



Grassroots initiatives as pioneers of low-budget practices: An activists' roundtable

CiT-Collective, Gängeviertel, New Cross Commoners, Revolutionary Autonomous Communities, Heike Derwanz and Hans Vollmer

Introduction

Grassroots initiatives around the world try to balance neighbourhood responsibility with politics. As David Harvey writes: 'The urban obviously functions [...] as an important site of political action and revolt' (Harvey, 2012: 117). He regards territorial organisation and spontaneity, volatility and rapidity as characteristic features of urban political movements (*ibid.*). Other writers dealing with critical urban theory describe the political and economic tasks relevant groups need to perform. In this round table we wish to inquire into these performances. To this end, we have taken Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer's finding that the accumulation strategies one finds in cities not only concern capital, but can also be local and highly specific (Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer, 2012: 1) as our starting point for asking the activists themselves how these other strategies and urban change come alive on a grassroots level.

RAC-LA from Los Angeles, the *New Cross Commoners* from London, the *CiT Collective* from Vienna and *Gängeviertel* from Hamburg answered our questions concerning the manner in which they organise to 'save the city'. In this round table, 'saving' the city refers to all the various notions of saving: refashioning a civil society by mobilising the public, helping neighbourhoods or urban society in general to cope with current and future challenges such as growing inequality, avoiding the waste of money and resources in their voluntary work by redistributing, reusing or preserving items within the metabolism of the cities, or

in many other ways. Some are aligned with the ‘right to the city movement’¹, a name coined by Henry Lefebvre, nowadays an umbrella organisation for activists ‘fighting for democracy, justice and sustainability in our cities’². They share similar ideals, interests and motivations, but have developed diverse ways of pursuing them. All four of them, centred on the fight for space, resources and collectivity, sent contributions in response to our call for participation and contributed their experiences with organising themselves. After sending a questionnaire to four representatives, we compiled them for an activists’ round table which introduces their initiatives and shows how they work. Our questions concerning the ‘how-to’ are focused on methods, skills and calculations like the juggling of finances versus autonomy. The questionnaire enabled us to place different experiences and organisation models side by side, hopefully without losing their original voices.

Who are you?

RAC-LA: For more than 7 years, *The Revolutionary Autonomous Communities-Los Angeles (RAC-LA)* have distributed, on average, over 150 baskets of food (vegetables and fruit) every Sunday, affecting the lives of 450-600 persons. RAC-LA is based around McArthur Park, downtown Los Angeles, and consists of approximately 35 members with an additional 300 supporters. RAC-LA is overwhelmingly made up of the working poor, in many cases migrant workers (not ‘immigrants’, which assumes the existence of a ‘border’), in the main from Mexico and Central America, though there are black, white and members of Asian descent. In addition to our food program, RAC-LA distributes free cooked food made by our members to those we serve: the homeless, the poor and those without documentation, has ‘Know Your Rights’ seminars, has an attorney (member) who gives legal advice, and a physician (member) and nurse (member) available for health inquiries on our two feast days (May Day and 1st Sunday in November). In addition to those regularly scheduled events, RAC-LA gave a presentation and hosted the final day of the Anarchist Bookfair in LA (on December 8, 2013).

1 Their aims are: ‘We fight for concrete improvements that result in stronger communities and a better state of being for our friends, families, and for our children’s futures. Our organisations take on campaigns to win housing, education, transportation, and jobs. We struggle for community safety and security, neighbourhood sustainability, environmental justice, and the right to culture, celebration, rest, and public space’ (Perera, 2013).

2 Original slogan from the website: <http://www.righttothecity.org>.



Figure 1: RAC-LA distributing food. (RAC-LA)

NXC: The *New Cross Commoners* is a collective of people living, working, studying in New Cross, an area in the South East of London. Many of us consider what we do as a sort of activism. It is an activism organised not around campaigns but around issues, needs and desires. It is activism as a process organised around our everyday lives. It is also activism as a collective learning process, learning from the neighbourhood, learning from each other, learning from the texts we read together. The question is: how can we do things differently, away from the competition imposed by the market, away from the hierarchy imposed by the State. The shape of the collective is difficult to define, at the moment (January 2014) there are something like a dozen people who see themselves as part of the collective. The composition of the collective has been a subject of discussions from the beginning: how to respond to the complex social composition of the neighbourhood and, at the same time, how to sustain the consistency of the collective?



Figure 2: *The New Cross Commoners (New Cross Commoners)*

CiT: The CiT-Collective (Culture is Transformation) is an independent group of urban activists with the aim of a collective appropriation of the former *Gaswerk Leopoldau* in the north of Vienna, and bottom-up city planning strategies in general. The group, founded in summer 2011, consists of architects, city and landscape planners, artists, researchers, theorists, social workers and people related to the field of art and culture. The collective gathers knowledge about participatory processes, needs, ideas and spaces of cultural activists and cultural workers in Vienna and beyond and brings this knowledge into city politics and city planning situations.



Figure 3: *Performance by CiT Collective in the disused Leopoldau gasworks (CiT Collective)*

Gängeviertel: The *Gängeviertel* initiative started on August 22, 2009, around Valentinskamp, in the inner city of Hamburg. The *Gängeviertel* is a non-commercial urban space in the heart of one of the most expensive office locations in Germany. It occurred out of the first successful building occupation in Hamburg for twenty years. Over the last 5 years the occupiers have established studios, workshops, offices and event venues by refurbishing the old buildings to the extent possible with the resources available. With the foundation of a cooperative, the *Gängeviertel* is undergoing a structural change in its organisational model as a registered association.



Figure 4: The *Gängeviertel* buildings (Franziska Holz)

Why did you start? What is your motivation?

RAC-LA: The initiative that led to *RAC-LA* and culminated in the launching of the Food Program in November 2007 began in the wake of the police riot in MacArthur Park on May Day of that year, wherein the LAPD launched brutal attacks upon a march for human rights initiated by migrant workers, their families and people having but not necessarily claiming ‘citizenship’ in the US. The idea of mutual assistance (not charity) as a vehicle for building a non-hierarchical model of a revolutionary organisation via such mutual aid in the form of a food assistance program was launched. *RAC-LA* is today an exportable model of self-agency on the part of members of the working class and as such constitutes important work.

NXC: In February 2013 we came together as the *New Cross Commoners* to learn from forms of self-organisation in New Cross, and also in an attempt to organise our lives differently and contribute to the existing collective experiences happening in the area. It was not just learning from the neighbourhood but also from the city at large with its squats and social centres, with its occupations, with its campaigns and demos, with the life of other collectives some of us had experience of. As students or ex-students many of us had a frustration with Goldsmiths³, with the way it exists as a separate entity from the life of New Cross, with the self-referentiality of a knowledge too often designed to feed the academic system. The *New Cross Commoners* has been thought as a process of learning differently, a process where people could learn from theory as well as from the neighbourhood and from various experiences of self-organisation. This is what makes this learning (micro)political. Another motivation for coming together was a desire to become gradually independent from wage labour by experimenting with the sharing of resources, with collectivised forms of production and reproduction, with forms of cooperation, with community based economies. A third and more basic motivation is to make our life in the neighbourhood less alienating by connecting with other people who have a desire of changing New Cross for the better by organising bottom-up.

GiT: The main motivation of the collective and its collaboration network is to perform their 'right to the city' by negotiating new public spaces for practices of cultural and social transformation. By researching and practising urban common strategies, possibilities and productions, we emancipate ourselves from an everyday paralysing situation and formulate our own aims and strategies regarding the city as a social and political space. This is a process within networks and collaborations to create a positive utopian contribution to contemporary theory, production and mediation in the field of city planning and the production of space.

Gängeviertel: Many of the *Gängeviertel* activists had lost their studios and apartments as a result of the progressing gentrification process, or were threatened by steep rent hikes. The prospects of finding adequate spaces on the real estate market appeared slim at best in the eyes of the protagonists, most of whom had very few financial resources. Rents in Hamburg were rising rapidly, and urban niches for cultural activity and affordable housing were disappearing day by day. Instead of taking counteractive action and providing for affordable housing and working spaces, the city government opted for costly lighthouse projects that gave further impetus to the upward price spiral. The occupiers originally wanted to make a statement in opposition to this policy. But once they

3 A college of the University of London situated in New Cross.

got the chance they developed the aim to realise a lasting alternative social model in the *Gängeviertel* based on self-administration and openness.

How do you work? What are your methods and forms of working together?

RAC-LA: Anyone can join *RAC-LA* by participating in the work that we do. When *RAC-LA* began it did so with a group of a dozen or so activists. Since that time all but two of the founders have gone on to other work. But these have been replaced by members of the community who came because they needed the food and who saw what we were doing and decided to join. There is no longer any distinction of moment that divides the activists from these members of the working class.

The innate purpose which drives *RAC-LA* is the building of a model of a revolutionary organisation through a mutual aid food program. What we are doing is technically illegal as we have no permit to do our work in the park. In addition, *RAC-LA* needs to block off parking spaces for the arrival and loading and unloading of both the vehicles of compost-seeking gardeners as well as the trucks bringing the food donations. As it is illegal this has been an excuse for police interventions. In spite of all of this, members of *RAC-LA* ‘cop-watch’ (with video cameras) all such incursions. In the process of distribution we try to achieve maximum equality. Picking-up food at farmers and wholesalers and distributing food according to the number of people desiring parcels of food is voluntary work sans the incentive of payment – though most workers opt to receive baskets of food at the end. *RAC-LA* is thus a mode of cooperative production, where one works for the benefit of all and is, in turn, benefited by the work of all.

No one assigns anyone to any sector. Anyone can do any job. In our methods of production, the first order of business is the unloading of the vehicles bringing the raw materials of *RAC-LA*'s production, fruits and vegetables to our location. Separately, a group of 4-6 people measure and package quart-bag-size packets of rice and beans. *RAC-LA* has full intentions of creating value-adding jobs for its members as well as the community at large. When tabling at other events, members of *RAC-LA* will cook and offer food for donations with a portion of the surplus above the costs of the items cooked going to the comrade who did the work, and a portion to the organisation. Also we have created a line of organic soaps which will employ some comrades in their production as well as sale. Also *RAC-LA* t-shirts and handbags are prized by other comrades and we offer them for donations at every event we table or participate in. But our food program is our base for launching other projects like our garden, our exercise program, our

soap- and t-shirt-making efforts. This is the hard work, the real work, of reading ourselves, our comrades and our neighbours to take up the struggle for and the building of a new way of life: new vistas, new horizons, new visions made manifest through such work.

NXC: The *New Cross Commoners* is an open collective, and this openness is something that is actively pursued. Openness doesn't simply mean that what we organise is open to everybody, it means that we try out ways to engage with different people by organising different activities. When we read theory together, we read very slowly, not so much to understand the meaning of a text but to understand the connections it can have with the neighbourhood and our life as part of it. Still, a reading session would attract certain people and not others. The people's kitchen as we conceived it⁴ has been thought for this as well, to get other kinds of people engaged in activities that would also make us think together about our life in the neighbourhood against the many forms of enclosures produced by capitalism: enclosures of knowledge, housing, food and food production, and care. We have been discussing the problem of homogeneity since the very first Commoners meeting. De Angelis defines the commons as characterised by a 'non-homogeneous' community (de Angelis/Stavrvides 2010). It is not easy to increase the degree of non-homogeneity of a collective: for us it is a matter of creating new terrains where consistency can be created through a diversity (of class, race, gender, age, ability) that does not get erased or ignored.

The organisation of the *New Cross Commoners* is not hierarchical, and it is anarchic in a literal sense because there is no leadership. But this issue is more complicated by the fact that only a few of us initiated the process, after a long period of discussions. In such a case it is not easy to redistribute power and responsibility: they get conferred even when they are unwanted. It was very useful for us to propose the format of the 'people's kitchen' to other local collectives as well, so that even if for the moment some perceive the *New Cross Commoners* as somehow leading the people's kitchen, the dynamics got redistributed, new people took responsibility for this new 'project', and this makes the whole process more complicated, but allows for others to come to the fore, with their interests, desires, experiences. More specifically about the organisation: we have two mailing lists, one for activities open to everybody (readings, visits/walks, people's kitchens, workshops etc.) and another one for 'commoners', that is people who get involved in the organisation.

4 The people's kitchen as we organise it involves the usual food skipping, cooking and eating together, but also discussions around tables: the attempt is to bring together the conviviality of the people's kitchen with discussions about issues affecting our lives in the neighbourhood, so that the people's kitchen could function also as a platform to organise other activities.

CiT: As a collective, *CiT* embraces each member's individual skills and experience. We communicate in person and directly through meetings as well as using the Internet or individual sub networks. Tasks are worked out by specific members of the group or if necessary in sub-groups and through delegates. All main decisions and results are talked about and decided upon in consensus.

We are working within different formats – written, spoken, performative, visual, audio and moving image. We instigate political negotiations and understand ourselves as part of the DIY movement, amateurs with high compatibility to technocracy. Our main agenda is the conceptualisation, the development of visions. We sit down and talk, try to listen to each other as much as we can, bring forward all cases and stay mindful and respectful towards diversity in the group. Collective writing through open source tools, sharing of files, images, insights, regularly inviting in collaborative activists, politicians, inhabitants and locals to discussions and multi-layered forms of exchange. We apply the concept of 'actocracy'. If no one opposed to an idea, any person can go ahead and proceed with an action.

We publish our outcomes, information and results on our mailing list at our regular meetings and/or at our weblog. Thus we reach not just people from and in Vienna, but all over the world. We prepare press work and keep contact with journalists. We are in conversation with various departments of the city government and keep in touch with specific municipal authorities for the sake and purpose of knowledge transfers.

Through workshops (Urbanize-Festival 2012 and others) we collect wishes, ideas and needs of visitors and local residents. Post-cards, e-mail campaigns and (online-) petitions are means to mobilise political protest and for initiating discourse among citizens and politicians, as well as through press work, publications, articles, university classes, talks, panels, radio shows and academic papers. Artistic interventions, tactical media, performances, street art, invisible theatre, film screenings and cultural activities in public spaces allow for inclusion and urban communing to create an issue and talk about new options and perspectives.

Gängeviertel: The occupation of the *Gängeviertel* (2009) was disguised as an art and courtyard festival and advertised throughout the city. Exhibitions and performances that had secretly been prepared for weeks became visible for thousands of visitors by opening one door after the other, which had been locked for years. This tactic of cultural appropriation generated a positive response from all parts of the city's society. Today there are exhibitions, concerts, film showings, readings, discussions or workshops taking place nearly every day. Hundreds of

visitors come each week and take advantage of the free program of events and activities.

Where the association is primarily responsible for the design of the program, the cooperative is going to manage the houses after the renovation. For the ongoing renewal process, a 'building commission' was founded to mediate between the architectural office, a private development agency and, if necessary, the municipality.

The weekly general assembly is the most important organ, to ensure self-administration in a complex organisational structure. There is a basic consensus of how to work together. The association and the cooperative as formal institutions are hierarchal organisations. The members elect their chairmen, who can act after they informed and asked the general assembly. This is an informal committee where all relevant decisions are made on the basis of grass-roots democratic principles. The meetings are mostly open to everyone and thus also serve as a point of contact for outsiders who wish to become involved. The principles are: partisan and religious independence, openness, commonness, self-management, preservation and non-commercial use of the place. Several working groups, temporary or consistent, are responsible for certain tasks (cultural program, public relations, planning).

As the *Gängeviertel* is an open place and fluid social system it is hard to draw a line between in- and outside. There is something you can call a hard core of round about 80 activists but new people and ideas are very welcome. Venues can be used by all kinds of groups for non-commercial events and activities. Space is limited and there are some unwritten rules of how to behave: no violence, respect to others and so on. Unfortunately all kinds of social collectives produce excluding behaviour, like common symbols and language that might deter other people. But most of the members are aware of this and try to avoid this exclusion.

The *Gängeviertel* uses social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and runs two webpages (das-gaengeviertel.info, gaengeviertel-eg.de) to share events, dates and news, mostly about cultural and political issues. A monthly newsletter or the 'Übergänge' (transitions), which is part of a newspaper published by the municipality to inform neighbours about the ongoing renovation process. In 2012 the *Gängeviertel* released the publication 'Mehr als ein Viertel' (more than a quarter).

What are your resources?

RAC-LA: The greatest resource that *RAC-LA* has is the quality of its constituent members. Being revolutionaries whose ultimate aim is the destruction of the existing capitalist economy and its state apparatus, *RAC-LA* accepts no assistance whatsoever from that existing state. We are not a 501.c.3 - U.S. tax code reference number for an officially recognised non-profit organisation. Donations to us cannot therefore constitute an income tax deduction for our donors; donors who thus have no incentive to so donate to us save the presentation by and the representation of our organisation by the *RAC-LA* members who have made the initial contacts and stay in contact with these our donors. Our second greatest resource is the people that we serve. For, in the main, this is how it is that *RAC-LA* continues to be a growing dynamic. *RAC-LA* makes no 'recruitment drives'. There is no pressure exerted by members to 'do this so as to get that'. Members recruit themselves. And do so only out of the good that is in their character. Seeing others working voluntarily with no thought of compensation beyond 'Thank you's' impels a person into self-evaluation. A private introspection that, given the right type of person, can lead that one to do that which he/she has come to admire, i.e. join *RAC-LA*. This is the method to the model that is *RAC-LA*.

NXC: At the moment, the *New Cross Commoners* have no budget. So far the funding we got was very little and it was used mainly to cover production costs⁵. In our exploration of the neighbourhood we came across different resources that people use collectively, both material and immaterial, resources used for production and for reproduction. We could associate different kinds of resources with different places explored: housing for Sanford housing co-op, food for Common Growth communal garden, knowledge for the New Cross Learning (former public library), care for the New Cross poetry workshop. The *New Cross Commoners* itself have been dealing with knowledge (to self-organise a production of knowledge that comes from theory as well as from the experience of a specific context), care (to take care of the formation of a collective, to take care of our differences, to take care of our potentials) and more recently food (skipping food for the people's kitchen and cooking together not for charity and not as a service/entertainment), but it might be reductive to categorise resources in such a way.

5 We got 1,000 pounds from the Goldsmiths design department and we used them to pay travel for people coming to visit us, materials for workshops, and for this publication:
http://newxcommoners.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/nxpublication_2013.pdf.

In more concrete terms we have often been using Goldsmiths as a resource for meetings, but also cooking, printing and making photocopies, getting materials for workshops and using the library. For us it is a way to reclaim Goldsmiths as a public place, to crack the enclosure of knowledge academia produces.

A resource in New Cross are also the several local collectives organising from below, sometimes in dialogue with public institutions, like New Cross Learning, a former public library closed because of the cuts and then reclaimed and run by locals. A tool we use and often go back to in order to interrogate the potential of local resources are maps like this one <http://nxc.smappamenti.org/>, which came out of a workshop we had as part of Party in the Park, a local free festival. These mapping exercises are more than simply a matter of locating and transcribing what exists in New Cross, they are a tool to think what does not and should exist in New Cross, where enclosures are produced, what should be reclaimed and collectivised. They are a tool to discuss together, to incite people's imagination, to see what we got already, what has been taken away, what we could make use of. People as well can be considered as resources, against a neoliberal ideology of 'human capital' and 'human resources' based on exploitation and self-exploitation.

To talk about resources is to talk about local economies, and in this respect we will soon experiment with local economies also through The Field, a small building owned by a private landlord that some of the commoners got rent-free for a few years⁶. We are talking about the possibility for The Field, besides being a meeting point for locals and for activist collectives, to make some profit by selling food and drinks. At the same time the space will also offer a free use of tools and facilities. A community economy has to be fed not only by public money and private income but also by sharing and exchanging (skills, labour, goods) that do not involve the use of money, by self-productions (food, energy, clothes, cleaning products, medicines) and collective uses of resources: this might allow a partial withdrawal from a monetary based economy.

The question of ownership is important in the context of the commons. As a collective the *New Cross Commoners* does not own anything. A public square is not a commons in itself because the citizens cannot make a free use of the square, there are rules which regulate the use of the square, and those rules have not been decided by those who use the square. A commons is a resource whose use is negotiated, decided and regulated by its users on a direct and non hierarchical basis. A commons is not a resource that everybody can use, it is a resource that can be used by people who take part in the processes of negotiating

6 <http://thefieldnx.wordpress.com/>.

and re-negotiating its regulations – people who take part in commoning. Such a commons is something that has to be taken care of against the control of the state and the privatisation of the market.

CiT: A crucial resource for the *CiT-Collective* is the space in which we can work and that allows us to talk and listen to each other. A space to cultivate the community through social and cultural practices that emphasise creativity and ever redefined learning. This space can be (nearly) everywhere. It is also on us to generate this space, not on others to give it to us. Simultaneously a main source for the group and our work is the idea and practices of a collective/solidarity distribution of resources within Vienna (and beyond). We demand a direct democratic, creative and bottom-up planning process opposed to top-down, profit-oriented practices of exclusion as witnessed in today's city politics. Our network, which allows communication and collaboration with similar projects and groups all over the world, and the sharing of experiences and tactics within these networks, are as such a fundamental resource and aim at the same time.

There is no financial budget, just personal/collective resources so far. No plan to apply for sponsorship/subsidies until we get the planned project Gaswerk Leopoldau into practice. If not, it could happen that the collective applies for subsidies within a framework of other projects if necessary.

Gängeviertel: The fundamental resource of the *Gängeviertel* is its place with the twelve historic houses. Individual donations and pro-bono services help to organise events, which are mainly made possible by the unpaid labour of the activists, artists, architects, film-makers, cooks, and all kinds of craftsmen. Social networks, including many actors of the cultural scene and the Right to the City network of Hamburg, contribute and support the *Gängeviertel* with knowledge and experience (e.g. from former squatting projects). But the most specific resource and capital of the collective is its heterogeneous but coherent social structure.

All buildings belong to the municipality. After a building is renovated the *Gängeviertel* cooperation is going to leasehold them. But conditions are not negotiated yet. In the eyes of the activists the municipality has to waive profits and regard the activists' high amount of voluntary work in the process. In general there is no budget and no paid position. Only some of the temporary jobs for the most responsible and time-consuming functions in the frame of the renewal process are paid. These wages are paid by visitors' micro-donations and funding from the municipality. In addition, the cultural office funds some galleries in the *Gängeviertel* with project-linked payments. But in general the activists are paying for their success with self-exploitation.

How do you balance autonomy and institutionalisation?

RAC-LA: RAC-LA was founded and constituted as a long-term project – not as a quick, easy ‘solution’⁷. When we began a comrade voiced the admonishment that we were undertaking a 15-20 year project, with the first 5 being committed to gaining the trust of the community, the second 5 or so would be establishing ourselves as a force in the neighbourhood, and the third 5 being the beginnings of the exercise of that ability to influence and change our surroundings. In this, we will be greatly assisted once we find a place for a RAC-LA community centre that is close to the park and affordable for us. Towards that we have saved money and are ready to lease if and when a location in the area comes available.

The ‘balance’ referred to in the query just above flows as a matter of course from the ‘first fundamental’ that the organisation, development and evolution of RAC-LA has proceeded from: the equality of worth of every member sans regard for age, race, language, ‘nationality’, sex or sexual preference. This is readily relatable to the ‘autonomy’ portion of the above inquiry. As for ‘institutionalisation’, the word has an echo of a ‘finished product’, like dried solid cement. For RAC-LA, ‘institutionalisation’ would perhaps be better replaced by ‘institutionalising’, i.e. the creation, experimentation and, if need be, negation of ideas and/or practices as we try to learn how it is that we want ourselves to be. For, and this is the ‘prime directive’, ‘we cannot get to where we have not travelled’.

NXC: There are often compromises to be faced when getting funding, and it is vital to be able to mitigate them. The only ‘compromise’ with the Design Department which gave us some funding for the first year of activity was that we had to produce a publication as an outcome. To get compromised through public funding might also mean to deal with a public institution in direct ways, and in the best scenario this might open a process of dialogue, negotiation, confrontation that can have a political relevance, it can have an impact on the institution itself or at least on some of the people working for it.

An institution is not necessarily something evil, it depends how we understand it and what kind of institution we are talking about. ‘Institutionalisation’ could be seen as a goal if we understand it in these terms: in five or ten years the *New Cross Commoners* could exist as a revolutionary collective and an institution of the commons without having to rely on the singularity of the commoners composing it today.

7 <http://fourstory.org/features/story/who-are-rac-la-and-what-are-they-doing-in-macarthur-park/>.

In order to answer this question it would be useful, especially in the context of New Cross, London and the UK, to talk about ‘Big Society’. This is a programme the current Tory government has promoted to ‘support and develop talent, innovation and enterprise to deliver social impact’ (this definition is taken from the Big Society Network website).⁸ In other words, Big Society is a way to exploit people’s desire to do good, build communities, improve their neighbourhood as a way of filling the holes that the erosion of the welfare state, the cuts and the austerity measures are provoking. It is like saying ‘dear citizens, the government doesn’t have much money to help you anymore and now you have to help each other’ – but this has to happen now under the government’s ‘facilitation’ and control. Whenever you do something for your ‘community’ on a voluntary basis you have to ask yourselves: to what extent am I playing the Big Society game? Is it fair for public money to feed the financial market instead of the welfare state and do I want to be complicit with this? We could answer to this problem like this: we build communities, improve our neighbourhood, as long as we don’t do this for someone else, for charity, and as long as we do also fight in some way against the privatisation of the market and the control of state, as long as we can obstruct gentrification, the multiplication of enclosures, the commercialisation of our lives.

CiT: As long as the *CiT-Collective* is not officially part of the planning process (Gaswerk Leopoldau), we were not forced to institutionalise ourselves. But in the future it is possible that we have to do so if we want to make any sort of official contract in terms of using the former gasworks for our means. For that matter, the foundation of a parallel organised NGO-association (KIT Kultur in Transdanubien) is a first step we took in this direction. But the *CiT-Collective* itself is a (fluid) collective and as such in general not an institution at all. Our autonomy and solidarity is a core content of our position as a independent structure and social-political actor.

Gängeviertel: To reach the goal of self-organisation and – management also after the renovation in negotiation with the municipality, the *Gängeviertel* initiative founded the cooperative. In the eyes of some activists this progressive institutionalisation poses the risk that the *Gängeviertel* could lose its openness and its character as an experimental free space. On the other hand, through the process of institutionalisation, they hope to build a more reliable foundation upon which to live and work. From the standpoint of de Certeau’s distinction between strategy and tactic, institutionalisation can be seen as a transition from the tactic of cultural appropriation to a strategy through which the occupants of the *Gängeviertel* hope to overcome the precarious status of their situation.

8 <http://www.thebigsociety.co.uk/>.

Principles, strategies and lessons learned

RAC-LA: To paraphrase Marx in the ‘Critique of the Gotha Plan’⁹: Only then, when we have eliminated the social and economic bases of greed – will society be able to inscribe on its banners that we have at long last made the transition from ‘each according to his greed’, to ‘each according to his need’. Towards that end, RAC-LA has discovered that one of the asserted ‘problems’ of communism solves itself. It has been alleged that when goods no longer have a price that greed will run rampant leading to gross inefficiencies. What has been seen in RAC-LA is that when we have a surfeit (sometimes we have an extreme amount of a certain item) and we ‘communise’ it, that, at first, people will take as much as they can, i.e. wildly out of proportion to their needs or even desires. What happens? They with effort lug it home where a portion of it remains unconsumed and rots. They have to throw it out. They do this once, twice, by the third or fourth time many have learned.

Another ‘problem’ is that of the disassociation of work from compensation, of effort from reward. The spirit that binds RAC-LA together is the celebration of working with and working for each other. Of course we have problems. All of us joined RAC-LA suffering from the PTSD that is endemic to capitalism. When disputes flare, we solve and resolve these by placing and examining the problem in the context of seeking ‘what is right?’ and not ‘who is right?’.

RAC-LA is an experiment, an experiment of anarchist-socialism¹⁰ operating within the very bowels of the beast that is capitalism. And as an experiment we must try things. Some work. Some do not. The point, however, is that we try. And that we learn.

NXC: We don’t have a manifesto, but there are some principles that also emerge from the documentation gathered in the *New Cross Commoners* website¹¹. An important principle is that of an experimentation with a temporality of care, to

9 In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life’s prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly – only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!
<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/cho1.htm>.

10 <http://revolutionaryautonomouscommunities.blogspot.com/2011/02/experiment-in-socialism-racs-free-foo..html>.

11 <http://newxcommoners.wordpress.com/>.

follow a sustainable pace, to avoid burnouts but also to allow for different kinds of speeds to be taken into consideration, for different issues and desires to emerge, to be perceived, to be taken care of. This is the meaning of ‘going slowly to go far’, starting from a micropolitics, a politics of subjectivity, of a becoming collective that requires care.

A second principle has to do with the necessary connection between micro- and macropolitics, between a politics of subjectivity, desires, conflicts and care, and a politics of institutions, rights, decisions, campaigns. Commoning is not just a matter of changing lifestyles, of buying less and sharing more, it is also a matter of fighting enclosures, of reclaiming a collective use of resources, of opposing the government’s austerity measures, of withdrawing from the market and its logic of competition. The *New Cross Commoners* attempt to bring together the ‘positive’ of a creative experimentation with the ‘negative’ of a critical analysis, by starting from the micro to engage with the macro. For example, a practice of commoning around care cannot be separated from the struggle against the closure of Lewisham hospital. Otherwise you might end up either paralysed by the enormity of what is unjust, or inadvertently complying with the dominant system.

Another connected principle is to start from the middle, from where we are, who we are, and what we do. This principle comes from a feminist tradition that takes experiences and living conditions as starting points for a critical analysis that moves onto action. We live in London, we live in New Cross, we share a precarious condition. At the same time there are differences, we are not all precarious in the same way. To start again and again from the middle means to recompose our differences without erasing or ignoring them. It is a way of starting now, with what we have, instead of preparing for something to come in the future, or getting paralysed in the present. And it is a way of undoing an ‘us and them’ dynamic that we see so often when it comes to social engagement.

CiT: The act of a participatory/bottom-up/direct-democratic planning intervention and planning process, without making the same mistakes like economic exploitation and political adsorption as many other creative planning projects faced. Acting as a coming voice. Speaking out positions to confront hegemonic principles and power productions. Generate utopian pictures, ideas and aims to practise the production of a critical common voice in opposition to political and economic stakeholders. One key principle of *CiT* is therefore not to fix one use and state of the (city) space, but to implement a floating self-transforming system of (cultural) usages and to take a clear (political) position at the same time.

Gängeviertel: The *Gängeviertel* as a collective has something one can call a joint action. Like a colleague once wrote, it ‘finds its form within the process of acting’ and follows a direction ‘based on overlapping interests of individuals around a situation’.

If their strategy proves successful, the activists in the *Gängeviertel* will have secured yet another part of their ‘right to the city’. Henri Lefebvre sees this in part as the production of one’s own urban space, which represents a social change. The *Gängeviertel* is already a symbol of opposition to a purely investor-oriented urban development policy and to gentrification, and of the appeal for free spaces and self-determination. Now the initiative is working on transforming that symbol into an alternative urban space from which the actors themselves and the people of Hamburg can derive sustainable social and cultural benefits.

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Heike Derwanz is associate researcher at HafenCity University in Hamburg, Metropolitan Culture.

Email: heike.derwanz@hcu-hamburg.de

Hans Vollmer is a landscape architect working in Basel.

Email: derselbstbauer@gmail.com