

## Report from Social Centres Gathering the Commonplace social centre, Leeds

29 January 2006

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**Introduction.** What might be the first UK-wide gathering of social centres took place at the Commonplace social centre in Leeds and was a very friendly, informative and constructive experience. It was also a positive step in the creation of a working network of social centres. Some 60 people attended from *past centres* like ex-Grand Banks, Institute for Autonomy (London), PAD (Cardiff), *current spaces* like Kebele (Bristol), LARC (London), Matilda (Sheffield), Basement (Manchester), Sumac (Nottingham), Chalkboard (Glasgow), Common Place (leeds), Hanover Squares (leeds), 1-in-12 (Bradford), the Square (London) and *future initiatives* in Preston, Liverpool and Newcastle.

**The Films.** After enjoying the commonplace café collective's regular Sunday vegan brunch (which has been packing the place out for the past month), some 60 people watched a montage of clips about social centres and other autonomous spaces from across Europe in the Common Place cinema.

***The Common Place Cinema Collective is making copies of its social centre archive available on demand (email stuart [at] riseup.net).***

**The Meeting.** This took place between 4pm and 6pm. We kept roughly to the following proposed agenda:

### 1. Opening

*Brief presentation of gathering: why we're having it, the purpose of constructing a network*

### 2. Introductions (3-5mins each)

*Present your social centre, background, history, events, shared politics, your aim...etc*

### 3. Collective projects

*Utilising the number of SC present, what projects do we need support and development with other SC (Common resources, hack labs, unified political strategies/campaigns)*

### 4. How do we make a network function?

*Following on from the discussions, what's needed to be discussed and what work delegated to continuing and improving relationships between SC.*

**1. Opening.** The Commonplace Cinema Collective had scheduled an afternoon of films and discussions on social centres and autonomous centres for Leeds folk. Realising that there had been a few attempts to create a network, they thought this could be a

useful contribution to that end and put a call out to other social centres to come along. No one was expecting many people to come, especially as it was a Sunday and the trains are so shit! It was a pleasant surprise, then, that so many people turned up and bodes well for the future.

**2. Presentations of social centres.** We had a quick go round which took about an hour in the end such were the range and depth of presentations by those present. Here is a summary of what was said – please excuse any mistakes.

**London.** Successful temporary squats in Central London have created different effects depending on where they have been located, some being in central commercial locations reaching passers-by, and others in residential areas making a real connection with local communities. WOMBLES have been involved in various attempts to use the tactics of social centres. In January 2002, **The Radical Dairy** was occupied and ran for some 14 months in Stoke Newington. Between Jan and March 2004, we occupied an old community centre in Kentish Town on **Fortess Rd**, which gave birth to the "anti-copyright cinema" (films were "premiered" weeks, sometimes months before being officially released) which proved to be a success in the area. We then occupied an old wine bar "Grand Banks", a few blocks down the same road. The **Ex-Grand Banks** was a big success. It ran regular events, had hundreds of people from the area attend every week, and was used by a mixture of local kids (every lunchtime we have upwards of 50 school children, lunch was organised by donation and some of the older kids started helping behind the counter), parents, some teachers. During the week it was more like an extension of the school and was used like a common room. A recent newspaper article by a youth in Camden New Journal bemoaned the closure of ex-Grand Banks as a place where kids could hang out and feel respected – a kid was recently stabbed nearby. Between Feb and July 2005, we were involved in the **Institute For Autonomy in Gower Street**, which was run by a collective made up of University of London students and other assorted refugees from Grand Banks (!). The IFA, located close to the university/student area became used by a variety of political groups as well as hosting various labs (hacklab, screen printing, photolab, infoshop/bookstall) held a cafe three times a week offering top-quality food attracting workers, students and lecturers from around the area. It also housed upwards of 15 people and provided housing for people who were on their way to attend the anti-G8 actions in Gleneagles. Other social centres in London include **RampART (squatted)** since May 2004, and **London Action Resource Centre (owned)** since 2001. In the last month, in co-operation with a student anarchist group, a new squatted social centre has been launched in Russell Square – called **the Square**. The university has already won a repossession order but squatters are trying to create alliances with University staff and students to keep the space.

**Bristol.** The Kebele Social centre has been operating for 10 years and is mainly funded by a housing co-op situated above. Facilities include a library and resource centre, and space for community activities such as circus skills workshops and refugee support.

**Nottingham.** The **Sumac Centre** has been in its current building, which it owns, for 5 years. A private members bar and café rent space in the building and rooms are regularly let to a range of different groups from archeology clubs to refugee artists. It

also rents out space to ASBO social centre activists who are in the process of setting up another social centre in Nottingham and there are some residential rooms upstairs that are also being let. **ASBO** social centre has been going for 4 months. It's in a council owned building and has very strong community involvement, something helped persuade the council to give them the building. Its Situated in a large building containing many different flats, the space is divided between residential flats and space for a free shop, print resources & computers, an art workshop, a bike workshop and kitchen which provides cheap food and has regular user groups such as a Kurdish film club.

**Glasgow.** The **Chalkboard** social centre is situated between a yupified West End, the centre of town and a run down residential area – Mary Hill. The centre's primary focus is to attract and welcome the involvement of the local community by engaging in campaigns that are immediately relevant to local residents such as supporting tenancy associations and battling corruption and gentrification. They want to produce a citizen's user manual for people to cope with different aspects of living in struggle.

**Liverpool.** A group emerging out of Liverpool social forum is looking into the possibility of setting up a social centre in the basement of 'News from Nowhere' radical bookshop

**Sheffield.** Situated in a very central location in Sheffield, **Matilda** social centre operates an info shop, exhibition space, bookshop, cinema, hack lab, meeting space and café. They've managed to be financially sustainable through the money made by selling food at the café and books in the bookshop. The building has been run by a guy from a local record label for a while and was illegally sold by Sheffield Hallam Uni so they are occupying it – they don't pay rent.

**Preston.** A group of people in Preston are trying to get together and set up a space. One of their main problems is building support for such a project, since a lot of the potential energy in the area, especially amongst students and young people is being sucked dry by independent parties and their shitty politics.

**Bradford.** The 1 in 12 has been a collective for 25 years, initially putting on events around different venues in Bradford. They've owned their own premises for 18 years which they managed to buy with an inner city regeneration grant. They have a very active gig venue and a football team is run from there. One of the things they are challenged with at the moment is trying to maintain people's enthusiasm and commitment.

**Manchester.** The Basement is in central Manchester and it runs an infoshop, exhibition space, bookshop, asylum seeker project and a vegan café used by lots of city workers. The café pays rent on space, but they've also received help from the Ethical Property Co. which offered to buy the property for them. They also have a whole load of equipment which belongs to the social centre network such as: marquee, kitchen equipment, sound system, solar panels to run it all.

**Cardiff.** A group in Cardiff have been experimenting with squatted and legal spaces to get a feel of how they want to run their centre and also to get the confidence of organizing events and spaces that they feel they need in order to set up a permanent space.

**Leeds.** The **Commonplace** has been going for about a year, renting a disused factory in heart of yuppie corporate quarter called the Calls.

**Newcastle.** A group in Newcastle that have been working together for a year & a half, are currently negotiating a building in a central park of Newcastle which is between the city centre and the more 'underdeveloped' west end. It needs £30 grand worth of repairs and the group are in the process of putting together a business plan and legal constitution and will appreciate any technical help. Plans for the space include a resource centre and meeting space, which are both really needed in Newcastle, and also a cinema, gig and art space.

**3. Collective projects.** The presentations gave a lot of us a sense of being part of a broader political movement and were followed by a wide-ranging discussion about what we are trying to achieve, some of the problems and shortfalls involved and in what ways we can work together.

Not everyone agreed on why a network was needed but everyone seemed to think that better communication and sharing of resources was a good start. Three aspects were identified as being the main priorities and reasons for the formation of the network:

(1) The need to share information, advice and support on the legal, operational and practical questions surrounding the setting up & running of political social spaces. There was a clear call for a pool of resources, where advice documents such as the Guide to Licences put together by the Common Place can be downloaded and used by others trying to set up. It was also noted that there is a need to put together a list of contact details of individuals or groups with specific skills that can offer specific advice to any group that needs it.

(2) The desire to share programming information from selection of films for festivals to being able to book local and international speakers from one centre to the others. There was also a suggestion to put together a programme listing what's happening in all the different social centres across the country, similar to the Infosurpa events list for squats and social centres in London.

(3) The desire to exchange ideas, opinions and political views by reflecting on our different experiences of being involved in these projects. To create a platform from which to exchange not only practical skills, but also angles and political positions on the issues involved in setting up and running social centres. One suggestion was that the debate will assist each project to reach its full political potential.

In summary, many ideas were generally put forward:

- video/film sharing;
- skills sharing;
- technical support/expertise;
- combined speakers/band tours/art exhibitions;
- joint-campaigns against gentrification;
- joint-gatherings in one area to 'do something' positive/transform a place;
- shared bar at Big Green Gathering; do a
- guide to setting up social centres;
- citizens user manuals
- accessibility to old, disabled and non-white people

**4. Outcomes and action points.** There were a number of concrete outcomes:

(1) **Website.** It was agreed to set up an open working group to produce an **open, transparent website** for the social centres network incorporating aspects of existing sites in order not to duplicate. It will host information on practical and programming issues, a forum for discussing and organising, an events list for what's on, contact details and skills list, links to and descriptions of past and present spaces, a resource section comprising writings, practical guides, contacts etc, a discussion forum, a newswire (taken from Indymedia free spaces) etc.

***Action – Alessio from wombles agreed to take responsibility for coordinating the working group: contact him on michael\_bakunin [at] hotmail.com***

(2) **Social centres gathering in 3 months.** It was agreed that a **rotating meeting of social centres** every 3, 4 or 6 months in a different social centre if possible would be useful. As a starting point, people agreed to a well facilitated 2-day gathering of social centres/autonomous spaces in approx 3 months time (time/date/venue TBD), which would have a mixture of political and strategic discussions, practical skills and resource sharing. One possibility mooted was for the second day to be a kind of 'fix shit up' day somewhere that needed it. The gathering will be as open and inclusive as possible to all ages and ethnic origins, and will accommodate social spaces of all different forms regardless location and size, from small co-ops that offer some of its space for public use, to larger established social centres.

***Action - Ideas and proposals to be circulated via the social centres e-list***

(3) **E-list.** The decision was taken to use and expand the already existing social centres list to communicate and organize the website and conference.

**Action - Ian to update the social centres listserve.**

**Action – sign up at <http://lists.riseup.net/www/info/socialcentrenetwork>**

(4) **Big Green Gathering shared bar.** Sumac have been asked to do the bar at the Big Green Gathering this summer and feel they can't do it alone and would welcome the networks participation.

**Action - Get in touch with Andy at the Sumac if interested.**

(5) **Climate Action Camp – social centres barrio?** A suggestion was made to recreate the barrio set up, with social centres taking responsibility for each of the different neighborhoods & kitchens, at the forthcoming Climate Action Camp which will take place in the summer somewhere in the North of England. This is open to anyone interested.