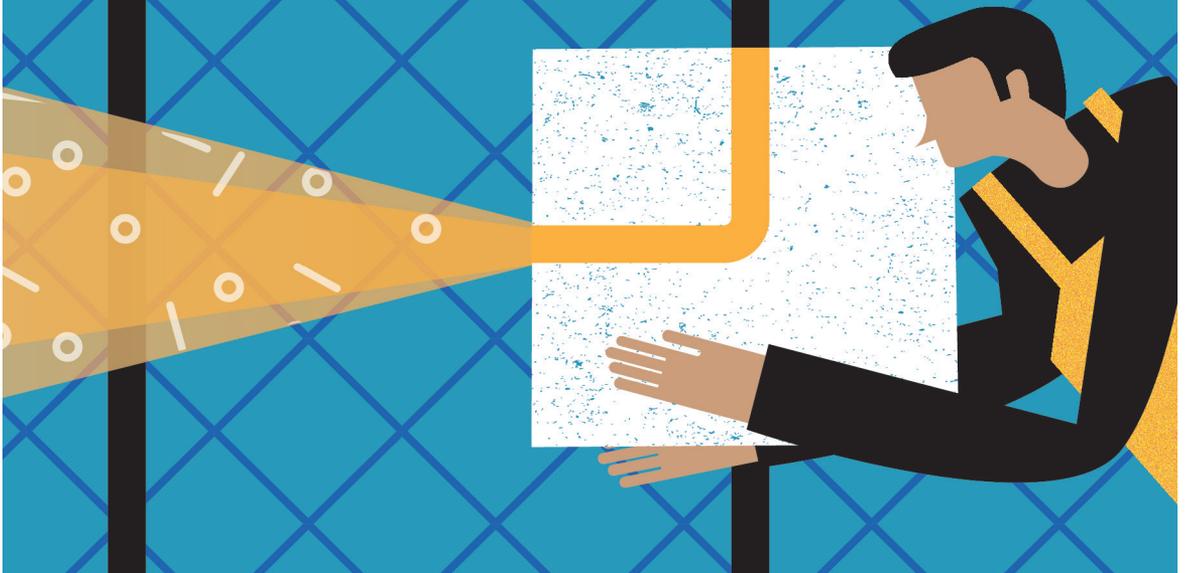


SPACES of DISSENT

Co-producing Resilient Futures

between social enterprises, charitable
organisations and activist groups

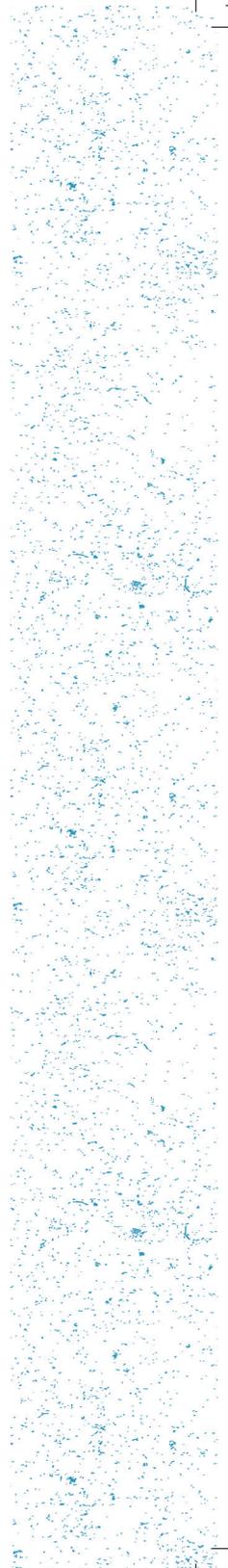


Utopias

The social enterprise Coexist chose their name as a defiant statement of intent, a commitment to 'what could be' in their effort to achieve a potentially unachievable vision: a pluralist world in which a myriad of resilient communities can coexist. One could describe this as a utopian vision. However, it has been suggested that Thomas Moore's model of utopia is detrimental to everyday practice as it positions egalitarian practice as a distant unachievable 'no-place'.

Instead, alternatives are often used such as 'heterotopias' or 'everyday utopias' to describe the innovative and alternate practices that are occurring within our current societies across the globe. These labels enable us to acknowledge the realised dreams that exist today, as opposed to distant non-existent 'no places.' It is a deliberately affirmative stance that emphasises the power we each hold to affect the world and create moments of change in our societies.

The Spaces of Dissent series acknowledges the everyday utopias one can find in Bristol by inviting a diverse range of alternate and innovative groups to participate in our workshops. Furthermore, the workshops themselves are an attempt to realise the dream of diverse organisations and groups collaborating and coexisting in the same space together. It is our ethical stance that while we should celebrate difference and diversity, this does not mean we should all work in isolation. If we are going to construct a better future, it must happen together, starting today.



Co-production

'Co-production' is an increasingly popular term and approach within academic research and public service delivery.

Most simply, co-production is what happens when we make things together, be those things research, museum exhibitions, archives or public services.

When we co-produce research projects between universities and community groups, we are making an ethical choice with regards to how knowledge is produced. We are rejecting a situation in which 'experts' produce knowledge about other people. Instead we are committed to the co-creation of knowledge with all relevant stakeholders.

There is a well-known quote:

'when writing the story of your life, don't let anyone else hold the pen.'

It is an ethos shared within co-produced research. When we are exploring specific social-political issues within our current society it would be foolish not to include those directly affected by these issues, for they will hold the most relevant knowledge.

Therefore, when we engage in co-produced research we acknowledge that we are all experts.

Spaces of Dissent Workshops

This series of workshops brings together social enterprises, charitable organisations and activist groups within Bristol into spaces of mutual learning in which best practice can be shared and common tensions can be explored.

We combine embodied facilitation techniques with digital media, art and experiential learning.

We recognise that right now there are many new and alternate approaches being practiced in Bristol. It is not our intention to promote one method of working, instead we want to celebrate the diversity of approaches being practiced. The challenge is enabling diversity and difference to flourish without this resulting in us working in isolation.

It is for this reason we felt there was a need to hold a series of workshops in which we could directly collaborate with one another. While individual groups or organisations may have contrasting styles of practice, we are nonetheless able to acknowledge shared values:





A consistent belief that there must be better ways of doing things than are currently found in the world.



A critique of power and exploitation that subjugates individuals and groups, and also prevents better ways of being from emerging.



A commitment to constructing a more equal future, in which different views, values and beliefs can coexist.



We therefore come together in these workshops with the intent of learning more about one another's experiences in the world, so that we are all better placed to continually deliver on these shared values.

What is meant
by dissent?





While some feel empowered by the word dissent, linking it to a pure politics or pure democracy, others are wearier.

Maybe the word instigates images of violent insurgencies or aggressive acts, which a person might understandably feel is unwarranted in a world that already bears witness to such horrors on a daily basis. We are instead viewing dissent as a progressive act. We are using the word 'dissent' to describe a kind of disruption. **A disruption to our daily routines, our habitual ways of thinking and being.**

Disruptive acts enable spaces in which we can question, or indeed challenge, the codes of behaviour or constructed laws that we – as a large mass of people – are expected to abide by.

Spaces of dissent can therefore be understood as **any space in which people converge, challenge dominant social codes and perform new ways of being,** such as gender; sexuality, economic systems, our relation to the environment, food production, pedagogical approaches and so on.

In these spaces of dissent workshops we utilise embodied facilitation and participatory film methods with the aim of constructing a **subversive and playful space that enables participants to interact differently** with themselves, with each other and also with the material space they inhabit.

It is important that we have these spaces to not only challenge practice within wider society, but also **critically reflect upon the codes of behaviour we practice within our own organisations.**

Workshop Themes

Having the capacity to consider our daily practice can prove difficult if not impossible for many small-scale and grassroots organisations.

Attempting to be an economically sustainable organisation, or dealing with constant 'firefighting' of social outreach, can mean that we find ourselves unable to reflect on the how and why of what we do.

The Connected Communities funding has enabled us the capacity to host a series of workshops with other organisations, in which we not only reflect upon our own practice but share knowledge about each other's practice and experiences. For this reason we felt it was important to explore themes that are of relevance to many organisations, and that perhaps do not always get the attention that they deserve.

Workshop #1

Experiments in Governance: Who Decides Your Future?

This workshop explores how different modes of decision-making are implemented by social enterprises within Bristol. We are not attempting to identify or champion a particular model of decision-making but instead explore the reasons why social enterprises that share similar ethical goals will often choose contrasting styles of governance.

Furthermore, we are exploring whether a different future can be achieved using conventional modes of governance or must more radical approaches be incorporated? We have therefore invited co-operatives that consider consensus decision-making as integral to their practice, as well as social enterprises that uphold hierarchical modes of governance.

Using film, art and experiential learning, this workshop provides a unique opportunity to journey through our conscious and unconscious relationship to hierarchical, collaborative and agile governing structures. We will apply different decision making models to everyday situations and interrogate the strengths and weaknesses of each.



Workshop #2

Can diversity be designed? Or will there always be exclusion?

When Coexist first gained control of the former office block Hamilton House in 2008, the first act was to hang a banner outside which read 'Everybody'. It is an idealistic ambition that is perhaps shared by other likeminded organisations but it is an ambition that is rarely realised.

The second workshop explores not only tensions of exclusion in public spaces and community centres, but specifically what it means to attempt to rectify these situations. Many of the social enterprises in and around the area of Stokes Croft have been criticised for containing a fairly narrow demographic of staff. However, while there might be a shared desire for greater 'diversity' this desire in itself can be problematic and indeed exacerbate exclusion by constructing power relations and fixed identity roles.

This workshop therefore confronts the question of whether or not we need positive discrimination within social enterprises, exploring the ethical tensions embedded within such an approach as well as considering what practical changes would need to be implemented for this approach to be operational.



Workshop #3

Disruption and Development: Where do our values intersect?

This workshop explores tensions that arise surrounding grassroots regeneration and big business development of urban areas, namely processes of gentrification. It is an exploration of where the values and vision of organisations active in Stokes Croft; intersect, oppose and align.

With an aim to identify how grassroots 'disruptive' acts and large scale development shape the evolution of this shared space.

Stokes Croft has experienced rapid change over the last ten years, with different individuals and organisations playing significant roles within this process. A once neglected and forgotten street has transformed into a creative and dynamic neighbourhood. Stokes Croft now experiences a greater number of individuals and organisations operating within the area. Consequently this means there are now many different visions of what should be the future of Stokes Croft.

The purpose of this workshop is not for any one group to claim ownership of the Stokes Croft neighbourhood, or for promoting one vision of the future over others. Instead we understand that change is inevitable and therefore we want to develop a memorandum of understanding, so we have a common language of the principles and forces that play out in Stokes Croft. We want to develop clearer lines of communication so raised concerns can be met with empathy.

Testimonials

'This society we operate in is so busy, conversations and opportunities to meet others is much needed'

'I think "alternative organisations" hold the best opportunity to bring about widespread change'

'It has really helped me visualise some of the struggles that were going on in our organisation'

'Through openly sharing and discussing these problems new and fresh solutions emerge'

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