

Firebrand Infoshop Interview

Can an anarchist infoshop make a difference in Nashville?

Andy Sunfrog (Andy “Sunfrog” Smith)

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While the idea for Nashville’s Firebrand Community Center and Infoshop was born in 2003, the collective finally found its current home in 2008 as part of the shared Little Hamilton Collective space on Little Hamilton Road near the city’s downtown.

A member of the original organizing group, Ryan Kaldari explains the roots of the project: “The idea for the Firebrand was conceived immediately after the 2003 Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) protests in Miami. The idea that emerged was to set up an infoshop so that political radicals in Nashville could have a public space to use for events, education, and organizing.”

Having organized the 404 Willis space in Detroit in 1991 and lived in the Trumbullplex cooperative, I’ve long appreciated urban infoshops and community centers. Clearly, the Nashville spaces provide a confluence for various artistic and activist groups that might not otherwise mingle.

During a May visit from Vermont’s visionary Bread & Puppet Theater, I was impressed to see the diverse crowd gathered on the grass outside the Little Hamilton enjoying a radical performance just as they are at the art openings or punk shows that are held there.

Firebrand collective member, Nate Cougill, shared his interpretation of the project’s history and mission.

Fifth Estate: What does the Firebrand infoshop provide for Nashville?

Nate Cougill: The Firebrand provides access to alternative ideas not otherwise available to Nashvillians. We have a library that features zines, books, and movies on political movements, alternative economic systems, alternative lifestyles, and DIY culture. We provide hard to find how-to guides that empower people to learn new skills and solving their own problems, rather than paying a “specialist” to do it for them.

We also offer computer access with internet so that all the information on the web is available to everyone, regardless of their economic status. In addition to resources, we also offer community The Firebrand is Nashville’s living room. It is a space where people can gather and not be glared at for not buying anything.

We schedule workshops, potlucks, shows, movies, and dance parties to bring people together in a neutral space. The focus is not insurrectionist organizing, but in creating an alternative society to sustain us while corporations and mainstream America eat each other.

FE: Explain the importance of the name Firebrand.

NC: The Firebrand is named in honor of an eccentric Tennessee anarchist named Ross Winn, who published a paper called Winn’s Firebrand in the early 20th century. There is a zine about this by Sean Slifer called “Digging up a Tennessee Anarchist” available from Microcosm Publishing and other distros.

FE: Discuss some of the past successes, crazy stories, and current legends of the space. Discuss the long-term goals, utopian fantasies, and practical challenges.

NC: Firebrand and Food Not Bombs banded together to host a National Food Not Bombs (FNB) gathering, the first since FBI repression caused the last one to be canceled. The community put together workshops, and

provided accommodations for everyone all weekend. In the end, about 200 people attended, and festivities included a productive discussion about the future of FNB.

We have hosted several documentaries that have helped shape local views of political issues, such as First Earth, David Sheen's documentary on cob building, Shelter: a Squatumentary, on a squatter movement in California put together by Hannah Dobbz. Our biggest successes are the little things. At a punk show the other day, between sets there were people reading zines! One guy had "Against the Logic of Submission" and another was reading a "Know Your Rights" pamphlet. Every time the space is full of interesting, engaged individuals, we win.

FE: Over the last two decades, many DIY activist spaces have doubled as art galleries and music venues, particularly for punk rock, experimental, and folk acts. Describe some of the reasons for these connections and how the Little Hamilton fits that tradition.

NC: Arts and activism intersect at the idea of freedom. Artists need the freedom to innovate and connect with large groups of people. At many protests, you'll see "dance-ins," built around the idea that the revolution is worthless if there's not dancing, art, and community with people other than serious middle-aged political scientists with unisex beards and right-wing nut jobs.

FE: Discuss any challenges that Little Hamilton has experienced with neighbors, authorities, or internal, interpersonal work.

NC: The neighbors have been wonderful, the authorities have been oblivious, and our only problems have been the squabbling that every family experiences. Our problems have come from poor or underdeveloped communication, residue left from past political paradigms, the limitations and tyranny of the English language, and the tendency to overlook each other's good intentions.

Other problems include defining our purpose negatively rather than positively—what we are against rather than what we are in favor of, and paranoia eclipsing love and solidarity

For more information about the Firebrand or Little Hamilton, visit the following websites:

thefirebrand.org

myspace.com/firebrandinfoshoptn

littlehamilton.org

and

myspace.com/littlehamiltonshows

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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/381-summer-fall-2009/firebrand-infoshop-interview>
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[fifthestate.anarchistlibraries.net](https://www.fifthestate.org)