

Building a New Kind of Infoshop

CrimethInc.

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On Saturday, November 13, a new and experimental infoshop in Winona, MN, opened its doors to the public. The Burrow is one of the first new infoshops to open since the controversial essay “5 Steps to Reviving Your Failing Anarchist Bookstore”, and at a time when long-standing infoshops are throwing in their towels, this account offers insight into the new models still unseen.

This story begins where our coverage of small-town organizing left off in Rolling Thunder #7. What follows is not only an account and recipe for a new type of space, but a possible intermediate step in anarchist organizing in long-term communities.

If You Build It ...

Early on, the plan was to put a space in our home. Our friends and colleagues have known about our wild dreams for the last two years — that we’d be able to have a social space independent from the rest of our house. Now that we’ve finished most of the work, a community is waiting for us.

We knew from the start that making good on our promise would mean a lot of work and time. It would mean learning how to do things we’d never done before. Perhaps most importantly, it would mean we would have to care enough about the outcome to do things *well*.

The process was long, though. Visitors passed through to see the space in wholly different stages and shades. Before any work was done the wallpaper was sagging, the plaster dripping, like some paper street soap company.

The walls were first to go. We had to tear down the old walls, swinging hammers and crowbars. Carpenters call this doing “demo” and it is similar, in many ways, to the anarchist sense of the word. Of course, it wasn’t all smash. We shoveled plaster and lath. We scooped armloads of asbestos vermiculite. It was dusty, disgusting, probably deadly, and it had to be done.

With the inside of the walls exposed, we had lots of work to do. The framing of the walls had to be restructured. A wall and staircase were moved and supports were installed to brace the buckling structure of the house. We insulated the outside walls to protect the space from our frigid winters. We established a subfloor and a new ceiling to accommodate for a century of sagging and settling. Somehow, we found time between phases to host gatherings like this Really Really Free Market spokescouncil.

New drywall meant new paint. We argued many nights over the exact colors to be sure that everything would be just so.

We found used flooring at an extreme discount, and taught ourselves how to properly install it. It took about 45 hours to place all of the pieces and fasten them. Afterwards, we sanded the entire space with a very powerful expandable drum sander that a friend loaned us. Tragedy struck when we botched the seal job, on account of the frigid autumn temperature. And even though most people can’t tell, we will have to buff it down and apply a fourth coat of polyurethane.

A member of our community happens to be a professional cabinet builder, so we called upon him to build the cabinetry for the infoshop’s kitchen. Amazingly, he manufactured a countertop out of wood pulled from a dumpster.

Finally, we built the shelves for the infoshop’s library. This was a considerable undertaking, and another task we had never attempted before.

- 20x 8’ pine 1”x12” boards = \$260

- 5 lbs Tan Deckscrews = \$18
- Jug of Woodglue = \$8
- 5x 8' pine 2"x2" boards = \$9
- 3x 8' pine 1"x3" boards = \$10

At just over \$300, our shelves store over 1000 books, a collection of anarchist magazines, and a display for anarchist primers and other critical material. Without the made-over interior, a sizable anarchist library can be a public resource for a third the cost of a month's storefront rent. If you sacrifice your personal living room to it, there are no additional mandatory expenses. This does away with the tiresome obligation to fundraise month-to-month, and allows donations to go directly towards more features and services.

The construction work isn't over — we still have to build shelves for our free food pantry, make other kitchen installations, trim the space, and build a projector mount and screen. Although, the space is open, welcoming, and usable, however incomplete. Building things from scratch complements the theories in our books — the sense of lasting commitment to anarchist resistance and transformation is embodied in the very process of creating long-term anarchist spaces. This is our propaganda by the deed.

... **They Will Come**

From the beginning, we wanted an explicitly anarchist space, even if we wanted to make it available to a community that was largely outside of the anarchist subculture. By waving this flag, we not only introduce and elaborate anarchist critiques and perspectives, we also can feel safe knowing that a thriving small-town community values and has affinity with anarchists who would otherwise be defined by the misdirected representations — or, and especially, those directed misrepresentations — made in the newspapers and on the occasional newscast across the country. By flying the black flag, we put a face on the shadowy anarchists so that others can befriend or become them.

To these ends, we drafted the first version of a thorough *Owners' Manual*, which details the policies of the space and articulates common anarchist intentions and tendencies. Additionally, this document spells out how to use the space, from operating the audio system to borrowing books from the library.

It had been said before that it would be difficult to create a completely open space in a home. Although the duplex creates the illusion of separation, this obstacle is not completely overcome by architecture alone. To create neutral space in our home, we have committed ourselves to social communities larger than the anarchist subculture, and to sharing the reins with whomever will take them. In a small midwestern town with a modest anarchist population, this is a necessity. Wherever there are public anarchist spaces, they must connect with larger communities, or the anarchist scene will remain forever in adolescence. In this sense, we've created neutral territory on anarchist ground — a victory against subsumption and for communities of resistance.

Communities of Resistance

Today, mainstream society presumes that everyone who disagrees with its logic or authority will plead their grievances through established channels. This tendency is flawed in at least two ways: the first is that it presumes that anyone who doesn't utilize those channels (write their elected representative, vote, peacefully demonstrate, etc.) has no wide-reaching grievances of their own; second, the established channels form a closed-loop circuit of speech-with-no-action.

For over than one hundred years, anarchists in this country have struggled against the narrow walls of these established channels—sometimes controversially—and because of that society has conceded ideas like the eight-hour workday and the term “birth control.”

If anarchists reject capitalism, hierarchy, gender and sexuality norms, the subordination of other species, eco-devastation, imperialism, and other forms of authoritarianism, what then is the purpose of demonstrating through the established channels? And what exactly would we be *demonstrating*? It is in this spirit that communities of resistance can inform expressions of our dissent. Each member of such a community is free to act upon their grievances with society in whatever ways they need to.

Communities of resistance are creative places, full of invention, performance, freedom of identity, consensual relationships, and gift-giving. But they can be a destructive force, too; as each member confronts their domination by modern society on their own terms, little pieces of that world crumble away.

A community of resistance is a demonstration of the lives we want—individually, we may be stuck in the real world, but collectively, we inhabit *another* real world.

— *From the Burrow Owners' Manual.*

The Grand Opening

The night before our grand opening, anarchist comrades arrived from the region to celebrate the beginning of a new anarchist space. After a feast at our grand banquet table, we cleared space and dimmed the lights for music and dancing. One by one, our local friends arrived, too. Electro dance music sounded where only power tools had for a full year prior. It was lively and lovely; but it was solemn, too, when the oscillating rhythm of Test Their Logik's *No World Order* filled the Burrow with fury and longing.

Saturday began with an open house. Carload after carload of supporters arrived with trays of treats and boxes of books. People were able to browse the Owners' Manual, inspect the shelves, and admire the signage for the first time after months of waiting. Approximately 40 people visited the space in this first event of the day.

Later in the evening we threw a potluck. Dozens of dishes from different households, accumulated in the kitchen. Afterwards, some kitchenware was even donated to the space!

The Burrow collective presented a slideshow with before and after photos, and welcomed the crowded room officially to the first evening of the new community library and social center. One of the out-of-town guests courageously stood, and delicately opened a little blue book to recite a passage.

It was then that famed author and filmmaker Bill Brown took the stage to present a short film on the subject of demolishing old spaces and read adorably idiosyncratic tales of the adventures

in daily life. The evening's events ended with the latest from Froseph, and the jar went around to cover Bill's bus ticket.

Coming Soon to Living Rooms Everywhere

Now that the long stretch of labor is past us, we are left pondering how many other living rooms could transform this way. How many new types of long-term social spaces can emerge from the anarchist community? In the days following the grand opening, participants returned to their households with Owners' Manuals. A woman walking a dog through the neighborhood brought us 30 books and kind words, because her friend's mother had given the space such a warm review. A homeless man had found a copy of the Owners' Manual at the Catholic Worker and came to share some anti-police poems he had written. In our first week of open hours, we've received over 300 book donations: from Žižek and woodworking manuals to *The Red Tent* and *The Monkey Wrench Gang*. What dangerous ideas lie on the shelves of your friends and neighbors? More importantly, what must be built for them to synthesize?

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