

**Dougald Hine**

## **Space Makers at Brixton Village (aka Granville Arcade)**

Twenty empty shops in an indoor market in south London became the focus for a hub of new creative projects and community-driven businesses, creating a space in which people want to spend time.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Unhurried Conversations

Like just about everything worthwhile I've been involved in, Space Makers grew out of a particular kind of conversation: unhurried, drawn out over time, beginning with an open invitation to all kinds of people, not oriented to a preformed objective, but given focus by its subject.

In this case, the subject was how to make better use of underused space, build relationships between grassroots creative energy and top-down organisations, and create places in which people want to spend time. Over six months, we organised regular Space Makers meet-ups in London, bringing together activists, architects, artists, thinktankers, squatters and others interested in these questions. When we set up an online network to share information, it soon had hundreds of members around the UK. This conversation crystallised into the Brixton Village project.

### 2. Getting Hands-On

Brixton Village – aka Granville Arcade – is a 1930s indoor market, moments away from the noise of Brixton town centre: six avenues of open-fronted stalls and glassed-in shops. The narrow entrance off Atlantic Road gives no warning of the high-ceilinged space which lies behind. On weekday afternoons, you can hardly get past the queue at Dagon's fish stall, but the crowds soon thin out as you wander further inside.

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<sup>1</sup> A version of this article appeared in T. Britton (ed) *Hand Made: Portraits of emergent new community culture*, August 2010.

By mid-2009, the shops were thinning out, too. The market had been bought by a property company who arrived with plans for a major redevelopment. But they had underestimated Brixton's immune system. Resistance from local residents led to the creation of the Friends of Brixton Market, whose campaigning turned the council against the owner's plans.

It was here that Space Makers moved from hosting a conversation to running a hands-on process. The initial contact came from Lambeth council: they had been approached by the owners about doing something creative with the twenty shops currently standing empty. Lambeth couldn't help with funding, but suggested they talk to us.

A key early conversation was about money. These guys owned the market in order to rent out the shops, they couldn't find tenants, so they had a problem. If they wanted something creative to happen in their space, it was because this might help solve the problem. If it worked, they would make more money. So rather than looking for external funding, we told them, they ought to fund us to run a project.

Lacking other options, they agreed to this – for three months,

initially – hardly any time, but just enough to get something moving.

### 3. Space Exploration

On a freezing November night, 350 people turned up to a Space Exploration event at the market. Once again, we had begun by throwing out an open invitation. The vacant shops were open for viewing, we ran workshops to help people develop ideas, find collaborators and discuss practicalities. And we gave them a week to submit a proposal.

These proposals were for what they would do with a shop, rent-free, for up to three months. It could be a deliberately temporary use of a space, or a trial for a new business. In all cases, we wanted proposals that were grounded in Brixton, that would work with the existing shops and stalls, while drawing new visitors and bringing life to the place.

A week later, we had 98 proposals.

#### 4. Racing to Open

The selection process was a blur. On the final day, we somehow got down to 30 projects. Of these, 14 had long-term plans, while the rest ranged from weekend pop-ups to three month exhibitions.

Seven weeks after the owners had agreed to the project, the first wave of new shops launched. These included a WorkShop making and selling recycled clothes, a deli specialising in locally-sourced food, two vintage clothes shops and a Community Shop run by Transition Town Brixton, the Market Traders' Federation and the Friends of Brixton Market.

#### 5. The Reality Gap & the Deep Story

As the initial rush of DIY energy subsided, I watched our first-time shopkeepers hit reality. There was a great gap between the idea of having a shop and the reality of keeping it open six days a week in a cold, neglected location, where you might go half a day without seeing a customer.

In a different way, Julia Shalet and I – who were running the project for Space Makers – hit our own reality gap. What did we know about running a market? How could we possibly turn this place around and live up to the promises we'd made to people? What the hell were we doing here?

It was at this point that I found the deep story which made sense of my own involvement. Before setting up Space Makers, I had co-founded School of Everything – a website often described as an online marketplace for face-to-face learning. When it launched in 2008, an old activist friend challenged me: “All this marketplace for education stuff, it's just Thatcherism, isn't it?”

In response, I wrote a piece called 'How I stopped worrying and learned to love the market!' This contrasted the modern abstraction of 'the Market' with 'the marketplace' as a far older social institution. A marketplace, I wrote, is a sociable space in which buying and selling take place surrounded by other activities, a place you come to see friends, to hear stories, to argue about ideas. Crucially, unlike a Starbucks or a department store, it is a space where your welcome is not determined purely by your ability to spend money.

Brixton Village was a real-life marketplace: you saw people stopping for long conversations, arguing, preaching, putting up posters for club nights or public meetings. If we could build on this, make it known as a sociable space, embedded in the place and the people around it, then perhaps we could draw more people to the market, give the businesses a better chance of succeeding, while keeping what made it special, what made it a marketplace and what made it Brixton.

## 6. Building a Community

We started organising weekly events. Every Saturday, there's something happening at the market – music, pop-up stalls, food tastings, storytellers, children's workshops. The weekly cycle matters, because people don't have to check their diaries: you just know there's always something worth coming down for on a Saturday afternoon.

A small team on a tiny budget, we realised that we could burn ourselves out trying to run events without having achieved enough to make the project succeed. The answer, once more, was to open this out.

We started an open meeting on Tuesday nights in the local pub. Anyone can bring an idea for an event, performance or stall and, while we give advice on what works in the context, we have never said no to an idea. That doesn't mean they all happen, of course – because the responsibility for making something happen stays with the person who proposes it.

The meeting is informal. Most weeks, there are 20 or 30 of us, often including some of the shopkeepers. In this way, a community of several hundred people has grown around the market, all of whom have had some involvement in making it a good place to spend time.

## 7. Passing It On

We are currently into our eighth month at Brixton Village. Of the 14 projects which hoped to become long-term tenants, seven of them have done so, including the Community Shop and the local food deli. Eight other shops have been let to new local businesses or arts organisations. More and more people visit the market each week.

When we arrived, there was little trust between tenants, local campaigners, the council and the owners. This hasn't been transformed – and nor should it be, because there are good reasons for caution – but enough trust has built up that issues get dealt with before they reach the front page of the local paper. The Friends of Brixton Market have been critical friends to Space Makers, helping us think through the implications of our work. Hopefully we've helped open up a possible future for the market which could work for all sides, though for it to do so will require continued vigilance as well as constructive engagement.

The project will have succeeded when Brixton Village no longer needs Space Makers. Our aim is to pass on the processes we have created to the community that has grown around the project. We also want to pass on the lessons to groups working to reuse space elsewhere – and to apply our ways of thinking to making other kinds of space in which people will want to spend time.