doable and avoids the dogmatic, moralist politics of the Left.

Another strategic area is about developing and sharing anti-capitalist ideas. Education, and the long tradition of popular education, is important here. There needs to be more times and spaces for people to come together to discuss joint approaches to confronting neoliberalism. At some point there needs to be serious connected conversations with all those on the Left about the merits, or not, of movement building to seize power on

	POINTS OF RESISTANCE	POINTS OF PROMOTION
SPACE	Enclosure, privatization, speculation, gentrification	Commons, platforms, safe spaces, permanence, incubation, shell
POLITICAL IDENTITY	Fixed, pure, answers	Impure, messy, possibility, questioning, complexity
SOCIALISATION	Alienated, dependent, depersonalised, individual	Autonomy, care, interdependence, collective, mutual aid, solidarity
ORGANIZATION	Hierarchy, representative, static, wage labour, for profit	Experimental, consensus, direct, flexible, free labour, not for profit, self managed, biodegradable
STRATEGY	Ghettoisation, blueprints, propaganda, indoctrination, co-optation	Means and ends, deeds and words, outward facing, engagement

“ *Social centres and autonomous spaces in these dark times are amazing reminders of the possibilities of building the new worlds we dream of* ”

the one hand, and focusing on grassroots power on the other. Locally, social centres also should consider whether, and how, they need to confront the local state as it becomes a block to further change, and the problems of just promoting their own version of local self management. One final issue relates to the ongoing tensions between strategies of illegally occupying/squatting space and legally renting/buying space. The accusation that legality and inclusivity has de-radicalised these place projects and professionalised activism needs addressing head on and needs talking about.

There are a number of key internal strategic issues such as, often invisible, internal hierarchies, lack of attention to accessibility, emotional needs and inclusivity, gender

divisions and domination of men especially within group process, and age divisions especially those between different political cultures and movements. The wider issue is how anti-capitalism can break out of the limits of the protective, internally looking ghettos it sometimes makes for itself. We have to ask ourselves, how can our examples appear more do-able and what we say more feasible? Finally, there are strategic issues of evaluation and collective methodology. What methods can be used for evaluating our own projects so we know what is working and what isn't? Can we evaluate why anti-capitalist ideas do not spread. Is it the content, the medium, the messengers, the process, the presentation? How do we decide what we do next? How can we use wider consultations and co-inquiry to develop a greater collective understanding

of what we have achieved, and would like to achieve, and to engage with others about key issues?

A commitment to anti-capitalism is always going to be messy and incomplete. Social centres and autonomous spaces in these dark times are amazing reminders of the possibilities of building the new worlds we dream of. We still ask, what now? What next? When will the future begin? Social centres help here: they continue to give us strategic glimpses of what an anti-capitalist life may look and feel like.

RESOURCES

BOOKS AND GUIDES:

- Advisory Service for Squatters (2005) *The Squatters Handbook*. Advisory Service For Squatters, 84b, Whitechapel High St, London E1 7QX. 12th edition.
- Bey, Hakim (1991) *The Temporary Autonomous Zone, Ontological Anarchy, Poetic Terrorism*. Autonomedia, New York.
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- Wates, N. (1980) *Squatting: The real story*, London: Bay Leaf Books.

WEBSITES:

GENERAL

The Commoner. A web journal for other values
 Diggers & Dreamers Guide to Communal Living
 Intentional Communities
 Social centres
 The Land is ours

www.commoner.org.uk
www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Intentional_community
www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_center
www.tlio.org.uk

SQUATTING

Advisory Service for Squatters
 Schnews squatting guide
 Squatters handbook Australia
 No frills Melbourne Squatters Guide
 Italian squats
 Squat Net
 Wikipedia definition

www.squatter.org.uk
www.schnews.org.uk/diyguide/squatting.htm
www.cat.org.au/housing/book.htm
www.geocities.com/squattersguide
www.tutto.squat.net
www.squat.net
www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Squatting

NETWORKS

UK Social Centres Network
 Global Infoshops network
 Italian social centres

www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk
www.eco-action.org/infoshops
www.ecn.org/presenze

CO-OPERATIVE ADVICE

Radical Routes
 Industrial Common Ownership Movement
 Co-operatives UK
 Catalyst Collective Ltd
 Upstart Services Ltd

www.radicalroutes.org.uk
www.icof.co.uk/icom
www.cooperatives-uk.coop
www.eco-action.org/catalyst
www.upstart.coop

E-LISTS

UK social centres network

www.lists.riseup.net
www/info/socialcentrenetwork

London Social Centres Network
 Infoshops e list

londonscn@yahoo.co.uk
 send e-mail to lists@tao.ca
 with the words 'subscribe infoshops'



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