

# Autonomous Zones

## Space for Anarchist Organizing

Jesse D. Palmer

2014

Since 1995, I've helped compile the radical contact list that Berkeley's Slingshot collective publishes each year in its *Organizer* calendar date book. The 2014 list runs 21 pages and features autonomous spaces and projects in 45 states and dozens of foreign countries.

The *Organizer* pocket version classic is a 176 page pocket planner with radical dates for every day of the year, the contact list, a menstrual calendar, information on police repression, plus other features. There is also a large-size version with a spiral wire binding and is twice the size of the smaller classic.

By contrast, the 1996 list only had a dozen US places outside the San Francisco Bay area including Left Bank Books in Seattle, Wooden Shoe in Philadelphia, Detroit's Trumbullplex, the A-Zone in Chicago, Blackout in New York, and the Lucy Parsons Center in Boston.

This expansion traces a dramatic increase in the number of anarchist-inspired projects with a physical presence. Part of the reason for the increased length of Slingshot's current list is because it now includes non-anarchist but complementary gathering spots for anarchist-minded people such as food coops or vegan restaurants as well as specifically anarchist projects like infoshops, bookstores, performance venues, etc.

Still, plenty of new anarchist spaces have formed since 1996. For example, Taala Hooghan Infoshop is "an Indigenous established anti-colonial and anti-capitalist space located in occupied territories of Flagstaff in the racist state of Arizona," as its organizers define it. Denver has a variety of bookstores and anarchist projects at the 27 Social Center. The Big Idea bookstore and cafe in Pittsburgh is an anarchist coop opened in 2001. Many smaller towns have opened anarchist spaces such as the Madison, Wisconsin Infoshop, Monkey Wrench books in Austin, Texas, and the Flying Brick in Richmond, Virginia.

Many people use the list when they are traveling to meet people in towns they visit. And, it is helpful for distributing printed materials or as contacts for organizing campaigns. But the best use of the list is to inspire us. If you're sitting in one of the spaces, the list helps connect your local radical community to like-minded people all over where otherwise you might feel isolated and alone.

The Slingshot collective tries to call or email each contact on the list each year to make sure they are still functioning. What jumps out at me each year when I'm making my share of the calls is how similar these spaces are even though they are in very diverse communities.

There is no organized coordination between projects. Instead, countless collectives and individuals have decided autonomously to create zine libraries, meeting rooms, lending libraries, free stores, movie nights, art studios, and prisoner mailing projects.

Anarchist projects take many forms. Some are bookstores or cafes, such as Left Bank Books or more recent arrivals Boxcar books in Bloomington, Indiana, Red Emma's in Baltimore, Bluestockings in Manhattan or Firestorm Cafe & Books in Asheville, North Carolina. Others are a public room in a collective house with a zine library like Flying Brick. Many are somewhere in between—social centers operated by volunteers renting commercial storefronts that provide room for meetings and events with commerce on the back burner. Most projects organize deci-

sion making horizontally and primarily seek to distribute radical literature and host anarchist-related events and projects.

Part of the popularity of opening radical spaces is that people are attracted to projects where tangible results can be seen.

Compared to building a new anarchist society, operating an infoshop seems doable. The most successful moment of the recent Occupy movement involved building the physical and organizational infrastructure of the camps themselves for the same reason. However, what many people find after they open a radical space is that keeping it going is a lot more difficult and frustrating than opening it up.

An ongoing discussion in some projects is whether the energy required to raise funds for rent month after month is worth it. On one hand, establishing a radical space seeks to create a physical place for organizing and creating community. But it is easy for the project itself to take up so many resources that it ends up paradoxically draining energy away from organizing. So, while many spaces open, the number that close is also high.

Often one purpose of such projects is to serve as a public portal so new people can join a local radical community. However, being open to the public raises tough contradictions for anarchists. Should a space be open to everyone or does creating a safer space require banning people who steal or act in racist, sexist or violent ways? It can be draining and divisive to deal with people who take advantage of a project when staffers feel hostile to having too many rules. A project may seek to be welcoming to new comers, but the volunteers staffing don't want to adopt a smiley customer service attitude. As a result, walking into some of these spaces can feel like entering a private club if you don't have the right punk cultural signifiers.

People establish radical spaces so they can experiment with and affirm anarchist values and ideas. Opening a semi-permanent location can symbolize a local radical community's evolution and growth by testing its organizational capacity. Radical spaces provide liberated zones that exist between particular mass gatherings or protests. Building community and relationships is ultimately key.

Collectives give their members a sense of belonging and make our day-to-day lives more meaningful in a capitalist world bent on dehumanizing and isolating us.

You can check out Slingshot's online version of the radical contact list at <http://slingshot.tao.ca/rcelist.html>. If there's a space near you, drop by for a visit.

Jesse Palmer has been a collective member of *Slingshot*, an independent radical newspaper, since 1988, and has volunteered with Berkeley's Long Haul Infoshop since 1993. He also is an attorney who represents housing coops and non-profits, and a new father.

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2014

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Fifth Estate #391, Spring/Summer 2014 — Anarchy!

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