In towns and cities across the country, activists are reaching out to local communities with a new style of ‘rooted’ politics. **Paul Chatterton reports on the UK’s ‘autonomous social centres’**

What’s this place? Want, leave what you don’t: the motto there. Out in the yard there are lettuces and tomatoes growing, which are used in the kitchen.

‘What’s this place?’ you might well ask. Welcome to the Common Place social centre, and your first glimpse of the UK’s autonomous social centres network.

**What’s it all about?**

So what are ‘autonomous social centres’? In essence, they are volunteer-run, self-managed, not-for-profit spaces for radical politics, debate and action alongside affordable entertainment, food and services. They provide a huge variety of activities: radical-cinema screenings, information services, bookshops, free shops, self-defence classes, cafes, bars, gig spaces, language classes and support sessions for migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, solidarity products from around the world (Palestinian olive oil, coffee from Zapatista autonomous villages), welfare and benefits advice, free computer access and ‘hack labs’, libraries and reading groups, and political meetings, action planning and talks.

Increasingly, they have become a base for organising on key local issues such as asylum rights, destitution and the loss of free spaces, community facilities and affordable services. Some centres, such as George’s X Chalkboard in Glasgow, produce and distribute community newspapers. Not surprisingly, a wide range of people make use of them — students, migrants, seasoned campaigners, the unemployed, parents with children and many others.

There are around 20 such spaces in the UK. Some are squatted, some rented and some co-operatively owned. They describe themselves as ‘autonomous’ to stress that they do it themselves, without help from government, lottery grants, political parties or individual benefactors. Some are based in city centres so as to be accessible to people from different communities; others have grown out of activities in specific communities.

Social centres haven’t just emerged from nowhere; they have grown out of a long tradition of similar experiments in other times and places. Social centres haven’t just emerged from nowhere; they have grown out of a long tradition of similar experiments in other times and places. In the 1980s ‘autonomy clubs’ came out of the confrontational anarcho-punk movement and an angry youth generation alienated by Thatcherism. The 1990s brought another wave around squatted projects that were part of the resistance to the poll tax, the 1994 Criminal Justice Act and the Tories’ road and airport expansion programme.

By the late 1990s, a wider global anti-capitalist movement emerged, which, faced with the increasing difficulties of squatting and land speculation in the UK, attempted to establish more permanent social centres where activists could put down roots and develop resources for action. A number of centres were also inspired by Italy’s militant and longstanding centri sociali movement, which has been occupying abandoned factories and community centres since the 1970s.

Many centres were set up to try to counteract the ‘buy buy’ consumer mentality and the carpet bombing of our cities by corporate brands. The Common Place, for example, does a fry-up brunch followed by political films every Sunday afternoon, all paid for by donation. What is significant about these activities is that while they may often plug gaps in welfare or service provision, they do so not by helping the state but by defying and challenging it, by promoting an ethos of mutual aid, solidarity and self-management — the old socialist and newer punk attitude that ordinary people can organise their own lives without asking the state or depending on big corporations.
Honest, complex and messy

Autonomous social centres share no single objective. Many are hubs for local activists and campaigning, providing resources for skill sharing, meetings, national gatherings and fundraising. Words like ‘anti-capitalist’ are sometimes used. But what does this mean in practice?

What you won’t find are Leninist vanguards plotting to overthrow state power. You are more likely to find a politics inspired by the Zapatista movement in the Chiapas state of Mexico, stressing the need to challenge all forms of dominating power. Instead of blueprints there is an honest, complex and messy politics that reflects the openness of these spaces.

As Jim, from the Common Place, puts it, ‘The people who congregate round here are people who want to get their hands dirty; they are not about pure politics. It makes you face up to loads of things you don’t normally consider.’ Social centres are about what is called deliberative democracy – places of debate and discussion, not places where you go to be told what to think.

Many of those who started social centres were inspired by the big moments of national and international resistance (the 1990 poll tax protests, Seattle in 1999, Genoa in 2001, the anti-war march of 2003) to make the ideas behind these mass mobilisations mean something locally. For them social centres are about reaching beyond the activist ghetto and mixing the more confrontational and short lived politics of direct action with something more permanent for organising and educating and getting involved with local people and their concerns.

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Jim, the Common Place, Leeds

‘This place has become a bit of a hawk in the storm,’ says Andy, from the London Action Resource Centre. ‘Things flourish and wax and wane and we kind of stay in the midst of it.’ Anna, from the same centre, describes how ‘we felt 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.’ In this sense social centres are also a political response to that very basic – and ancient – need for space.

So how are social centres organised? This boils down to how to manage your own affairs – which for these places means getting to grips with direct democracy and self-management, and a rejection of hierarchy and discrimination. In practice organising is very flexible and experimental and there is a necessary willingness to accept mistakes. Most have regular open assemblies, which use consensus tools and are the sovereign decision-making bodies at which decisions get made, problems get responded to and people can bring suggestions or requests. Anyone attending can propose an event such as a gig, meeting or film night, link up with like-minded people – and just do it. That can be really empowering.

Reaching out

How can social centres reach out, however, to someone who’s not a seasoned activist and may feel intimidated in a new and unfamiliar space? One approach is by offering activities and services that are relevant and useful to what’s happening locally, as well as providing opportunities for discussion and action on big issues. Some of the events taking place recently in centres across the UK have included film nights on asylum and destitution arranged by the No Borders network, organising meetings by the Camp for Climate Action, seed swaps organised by the Permaculture Association and various UK tours on everything from saving the wilderness in Iceland to getting involved in this year’s G8 demonstrations in Japan.

The idea is that these activities and events are used to try to get people actively involved in both campaigning and in the centre, putting mutual aid and cooperation into practice. It can be as simple as organising affordable food and entertainment, or skill sharing and free classes in self-defence or bike maintenance. These kinds of activities are urgently needed in overpriced cities where spaces to hang out without feeling hassled to shop are almost absent.

Social centres have also been active at responding to the needs of the most marginalised and precarious members of the community. Several centres offer free support and advice to these groups as services are cut back by the state. Common Conversation at the Common Place in Leeds, for example, has been offering free conversational English lessons every Saturday for two years, while the Migrant English Project at the Cowley Club in Brighton emerged as a response to government cuts in ESOL languages courses.

The Kebele social centre in Bristol is one of a number that have set up a housing co-operative to offer affordable accommodation; it is looking to set up a community co-operative to increase its involvement with the local community. A few places also run wholefood shops with the aim of trying to make them affordable to ordinary people. Examples include the FareShares food co-operative at the 56a InfoShop in south London and Leith Wholefoods at the Autonomous Centre for Edinburgh (ACE). The latter operates under the slogan: ‘Run by skint people for skint people.’ ACE has also run Edinburgh Claimants for several years, offering support with benefits, housing and debt problems, and is now involved in a new network, the Edinburgh Coalition against Poverty.
Managing these kinds of projects isn't easy. First, there is the familiar issue of a small group of people doing most of the work and failing to get others to go beyond simply using a place rather than getting involved in actually running it. Alongside this problem goes a recurring pattern of burnout, exacerbated by the ever-present precariousness of existing on a shoestring.

The issue of how people self-police each other’s behaviour in a free and consensual space is also difficult, as too is that of how to deal with people who simply exploit the effort and commitment of others. There is a risk of activists becoming building managers rather than focusing on activism and campaigning. And then there are race, class, education and gender divisions, the ever-present alpha males who dominate meetings and the problem of informal hierarchies emerging when consensus decision making processes are employed and the most confident, articulate and well known can get their way. Harassment by state agencies and the police is also a constant threat to the centres.

The biggest issue, however, remains that of accessibility and inclusivity. As a response to the negative stereotypes about ‘radical’ social spaces and anarchist squats, there is now a preference for a more inclusive look, using familiar signs such as coffee machines, art exhibitions and reading areas, which attempts to strike a balance between a commitment to radical politics while at the same time being appealing to new people. This desire to reach out is about realising that big spectacular moments of resistance aren’t enough on their own to change the world.

The anti-capitalist ‘movement of movements’ that reared its head at Seattle in 1999 has matured and moved on in the past decade, and autonomous social centres have moved on with it. While those involved in setting up such centres still have that urge to take on global capitalism in spectacular fashion, there has been a shift to a more rooted activism that is connected to daily struggles and organising around the material needs of the most disadvantaged. There is now a major focus to move beyond the comfort zone of the activist subculture into the wider community, and to make connections between radical activism and local struggles.

Their main political strength of the centres is that their activities demonstrate to a wider public the real possibilities of providing and managing our own spaces and services. Many of these centres are living examples of how we can all resist property speculation, privatisation and the domination of big business. But one of the questions they raise is whether anti-capitalist groups can develop attractive and feasible local alternatives that make sense to people who are not themselves politicised or activist.

Autonomous social centres are unusual political animals – positioned somewhere between 19th-century co-operative mutual aid societies, 20th-century radical social movements, and 21st-century local welfare providers. They represent a novel, more locally-grounded direction for political activists, based on activities that stress mutual aid and solidarity and a rejection of hierarchy. These kinds of political projects are always going to look messy and incomplete. This is, to a very large extent, their point – they aim to reflect and to harness, rather than try to subsume, the different ideas, viewpoints and energies of the wider society.

At their best, they are amazing reminders of human possibilities. As Jane from the 1 in 12 Club in Bradford puts it, ‘I think it is important to maybe not ask the big “Why are we here?” Maybe it is just a big exercise to see what the collective imagination can dream up.’ Social centres certainly don’t have all the answers, and they don’t offer a unified political plan. Their real potential is in their desire to break out of the activist ghetto and connect radical politics with their wider communities – which together can develop skills, ideas and action for positive social change.

Details of UK social centres can be found at www.socialcentresnetwork.org.uk. The new book What's this space? Stories from social centres in the UK and Ireland was published under a Creative Commons licence in May 2008 with funding from an ESRC project (www.autonomousgeographies.org). It features stories and analysis and can be downloaded for free at www.socialcentrestories.org.uk or ordered by emailing socialcentresbooklet@riseup.net

Photographs by Cecilia Anesi, taken at the Bowl Court centre in London