

Research Summary

Spaces of Resistance: Activist, DIY and Collective Spaces in North America

What is this research about?

Autonomous spaces are spaces that are resistant to the dominant capitalist system by prioritizing primary purposes other than profit. These spaces prioritize activities such as activism and alternative ownership and creation methods, such as collectivism and D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself). While not fully autonomous given the realities of the capitalist system, these spaces offer a middle ground between the desire for autonomy and the reality of having to compromise. Examples of autonomous spaces include collective houses, social centres, infoshops, hackerspaces and DIY bike shops.

This research examines the different types of autonomous spaces in North America and determines the factors for their successful establishment, financial sustainability and long-term operations, and what benefits they bring to the community.

What did the researchers do?

A comprehensive survey was sent out to 266 North American autonomous activist, DIY and collective spaces identified at the time of the survey. 55 responses were received. The survey asked questions regarding involvement, finances, structure, space, benefits, conflicts, difficulties, ideology, and community relations.

What did the researchers find?

The research found that autonomous spaces are local hubs for broad spectrum of activists and progressive causes. This provides opportunities for networking, friendship and connection between activists from various backgrounds and different causes, breaking down barriers and strengthening solidarity. These spaces allow a person to access alternative ideas and educational opportunities, which

brings in new people to activism and strengthens the knowledge, skills and commitment of activists. Space is critical to successful organizing and creating social change, and thus creating and maintaining shared spaces should be a priority for activists.

Two particular space types should be examined further, as they could provide greater insights into the conditions for success of autonomous spaces. They are the Catholic Workers Movement and their collective houses for their longevity, and hackerspaces for their innovation and rapid spread.

Two recurring challenges stand out for autonomous spaces: financial difficulties – lack of income and cost of the space – and inadequate volunteer support. One possible solution examined to high rents was squatting. In Europe, autonomous spaces are often established in squatted locations. Squatting is uncommon in North America and has only successfully occurred when progressive municipal governments were in power. Squatting is more burdensome to the maintenance of autonomous spaces, as one is constantly living under threat. In North America squatting should only be embarked upon if there is a strong possibility that the squatted space can be legally transferred over to the occupiers.

What you need to know

Activist, DIY and collective spaces should be supported by activists, non-profit organizations and unions, as they provide multiple benefits to the community and are focal points for generating progressive social change.

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How you can use this research?

As an individual involved in an autonomous space project, this research can be applied to improving the finances, structure and long-term viability of the space.

Activist, DIY and collective spaces vary widely in size, scope and legal status. With legal recognition come additional responsibilities that could become burdensome and a drain on limited resources. Often a handful of activists put in extraordinary effort to maintain a space. Each space should assess what are its goals, resources and the skillsets of its members in order to determine if they should become a legal entity or continue to operate informally.

Collectivism can be used to reduce the overall burden of rent. This can be achieved by having multiple groups or individuals share in upkeep and management of the space. The ideal situation is receiving the use of a space for free from government, a university, church or non-profit organization, or owning the space outright. This requires developing community and political connections, and possibly having a relationship with the state.

Income generation is important for those spaces that must pay rent and other large expenses. While some activists feel this is a contradiction, most autonomous spaces sell various goods and services. Additional potential streams of income should be examined, along with developing social enterprises and applying for grants. Some spaces may not need to generate any income if their expenses are minimal or covered by other sources of funding such as a university student levy.

It is important to manage and preempt conflict, both internally and externally. This can be achieved through the prevention of informal hierarchies and in-group/out-group dynamics from forming. Activists should also avoid dogmatism, as it alienates new and less dogmatic activists and results in *activist ghettoization*.

The establishment of networks, local solidarity networks that bring together different causes, and larger regional, national or global networks for particular causes, would greatly benefit activist, DIY and collective spaces by strengthening ties, knowledge sharing and aid in the development of best practices.

About the Researchers

Michael Kenny is a PhD student in the Faculty of Education at York University. Michael serves as Executive Director of Regenesiis, a university/college focused environmental organization.

ecomike@yorku.ca

m@regenesiis.com

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