

# Making Spaces / Making Publics / Making Politics

Eleanor Saitta, DIY Citizenship, Toronto, 2010

Hi, I'm going to talk a little bit today about the physical character of hackerspaces and how that affects their range of interactions. I'm speaking here from a variety of personal experiences, as well as larger observations of and interactions with the hackerspaces movement. I was one of three founders of a hackerspace in Seattle, Public Nerd Area, and have been a frequent guest at a dozen or so other spaces. I'd position myself at most halfway inside the movement, both given my background and given the (hackerspace specifically) movement's general lack of an internal critical dialog.

We can think of a hackerspace as a temporary autonomous zone for transgressive interactions with the infrastructure, both physical and digital, of network culture. This is at least potentially a really critical function. They can serve to aggregate and magnify disruptive action, to encourage the kind of openness, freedom, and political engagement that is and will be essential to forming the kind of network culture we want to see — one that's open, human, and at the very least has room for non-commercial actions.

However, their potential is quite often seriously compromised by the reality of hackerspace cultures. Around the world, the most hackerspaces have a very homogeneous social profile — white, male, and middle class. They're frequently located in neighborhoods that have a very different racial and class profile from the space itself, and often completely isolated from those neighborhoods.

Hackerspaces are often non-economic spaces in a very specific way. They do end up creating projects that have an economic footprint, but that footprint falls outside the space, as side projects started in hackerspaces become products for sale or spin off into entire companies. Unsurprisingly, the kinds of companies and products created tend to feed back into the same kind of professional, middle-class culture. These are all things generated by the space, though, not things that are directly operative out of the space. This kind of non-economic space represents a barrier to entry to people who actually make things for a living. Hackerspaces are generally (although admittedly not always) unfriendly to people doing actual direct productive and production work in them; hence, if you're someone who actually makes things for a living, if you can't afford to economically support a purely non-economic secondary workspace, you're prevented from full participation.

The cultures of hackerspaces do vary, of course, but a surprising number of them are actually quite anti-political outside of a very small set of specifically electronic-rights oriented issues. This is another symptom of the lack of engagement with their communities and the relatively homogeneous social profile.

The same cultural homogeneity lends itself to a very pure-technology standpoint, a technofetishism wherein craft, art, and even media outside of a narrow range of technologically-focused mostly documentary or communicative media.

The hackerspace movement views itself as largely something new, having come from a tabula rasa, being the first spaces of their ilk. This is of course ridiculous — there's a long tradition of cooperative workshops, art collectives, squats, and similar spaces that the hackerspace movement could draw from.

So, we all know that any movement has its problems; why catalog them?

There's an interesting reflection between the physical architecture of the hackerspace and the cultural shape of the movement. In general, we underestimate the direct influence of the spaces we interact with on our social structures. For instance, in housing, the residential spaces available both reflect and determine the kinds of families that we can have; if we want to have a non-traditional family, we have to house a non-traditional family, and this requires non-traditional housing; chicken and egg.

So, what's the built reality of the hackerspace?

Hackerspaces inhabit commercial spaces. They rarely have street frontage in pedestrian zones; most are either purely interior spaces, back alleys, on upper stories, or simply out in the commercial industrial margin, separated from any community by miles of parking lots and anonymity. They often masquerade as commercial enterprises — certainly, they often have them for neighbors, and sometimes they actually pretend to be them, as a way of explaining themselves to landlords who don't understand who they are.

There's a standard growth process for hackerspaces, where they start small and move through a succession of these spaces as they grow and gain financial clout and permanence. The end-state of this would be hackerspace as institution and possibly eventually hackerspace as franchise — for instance, Techshop, a for-profit entity on the borders of the hackerspace movement, has done exactly that, going from a single workshop to a chain of franchise across the United States.

During the organization process of a hackerspace, getting a space is the tipping point into the real; prior to that, it's a group of a dozen people sitting in a coffee shop, and frequently a wiki and a mailing list, and. After, it's a physical room and a bank account. While the group finds their space, they also cement the character of their interactions and largely determine the political structures with which they'll approach the future. Because of the legal requirements around obtaining a space, the shape of the group necessarily comes to reflect to some degree what's required by the commercial spaces they inhabit — it must be a legible entity to their landlords. Entities which are, for example, purely consensus-driven with no specific leader for any given situation are rendered non-viable regardless of their functionality as a group by the necessities of the rental process.

Hackerspaces pick and choose between the available spaces, and it's no accident that they end up somewhat isolated — it comes from a desire for protection of socially transgressive activities — one only needs to look at things like the Moominite debacle in Boston to realize that being the weirdo building things people don't understand can be a socially complicated position. This isn't a value-free choice, however; the same isolation that gives a degree of security ensures a lack of involvement with the community.

This takes a literal, physical expression in the door to the space.

For the amount of time spaces spend getting the word out online and the degree to which they're dependent on bringing in a membership of a reasonable size, hackerspaces, even or perhaps especially

when they're in pedestrian areas, are uniquely invisible. Noisebridge, a San Francisco hackerspace with over 80 members and 3,600 square feet of space, until recently didn't even have a real sign on their door, just a doorbell and a little typed label a quarter inch high — and they're one of the more community-engaged hackerspaces around. Most hackerspaces are completely invisible from the outside, and unless you're part of their social circle, you'll never know they exist. Even when there are signs — and Noisebridge has one now, along with flyers, it's still very rare for the public to be able to see into the space, to see what kinds of things go on there immediately. Transparency of community is intimately related to actual transparency.

The second, and often second-most-critical formative act of a hackerspace is the buildout, when a group turns a blank and temporary commercial space into a functional working room.

The decisions made here determine the character of the work and interactions that the space will support. The process of creating the space is also a functional, collaborative act that makes concrete the working relationships between the members. Hackerspaces tend toward having purely communal workspaces, and storage for members is usually limited to a locker or a bin or two on the ubiquitous wire shelving. Projects which take up persistent space, even when they're under active use, tend to be frowned on unless they're collective projects of large parts of the space. There's a practical problem here that they're dealing with, of course — unmonitored, hackerspaces become horrible accumulators of junk in relatively limited resources, but the spatial solution taken becomes socially constrictive. Productive work requires storage space and some ability to leave work set up. The class privilege of most founding members, who can afford the space on a purely non-productive basis, tends toward excluding spatial arrangements that might explore this space.

One of the immediately obvious visual breaks between hackerspaces and their antecedent collective spaces is their decorative character.

The world of art collectives, squats, and extra-commercial group workshops tends to be a pretty colorful, obviously culturally transgressive one. Graffiti and sculptural bricolage become basic forms of dialog, and the cultural messages that the space embodies are literally written on the walls.

Hackerspaces often stand in distinct contrast to this. They are good, middle-class neighbors, and their relative lack of politics is reflected in their relative lack of decoration. Even Noisebridge, by American standards an almost hyperpolitical, radicalized space, has exactly one spot within a maze of white walls where graffiti is given its social outlet. The wall in question is regularly repainted back to white. The artistic decoration in other species of collective space acts as a form of memory, a visual record of the cultural history of the space and the people in it. As hackerspaces move from space to space and maintain their literally whitewashed walls, they actively resist the formation of that memory. In exchange, they may gain a certain kind of respectability, reflecting a corporate-like endeavor — passing privilege for spaces of production.

As the hackerspace ages and grows, it risks moving from insurrection to institution, leaving its nature as a temporary autonomous zone behind and fossilizing into a venue which supports only specific kinds of productive transgression. So, how can the hackerspace avoid this fossilization?

What if we could change the founding spatial metaphors that hackerspaces draw upon? Right now, hackerspaces take the forms that they can find room for. They make active choices in how they deploy

themselves in the set of available spaces, but those spaces also shape them. If we could make available different kinds of spaces, could that help open up the social forms they take?

### Infrastructure and agglomeration

One of the critical functions of a hackerspace is as a provider of infrastructure — the sharing of tools, knowledge and collaborative energy is the core of the hackerspace as concept. Instead of the hackerspace as a self-contained, unified space, imagine a set of agglomerated semi-discrete spaces around an infrastructural core — not a virtualization of the hackerspace, but an infrastructuralization. Instead of the hackerspace growing into a single, unified institution, as it grew and gained stability, it could expand by making its own borders porous and allow spaces to be partially of it, partially of its surrounds, with the hackerspace as such forming a core. Agglomeration is an especially interesting model here because it allows different parts of the space to operate at different levels of privacy and communality — instead of requiring the entire space to shift as a whole.

An infrastructural approach can keep the hackerspace flexible and allow a kind of elevated social mobility — instead of it only supporting a single, homogenous culture, different groups can interact with it in different ways — the social agglomeration mirroring the physical one.

### The camp

At the opposite end, why become an institution at all? Instead of the hackerspace as a permanent space, recreate the hackerspace as a camp. Instead of a fixed location and a fixed interaction (or lack of interaction) with a community, become a mobile set of elements that can appear for some short tenure in a repurposed space. When privacy is needed, take a private space; when publicity is desired, find somewhere with a street presence. By removing the fixed, infrastructural nature, you allow for a variety of different presences. The form that a hackerspacecamp could take is heavily dependent on the kind of legal structure it's embedded in — in a liberal, pro-squatting regime like the Netherlands (at least historically), they might literally be camping, taking over different public spaces and transgressing physically as well as culturally. In a more conservative regime, short-term pop-up like occupation of retail spaces in conjunction with land-owners might be necessary.

### The factory

Hackerspaces currently construct themselves in opposition to the traditional frameworks of production, but there's no reason for this to be a strict opposition. One of the big barriers to creating a new hackerspace is simple access to capital and tooling — bringing together a group of people once there's seed is much easier, but doing so without is a lot harder. Instead of trying to create a space that's purely outside of existing economic spaces, collaborating and cooperating with existing enterprises to create shared spaces can benefit all parties.