A workshop and discussion on resisting threats to your home led by Ed Daffarn and Lowkey
24 OCTOBER 2019 | 18:30 - 21:00

TICKETS AND INFO:
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Preface

In the midst of a housing crisis where home is as precarious as ever, where the wealthy and powerful set the terms for our survival, how do those who are vulnerable to having their homes and community spaces taken away begin to fight back – and win?

Free Word’s Tactics of Defence aims to build on existing knowledge of how communities have successfully come together to resist development, whether through forming coalitions, community organising, the use of Freedom of Information requests, blogging or other forms of resistance. An evening of discussion and creativity brought together a panel of activists – including Eileen Short, Paul Burnham, Emer Mary Morris and Toby Laurent Belson – to conduct a workshop to recognise and record proven successful tactics of defence.

Our intention was not to reinvent the wheel during these discussions but to have useful and inspiring conversations to identify what works best, and what methods can be used to empower communities against what can sometimes feel like overwhelming forces.

It is important to remember that many local battles against developers have been won in the past and Tactics of Defence aims to celebrate these victories and provide a template for successful resistance moving forward. We hope the pamphlet we have produced in collaboration with event attendees provides a useful tool for groups, organisations and communities who find themselves having to defend their homes and public assets.

Ed Daffarn and Lowkey
“Study, imagine, play, experiment, challenge, practice... Make a struggle a place where you make each other stronger.”

Toby Laurent Belson

“To document, to record and not to give up are the basic tenets of how I see activism. We didn’t have the choice to give up because the stakes were so high.”

Ed Daffarn
Workshop led by Eileen Short

Coalition and Community Building

How to build collective action:

Organisation is key in making an impact.

Working collectively is the best way forward. There is more pressure in society today to be individual. Find ways of connecting with others in your community.

Local estates and nearby housing being pulled down might create anxiety about your home being next, but it also creates a common ground to bring people together and turn the anxiety into action.

1. Find the groups that already exist within your community. Meet with them, respect the work that pre-dates you, and take care not to set up new campaign groups with the same purpose as those that already exist.

2. Don’t bypass your housing association – discuss issues with them before taking further action.

3. Many different community groups often merge together to take action on one issue, which can be very effective (e.g. Labour housing campaign joined by other campaigning groups).
Building groups / community can feel easier where people have been in the same place for a long period. This is trickier in areas of ‘regeneration’ or those in ‘temporary accommodation’. Food is a good way to tackle this – organise groups and meetings with food and use this opportunity to speak to people.

1. Always go to meet council reps with a family member or friend. Record and note everything that is said, and be aware of what recording equipment is allowed. Tip those in authority out of their comfortable place – e.g. turning up en masse to housing officers’ surgery with posters of the people’s questions – getting photos.

2. It’s hard to stay positive and motivated after being knocked down many times. Some start to feel ‘imposter syndrome’ and look for ways to feel empowered again in their activism. Confidence comes from collective action; speaking with your neighbors and those in your community and finding reassurance and unity in the shared experience.

3. Keeping community spirit is hugely important – those who feel alone or vulnerable may be more susceptible to deals with council / developers (e.g. If you vote for regeneration plans, you will get a flat on the new estate). If people are ‘picked off’ one by one, the campaign diminishes.
Use of Language in Campaigning

**How language can be a barrier:**

Language can be twisted by property developers and councils. For example, local authorities never use the word ‘demolition.’ There is a negative association there even if that’s what it is. They also don’t use the term ‘social cleansing.’ Some terms cut through to the point of the issues and are avoided by councils – and these are words you could use in your campaigning.

The use of the term ‘affordable’ housing can have several meanings, which are being contested. But the reality is simple: private interests are driving up house prices and rent.

The language used by society and the media about working class people is divisive – the idea of the deserving and underserving.

The Greater London Authority is much more hesitant about backing large scale regeneration now – the culture around this has shifted due to change in language and public pressure.

There are different languages spoken in different communities, and you might need translators to effectively get your messages across. This may mean planning door-knocking exercises when children are at home or translating leaflets/posters. If you do translate flyers, always get the translation checked.
Workshop led by Emer Mary-Morris

Creative Accountability

When consultations on social housing can be a box-ticking exercise, how much do councils take residents’ input into account? How can we ensure their views are adequately and responsibly engaged with?

Pressurise local councils to build social housing by getting “power” on side. For example, Emer and her team once created a living interactive mural in Belfast including campaign demands which has been signed by the mayor and councillors. It is updated every month to reflect how effectively authorities are performing their duties.

1. Thinking about the politics of visibility: normally we show the people who are suffering as a result of particular decisions, but an alternative is to make visible the people who are making these decisions that cause suffering. Make the ‘invisible’ visible; put pressure on bureaucratic figures; don’t allow people to forget the agents behind particular decisions or ongoing issues that negatively impact communities.

2. Create loud, colourful campaign banners to make sure that the public are able to absorb the messaging. Another means of making the invisible visible is to draw out the human consequences of particular policies or decisions, by shining a spotlight on the difficulties residents are facing and attaching them very specifically to the people responsible for particular decisions.
3. Disrupt prevailing narratives: produce large, colourful posters revealing the truth behind the narrative and promoting communities’ views. Feature residents in videos which reveal their views.

4. Create a counter-report in response to official reports and documents, revealing the truth behind these narratives. Investigate the background behind companies. Make the most of publicly available information and publicise your findings. Investigate how much money organisations make and determine how this money is spent (following the money and making it public; transparency).

5. Be opportunistic with publicity and use it to spread your message widely and create public pressure. Engage with community leaders, local councilors, etc. Get community leaders on side, particularly those with links to a particular area.

6. Be in solidarity with other communities, or other members of the community with different priorities.

7. Use your own personal platform to gain support.

8. As Arundhati Roy once said: “There is no such thing as the ‘voiceless’: there are only the deliberately silenced, or preferably unheard.”

9. Where councils are attempting to strip the emotion out of narratives, counter this by putting the human and subjective element back in. Document the emotional impact of decisions.
10. Collate oral histories to bring statistics to life. Counteract numbness. By tracing what people say you can also see the particular ways that states have failed. These histories are also evidence.

11. On the other hand, use impersonal and objective language when it is useful to directly counter official reports/terminology.

12. If you don’t tell your story, someone else will tell it for you. Take control of your own personal (and your own community’s) narrative. Which stories do you want to tell?

**Turning Theory into Practice**

How do you make sure your approach stays rooted and practical, rather than abstract and theoretical?

Explore the opportunities for crossover between art and politics. Explore creative opportunities alongside traditional digital campaigning. Unique projects and approaches attract more media attention.

Creative projects to promote messages (e.g. a grime video released in response to a sham consultation; projecting poetry on to London landmarks). Promote it widely, directing it specifically to individuals who are involved at a policy level. This also allows you to respond to bureaucracy in your own language and on your own terms.
Reach out to people, make sure you engage with the physical environment and the community within it rather than only interacting digitally.

Think about the practicalities and opportunities of your particular area. For example, the living mural was a response to the fact that there are a lot of walls in Belfast which were erected as a response to the troubles.

The state is required to show improvement in relation to housing provision. Engage with authorities to hold them accountable against benchmarks and targets.

Make the most of engaging with authorities and being diplomatic when it serves your purpose, but keep your priorities in mind. You are not asking for permission.
Workshop led by Paul Burnham

Ballots and How They Are Used

Since July 2018, major estate regeneration schemes involving any demolition of social homes must have the backing of existing residents before they can receive City Hall funding.

One positive of the ballot is that it’s better than ‘soft consultations.’ It means there’s an opportunity to stop a regeneration scheme. The ballot approach is highly risky to councils because it opens up the window toward organization and resistance by local people.

However, clever tactics are now used by councils to manipulate ballot votes. This could be saying to tenants that if they vote ‘yes’ to ballot, you can have residency in the area and secure housing on the estate and suggesting that voting ‘no’ to regeneration could mean you’d be moved to Luton or that you’ll thereby remain insecure.

‘Soft consultations’ can be insidious – people might not be aware there is even a consultation taking place. This could just be receiving vague questionnaires which are not binding.
Fighting the Developer

How do we counter the narratives that councils spread?

Make bad policies look toxic. For example, the ‘STOP Harringay Development Vehicle - STOP HDV’ was effective in creating a Twitter (@StopHDV) and website with well-researched rebuttals of the councils arguments.

Research is a core part of building counter-narratives. If you look at council documents, you can dig out developers’ papers. You can often find the true nature of these developments. For example, Meridian Water in Enfield, this turned out to be driving out the poor essentially. Put this in front of people and you can build a campaign. Find people passionate about doing this research. Commercial confidentiality can interfere with this. Private developers’ communications are not subject to same laws. But this doesn’t have to be the case – this could be reformed in law. 1947 Town and Country planning act: ownership of land is not nationalised, but decisions on use of land is nationalised, it can be developed but according to this still has to be in the public interest (decided by councilors).

Think of a particular angle for the press. With the STOP HDV campaign, the story was the division within the Labour Party which garnered interest. Ultimately, after a lot of mainstream press, 1,000 Labour Party members voted to remove councilors concerned. The impact went beyond Harringay as it made other regeneration schemes vulnerable.

Working on the ground is essential. Having people within the blocks and housing units is important. For example, In Lewisham for the Reginald House
Campaign, people with gas masks came in and occupied the space as a form of public protest. This was exactly the kind of protest the council did not want.

Pitch a column to the local paper. Having lived experience can enable you to write with insight into your community. People on the ground have powerful stories to tell and there are several ways to go about telling them.

Use different mediums in telling stories of an area. For example, researching and documenting Broadwater Farm Estate if you’re from the area or nearby. Researching and documenting its history from sound system culture through to drill, what defines an area’s cultural history and how will that shift. Similarly, using zine-making as a medium to highlight the importance of community assets like libraries and markets. For example, the North Kensington Library Zine or the oral history zine about Shepherds Bush Market.
Workshop led by Toby Laurent Belson

Using Creativity in Your Activism

Where do you begin?

What is your community? Look at your own area, your geographic location and what communities exist around you. Community can be space-based but it can also be identity-based (Black, Muslim etc).

In the very first instance, it is important to understand that you are an asset to your community in the skills you have as an artist. It’s about using those skills toward activism. You can start small by creating something really simple like a poster or flyer.

Green For Grenfell was started by local school children and Local artists developed it. It was about creating strong visual impact and it was about producing images that could go worldwide quickly. Locally, it was about seeing buildings and streets bathed in green light. Green is the light wave that is least stressful to your eyes. Whereas Blue light wakes you up, Green light is calming - on a local level that was needed. This was about impact on multiple levels. Calming local people after a trauma, sending a strong message of solidarity and highlighting the cause on a national and global level.

If you are starting a bigger project which is in tandem with an existing campaign, break down what you need. Do you need funding, do you need materials, have you spoken to local campaigners and attended meetings?
For Green For Grenfell, artists began by going to a meeting with the community about an issue. That should always be the starting point.

Community legitimacy is important. Especially if you are not from an area. Grenfell has had examples of this, some who have asked, some who have not. Steve McQueen is an artist who grew up in White City estate, he filmed Grenfell Tower but did speak to the community but there were sensitivities around using a helicopter to do this. There was another artist who wanted pieces of the tower to create paint from it. This artist emailed members of the community and was refused that demand. Artists need to engage with why their suggestions might be offensive. There is a value in that failure and why that’s happened.

Ask yourself, where is this art-work going? Is it sitting in a gallery far away? How are they benefitting from it? Contemplate who the art is for? What is its purpose, and who can engage with it? We all need to look a little bit closer at what’s going around us.

The whole point of art and creativity is about creating something where there wasn’t something before. Creating and understanding where there wasn’t a connection before. You’re trying to create a ladder toward your progression. Through creativity, you leave an asset. That asset can end up in a gallery, in a museum, on YouTube, anywhere.

For example, filmmaker Dhelia Snoussi made a film about the Granville Centre - a community centre in South Kilburn under threat - her process was imbued with a sense of co-design, bottom up, invites contributions and featured people from within the community.
At Notting Hill carnival following Grenfell, the local community painted green hearts across the area, bringing together graffiti artists to achieve this. There was a prior discussion about which areas would be best/most appropriate to paint on.

Subvert council narratives using art. The history of parodies and satire is imbued with the idea of subversion. For example, South Kilburn activists created an alternative timeline of their community centre to counter the South Kilburn Trust. It was called The Real Timeline of the Granville - using the same colours. This is the spirit of subversion which is quintessentially British. Akin to drawing a moustache on a person’s face.

Explore the politics of naming in the area you’re in. For example, Shepherds Bush roundabout being renamed ‘Holland Park Roundabout’ by the council. Re-writing and re-naming is an attempt to re-write history.
Workshop led by Lowkey

The Use of Celebrity

What are the advantages and disadvantages of involving celebrities in your campaign(s)?

1. A good case study of this is the Granville Community Centre in South Kilburn. In July 2016, there was a proposed takeover of both the Granville and Carlton Centres. The public consultation categorically stated that ‘there was no appetite for either centre to be removed’.

2. A decision was made to remove both centres to be replaced with unaffordable housing. This is when author Zadie Smith was approached. Zadie Smith grew up nearby and her mother used the spaces. Local activists organised an event with her called ‘Saving the Granville’ with Zadie Smith and local poets Zia Ahmed and Caleb Femi. 300 local community members were in attendance.

3. The big advantage of this was that it shamed the council into reversing the decision. It got publicity from London Live and local press and the council was forced to manage the PR disaster and send local councillors. Zadie Smith has also shown her continued support since then.

4. However, there are disadvantages to celebrity involvement. Campaigns can get hijacked by public figures for the wrong reasons. The rules of engagement for journalists can shift as journalists get involved. Russell Brand being involved with FocusE15 was effective, but journalists can get
fixated on the celebrity name instead of the issue itself. There is also the risk of campaign fatigue, as each campaign ends up needing a ‘unique selling point.’ This feeds into the twisted model of how to attract journalists to the campaign.

5. The case of Russell Brand being involved with the FocusE15 Campaign had a huge impact. Russell Brand publicly challenging the eviction of 93 families on the New Era Estate in East London being done by a US investment company called Westbrook Partners made their plans untenable. Russell Brand was also impeded there and didn’t leave after one appearance but was committed. This was hugely important in gaining mainstream media attention (in The Guardian and other publications).

6. Another fascinating case study is that of Stormzy. Stormzy’s involvement in supporting Grenfell came as a result of getting directives from local activists pushing him to support the cause. As a result, Stormzy’s performance at the Brit Awards was a key reminder. The unexpected addition to his performance surprised people within the industry. Stormy sharing petitions by Grenfell United have had a huge impact and in heightening campaign visibility.
Using Social Media

How to combine digital activism to build momentum with a campaign:

Social Media can be described as using Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to advance the cause of a campaign.

As mentioned, this could be about setting campaign Twitter accounts or campaign Facebook pages which highlight the issues at play. This needs to be done in tandem with activists on the ground, with the appropriate permission and ensuring there is a method of communicating which is vetted by everyone.

Hashtags can have a big impact. For example, during Brent’s up-coming Borough of Culture, the hashtag #Brent2020 can be used to draw attention to how Brent is demolishing community centres. In addition, the #Justice4Grenfell helped highlight the cause and campaign.

Utilising celebrity voices on social media. You can lobby powerful celebrity voices to tweet your campaign petition as mentioned with Stormzy. This was also undertaken by footballer Raheem Sterling.

It’s worth remembering that social media campaigning can only be effective if carried out alongside activism within communities. If you do use social media as one of your methods for campaigning, ensure you have a strategy. Know what else is trending or likely to come up on social media to avoid your message being drowned, or to find ways to link your messaging to what’s out there already.
Workshop led by Ed Daffarn

Freedom of Information Requests and Blogging

How can this be used to your advantage?

1. Setting up a blog is a simple way of holding power to account without money or resources. For example, Grenfell Action Group Blog was set up by Ed Daffarn and Francis O’Connor. It gave the Grenfell community a voice and sense of power that was not felt previous to setting up the blog. It doesn’t matter how much you do or how little you do, this could be photographing a letter from the council or a letter you received from the council, this can have an immense amount of power. In the end, the blog ended striking fear into the council.

2. A key piece of advice from Ed would be to be anonymous in your blogging if you can. A famous blog set up in Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea called ‘The Hornet’s Nest’ scrutinized this Tory-majority council. It massively changed their behavior. We started this blog, thinking it had no power, but when Grenfell happened, the MET Police came along and every single blog will be used as evidence in their investigations.

3. One of the disadvantages of the blog can be that, not everyone has access to a computer. There’s also the danger of no one knowing the blog exists.

4. Facebook is a legitimate way of starting local campaigns and local conversations. It can be a way for a group of activists to share information and knowledge of campaigns or local events. However, Facebook can be infiltrated by journalists and councils.
5. Think about who the blog is intended for: Is it for the council? For local people? Or for people who want to support the campaign? One of the most powerful things about Grenfell Action Blog is how it acted as a sign-posting for other activist organisations including Westway 23, Save North Kensington Library and the Save Wornington College campaign. The Grenfell Action Group Blog had a section containing this information to easily guide people to the right place.

6. Do not always expect results straight away. There isn’t always a silver bullet. Campaigns and laws are two pedals of a bike, without one another, it is sterile. Do not get disheartened by the lack of results either.

7. The blog is a way of memorialising struggle, a process of archiving history and it has a longevity.

8. Freedom of Information is a very useful tool. A lot of people can be put off by it but it’s such a great way of accessing information. All you have to do, is write to your councillor and request a particular bit of information. For example, “Dear X, please could I request the following...” There is an art to doing it and there are ways of learning what you can and can’t ask for. You also can’t make it such a broad search or a narrow search. However, after a little bit of experience, you can learn as you go along. Learn the skill of what opens doors.

9. There are different routes of accessing information via a council. If a local authority is too slow to respond to your FOI request, you can complain to the Information Commissioners Office. We took 7 cases of complaint to the ICO, and won 6 of those cases.
Moving into a new area

What can you do and how can you show solidarity?

1. There is a temporariness in London due to the way councils can move working class people. There is also a temporariness to community spaces (as luxury residential sites replace public assets). This can mean people feel fatigued and disengaged. Social life can get scattered, isolation can be common and people struggle to engage as they just want to get on with things. There are a few ways of attempting to overcome this.

2. In this context of temporariness, community space is essential. Public assets like libraries and community centres are invaluable in bringing different groups of people together.

3. The simple act of joining a local library if you’re moving into a new area is a small way of underlining its importance. If a council believes you don’t care, they think they can get away with removing public assets.

4. Seek out your local community centre. Finding your local community space and getting involved is a similarly useful tool in showing solidarity to your local community. Councils will attempt to allow years of neglect to pass before using skewed statistics to say community spaces are underused.
5. Find your local food bank and support them if you can. Knowing where physical community life takes place is important if you’re moving into a new area.

6. Being aware of local blogs and local Facebook groups is a great way of connecting with people, especially if you may have mobility issues.

“Build Homes Now is about giving everyone a voice and taking a stand on issues that no one else is willing to come together to talk about and solve. Everyone has the right to a safe and clean home.”

Build Homes Now campaign
With Thanks to:

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Eve Wedderburn
“We can succeed, if we get organised on estates, link up and work together.”

Eileen Short