

7 THE IMPORTANCE OF ORGANISING IN SPACE, IN COMMUNION, TOGETHER

In this chapter we're going to focus on the historical precedence that organising in physical space has had on the knowledge production ecosystem, and the modern challenges proposed today.

In Treorchy, South Wales, in 1892 the miners built a working man's institute called the Parc and Dare. They built this space by donating a penny from every pound of their wages, they saw value in it and what it meant to come together. It was here that exchanges were had and ideas formed.

- Rhiannon White, The Future of Civil Society is Dependent of Space (2017)¹⁵

A little down the way from Treorchy a group of coal miners and ironworkers in Tredegar set up a medical aid society in 1890 called The Tredegar Workmen's Medical Aid Society, also known as the Tredegar Medical Aid Society (TMAS).

At the time, healthcare access for the working class was limited, and many workers struggled to afford medical care. The founders of the society recognised the need for affordable healthcare services and decided to pool their resources to establish a cooperative healthcare system. Initially funded through a combination of member subscriptions, donations, and grants from trade unions and friendly societies.

Over time, the society grew in size and financial stability. It built its own hospital, the Tredegar Medical Aid Institution, which opened in 1904. The hospital was modern and well-equipped, providing quality medical care to the society's members.

This place was influential on a local miner's son who later became a prominent British-Welsh politician, Aneurin Bevan. Bevan was inspired by the Tredegar Medical Aid Society and its cooperative model and used its principles as the Minister of Health in post-World War II Britain for the establishment of the NHS in 1948.

Physical spaces have had an important history in social justice and cultural organising. The salons of the 17th and 18th centuries and the coffeehouses of 18th-century London where progressive arts, literacy, and politics met. In the 20th century bookstores like The Book Cellar in Johannesburg, South Africa, a renowned independent bookstore that has been involved in promoting freedom of speech, democracy, and social justice during apartheid and beyond, represent how physical spaces sit at the epicentre.

Those looking to challenge the existing power structures met, shared, learned, and loved from each other in their respective resistance movements. Places such as City Lights Bookstore (San Francisco, USA), Books Upstairs (Dublin, Ireland), Bookmarks Bookshop, Gays the Word, and New Beacon Books (London, UK) have not only served as platforms for the dissemination of knowledge and literature but also as gathering places for activists, intellectuals, and community members to engage in critical dialogue, organise events, and cultivate social justice movements. They have played a vital role in supporting marginalised voices, promoting social consciousness, and fostering community engagement.

It is then interesting to observe the state incentivised push for real estate development, through deregulated markets under late 1970s neoliberalism, in inner city areas and its relationship to the gentrification, displacement, and alienation of people and places through the acute financialisation of space.

Gay's The Word is the UK's oldest LGBT bookshop and a touchstone for the broader LGBT community. The bookshop was set up in January 1979 by a group of gay socialists as a community space where all profits were funnelled back into the business. This ethos continues today with shelves bursting with books and the space used for book and community events

Photo © Gay's The Word



In the UK, according to Locality, between 2012/2013 – 2016/17 4,131 local authority non residential buildings were sold to “balance the books” of local authorities, those mostly responsible for providing spaces such as libraries, community halls, and other meeting places. Forecasts from 2018 shows that a further 7,280 were deemed as “surplus” with a view to being sold ¹⁶.

As a result of responding to the Global Financial Crisis of 2008- the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition party chose a method of ‘balancing the books’ by depriving local governments of the central government funding, who were the tasked with becoming more self-sufficient based on their revenue basis.

Local governments have arguably four means of generating revenues: domestic council tax, non-domestic business rates, rents from owned assets, and the disposal of assets. Needing to make up for the windfall in incomes, a market driven approach to generating revenue was taken, primarily through the urbanisation of areas and increased levels of development to create taxable assets. Properties in government sponsored enterprise zones and development areas increased in value and unless organisations could meet new rental values their leases were not issued or renewed, and the property was most likely sold for redevelopment or leased to a higher bidder.

This cannibalising of place was coined by Gray and Barford as “territorial injustice” where local governments were left to compete for capital from private markets and taxes generated by private firms. In their 2018 paper they reference another researcher, Shoenberger who notes: *how the public discourse once reserved for the competition between firms has been extended to encompass competition between cities, regions and countries for mobile capital* ¹⁷.

In today's society have we lost the notion of what is valuable about space? Where are the spaces where people regardless of circumstance come together? Do they exist? and if they don't how can we build them? We need to start building. If the miners did it back in 1892, can't we?

- Rhiannon White, Democracy Now (2017)

Since the ushering in of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government in the late 1970s, Britain has followed suit of its English speaking counterpart, the USA, in living through a socio-economic model determined by neoliberal thinking. Despite the presence of New Labour from 1997-2010 the model of market-first economy has dominated the landscape.

The government-dictated austerity that became less about the immediate management of a global financial crisis (GFC) and is rather a fundamental aspect of a longer-term neoliberal project which aims to re-shape and redefine the state at a national and local level¹⁸.

The GFC and the associated Great Recession should therefore be understood as "a justifying mantra" which forms part of a resurgent neoliberalism with aims and practices which include disempowering and dismantling systems of social protection¹⁹.



Photo: Oli Scarff

Protesters outside Kensal Rise library in Brent, North-West London

Fortunately, another space was opening up: social media and expansive use of internet platforms. What once existed through word of mouth and in person marketing is now accessible to the world within the pressing of a "post" button.

Digitally discovering knowledge and people *has* become a more democratised process however there are limitations. Digital communication has a very different dynamic to that of in-person communication. Digital culture rightfully is curated in a way where people are given the time and space to communicate as they intend to, however most will agree that in person provides a level of intimacy and dynamism that are crucial for movement organising.

The development of movements, knowledge production, and dissemination are defined by their mediums of expression. If we go by McLuhan's theory that the "medium is the message" then the organising that happens virtually doesn't exist in reality, it is easy to disassociate its message from reality by not existing in physical environments, influencing people on a day-to-day basis and shaping those who chance by its presence.

The 20th century was, for better or worse, defined by chance interactions - so much so that university workspaces are now engineered *to create* "chance interactions" like those occurring at places such as Bell Labs in the 1960s and '70s. On 17 October 1961, one precocious young man saw another on a train station platform carrying a Chuck Berry album, recognising each other from school they began to speak, realising their shared love for music, and so the beginning of the

Rolling Stones was formed. The cannibalisation of towns and cities in pursuit of tax revenue actively works against the chances for non-commercial chance interactions to occur. Whilst many are thriving with the advent of digital tools it would be remiss to ignore the control that governments and corporations wield on our freedoms to organise and the genuine need for what happens on a human-to-human, and non-human basis.

Organising and being in place isn't limited to the confines of buildings and assets. Since land enclosures started as early as the 5th century in Britain, the removal of people from land under an illusion of divine rights has systematically erased ways of being the world over.

When you remove a Peoples from their land, you remove their agency to exercise their ways of being and those held and nurtured by their ancestors.

When we look to supporting an infrastructure that allows for knowledge to (re)surface and develop we cannot ignore the role that Land plays. We must free the Land from the false constraints of conditions, covenants, deeds, and interactions of an economic system. It/They is not a product for the use of capital, they are a living being. We cannot have life if the Land does not have life.

Indigenous people from various tribes taking part in the Terra Livre Indigenous Camp protest against Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro in front of the National Congress in Brasilia, on April 13, 2022.

Photo: Sergio Lima/AFP/Getty Imagesf



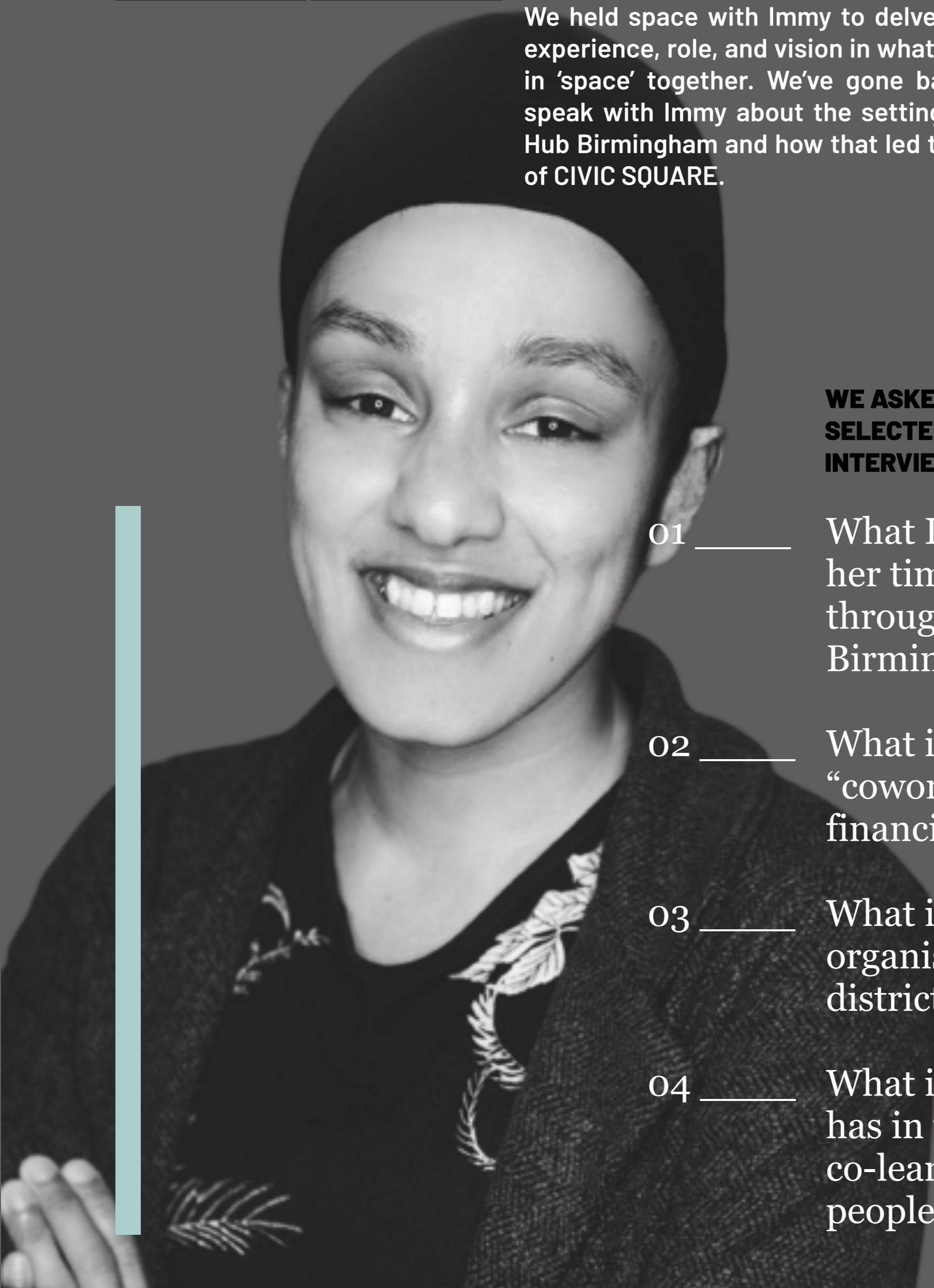
INTERVIEW WITH IMANDEEP KAUR



Immy is a Co - Founder and Director of CIVIC SQUARE; demonstrating neighbourhood-scale civic infrastructure for social and ecological transition, together with many people and partners in Ladywood, Birmingham UK. She is also an active member of Project 00.. Immy is part of the Doughnut Economics Action Lab Advisory Team, a Birmingham Hippodrome Trustee, on the Common Wealth Advisory Board. Immy was a founding director of Impact Hub Birmingham, which was open between 2015 - 2019



We held space with Immy to delve deep into her experience, role, and vision in what it means to be in 'space' together. We've gone back in time to speak with Immy about the setting up of Impact Hub Birmingham and how that led to the founding of CIVIC SQUARE.



WE ASKED IMMY FOUR QUESTIONS AND SELECTED SOME KEY QUOTES, THE FULL INTERVIEW CAN BE READ IN THE APPENDIX.

01 _____ What Immy sees when looking back at her time during the 2010s reflected through what took place at Impact Hub Birmingham?

02 _____ What is was like to work within the “coworking” space during a time of rapid financialisation?

03 _____ What it’s been like to transition from organising within a central business district to a neighbourhood setting?

04 _____ What is the macro-economic vision she has in the future of knowledge creating, co-learning, and holding space with people?

INTERVIEW

IT FELT LIKE THERE WAS A COMMUNAL FRUSTRATION THAT DIDN'T HAVE A WAY TO ARTICULATE WHAT WAS WRONG OR WHAT WAS HAPPENING AT THE TIME.

I HAD NO IDEA THAT SYSTEMS, IDEAS, STORIES, CULTURES, THE WORLD WAS MADE, AND CAN BE REMADE BY US, RIGHT?

US IN BIRMINGHAM THAT WERE LARGELY GLOBAL MAJORITY LED, LIKE INDY AND CO, ALL SAYING HEY, IT IS NOT ABOUT BECOMING MORE LIKE THAT SYSTEM. IT'S ABOUT COMPLETELY STARTING TO BE ABLE TO BUILD A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT ONE THAT MAY EMERGE IN WAYS THAT SPEAK TO THE NEW THINGS WE'RE LEARNING.

BUT IN ESSENCE WHAT WAS BEING SAID WAS THAT GREAT PEOPLE CAN'T OUTSMART BAD SYSTEMS, THE BUSINESS MODEL WILL NOT WORK FOR LOADS OF REASONS.

HE [INDY JOHAR] TALKED ABOUT HOW WE'RE NOT IN DEMOCRACY JUST THROUGH A VOTE, BUT DEMOCRACY THROUGH THE POWER TO CREATE THROUGH AGENCY.

AT THE HEART OF IT WAS THIS IDEA ABOUT WHAT WOULD BE THE NEW TYPES OF TOWN HALLS FOR THE 21ST CENTURY?

I GUESS I AM VERY CRITICAL ABOUT THIS AND I'M PARTICULARLY CRITICAL STILL TO THIS DAY BECAUSE I THINK FOUNDERS AND PEOPLE LIKE US WERE OVER-SURVEILLED, OVER-CRITICISED OVER, AND HAD A HIGHER LEVEL OF WHAT WAS EXPECTED OF US.

BUT THE LIE OF THE WEWORKS AND THE HUNDREDS OF BILLIONS OF AND THIS REVOLUTION PROMISED IS GONE AND PEOPLE ARE STILL CO-LOCATING TO CREATE RADICAL MOVEMENTS AND STORIES AND WHERE THEY CAN, BUT IT'S 10 TIMES HARDER. IS ACCESSING SPACE CRITICAL? YES, BUT IT'S NOT ABOUT CO-WORKING, IT'S ABOUT NEW FORMS OF INFRASTRUCTURE THAT ARE ABOUT HOW COMMUNITIES, NEIGHBOURHOODS, AND PLACES COME TOGETHER.

PEOPLE WOULD COME TO VISIT US AND WE'D SAY IT'S NOT GOING TO WORK IN THAT WAY. WE'RE CONNECTING NEW ECOSYSTEMS UP, EXCHANGING KNOWLEDGE AND BECOMING PEERS IN DIFFERENT WAYS. WE'RE ACTIVATING AND FINDING OUR OWN AGENCY AND POWER AND DEMOCRATISING KNOWLEDGE AND WHO KNOWS WHERE WE'RE GOING?!

WHY WAS OUR AMBITION AND OUR ANALYSIS OF THE SYSTEM SO OVER SCRUTINISED AND OVER-POLICED AND UNDER-BELIEVED, WHY WAS OUR AMBITION NAIVE AND EVERYBODY ELSE'S IS COMPLETE.

INTERVIEW

WHAT WOULD THAT MEAN IF WE WENT EVEN MORE BACK TO THAT QUESTION OF WHAT IF TEDX WAS EVERY DAY IN DISCOVERING THE 21ST CENTURY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR NEIGHBOURHOODS?

FOR US AT CIVIC SQUARE I THINK PARTICULARLY ABOUT THE POWER OF DEMONSTRATING FUTURE REALITIES IN THE NOW.

WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF THINGS WENT THE OTHER WAY AROUND AND BE ACROSS THE NEIGHBOURHOOD BEFORE WE EMBARKED ON THE CONSTRUCTION, RETROFIT AND REBUILD OF THE SPACE?

WE'RE GOING TO NEED A TRANSFORMATION IN THE KNOWLEDGE, CONNECTEDNESS, MATERIAL REALITIES OF THE PEOPLE TO MAKE THIS TRANSITION.

WHENEVER YOU'RE GOING THROUGH MASSIVE CHANGE IT CANNOT HAPPEN CENTRALLY, WE KNOW THIS. IT HAS TO BE DEMOCRATISED AND EVOLVED BROADLY.

NEIGHBOUR