

// HACKING THE SPACES

A critical acclaim of what was, is and could be a hackerspace (or hacklab, for that matter) // Johannes Grenzfurthner / Frank Apunkt Schneider (monochrom) // Reprinted with permission from <http://www.monochrom.at/hacking-the-spaces/>

// Hackerspaces 1 // History

The history of the so-called hackerspaces expands back to when the counter culture movement was about to make a serious statement. In the decade after the hippies attempted to establish new ways of social, political, economical and ecological relationships, a lot of experiments were carried out concerning the construction of new spaces to live and to work in. These were considered as niches to relieve and rescue people from the monotonous way bourgeois society directed civic spaces from kindergartens to cemeteries to be exactly the same and to reproduce its patriarchal and economical order. The politics of establishing open spaces were meant as explicit statements confronting a capitalist (and in the East: an authoritarian communist) society whose very structure, purpose and operating mode were broadly considered to "alienate humans", to take control of and to modify their basic human needs and relationships. Thus, the failed revolt of the sixties survived and flourished in the shadows of a ubiquitous bourgeois lifestyle. And the idea of change was conjured up from nebulous lysergic dreams and pathetic speeches to get one's dreams and/or feet back on solid ground - to be dis-obamaized, if you like. This conversion gained its popularity because macro-political hippie dreaming ("I had too much to dream last night" as the title of a classical psych pop tune by 'The Electric Prunes' put it) had completely deteriorated. The hippies learnt that social and political change demanded more than just joining the mantra of posters, pop songs and drug fantasies that were promoting it. The real world was way too tough to be impressed by a bunch of filthy bourgeois drop-outs mantra-ing about change. The capitalist imperative of the real world was way too effective to really be changed. And yet, when it all was over in 1972, some of the people involved were not ready to give in and give themselves

over to the system and to fade into integration - hence the launching of micro-political tactics. Instead of trying to transfer the old world into a new one people started to build up tiny new worlds within the old world. They made up open spaces where people could come together and try out different forms of living, working, maybe loving and whatever people do when they want to do something. It is necessary to have a look at the historical development of political movements and their relationship to spaces and geography: the students' revolt of 1969 was driven by the idea of taking back places and establishing a different psychogeography within the maze of the city through détournement. Likewise, the autonomia movement of the late 1970s that came to life in Italy and later influenced people in German-speaking countries and the Netherlands was about appropriation of spaces, be it for autonomous youth centres or appropriation of the airwaves for pirate radio. Thus, the first hackerspaces fit best into a countercultural topography consisting of squat houses, alternative cafes, farming cooperatives, collectively run businesses, communes, non-authoritarian childcare centres, and so on. All of these established a tight network for an alternative lifestyle within the heart of bourgeois darkness.

// Hackerspaces 2 // Present

Hackerspaces provided room where people could go and work in laid-back, cool and non-repressive environments (well, as far as any kind of space or environment embedded into a capitalist society can be called laid-back, cool and non-repressive). Sociological termed "third spaces" are spaces that break through the dualistic scheme of bourgeois spatial structure with places to live and places to work (plus places for spare time activities).

They represent an integrative way that refuses to accept a lifestyle which is formed through such a structure. This means they can come to cooperative and non-repressive ways of working on e.g. technical problems that may result in new and innovative solutions. And that's exactly where Adorno's "Wrong Life" could slip in too. The Capitalist system is a highly adaptable entity. And so it isn't surprising that alternative spaces and forms of living provided interesting ideas that could be milked and marketed. So certain structural features of these "indie" movement outputs were suddenly highly acclaimed, applied and copy-pasted into capitalist developing laboratories. These qualities fit best into the tendency in which -- by the end of the seventies -- bourgeois society started to update and re-launch using the experiences gained through countercultural projects. Mainstream harvested the knowledge that was won in these projects and used it. Normalizing dissent. Uh yeah. Thus, the sixties revolt and all the micro-revolutions that followed turned out to be a kind of periodical refreshment. As a system, capitalism is always interested in getting rid of some of its old-fashioned oppressive traits that might block its overall evolution and perfection. As an example: eco-capitalism became trendy, and it was quite effective generating capitalist "good wealth" and capitalist "good feelings". Hackerspaces today function differently than they initially did. When the first hackerspaces were formed there were always clear distinctions (an "antagonism") between "us" (the people resisting) and "them" (the people controlling). Certain people did not want to live and toil within the classical bourgeois working scheme and refused to be part of its ideological and political project for some pretty good reasons. The otherness of the spaces back then was determined by the consistency of a bourgeois mainstream culture on the basis of a dualistic cold war world order. Here again they proved to be third spaces of a different kind: neither state nor free trade capitalism. And being structural and ideological different from that had been

an important political statement and stance. In a society easily distinguished into mainstream and underground categories, each activity carried out within the open space of such an underground was a step from the wrong direction. The very practice of making personal use of alternative structures came with assurance of being on the good side. But post-cold war society established a different order that deeply affected the position of the hackerspaces. While on the one hand it got harder and more repressive, the system (a clever one!) learned to tolerate things that are different (in the pipeline of integrating or assimilating them) and to understand that it always has been the edges of normality where the new substance grows. Milking covert culture. Before that, the open intolerance and often brutal oppression carried out against countercultural spaces only made them stronger and their necessity more evident (at least where society didn't succeed in crushing them). Thus, alternative life forms were applied ideally as a rejuvenation of what was old, boring, conservative and impotent to progress and adapt in an ever changing bourgeois present. New ways to solve technical (and aesthetical) problems were cooked up in the underground and bourgeois talent scouts watched closely to occasionally pick this or that, just as it happened in the field of pop music with the so-called alternative rock of the nineties. Alternative mainstream, ahoi! On the other hand, the nineties marked the triumph of liberal democracy, as Slavoj Žižek writes: "The fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 marked the beginning of the 'happy 1990s'." According to Francis Fukuyama, liberal democracy had, in principle, won. The era is generally seen as having come to an end on 9/11. However, it seems that the utopia had to die twice: the collapse of the liberal-democratic political utopia on 9/11 did not affect the economic utopia of global market capitalism, which has now come to an end." It's thus highly ironic that geeks and nerds, while watching the death of liberal democracy in its political form (civil liberties granted to keep the social peace) as well as its

economic form (crisis) turn to become liberal-democratic defenders of an ideology that has already failed. Without the political demarcation lines of a cold war society, hackerspaces changed sometimes without even noticing it. The political agenda was mushroomed by individual problems that techno nerds tried to solve in nice fearless atmospheres, non-aggressive states where the aggressiveness of the market was suspended; where one could discuss technical and creative problems and challenges politely with likeminded people. As such, the political approach faded away on en route into tiny geeky workshop paradises. The micro-politics failed on the same scale and to the same extent as older macro-political projects got pulverized through the irreversibility of capitalism. The idea of having a revolution (of whatever kind) was domesticated into good clean reformism, and the only revolutions that lay ahead were the technological semi-revolutions of the internet and its social web sprouts. Without former political agendas hackerspaces turned into small places that did not really make fundamental differences. Comparable to the fall of squat houses becoming legal in status and turning into new bourgeois housing projects where the cool urban bohemians live their lives commuting steadily between art world, underground, IT-business and advertisement agencies. This may not be the case for all the hackerspaces out there today, but it should be noted that most have travelled along the same paths. And while for a long time the macro-political scheme had worked quite well to provide the inherent difference that had been attached to all of the activities carried out in hackerspaces (even to things as trivial as soldering, pottery lessons or juggling trainings), it is missing now. And due to this deficiency hackerspaces can no longer be shaped and politicized on a broader scale. And that clearly means that whatever we might do: our hackerspace communities remain constricted; nothing more than nutrient fluid for breeding human resources. (Soylent Google is made of people!)

// Hackerspaces 3 // Future

So what can be done about this? Actually, it is not very hard to find something to protest against. Surveillance, whatever. It's no problem to use the prefix "anti". Use rule 76 - as long as you can think about it, you can be against it. But that's just too simple. Never before in the history of bourgeois society has everything been as fucked up as it is right now. But what is lacking amongst all the practising going on in hackerspaces is a concise theory of what bourgeois society is like and what should be attacked by us building and running open spaces within that society. The lovely alternative approach we share should be grounded in such a theory, which is to be read: a political agenda that lends some revolutionary glam to what we are doing on a daily basis making technical gadgets, networking through the world, or utilizing our technological and programming skills. To get there we really need a more explicit sense and understanding of the history of what we are doing, of the political approaches and demands that went into it long ago and that still are there, hidden in what we do right now. So to start off we would like to organize some workshops in the hackerspaces where we can learn about the philosophical, historical and other items that we need to get back in our lives. Theory is a toolkit to analyze and deconstruct the world. Plus, we need to reflect and understand that the hackerspaces of today are under the "benevolent" control of a certain group of mostly white and male techno handicraft working nerds. And that they shape a practise of their own which destines most of the hackerspaces of today. (It is hard to understand that there are hackerspaces in certain parts of the US that don't have a single African-American or Latino member. But we'd like to keep our European smugness to ourselves. We have to look at our oh-so-multicultural hacker scene in Europe and ask ourselves if hackers with a migrant

background from Turkey or North-African states are represented in numbers one would expect from their percentage of the population. Or simply count your women representation and see if they make 50% of your members.) As such, we find today's hackerspaces excluding a lot of ethnical and social groups that don't seem to fit in or maybe feel so and are scared by the white male nerd dominance, their (maybe) sexist or exclusionist jokes or whatever might be contributed to them. Or perhaps they don't have the proper skills to communicate and/or cooperate with the packs of geeky guys (or at least they might think so). What is needed is the non-repressive inclusion of all the groups marginalized by a bourgeois society just as it had been the intention of the first hackerspaces in countercultural history. If we accept the Marxian idea that the very nature of politics is always in the interest of those acting, hackerspace politics are for now in the interest of white middle-class males. This needs to change. Well, that's all for the moment. Let's start to work on this and see what would happen if we change the somehow boring hackerspaces of the present into some glamorous factories of an unpredictable freedom for all of us even those who do not fit in the classical nerd scheme. Change the nerds. Make them a better space. For you and for me and the entire human race. //