THE UBELE INITIATIVE, JUST SPACE, SPARK

Coordinated action in partnership with

On 25th June 2016, the Ubele Initiative, Just Space and Spark came together to organise the *Reclaim Our Spaces* event. The event saw a variety of activist groups and organisations gathered at Conway Hall to try and build a path towards a collective effort able to build an alternative London.

We were convinced that bringing together a number of different and diverse groups had huge potential to open up new avenues into community organising and campaigning to reclaim community spaces across London.

In the words of Yvonne Field, founder of the Ubele Initiative, the aim of the day was to “set forth the vision for a potential formation of a London-wide alliance that will aim to rebuild, secure and sustain ‘our spaces’, our houses, community centres, libraries, parks, neighbourhoods, and, ultimately, to reshape our societies”. In her introduction, Yvonne summarised The Ubele Initiative’s pioneering work on mapping BAME community assets in England and London and the report *A Place to Call Home*, produced in partnership with Locality, which set out some recommendations on how to retain and sustain BAME community assets across England.

Just Space coordinator Richard Lee, greeted the conference by describing Just Space’s efforts in influencing local authorities and the Mayor to create a *Community-Led Plan for London*. An extended version of this document is soon to be published, with the aim of setting out policy proposals to be presented to the Mayor.

This proactive approach aims to reclaim the right of community groups to be part of the process of writing up the new London plan, rather than being mere consultees. Richard highlighted that a sense of loss prevails on many of London’s local communities, loss of small businesses, community centres and neighbourhoods. In order to reclaim that lost space, he pointed out the need for collaboration between various different social struggles (equality-based groups, class struggle etc.).
Jake Colman from Spark, introduced the event as the launch day of the Spark festival. Now in its third year, the Spark festival is a month of free workshops, animated by art, music and discussion on building positive change by empowering individuals and communities. In his introduction to the day, Jake addressed important issues surrounding the loss of space such as gentrification, class and status and stressed the value of learning, discussion, art and solidarity as pathways to coalition building. More importantly, he stressed the importance of harnessing the potential of dispersed resistance to become networked and therefore build collective and coordinated action.

These words very much enshrined the spirit of the day, which was visually captured by the beautiful map prepared by Nicolas Fonty, a researcher at the Bartlett School of Planning. Nicolas asked participants at the event to put their campaigns or/and community spaces on the map – with the aim of adding them to an online interactive map.

The map attempts to build a network between actors and community groups involved in making London a more inclusive city.
The diversity of community groups contributing to the event was demonstrated in the storytelling session, which saw 8 campaigners and community activists telling their individual stories about reclaiming community space.

Ben Walters, stressed the importance of preserving and reclaiming LGBTQ spaces. He highlighted that ¼ of queer spaces have closed down, thus depriving LGBTQ communities of spaces that have served, historically, as safe places of belonging. Ben talked about the campaigns for the preservation of Black Cap – an LGBTQ pub shut down for commercial redevelopment – and the Royal Vauxhall Tavern – one of the UK’s oldest and best known gay venues, which was rescued through the LGBTQ community’s struggle and ultimately became the first listed building that celebrates queer heritage. In conclusion, Ben emphasised the importance of storytelling. Storytelling, he argued, galvanises community resistance and builds empathy. ‘Once the story is established, it becomes much harder to take these spaces away’.

Niles Hailstones, who was involved in the fight for survival of the West London grass roots music scene, emphasised the importance of determination and inspiration in resistance. Without inspiration, he stressed, we feel disempowered and thus can’t imagine how to possibly change things. Niles advocated for direct action against gentrification and called for a strategic response, rather than an emotional reaction to the hype. He concluded by stressing that immediate action is needed: ‘If we don’t reclaim our spaces now, we can say goodbye to everything we’ve built’.
Robin Grey presented the food growing project he was involved in with the Community Food Growers Network at the Somerford Grove Estate (Hackney). An abandoned and neglected green space was radically transformed with the lively and ‘mischievous’ participation of the estate’s residents. The process of reclaiming the space entailed growing plants and selling the produce they harvested. Robin described this experience as ‘revolution disguised as digging’ and said that it was particularly empowering for the youth of the estate, who realised what they were able to achieve.

Stephen Kenny from Grove park neighbourhood forum, talked about the campaign for saving Grove park in Lewisham. The forum campaigned for local authorities to maintain the park for community work. They put pressure on the council to transform the disused youth centre for community use instead of demolishing it. Stephen set up the tone for self-organising by concluding that ‘unless you fight for your own houses and surroundings, no one else will’.

Deirdre (Dee) Woods gave a powerful speech about the importance of community. Ordinary women, she said, must be able to choose how they live and how they raise their children. Mere housing is not our goal, she argued: ‘for real homes, we need community’. Dee suggested that we need to create alternatives on the ground and, for this, we need education. To this end, the London Community Housing Co-operative started an on-going journey of upskilling, travelling, learning, taking courses, growing their own food.
Carlos Burgos, one of the Trustees of Seven Sisters Development Trust spoke about Wards Corner market in Tottenham and the campaign that is trying to retain this important community space, in the face of huge development pressure. Carlos told the audience how this campaign empowered the community in Seven Sisters to take control of its future and determine how Wards Corner market should be developed. The community managed to curb re-development proposals from the 1970s to 2003 when, once again, big international companies tried to demolish and gentrify the local area. Carlos emphasised that the community of traders and market users were advised to step back as they had ‘no rights’ and no protection, but as he rightfully stressed, ‘everybody has rights!’

Anthony Howarth, anthropology researcher at the University of Cambridge presented the struggles facing a community of Irish Travellers that he works closely with, who have been on an unauthorised encampment in North Greenwich over the last 15 years and are fighting to continue to live their traditional way of life in an area undergoing rapid large scale redevelopment. The London Gypsy and Traveller Unit has been working to support Gypsy and Traveller communities to campaign for culturally suitable accommodation over the last 30 years. As part of Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month, LGTU showcased an exhibition of London’s Gypsy and Traveller history (photos) and activism which included photographs of community protests and initiatives to influence policy at a London wide and national level.
Gina Osbourne, a former member of the Chestnuts Community Centre management group (Tottenham), showed us a short video made during their campaign to save the centre in December 2014. Gina gave an inspiring talk explaining how the users of the centre came together to keep the space open despite the Council’s attempts to close it.

Another highlight of the day was the creativity used to put across some important messages. MFaSiS, a talented young rapper, performed with confidence in front of over 100 people. Robin Grey, a folk singer and land rights activist galvanised the audience into a massive sing along, with folk songs about reclaiming land for community food growing. Tony Cealy from the Ubele Initiative, staged an exciting theatrical piece which engaged the attendees of his workshop in an improvisation on the theme of community activism. The contribution of all these creative people not only lifted up spirits but enriched the event with the awareness that community activism can gain strength if combined with art, music and theatre.
To close the morning session, we ran 7 different workshops on different but interlinked themes (links to notes available below).

‘Land for What?’ Participatory Session Exploring Land Literacy and Land rights with Community Food Growers Network

Reclaiming Traditional Markets as Affordable Public Spaces with Spark and Sara Gonzalez

Intersecting and Decolonising ‘Reclaiming Space’ with Spark

Land Space in Diaspora Communities with The Ubele Initiative

A Space to Think and Act Creatively with Tony Cealy

Safe Spaces for Refugees and Migrants with Migrants Rights Network, Praxis and Runnymede Trust

Reclaiming London: Using Politics to Transfer Ownership with Take Back The City

In the afternoon, a session on ‘What’s bubbling campaign-wise’ gave voice to some very current and important campaigns across London. We had speakers from the Feminist Library (Southwark), which is threatened by the Council’s decision to increase rents; Passing Clouds music venue (Hackney) which recently faced eviction from the new landlords. Toby Laurent Belson from Westway 23 gave an interesting presentation about the most recent struggles the community of Ladbroke Grove are facing. He also introduced the development of a promising app, which will help community groups write and submit applications for Asset of Community Value designation.
This session was followed by the screening of ‘You Can’t Move History’ by Long Live Southbank, which features the successful campaign that saved the Southbank stake spot from demolition. The film beautifully shows the profound link between space and time, as the history and value of some special community spaces cannot be moved or replicated by simply rebuilding them elsewhere. As the film director, Winstan Whitter puts it: “our lives have been shaped by this space... I grew up skateboarding here and I was surrounded by this amazing architecture, which people say is really brutal and dull looking but which we have grown to love, it’s a shiny building for us”.

Next Steps

The film was followed by a panel discussion which then led into the final session, where participants discussed and agreed on the need to build a coalition around reclaiming community spaces. Some initial proposals were put forward and some people highlighted that the term network would be more appropriate than coalition. Others advocated for a loose coalition, recognising the great diversity of views and methods and acknowledging the autonomy of each group. A suggestion to have a two-tier network was made – one at local level with meetings in 3 or 4 Boroughs at community centres and the other at metropolitan level, with meetings which include those attending the local level meetings. Someone else made the point that Just Space is already working towards this objective, by bringing together local groups at the metropolitan level.

In terms of organising the logistics and the means through which the coalition or network will work, it was agreed to set up a virtual online platform to share ideas, resources and support, but also to showcase different community assets, their stories and campaign methods (Fig. 1).
It was also decided to hold network events on a quarterly basis and Just Space offered to host a network meeting of the coalition in early autumn. One of the first tasks of the coalition will be to agree on a statement of aims and demands to send to the Mayor and the GLA.

A virtual online platform to share information, ideas and campaigning.
Would this be useful for you? How?
(Feedback forms analysis)

We are aware that coalition building is not an easy task that happens overnight, but the #ReclaimOurSpaces event was definitely perceived by participants as a gateway leading to a much needed coordinated action, which is capable of overcoming the fragmentation that community organising often falls into. The struggle for London community spaces and the diversity that makes them so special, can unquestionably gain strength from building a coalition and we all felt the true potential of it on 25 June 2016 at Conway Hall.

Report author: Santa Pedone
Main Highlights of the #ReclaimOurSpaces event
(feedback forms analysis)

Hearing about campaigns
The diversity of the groups involved
Feeling of a common cause
Different levels of engagement,
Hearing of so many people active
in their local communities
The wealth of expertise
(particularly from young people)
Sense of community &
wanting to mutually support each other

The energy, the information,
the healthy and
independent food choice
Learning about what others are doing,
the goodwill and energy.
Good combination of panels,
workshops, films and creativity
Being here with everyone was inspiring

Sharing experiences
Meeting people
and sharing ideas
Meeting others with same
objective, but different
stories and expertise

Reclaiming spaces
through songs
by Robin Grey
Excellent
film
Tony Cealy’s workshop &
drama presentation
Take Back The City
workshop
Spark workshop
Ubele workshop

The speakers
The rap at the
start of the day
Storytelling

The panel discussion
Listening to speakers and
being inspired by campaigns
Westway presentation and App
Final debate
Case studies

Panel discussion
Workshops
Film screening
Reclaiming space
through songs
Networking
opportunities
The vibe, energy
and sense of
community
Diversity and
feeling of a com...
Other
Appendix 2 - Programme

"The social group structure of London is of the utmost importance in the life of the capital. Community group helps in no small measure towards the inculcation of local pride, it facilitates control and organisation, and is the means of resolving what would otherwise be interminable aggregations of housing. London is too big to be regarded as a single unit. If approached in this way its problems appear overwhelming and almost insoluble. The proposal is to emphasise the identity of the existing communities, to increase their degree of segregation, and where necessary to reorganise them as separate and definite entities. The aim would be to provide each community with its own schools, public buildings, shops, open spaces etc. At the same time care would be taken to ensure segregation of the communities was not taken far enough to endanger the sense of interdependence on the adjoining communities or on London as a whole."

Extract from London Plan, 1943

#RECLAIMOURSOUTPUT

Sat 25 June, Conway Hall, London
9:30am - 4:30pm

Programme

An event by
The Ubele Initiative
Just Space
Spark

In partnership with
Community Food Growers Network
Conway Hall
Latin Elephant
London Gypsy and Traveller Unit
Long Live SouthBank
Mela
Migrants Rights Network
Take Back The City
Three Acres and a Cow
UpRise

9:30 Registration and networking
Tea & Coffee in Red Lion Square
Open Mic - rap by MFASt MC
Exhibitions by:
London Gypsy & Traveller Unit - 'Gypsy Roma Traveller History month'
Latin Elephant - 'Being Latin in Elephant'
Stalls by:
Spark, Just Space, Westway 23, The Feminist Library, JustPlace

10:25 Welcome from The Ubele Initiative, Just Space and Spark

10:45 Storytelling and discussion about reclaiming community spaces across London, Stories from:
Chestruts Community Centre - Gina Osborne
Somerford Grove Estate - Robin Grey
Royal Vauxhall Tavern & Black Cap - Ben Walters
Grove Park Neighbourhood Forum - Stephen Kenny
London Gypsy and Traveller Activists - Anthony Howarth
London Community Housing Cooperative - Deirdre Woods
Wards Corner market - Carlos Burgos
Grassroots Music Venues - Niles Hallstones

11:45 Workshops
"Land for What?" Participatory Session Exploring Land Literacy and Land Rights with Community Food Growers Network - Main Hall
Reclaiming Traditional Markets as Affordable Public Spaces with Spark and Sara Gonzalez - Main Hall
Intersecting and Decolonising ‘Reclaiming Space’ with Spark - Main Hall
Land Space in Diaspora Communities with The Ubele Initiative - Main Hall
A Space to Think and Act Creatively with Tony Cealy - Brockway Room
Safe Spaces for Refugees and Migrants with Migrants Rights Network, Praxis, Syria Solidarity Campaign and Runnymede Trust - Main Hall
Reclaiming London: Using Politics to Transfer Ownership with Take Back The City - Bertrand Russell Room

12:45 Lunch
In Red Lion Square
(lunch vouchers provided at Conway Hall reception desk - suggested donation £2 waged)

13:45 What’s bubbling campaign-wise?
A presentation by Toby Lauren Belson - Westway 23
Refugee Fundraisingftar - Syria Solidarity Campaign
A popular music venue under threat - Passing Clouds

14:05 Singers circle with songs about reclaiming spaces with Robin Grey from ‘Three Acres And A Cow’

14:20 Performance by
Tony Cealy (The Ubele Initiative)

14:40 Screening of ‘You Can’t Move History’
Film about the successful campaign that saved the Southbank skate spot from demolition.

15:05 Panel discussion with
Winstan Whitter (Film Director & LLSB Campaigner)
Paul Richards (Film Producer and LLSB Campaigner)
Bee Taudearem (Founder of Black Blossom)
Ben Walters (Writer & Royal Vauxhall Tavern Campaigner)
Dr Roger Green (Goldsmith University)
Zahra Dallah (Take Back The City)
Ismail Musolke (Spoken Word Artist)

15:45 Closing session
What form would a community coalition to reclaim community spaces take?

16:30 Close
People are invited to continue the conversation at the nearby pub The Enterprise at 38 Red Lion St, WC1R 4PN.
Alternatively, we recommend the launch of the film Generation Revolution at 19:00 at Genesis Cinema in Whitechapel for the Refugees Fundraisingftar at 19:00 at the Egyptian House in Shepherd’s Bush.