

Getting To Know The Cube: A Utopian
Ethnography.

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“Dream in a pragmatic way” – Aldous Huxley

Abstract.

The aim of this project was to explore a grassroots association using the ethnographic method. I wanted to tell the story of the Cube Cinema from the point of view of the volunteers who work there, and those who attend the various screenings and gigs. However, something of an apology is in order. Due to the depth and variety of my findings from the observations and interviews with the volunteers and the restrictions applied by the word count I was unable to fully utilise the data I received from the patrons I interviewed. Their input was nevertheless valuable and some of it has contributed to this dissertation, although I was not able to tell their full stories. Therefore, I extend my apologies to: Snoopy, Peggy, Frank, Snow, Alex, Demolition Man and Charlie and thank them for the time they gave to the project.

As is clear I gathered an extraordinary amount of data from the interviewees that could be used to inform my argument about The Cube and its relation to utopia. There is a lot of literature on utopia, most of it being non-fiction, although there is still a large academic history of utopian thought, the vast majority of this literature is theoretical in its nature. It is only relatively recently that an interest in “intentional communities” (Sargisson, 2000, 1) has arisen. The majority of work concerning intentional communities is based around live-in communes, there are only fleeting mentions of utopian process within a grassroots organisations such as The Cube (Sargisson, 43, 2007 (edt: Moylan and Baccolini), Baccolini and Moylan, 2003, 246).

For this reason I was interested to see if a utopian community could exist in an organisation that was open for anyone to attend and join. I was also keen to try and champion a new way of looking at utopian possibilities in the present day. The path has been nicely paved by the likes of Lucy Sargisson (2000, 2004) and to a certain extent Ruth Levitas (1990). However, it is the utopian anarchists who have really been holding the torch for the possibility of utopian change, most notably Robert Nozick (1974) and Colin Ward (1973).

My findings indicate that if we choose to reevaluate what we define as utopia, by understanding that imperfection exists and accepting the spatial and temporal finitude of

utopia, we can start to make real transformative progress in the present day. Utopia does not have to be based in an unobtainable time and place in the future; on the contrary, I argue that the very idea of utopia should be based in human agency and the activation of ideas that ask how things can be done differently, in a more humane and ethical manner. This is utopia, affecting the local community and showing that different routes can be taken, for this reason I believe grassroots organisations such as The Cube are far more progressive than live-in communes, which only really exist to create utopia for themselves.

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Introduction

The Cube

The organisation I have studied is The Cube Microplex Cinema. I am using the Cube as a case-study of a utopian grassroots association. For now I will give a very brief overview of the organisation here as it shall be discussed in great depth in my analysis. The Cube was opened in its current form in 1998 and is run entirely “by a proper left field oddball crew” (cubecinema.com) of volunteers. Before the Cube came into existence the space it occupies was called Arts Centre Cinema and before that it was used for a various number of other things that have been turned into myth or distorted by the sands of time.

The original theatre was hand built and still maintains a DIY feel. The Cube is more than just a cinema, it houses: music events, burlesque nights, debates, secret and overt community groups and the ARTS (cubecinema.com). The atmosphere is leftfield, the lighting is low, the decoration is kitsch and the amphitheatre is 1950s in style. There is a no advertising policy and a dedication to screen and showcase alternative film, music and art. The Cube does not receive any external funding.

The Cube is a grassroots association. It is important to note that grassroots associations are not all uniform. Individual grassroots associations are bound to operate differently, be managed differently and be constructed upon differing ideologies. This is especially the case when we consider the vast range of organisations that the term grassroots association can encompass. Smith (1999a) includes the following, but the list is by no means limited to the following; sororities, social help groups such as alcoholics anonymous, church assemblies, cults, activist collectives, museums, businesses, galleries and communes (Smith, 1999a, 443).

The Cube is based in one building near the city centre of Bristol, it is not a place of residence and is officially run as a cooperative. The structure of the organisation will be discussed in more detail in my analysis. The cinema is run as a not-for-profit business. I hoped to gain a

broad understanding of the organisation by volunteering at The Cube myself and undertaking participant observations. As well as my observations I also undertook in-depth semi structured interviews with the volunteers and members of the public who use the space.

This study aims to understand how the Cube is run and organised, and to explore the day to day lives of those involved in the running of the Cube¹. I shall primarily use The Cube's volunteers to look at the possibility of utopia in the present day.

It is understood that this is a limited piece of ethnographic research as it will only represent one grassroots association and a there is limited number of participants. However, it is hoped that the study will produce findings which can be used in similar investigations of utopian grassroots associations and provide valuable assistance to future research into utopia in the present day. This study differentiates itself from many others because it does not look at utopia in the form of a commune or community as many others do, but rather the possibility of utopia in a single building in a metropolis. There are many utopian studies that are focused on utopias in communities such as Sargisson and Sargent's (2004) exploration of New Zealand's utopian communities.

If utopian groups can be said to be based in communes or communities, I propose that utopian practice is common in grassroots associations that are not based around communal living. The individuals who operate within the Cube also have a life that exists externally to the Cube. However, there is a very strong sense of community amongst the volunteers at The Cube, this something that comes out strongly in my analysis.

¹ As mentioned in the abstract I was intending to understand The Cube from the patron view as well, but I was unable to due to issues with my word count.

Literature Review.

Traditional Theories of Volunteering.

I would firstly like to introduce two traditional sociological theories regarding volunteering and briefly note how voluntary action and utopian practice are inherently linked. Although voluntary motivation is not the primary concern of this paper it should give some background context to the idea of volunteering.

There is widespread academic research regarding the voluntary sector, or as it is otherwise known in the UK, the third sector (Powell and Steinberg, 2006; Kendall, 2003; Kendall and Knapp, 1996, Smith et al, 1995a).

Traditionally the theories of Max Weber and Emile Durkheim have been prevalent when discussing volunteering (Janoski and Wilson, 1995b). Weber claims that voluntary action is made possible by socioeconomic factors. Weber claims that without an elevated social status, high earnings and an advanced level of education one is unlikely to become a volunteer. Indeed, organisations actively look for these preconditions when recruiting volunteers (Ibid, 273). Skills such as the ability to write coherently and an aptitude for IT, which are learnt whilst being educated, will inevitably be of great benefit to any organisation.

Durkheim on the other hand tends towards a theory of socialisation in order to explain volunteering (Ibid, 271). For Durkheim, volunteering is a means of adhering to a certain set of obligations, be it to friends or family in an informal manner, or formally to institutions such as the church (Ibid, 272). Durkheim does recognise that socialisation is linked to social, economic and educational status and his theory is therefore associated with Weber's socioeconomic hypothesis. However, Durkheim emphasises the importance of social interaction and claims that the more social ties one has the more likely one is to become a volunteer. Durkheim and Weber's theories are certainly prominent in sociological theory.

However, Janoski and Wilson claim that their scope is too narrow to effectively account for the extensive range of motivations that drive individuals to volunteer (Ibid, 275).

Utopian ambition and volunteering are intrinsically linked. Both involve, to some extent at least, the notion of giving up one's time and an interest in community involvement. Robert Nozick (1974) suggests that utopia in the present day is in fact based in the voluntary sector, as it rests on individuals choosing voluntary action, rather than taking the easy way and not choosing it. Nozick claims that voluntary action proves we have chosen our own paths and have destiny over our lives, without being coerced by the state or by big business; Volunteering enables us "to choose our life and to realize our ends and our conception of ourselves, insofar as we can, aided by voluntary cooperation of other individuals possessing the same dignity" (Nozick, 1974, 334). Any notion of utopia or even the application of utopian ideas must recognise the value and potential of voluntary action. Be it Weberian status flaunting or Durkheim's obligations, a combination of the two or indeed any of the many theories of volunteerism, it must be recognised and harnessed when applying utopian ideas.

Grassroots Associations

In this section my aim is to describe and analyse what a grassroots association is. Despite the wealth of research regarding volunteers and volunteer organisations, there is relatively little literature concerning what David Horton Smith has coined grassroots associations (Smith, 2000a, xiii). This is despite Smith's claim that such organisations have been in existence for around 10,000 years with their origins based in primitive "social clubs" in the Middle East (Smith, 1997, 189). Smith examines the extensive history of grassroots associations through preliterate societies, agrarian society, ancient civilisations, medieval society and finally industrial and post industrial society (1997)². Smith defines grassroots associations as:

² For more information see Smith, D. H. (1997). *The international history of grassroots associations*, International Journal of Comparative Sociology, 38 (3–4), 189–216.

“locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal non-profit groups that manifest significant voluntary altruism as a group. They use the associational form of organization and thus have an official membership of volunteers who perform all or nearly all of the work done in and by these nonprofits.” (Smith, 1999a, 103).

The difference between grassroots associations and paid-staff voluntary groups is not clear cut. Smith claims that if a line has to be drawn it should be that a minimum of 50% of the work done in and by the group must be done by volunteers (Smith, 2000a, 7). Grassroots associations are distinguished from other volunteer-run non-profit organisations in that they are locally based. This can range from a single building or an area substantially larger, such as a neighbourhood (Milofsky and Romo, 1988). Volunteer non-profit organisations that operate on supralocal level are similar to grassroots associations but are larger in scale (Smith, 2000a, 8). As mentioned, the Cube is based in a single building and is an entirely volunteer run not for profit organisation. I shall therefore move on from defining what can be defined as a grassroots association and look at utopian grassroots organisations.

History shows a great number of volunteer run organisations and attempted utopian settlements. The majority of these stem from disillusionment with some kind of mainstream culture: industrialisation and religion are two of the biggest factors. The implementation of utopian ideas is rooted in a desire for a better life. It is crucial to note that this does not necessarily mean a perfect society as so many individuals seem to think (Bueren and Tarlow, 2006).

Utopian grassroots communities are created and joined by individuals willing to commit to social change by virtue of their own will. Members are managed by one another, or by those who have elevated respect within the organisation; a long term member or founder for example. Outside agents and political forces have no sway over policy or organisational choice. Self determination is a key factor in any utopian organisation (Kanter, 1972, 2).

Rules are often implemented that don't conform to the rules governing the rest of society. For example in the Cube there is no obligation to turn up for a shift; in the everyday business world this would certainly be punished.

There are a vast number of organisations that may be understood to be utopian or hold utopian values. They may have a centralised power structure, may be run as a co-operative or as domestic unit, a place of production, a business, a political order or a religious institution. Unlike many utopian visions I believe that utopia can be concentrated into one visible entity that may be located in a single building. Kanter has similar ideas, however, she claims that these buildings are primarily for the use of the community members and any benefit that non members receive is a secondary concern (Ibid, 3). This is not true of The Cube, its primary function is to provide for the community the volunteers benefits are a by-product of this. Kanter does raise an interesting idea and the relationship between social and formal aspects of volunteering within the Cube is an interesting one that will be discussed presently.

Grassroots utopias following utopian goals often have family or friendship groups and characteristics. This is a good for group cohesion, however it can make them seem elitist, especially if the community is settled in a building or living on a plot of land or has been established for a number of years. Entering into these buildings or settlements can be a daunting experience for a new individual (Ibid, 3). Elitism is something that the Cube has been accused of before now; this will be covered in my analysis.

The formation of Grassroots Associations.

It is assumed that the formation of a grassroots association begins with a minimum of one founder, an individual or group of individuals who are interested in creating a group of some kind. An organisation comes into being when a minimum of one person convinces others to act as if the group already exists and these individuals agree to its existence. At this stage there is no assumed leadership structure. However, power and leadership structures evolve as choices regarding the formation of the organisation grow and the number of individuals involved increases (Smith, 2000a, 71).

A large proportion of the basic ideas within a grassroots organisation are determined by the founders. This is out of practicality because many decisions about structure and process

need to be made before individuals can begin functioning as a group (Smith, 1967). There is little research regarding the nature of the conception of a grassroots association as nearly all literature is focused on the middle period of the association's life. For this reason I am hoping to uncover some understanding regarding the birth and early years of the Cube Cinema. It is important to note that any expressions on the birth of The Cube are being reflected with hindsight and may not convey the exact conditions under which The Cube was conceived. All the volunteers, even those who have been there through the birth and development of The Cube will see the conception in light of the way the organisation has developed over the years. However, it is still useful to get these views.

There is also very little research regarding the reasons for choosing to be a non profit organisation as opposed to a business or charity. There are some theoretical suggestions as to why this is the case. They range from lacking trust in other types of organisations and governments (Hansmann, 1980), to the conflict between ego and altruism (Hardin, 1977, Smith, 1981). Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen (1991) argue that in general grassroots organisations first attempt to set up a profit based, businesses and realising there isn't sufficient demand, become volunteer, non profit organisations (Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen, 1991, 524).

Due to the large number of organisations that can be said to be grassroots there will of course be a large number of contributing factors. Whatever the reason for becoming grassroots is, I believe that there will be this 'desire for the other' or a 'desire for better'. For if this is not present there is no reason why such an organisation would continue; grassroots organisations need passion for change.

Grassroots associations can offer more to volunteers and patrons than capitalist organisations. This is because they are not targeted towards money making and can therefore provide individuals with social support, self-exploration, socio-political activation, friendship and mutual aid. Grassroots associations have a significant effect on their external environment and offer social cohesion by providing services to the surrounding community. Some examples may be classes and venues to hold local meetings or buildings for other organisations or artists to showcase their work. Many grassroots associations take a public

stance on issues facing the local community and are therefore politicised (Verba and Nie, 1972, 178–179).

Utopia

Utopia, as paradoxically defined by Thomas More (1516) is at once “no place” and “good place”. Or as Barbara Goodwin and Keith Taylor (1982) put it, does the ideal nature of utopia make it impossible? (Ibid, 3). The answer to this question signifies either the removal or continuation of political and social optimism. Utopian studies have flexed across time depending on the political and cultural landscape. Enlightenment thinkers such as Morely wrote works such as *The Code of Nature*, in which there is no private ownership as Morely believed private property was the reason for social and moral corruption (Ibid, 3). These enlightenment dreams were as such: just dreams. They were abstract, idealistic and like *Utopia* were primarily works of literature.

The French Revolution of 1789 hinted at change. The uprising showed that the course of history could be altered and utopian ideas could be put into practice (Ibid, 4). The abstract ideas from utopian writers could now be implemented in the real world and consequently utopian thinkers of the nineteenth century were bolstered with both optimism and activism. Physical utopias started popping up, for example, the Harmony Society (1804 – 1904) and the Society of True Inspiration (1843 – 1933) were utopian groups of German separatists. Brook Farm (1841 – 1847) was a utopian community of intellectuals, who provided inspiration for Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (Kanter, 1972, 5). At the end of the nineteenth century positive literature was also being produced, most notably by Bellamy (1888) and Morris (1890).

The twentieth century saw the rise of ‘utopianism’, rather than utopia, in an attempt to embrace utopian ambition without providing a “utopian blueprint” (Goodwin and Taylor, 1982, 4). The twentieth century was dominated by dystopia or anti utopia, with both Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949) and Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) being the stand out pairing. Although to his credit Huxley did turn his own tables and write *Island* (1962) a

few years later to show how the practices of *Brave New World* could be used in a positive way.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have provided us with “intentional communities” and “transgressive utopia” (Brown, 2002 and Sargisson, 2000). In her book *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (2000), Lucy Sargisson advances this new way of looking at utopia, “transgressive utopia” (Ibid, 1). Transgressive utopia is in Sargisson’s own words, “open-ended, slippery and gorgeous” (Ibid, 1). Because of the fluid nature of the Sargisson’s utopia a solid definition is never really reached. However, I understand transgressive utopia to be a boundless concept that does not conform to traditional utopian notions such as its infinite and perfect nature. In breaking traditional boundaries new utopian possibilities open up for grassroots organisations, like the Cube. I believe this to be the case because transgressive utopia surpasses the classical utopian form. As Sargisson puts it “it is not utopias themselves that have proved thus inadequate, but rather a mistaken reading of utopias as perfection seeking, blueprinting and desirous of perfection and finality” (Ibid, 11).

The classic utopian form is often an island (More, 1516), a country or section of land (Bellamy, 1888, Gilman, 1915), or the entire world (Efremov, 1959). With this new framework it is possible to incorporate alternative or “intentional communities” into utopia (Sargisson, 2000, 1). These intentional communities are inherently similar to Smiths grassroots associations. The main difference is that Sargisson talks about communities in which individuals live, rather than an organisation which can exist in a self-contained, none-live in building, as a grassroots association can. I claim that a new understanding of utopia must be reached; the basis for this change must be placed in the implementation of utopia processes for the function of social change and utopian grassroots organisations can spearhead this change.

However, unfortunately but not altogether surprisingly, seeing as utopia is first and foremost a literary form, the majority of utopian studies deal with utopia in an intellectual and abstract manner. Writers of utopian literature and often utopian theorists insist on utopia being at someplace in the future, to enable it to hold a transformative power. For

example, Bellamy and Morris both position their utopias in the distant future. There is little prominence given to utopia in the present, even when utopia is to be found in the present it is invariably in a land far, far away (More, 1516, Gilman, 1915). Intentional communities and grassroots associations are based in the here and now and aim to affect the future with utopian action in the present, rather than looking to the future to affect the future. This is a somewhat bizarre and paradoxical notion in itself that can be summed up by the popular saying “tomorrow never comes”.

Intentional communities are in general “quasi-anarchic internally but embedded in society with a state” (Taylor, 1983a, 89). The social controls exercised in these communities are done so on top of those imposed by the state, though the state itself “may have little penetration in these communities and recourse to its sanctions is often avoided where possible” (Ibid, 89). In many intentional communities material possessions are shared and owned collectively. For example in the Cube there is a ‘Cube Car’, which is available for the volunteers to use. In some intentional communities the opposite is true and figures with more authority are given more or better material possessions. Whenever this is the case these communities have a central problem regarding the distribution of labour, and because rewards are not based on work ethic or the quality of work there is a temptation to be a “free rider” (Ibid, 123). This problem is encountered in many live-in utopian communities because of the amount of work that must be done. At the Cube one cannot be a free rider because the volunteers are so scarce, indeed there would be little point in being a free-rider, as nothing would be gained by the individual.

Sargisson’s transgressive framework creates possibilities for Fredric Jameson’s ideas built around imagining the other and desire for something better than the status quo (Jameson, 2005). Jameson writes that many utopian dreams are frustrated and remain unsatisfied. What is needed is “a concept which will not transfer the theory of the split subject to the collectivity; nor will it encourage an apolitical mysticism of the infinite of unobtainable” (Ibid, 84). The desire for utopia needs to be maintained in the realm of reality and “authentically registered and set down” (Ibid, 84).

In the world of utopian studies you can't really mention the word desire and not include Ruth Levitas' *The Concept of Utopia* (1990). Levitas outlines the three ways in which utopia is traditionally defined: "content, form and function" (Levitas, 1990, 4). Content is the normative understanding that utopia should show a good society, however the ambiguity of content makes it difficult to use definitively. Form is a way of describing utopia in either a classical sense; a utopia of commonwealth or utopia as a literary genre. Finally utopia may be described in terms of function, which is providing a goal of some kind (Levitas, 1990, 4-5). Levitas argues that each of these definitions is ultimately descriptive in nature and therefore not comprehensive when attempting to define utopia. Levitas includes a premise which states that the form, content and function of utopia transform over time.

With her desire based temporal tool, Levitas moves utopian theory away from mere description and into an analytical framework. This entails that utopian desire is based in the negative and is created out of a discontent or a lacking in the status quo. Levitas incorporates a term borrowed from Miguel Abensour, the "education of desire" into her utopian theory. The education of desire "nourishes the sense that 'something's missing,' and is a necessary inspiration to social transformation" (Ibid, 111). This enables utopia to be studied in the present day in the space in which it may actually exist, this is a valuable asset which I will be utilising in my discussion.

Utopia and Grassroots Associations

Grassroots Associations can embody utopian ambition, trial utopian dreams and create utopian desire although there is minimal literature linking grassroots movements and utopia. The literature that is available comes primarily from Colin Ward in *Anarchy in Action* (1973).

Ward's concept of utopia and its temporal frame fit with my ideas about the possibility of utopia in the present. Ward believes that grassroots associations can bring utopian goals into this spatial-temporal time frame. He uses utopian themes to frame a political approach to not only time, but material life as well (Ward, 1973). Utopian thought, both scholarly and every day, tends to put its belief in a future event that that is possible, but cannot be

predicted with any certainty. Rather, utopians should be engaging with the present, as grassroots associations do. Utopian planners have placed little emphasis on activation, which if implemented can cause shifts in focus in the immediate environment and consequently formulate transformations in both the social and material spheres. There has always been weight placed on human ability to affect change in their experiences, behaviour and surroundings. It is this human capacity that gives utopian attitudes a powerful potential for transformation in the present.

Whereas time is often ignored or made redundant by “future wishing”, what utopianism has paid attention to is space. The planning of new communities and worlds is a recognizable characteristic of utopian thinking. Goodwin and Taylor note that “utopian thinkers passed on some of their key ideas to planners” and this transference has “established a notion of physical design for utopia, which overlaps with the literature of social and political theory” (Goodwin and Taylor, 1892, 201). This modern feature of utopianism and public space is what Ward develops his utopian thought around.

Ward firmly states that the employment of utopian ideas is intrinsically linked with voluntary models for social change. This is what grassroots associations give us, volunteer run organisations that are aimed at changing the status quo. Ward’s utopianism is rooted in spatial-temporal transformation via direct human action and the human ability to affect change in his material environment. Free individuals and strong communities are of course essential, as is clear by Ward’s ever-present interest in architecture and town planning. Ward saw town planning as a personal responsibility and active engagement with a community (Ward, 1973).

Ward’s utopian thought and notion of social change characterises what grassroots associations are all about, transforming the present day and processing utopian ideas. As Ward says, grassroots associations, or “community organisations” as he puts it “organise in loosely associated groups, which are *voluntary, functional, temporary* and *small*”. Such associations “rely on small, functional groups which ebb and flow, group and regroup, according to the task in hand. They are networks, not pyramids” (Ibid, 138). As shall be

demonstrated in my analysis the Cube's organisational structure very much follows the fluid notion which Ward mentions.

George McKay recognises Ward's contribution to grassroots associations and anarchist DiY culture in Britain during the nineties. In *DiY Culture*, edited by McKay, Thomas Harding claims that direct support for grassroots associations grew through the nineties, "by 1996 we were eager to branch out to support new grassroots communities, aware that DiY culture was becoming increasingly self sufficient and successful" (Harding, 1998, 95 - 98). The Cube formed in October of 1998, at the peak in the interest of DiY grassroots associations.

David Harvey in *Spaces of Hope* (2000a) insists that utopian thinking is vital to any kind of social transformation. Harvey takes a slightly different approach and looks at utopia via the destructive nature of capitalism and the way in which it destroys and rebuilds environments in order to make profit. Harvey also talks about transformative utopian spaces and indicates that utopian process is possible now: "There is a time and place in the ceaseless human endeavour to change the world, when alternative visions, no matter how fantastic, provide the grist for shaping powerful political forces for change. I believe we are precisely at that moment" (Ibid, 195).

Earlier I briefly mentioned the work of Robert Nozick (1974) and his idea of voluntary inspired utopianism. It is important to note that Nozick talks of "free society" or a "minimal society" characterised by anarchism that is itself a meta-utopia in which utopia experiments could take place (Ibid, 323 - 329). I do not believe an anarchist revolution is necessary to find utopia, nevertheless Nozick's ideas are still of use. Nozick believes that utopia in the present is possible, he states that small grassroots micro-situations, such as the Cube, through voluntary action can create utopian spaces (Ibid, 326 - 327). It is up to individuals to take up the mantle and perform these actions themselves. Any popular movement should be able to survive by utilising voluntary participation and as the organisation grows more individuals should start supporting it. It will therefore grow without having to force any of the participants into doing anything they don't wish to, with any individual taking any job they wish to (Ibid, 327).

Temporality and Utopia.

Organisations with Utopian tendencies challenge what can be achieved by society and endeavour to reform the social world. A utopian organisations aim is to create a world centred on constructive peer to peer interaction with more harmonious relationships between individuals and between humanity and nature.

Utopian visions are not of course without limits, as is clear from the general failure of many attempted utopian communes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Hardy, 2000, 163). As with any organisation that achieves longevity a period of stagnation is always likely. Just as it is likely that at some point utopian orientated organisations will become static and loose some of the vitality that sparked the inspiration in the first place. This raises a problem regarding the assertion that utopian organisations cannot exist over an extended timeframe, although the length of this timeframe is vague to say the least. The argument claims that if utopian communities do sustain they become sterile and unchallenging (Kanter, 1972, 213).

These criticisms lead to bigger critiques, as to whether utopian organisations are merely escapist fantasies. But more crucially, that they are in fact not instruments of social change at all, but simple refuges for disillusioned individuals, alternate communities and non conformists to escape from mainstream society.

The above criticism *may* be taken as true; most utopian communes dissolve within a few years. Over time individuals will come and go and by doing so the very nature of the organisation changes with the personnel involved. The question is, though, why should utopia be long term? It is a common assumption that utopia is a perfect state that need never change once it has been achieved. But as a member of a Mexican commune said “I don’t see (us) living here (for) the rest of our lives” (Hedgepeth and Stock, 1970, 158 (Quoted in Kanter)). Again, I believe it to be literary utopians that have put this suggestion of eternal paradise into the collective consciousness. It is time to remove this notion of

eternal utopia and embrace our own finite, temporal and spatial existence. There is no need for utopia to be infinite.

Utopian Boundaries.

Kanter (1972) claims the grand utopian desires of the past, which were characterised by utopian nations or a utopian world, have been replaced. The replacement utopias are alternate groups and communities and whilst grand utopian schemes such as the Twin Oaks in Virginia remain they are in descend (Kanter, 1972, 165 - 166). Communities and communes such as Twin Oaks have clearly defined boundaries, which are distinctive due to their physical, social and behavioural properties. With organisations such as the Cube a problem emerges surrounding defining boundaries. This is because it is not a place of permanent residence, although there are often individuals there, either working or socialising. The problems of keeping the strength in this organisation evolve around the developing local area, accelerating social change and keeping a strong sense of community.

However, strong community can generate resistance to boundary issues. The location of the Cube, although it is situated in an area undergoing rapid gentrification, is to some extent disassociated from this, by both its physical surroundings and philosophy. Whilst a weak community would falter and succumb to external pressures from capitalist investors and social boundary removal forces The Cube has continued for nearly twelve years. As Kanter points out, what goes on within the community is very different from what occurs outside, although the Cube attempts to influence its surrounding area in a number of ways (Kanter, 1972).

Urbanisation and a desire for advanced technology, improved communications, pluralistic options and choice regarding alternate lifestyles drove people out of bucolic areas and into the metropolis. Individuals and families moved to cities and wanted to stay there, this desire gave birth to the urban utopia based around advanced technology. Technological reliance removes a number of traditional utopian goals, such as self sufficiency and the removal of capital. Thus, many communities don't attempt to hold on to ideals that were prevalent in nineteenth century communes and organisations. Instead urbanisation, mass

communication and advanced technology push grassroots associations forward. As new members come into the organisations they carry with them new waves of counter culture, new ideas and renewed spirit that can be missing from long established organisations.

Rather than separating themselves from mainstream society grassroots utopias integrate themselves into the counterculture (Ibid). This means that they benefit the community and provide a valuable escape from the monotony of capitalist consumer culture, as well as offering real hope regarding the possibility of desiring something different. This reduces the cultural gap between alternate social forms and mainstream culture, thus making the alternative more accessible to the wider population. In today's world of excessive choice, complex pluralism and rapid lifestyle transformations it is difficult for individuals to locate themselves in careers, relationships and friendship groups.

Consequently there is a more diverse field of choice from which individuals can construct their identity and join organisations, groups, communes, communities and so on. Individuals or small groups with strong sets of beliefs should have no reason to alter these convictions so there was no need to conform to large scale ideologies such as socialism. Creating one's own agenda was now a possibility. These new groups tended to be more liberal in the sense that they held a much greater acceptance and a wider range of ideas that stray from the ideological principles on which they were built (Ibid, 173).

These organisations had a very unusual structure and often did not fall into traditional social arrangements, they lacked definition and legitimacy. Many chose to amalgamate as businesses, non profit organisation, religious enterprises, and educational facilities. For example, the Fort Hill commune set itself up as a holding corporation (Ibid, 173). These organisational boundaries help in the maintenance of the group, they are plastic but cohesive and unify the members in an "us against the world" manner which will give the organisations added strength and endurance (Ibid, 173).

In grassroots communities there is little in the way of rules or power structure and there is often no need to undertake any given task. However, most grassroots spaces involve some kind of set of rules and a power structure whether they are written or unwritten, although

leaving it unwritten can cause problems. For example, in an intentional community in New Zealand new members of a utopian settlement caused outrage by using a weedkiller, a strong but unwritten rule of which they were unaware (Sargisson, 149).

Methodology

For this investigation an ethnographic approach was particularly suitable because I wanted to see how the Cube functioned from the perspective of the volunteers and try to make sense of the organisation through their individual experiences and perceptions. By actively engaging with the individuals within the organisation it was easier to gain trust and consequently interviews than if I had approached the Cube as a total outsider.

I took forward the ethnographic approach to my research by becoming a volunteer in the Cube. Ethnography explores a way of life from the point of view of the individuals involved within it and attempts to refrain from using preconceived theories to layer onto the culture being studied. Ethnographic data collection is a multi-method affair and ideally continues until it reaches saturation. Unfortunately, due to time constraints this could not be achieved, although a multi-method approach was taken.

The aim of an ethnographic study is to understand and make sense of the organisation in the way the individuals who are involved comprehend it, as well as attempting to gain an understanding of the way in which the group works and interpret meanings from within it. There is a strong emphasis on the identification of a particular social phenomenon, in this case the Cube Cinema, its volunteers and patrons. Ethnographies tend to explore a minimal number of cases, or even just one case, as I have done. This is because of the long period of time required for the researcher to immerse themselves in the research environment.

As with all ethnographic investigations assumptions and exact research proposals need to be avoided. This is counter to other forms of social science, where identifying an area or problem early on is an important part of the analytical process. A large part of the ethnographic method is identifying what is worth pursuing once inside the organisation. The ethnographer must discover which observations will prove most fruitful in discovering phenomena “for example, cohesiveness or deviance” (Becker and Geer, 1960, 267: Quoted from Silverman: 2006, 80).

This does not necessitate that ethnographers blindly blunder into their research environment. Some questions must be asked at the birth of the project. Indeed, the subjective consciousness of researcher necessitates a certain amount contextual interrogation about what will be found and what one may be searching for. When starting the research, as Silverman says, “every issue seems so fascinating” (Silverman, 2006, 80). The ethnographer needs to break through initial experience that comes with working in the field, as otherwise they will be left with an extraordinary amount of data and no research focus.

Due to the character of such research, that it takes place in natural settings, data collection and analysis is longitudinal and flexible. Analysis emerges as time is spent in the organisation and the reality of the group unravels as observations and interviews take place. Ethnography is usually used in anthropological studies, but can be used in a wide range of contexts, as I have done here, using it to analyse a grassroots organisation.

Undertaking an ethnographic project requires a great deal of reflexivity on the part of the researcher (Abercrombie et al, 2000, 291-292). I allude to the claim that it is impossible to be objective and value free when undertaking research. Bryman (2004) puts forward the idea that there needs to be more attention paid to the position of the researcher. This is because they are necessarily an integral part of the research and contribute their subjectivity to the construction of the meanings they find. The ethnographer must acknowledge their personal preconceptions about the group they are studying, although be careful not to over analyse themselves for fear of losing sight of the study itself.

Observational Methodology

It is especially important to try and remove preconceptions when undertaking observational studies, reflexivity is constantly needed to negotiate personal biases and expectations, which can offset a true observation if not properly catered for. I had expectations upon entering the organisation, this was inevitable, I had visited the Cube many times as a patron, and therefore had an idea of what volunteering there would be like. As much as possible I

tried to put my preconceptions to one side and in many ways I was surprised by what I found there, always a good sign for a researcher!

It is important for ethnographic researchers to have a high level of access to the group they wish to study. I managed this firstly through talking to a friend who was a volunteer at the Cube herself. She mentioned that she could put my name forward for some research by emailing into the organisation directly, which I did.

I put forward my proposal for research and a group of volunteers met to discuss my suggestion. The organisation came to the consensus that they would allow me enter into their organisation if I become a volunteer myself. This is something I was hoping to achieve and was lucky enough to be asked to join myself. This gave me instant access to the large number of volunteers who worked there as well as an excellent chance to be directly involved in the running of the Cube.

I believe I was treated more or less exactly the same as any other new volunteer would be treated, aside from the fact I was given a one to one induction to the organisation. This was only because I could not make the standard monthly induction. However, I did notice that people's interest in me increased when I mentioned my research into the Cube. This is probably because they wanted to know what I was doing, how it was going and so on. Volunteers would regularly ask me for updates on how I was getting along, if they were directly involved or not and I was happy to share my progress with them. I think that this openness was appreciated and volunteers seemed genuinely interested and were keen to be as helpful as possible. When I was volunteering at the Cube I acted as any other new volunteer would do and took on any responsibilities that this involved. The jobs I actively engaged with were, working on the bar, ushering and taking membership.

My volunteering enabled me to undertake in-depth observations and was an excellent way to introduce myself to the side of the Cube I had never seen before. More importantly it was the best possible way to get to know the individuals who volunteered there. Whilst volunteering in the jobs mentioned above I actively engaged with other volunteers and the

public who use the space, this was necessarily the case, as otherwise I would have made a weak volunteer!

As a participant observer I became a part of the cultural group, with the aim of gaining the ethnographic goals mentioned earlier. I offered full candid disclosure of my observations to the volunteers involved. In candid participant observations such as this it can be difficult to know a researcher is present, especially because I looked like any of the other volunteers. However, I made the volunteers aware of my interests and my project and was happy to field any questions thrown my way (O'Leary, 2010, 211).

During my observations the participants were not put in positions where they may have felt that they had to act differently. This is important as otherwise data may be seen as incorrect and the observations contaminated. For the volunteers it was simply like having a new workmate, which they were used to due to the large number of volunteers who pass through the organisation. This was also important in removing the power relation between researcher and participant. I did not behave in any way that would have created a power bias. This was my intention as I did not feel in any way in a position of power and I believe that this was reflected by the volunteer's natural behaviour around me. To begin with my observations were totally unstructured as I did not know what to expect when I entered the Cube. However, as I grew more confident with the building, the jobs and some of the other volunteers I was able to focus on particular things. For example, how new volunteers would physically position themselves in the building as opposed to long term volunteers.

In terms of note taking, it was not practical to make notes whilst I was volunteering. When I arrived home I immediately made detailed notes of what happened during my observations and anything of special interest that occurred. The longer I spent volunteering the more comfortable I became with my responsibilities and the people around me, consequently the experience of being a volunteer and the observation became much easier. I conducted observations two or three times a week and often stayed until the last person was leaving, so as I could see the whole volunteer process. I worked at various different events, both film and music. I feel that this level of immersion was sufficient to get a basic understanding of the organisation and to get to know some of the volunteers.

It was pointed out by one volunteer that I really needed to have been volunteering for much longer in order to gain a true insight into the Cube and to some extent this is true. The structure of the organisation would have been much easier to understand had I been exposed to it for a longer period of time. I would have had longer to gain the trust of more of the volunteers and could have attended meetings, something I unfortunately was unable to do due to my employment arrangements. This is probably the biggest regret of my research, that I was not able to attend organisational meetings. Attendance at the meetings would have been an excellent way to see for myself how decisions were made within the organisation. I had to rely on interviews in order to try and glean an understanding of decision making processes and to some extent the power structures, although my other observations did help with this.

However, looking on the positive side I believe the fact that I hadn't been involved in the Cube for a large amount of time may have aided my research in some ways. Firstly, at the core the Cube is a very tight knit community and my observational judgements may have been clouded by excessive involvement and consequently I may have "gone native". When this happens the field worker may continue with his observation, however "he is only pretending" (Gold, 1958, 221).

The ethnographic situation in which I put myself held a mutual benefit for myself and the Cube. I was interested in how the Cube worked and exploring the social phenomena that occurred within the organisation. The Cube's volunteers were keen to get a sociological prospective on their organisation and they got an extra pair of hands to help around the building.

Interviews with the Volunteers.

Interviews are a great way of collecting ethnographic data and obtaining data from a number of different sources. I recorded all the interviews onto an MP3 player and made notes during the interview to remind myself of important themes that were emerging.

My interviews were very informal and I tried to breakdown any preconceived notions of a formal interview and attempted to establish a rapport with the participants. The settings for my interviews with the volunteers varied greatly. Three were set inside the Cube itself, although none in the same space. Two were undertaken in local parks. One was in a pub and one in a volunteer's home. I asked the interviewees the times and places that suited them best. This helped in getting them to talk comfortably about their experiences and gave the participants a sense of being fully involved in the research process. It also gave me a chance to get out and about! As well as interviewing volunteers I also interviewed members of the public who had been to the Cube, more on this later.

During my investigation I was able to gain an interesting and unique oversight into the organisation with some very in depth and varied interviews with a relatively well mixed demographic.

I recruited my interviewees by sending an internal email to all the volunteers at the Cube. The response was excellent and I received more offers than I could accept in my limited time frame, this was unfortunate as more interviews would have lead to more data and consequently greater understanding. This is interesting because it can be hard to source research participants (Oman et al, 2003, 157).

The reasons for the large number of responses ranged from an interest in self reflection or an interest gaining a sociological insight into the Cube. There was also an intrinsic interest to want be part of something that was directly relating to the community of the Cube itself, some participants wanted to tell their story and some just wanted to help out. In the email I sent out I gave the volunteers a chance to ask me any questions about the research, whether they decided to be involved or not. This may have encouraged people to step forward as I was being as open about my research as possible.

As mentioned I had a good mix of participants. In reality I chose my participants based mainly on my time frame, it was the keen interest of a good demographic that has made my research so fruitful. I was keen to get a mix of new and veteran volunteers, as well as individuals with ranging responsibilities. I was also keen on getting a variation in age and

gender. My volunteers ranged enormously in almost every way, with the exception of ethnicity, all were white British bar one who was white European. This is unsurprising when considering my observational data, I do not recall seeing a non white individual either volunteering or attending a film or gig. This is merely a reflection of the Cube's middle class, white demographic.

In terms of gender I had four females and three males, a good ratio. The same can be said for age, educational attainment and the length of time individuals had been volunteering. The ages ranged from 25 to 43, educational attainment from O Levels to Masters Qualifications and the "length of service" from three months to twelve years. All the participants, except one, were employed to some extent. Some worked for big corporations and some were self employed. The interviews varied in length from thirty five minutes (an imposed time frame as the participant was on her lunch break) to an hour and twenty minutes (this meant a lot of time was spent transcribing). All of these differences gave me an excellent range of opinions and ideas regarding various aspects of the Cube.

My interviews were semi-structured as there were a number of topics I wanted to cover with each interviewee. There were no exact predefined questions, just areas for discussion. If an interesting tangent came up I followed it through. In some cases, especially with those who had not been volunteering for as long, we spoke about the Cube itself for the minority of the interview and instead followed avenues such as political ideology. The advantage of using a semi-structured method is that I came away with the data I was looking for, as well as additional, emergent information. I chose to do one-on-one interviews so that individuals could express themselves and their opinions without judgement from other participants.

Interviews with the Patrons.

As regards the interviews with members of the public, when volunteering as an usher at the Cube I asked several people if they were interested in being part of the project. If they were interested I gave them my email address and telephone number so they could get in touch if they wished. Again I had a number of offers, initially too many for the time limits I was working within. However, many of these leads did not materialise and as I had no way of

contacting them I resorted to advertising my project on social networking sites and gained the remaining participants that way. This meant that I knew some of the participants before I interviewed them, this was not a problem as we were not discussing anything personal and in fact made the process easier for me. The interviews with the patrons were a lot shorter than the interviews with the volunteers; this was necessarily the case as they were much less likely to know in depth information about the Cube or have solid opinions of the organisation.

Most of the interviews with the patrons were done in their own homes; the reminders were done in parks around Bristol. These interviews were also semi-structured for the same reasons as above. Again, as much as possible I attempted to get a cross section of participants. I interviewed individuals who had only been to the Cube twice and some who had been there more times than they could remember. The age range was 24 – 56 and again gender was evenly distributed. Around a third of those I interviewed were unemployed. One participant had no qualifications whatsoever, whilst the majority were educated to degree level, with one undertaking a PhD. The only thing that was not varied was the individual's ethnicity, all were white British but as mentioned this does accurately reflect the Cubes demographic.

Unfortunately, as mentioned the patrons are not really given sufficient analysis. The other problem I encountered was one of the interviews with the public was almost totally inaudible and therefore has not been used in the analysis. This meant I had seven interviews with volunteers and six with patrons of the Cube.

Interviews and Utopia

One of the biggest questions I asked myself upon undertaking the interviews was whether I should attempt to directly broach the theme of utopia. It is a subject that I thought the participants may have some ideas about, whether their ideas were informed by their imaginations, literature or some form of media. It was also possible that the participants would not have a clear understanding of utopia, even on a very subjective level.

I decided to try and introduce the idea of utopia as subtly as possible by asking about the goals and objectives of the Cube with the hope that this would open up the topic without direct reference. This did not really prove to be effective so I decided to ask the participants directly. The participants did know about my interest in utopia, as I explained my research before conducting the interviews. In the end I thought it to be highly relevant to gain the volunteers and patrons ideas about utopia. If I am to claim that utopia in a grassroots association is possible in the present day, it is necessarily of great value to have the utopian understanding of those directly involved in the running of the Cube, as well as those who visit as guests.

By utopian understandings I firstly mean the way in which the participants comprehend the idea of what utopia itself, in the general sense. I wanted to know if they thought a utopia was possible and what a utopian idea would be to them. I was primarily interested in there conceptions of the spatial-temporality of utopia, where and when it could exist, if at all. Secondly I was interested in whether they saw the Cube as holding utopian values. However, I did not address this question to all of the participants, I only discussed it with those who expressed that they believed utopia to be a possibility, if a participant they rejected the idea of utopia it seemed pointless to ask if they felt that the Cube is utopian.

Coding, By Hand and NVivo.

Once I had collected and transcribed all the interviews I printed them off and read through them all a number of times. I then thematically coded by hand, highlighting key concepts or interesting sections, this enabled full immersion in my data.

All my interview transcripts were then entered into the qualitative research programme NVivo. This enabled the data to be analysed thematically with more vigour than could have been achieved by hand. Please note that NVivo does not help with any sociological analysis; it is merely a coding tool.

It was difficult for me to separate the data analysis from the data collection and for this reason the two occurred simultaneously to a certain extent. However, I did not undertake

any 'actual' analysis until I had collected all my data and transcribed it. The transcription itself is an important part of data analysis as it allows immediate secondary experience of the interview. Hearing the interview again a few hours after it had taken place refreshed my memory as to the topics discussed, as many of the interviews were very different due to their unstructured nature.

It was during analysis that I had to develop my themes. As mentioned, it is important not to have pre-conceived ideas when undertaking ethnographic research. This is because ethnography has the explicit goal of building and interpreting the way in which others understand and interact with their environment. It also acknowledges that description is interpretive and the basis for this interpretation comes from sorting observation and interview data through theoretical frameworks that are permeated with the researcher's subjective understanding. In order to overcome this paradox constant self reflexivity is needed and appreciation of how I affected the interpretive process. For example I used "member checking" (O'Leary, 2010, 115) to ensure that my understanding of events was consistent with the experience of the volunteers, for instance I asked many volunteers how they felt upon entering the Cube to see if what I experienced resonated with them and a lot of the time my experiences reflected theirs.

Analysis.

History of the Cube.

The history of the Cube as an organisation is an interesting subject; I shall briefly outline a little of The Cube's history to set my analysis in some context. There is some ambiguity around the formation of the organisation and something of a myth has risen around The Cube's conception. Volunteers' understanding of The Cube's beginnings range from minimal:

"I'm sketchy, I know it was an amateur dramatics theatre and then it got taken over by someone."

(Sparky)

"I think it was a night, I don't know if it was a club night, or something that was put on in various locations." (Littlest Mi)

Some volunteers appeared to have a fairly detailed knowledge about how The Cube began:

"I know it started out with a small group of people running an illegal underground bar, showing films now and then and grew from there." (Bea McMahon)

"The Cube started in 1998 ... The building came up for grabs and *****, and some others were doing squat film shows, they travelled around Bristol to different and unusual locations showing films and having parties in squats in weird places, so when this place came up for grabs they decided to go for it." (Stephen)

And some were reluctant to discuss it, feeling it was not their place:

"I don't know a lot, it seems a bit pointless, you should speak to someone like ***** who knows."

(Simone)

One participant was involved in the construction of The Cube. Although as mentioned it must be remembered that even this participants perceptions are influenced by what has happened since and a different answer may have given at the actual time of opening:

“Four people started it ... we came from a collection of backgrounds, performing arts, visual art, screen writing and ... film maker, director, writer, so we got together we wanted to explore doing our own film productions together, back then people were making films, but it didn't seem like anyone was doing anything in a collective, or doing anything together. So we thought, well we've all got different skills, let's see if we can work together and do something in that model.” (Rusty Bridges)

For Bridges, one of the co-creators, the idea of community, cooperation and creativity is seen as central to the formation. Whilst for some of the other volunteers there is more emphasis on the squat parties and / or other illegal events that preceded the Cube, whereas Bridges made no mention of this aspect of the Cube's history. This demonstrates how a myth has grown around the history of the Cube. This perception that The Cube rose from the squat party scene is passed on to new volunteers it, I was told a very similar story to the ones recounted by Stephen and McMahon on my induction and it's exciting to be part of something with such interesting and diverse roots.

The *Cube Volunteer Handbook* mentions neither of the two motivations discussed, but simply states that The Cube was formed in 1998, was originally called Club Rombus and had “previously existed as an experimental cinema” (Cube Volunteer Handbook, 8). The myth of The Cube's creation has evolved around the somewhat romantic notion of illegal bars and squat parties, whether the reality of it was romantic does not matter; with hindsight it is.

Thus, The Cube holds this quasi-revolutionary myth of literally fighting out from the rubble. This introduction immediately gave me the impression that the organisation was born out of the desire for social change through direct or alternate action. Whether it was illegal screenings or the aspiration to create a film production collective and screen alternative entertainment there was a desire for something better or different from the status quo. This attitude is neatly summed up by the following statement:

“At the end of the 90s the places just weren’t doing it for us, the places that we saw as meant to be the providers of culture just weren’t challenging or interesting. You have to do it yourself, that’s the only route you can take is kind of make that change yourself, there was a big desire to explore different ways of doing things and different material.” (Rusty Bridges)

Jameson (2005) contends that by acknowledging how we are lodged in the underbelly of capitalism and how it has come to rule us and dent our ability to imagine another possible situation, it may, be possible to create alternatives to the status quo. Jameson claims that our “increasing inability to imagine a different future enhances rather than diminishes the appeal and also the function of Utopia” (Ibid, 232). He believes this because the utopian form is the only possible answer, he contends that there are no alternatives left besides utopian disruption and a break from capitalism from which desire for utopia will be spawned (Ibid, 231 – 253).

Levitas (1990) also has some fairly progressive ideas as regards utopia and desire. Most notably her desire principle entails that utopia is born out of discontent. The Cube was conceived out of cultural dissatisfaction, not only for mainstream culture, but discontentment with alternative culture:

“(There are) so many modes of being we exist in to do with consumption and consuming, if you start to develop tastes that become dissatisfied then you have to do it yourself, if you’re not finding it there.” (Rusty Bridges)

However, Levitas seems to lean towards a position in which utopia is primarily useful as a point to be aimed at. I see utopia as holding transformative praxis in the present day, utilising utopian actions to create a better social environment is a reality in the present. This is what I believe the Cube offers in several different ways that shall be discusses presently.

The Structure of The Cube

The Cube was set up as a cooperative with a flat power structure, which means that no individual should technically wield any more authority than any other, although the actual structure of the organisation is complex:

“(The structure) seems a little bit sketchy, but I found that kind of endearing. There’s people in my mind that seem reasonably senior, although it’s not really that kind of hierarchy there. I know that there’s a core group of people, I don’t know if they are classed as admin or whatever but they have quite a lot of say because they have been there a long time and are there a lot, I’m not that clear to be honest.” (Littlest Mi)

“There are tiers of power ... There are general volunteers, sort of the regular long term volunteers, who have the higher up positions, they do more stuff and know more about it, and they have meetings and put things together a lot more. Then there’s the people who are directors, they don’t necessarily do so much, but they still have a certain amount of power, but no one is really stomping on anyone else or controlling anyone else.” (Sparky)

“We are a cooperative and everyone has equal say, there are politics in The Cube and there is a hierarchy as well ... While we claim to not have a structure there is one, there is a silent structure in place.” (Bea McMahon)

The structure of The Cube is something like as follows. The first structural layer is that of the everyday volunteer, who may work once a week or so, doing bar work ushering or taking membership. Then there are the bar and house managers, who hold a greater understanding of how The Cube is run and have been volunteering for longer period of time. The next step includes the technical roles like sound, projection and lighting, these are specialist positions and training is available if volunteers are interested.

After this layer there are the film, music and ARTs programming teams as well as the marketing and coordinating positions and positions involving the press. Finally there is a group of directors who coordinate the organisation. At the top end of this structure the volunteers are putting in a lot of time and effort into The Cube. Any given volunteer may fall

into any one or any number of these categories. For example Emma is involved in “sound engineering” she is also “part of the music booking team” as well as “looking after the sound technicians and trainees mailing list” and she is also “one of the directors and look(s) after the accountancy.”

There are no prerequisites for involvement in any of these positions, however, they are often left unfilled and volunteers seem too cautious about taking on more responsibility. There are a number of reasons for this, most noticeably I think, is the tight-knit nature at the core of the organisation. New volunteers may find it difficult to break through the cliquy element of The Cube to really be accepted. The elite nature of The Cube has been noted by a number of the volunteers and is something they are trying to alter:

“There has been a lot of criticism that the Cube can be quite exclusive and cliquy.” (Bea McMahon)

“I think because we are such a hybrid organisation and because our working guidelines aren’t clear and aren’t even written down so there’s no reference, The Cube can feel like a labyrinth, some people have fallen into this idiosyncratic behaviour and then you feel like you’re not involved with this in-group.” (Emma)

Permeability is the degree to which communities boundaries are open (Kanter, 1972, 151). The Cube is very open and anyone can become a volunteer within the organisation. The lines between the organisation and its environment are blurred at times; volunteers are often there for the social aspect, but they will pick up any responsibilities that aren’t being filled at any particular time. This enables fluidity between the community aspect of The Cube and attaining the social and cultural goals the organisation aims for. Therefore, many volunteers operate concurrently within and outside the organisation.

Because The Cube needs many individuals to perform a great number of tasks it is important that there is not a long initiation period or rite of passage, individuals need to be deployed as rapidly as possible in order for the organisation to survive. It is therefore of great importance that there are no rigid boundaries for new volunteers to cross. In terms of physically locating oneself within in the organisation there are no boundary problems. It is

the social boundaries that I consider new volunteers may have problems overcoming. The participants offered some intriguing explanations of the social boundaries of The Cube:

“I think that when you are new there you have to work quite hard to gain peoples respect, and do a lot of shifts.

Interviewer: I do think, that there is a sense that you have to earn...

Bea McMahon: Earn you stripes yeah, well, it's not for everybody ... Some of the people that work at the Cube live in very unusual situations, and have very alternative lifestyles, they might find it difficult to gel because some people are very socially awkward.”

“For people who have been here a long time there is a spirit or ethos in how things are done and it's cool for people to engage with that when they come and get involved, they have to kind of “get it”, we have had people in the past who “get it”, get the idea then other people wouldn't really get it and wouldn't last.” (Rusty Bridges)

It is this ambiguity expressed by Bridges that I feel encapsulates both the charm of The Cube and the problem of The Cube. There are no written rules, no way of doing things, no one will tell you what to do, and the initiative must be taken. This is incredibly refreshing from the usual way organisations are run, but at the same time unnerving and until a volunteer understands “The Way of The Cube” they exist in a world of uncertainty.

“The Way of The Cube” is a phrase mentioned by many of the interviewees; it neatly and accurately sums up what The Cube is about and how it's run:

“The way of the cube is something that you learn when you've been there longer, it would be, quite, flaky and unprofessional maybe, but with a good heart, and a good ethos, “the way of the cube” might fox or flummox new volunteers when they come in” (Bea McMahon)

“It means a little bit of chaos and the Cube is always going to be chaotic ... I like order, and control, so when I started working I found it very uncomfortable because of the chaos and after a while you just have to go with it” (Stephen)

Utopian communities such as The Cube need strong social boundaries in order to survive and many of the volunteers have strong loyalties both to each other and the organisation. Because it is a non-live-in community these bonds need to be sturdy in order to keep individuals coming back as there is no obligation for them to stay. The price that must be paid for this dedication is the quick turn-over of volunteers, as not many of them break through the social boundary and become heavily involved in the running of the organisation. This is summed up thus:

“There are around 200 volunteers, but there aren’t that many who volunteer all the time, there is probably fewer than 50 on a regular basis.” (Simone)

This is a problem if The Cube wants to maintain in the long term, although there are question marks surrounding its temporality as the current lease runs out in 2012. This is an interesting area but unfortunately will have to be ignored in this particular paper.

Volunteer Motivations

Most of the volunteers I interviewed mentioned this sense of community in The Cube as being one of the biggest motivations for working there. A sense of community is essential for any utopian organisation to survive (Kanter, 1973, 2 – 3)

“It’s this idea of community and new friends and new people, and I was kind of becoming part of that, but that gave me the impetus to get more involved.” (Simone)

“It’s a community thing; people have to trust you as a person.” (Sparky)

The community is of course not perfect and individuals have disagreements, but on the whole, from my interviews and observations the balance seemed harmonious enough and disputes are rare. When arguments do arise they are generally settled between individuals, but if necessary groups are formed to settle serious disagreements:

“Ideally, people deal with their own disputes. If they can’t a group has to come together to sort it out. Recently we had a case where two people were clashing and the group that sorted it out was a group that cared, (they) just to hear what the two people had to say and try and mediate.

Interviewer: So what was the outcome?

Stephen: In this case someone ended up leaving but that’s unfortunate.

Interviewer: They weren’t coerced into leaving?

Stephen: No, no. In the history of the Cube some people have been asked to leave, but it’s very, very rare, the people who have been asked to leave have done something really inappropriate.”

Because The Cube is not a live-in community the strain on personal relationships is put under much less pressure than in communes and therefore an individual’s privacy and personal life is not necessarily public knowledge. Although this may not have always been the case:

“People keep their private lives, very separate from it and in the past it was the other way round, it was people’s private life. But now it’s the other way round, half the people you don’t know where they live, what they do, what their situation is.” (Rusty Bridges)

Despite this perceived change by Rusty Bridges the sense of community and the offer of friendship were still paramount amongst the reasons for individuals volunteering at The Cube:

“It was more to do with making friends and that sort of thing.” (Littlest Mi)

“A lot of people come to make friends ... that’s part of the reason I started, to meet people.”
(Stephen)

There were numerous other reasons, including an interest in bar work and a keenness to work in a volunteer run organisation that would close without assistance (Sparky). There

was a longing for alternate culture in a “cluttered” and “higgledpiggledy” new city (Emma), and a mixture of “curiosity and boredom” (Bea McMahon). Surprisingly, in my eyes, no one that I interviewed had joined with the aim of gaining new skills. As mentioned, The Cube does offer a number of quasi-training programmes, volunteers can learn to be projectionists, sound engineers and how to promote nights, amongst other things. No official qualifications are offered but the opportunities are there. Although during my observations I talked a few individuals who were there to specifically to learn a skill. Despite this it is unequivocally the case that the lure of community and friendship attracts people to The Cube.

The Cube’s Utopian Actions.

The Cube has many assets that I interpret as utopian, some of them are not necessarily exceptional on their own, but they all provide an alternative way of engaging with certain aspects of everyday life. For example The Cube bar operates differently to most other bars:

“The Cola thing was big news, debating whether we should be selling Coca-Cola or not ... The meaning of not selling Coca-Cola is less important than the idea of making your own ... I mean, you can not drink coke but that’s not that interesting, making your own, now that starts to become interesting.” (Rusty Bridges)

“We try to source the products we sell in an ethical manor, we have relations to a South American co-op selling coffee beans , so we try to not only be a co-op with a social agenda, but also nurture other co-ops with social agendas, you know, it’s being humane” (Emma)

As is clear The Cube volunteers engineer their own cola and don’t sell products made by Coca-Cola, they also import their own coffee from South America. These are activities that may seem of little real value and on a global scale this is true. But locally these are attempts to change the ways in which people look at activities that are often taken for granted. There is a general anti-corporation attitude held by many volunteers and this ideological position was usually backed up with some of reasoning, it is not blind:

“Coca-Cola has been linked to a lot of union workers deaths, or it’s been implied that they’ve not made any effort to investigate these deaths of union workers on their plants.” (Stephen)

“You sell coffee, but you’re part of that chain, you know, fair trade is a questionable practice, so the idea was to get the most direct link we can have for coffee, so people went to El Salvador and found a cooperative we could work with ... its exploring those types of links.” (Rusty Bridges)

Other goals that The Cube holds, which I claim to be utopian in nature, include a no advertising policy and a dedication to screen locally produced films. Again these actions are attempting to affect the local community in a positive manor by allowing the local community to be involved. The no advertising policy is a reaction to what The Cube perceives to be a problem with contemporary society and freedom of choice:

“For the first few years we did show adverts and that gave us just enough money to pay the VAT, but when we got stronger financially we looked at it and said, “can we justify showing royal navy recruitment adverts or Nissan or Honda?” and we thought that we didn’t want to do that.

Interviewer: And you chose to go against adverts?

Rusty Bridges: Well, it was a statement I suppose ... we felt it was objectionable. We used to subvert them and play music over them a lot.”

“It (The Cube) provides an option, it shows that it doesn’t have to be consumerism that drives things.” (Simone).

“We have bluescreen, which is a show case for amateur films. Bluescreen is a passionate night, it has a lovely atmosphere there’s no judgement. I love bluescreen, I think it’s one of the most important things we do here.” (Stephen)

The Cube is actively attempting to implement social change through these actions; again they are offering alternate ways of operating within western consumer culture. As mentioned it is a not-for-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers, none of whom take a salary. The only time anyone took any money out of The Cube was when it was originally set

up. This rejection of money and the lack of incentive to gain a profit are classic utopian goals; the removal of money is coupled with satisfying and self appointed work (Sargisson, 2000, 105). This is precisely what The Cube offers, volunteers choose when they want to work and which job they want to do, there is no obligation to work set times or shifts, every aspect of work is dictated by the individual, according to their needs and wants:

“No, no one gets paid at all, at all. That stopped really almost straight away. We were being paid, in a way, to start it up, to get it up and running, but that run out after a month or two, it’s always been volunteer run. We decided very early that if you were just being a cleaner here you’re on equal terms to a person who’s here every day programming film.” (Rusty Bridges)

“Some people want to come here and do a bar shift or an ushering shift every now and then and they don’t want anything deeper than that, which is fine.” (Stephen)

This links with the work of Ben-Ner and Van Hoomissen (1991) who, as we saw earlier, state that many grassroots associations start as attempts at for-profit businesses and find that their ambition is too great or the market for what they are providing is too small and consequently grassroots associations are formed (Ibid, 524). Although there is more than this to the formation of the Cube, there seems to be a real desire for direct change and social transformation. This transformative idea that sparked The Cube into life twelve years ago still seems strong in the volunteers. Everyone I interviewed had a passion and dedication, even those who had only been working a few months. It is also clear that some of the longer-serving volunteers put an incredible amount of time and effort into the organisation:

“Interviewer: How much time would you say you give to the organisation?”

Emma: Too much! It’s a problem because I have other interests as well and they have been suffering over the past months ... there’s lots of email work that can clock up very quickly ... on top of that a sound engineering shift is between 6 and 9 hours, and then the accountancy takes between 2 and 3 hours, the music meeting 2 hours.”

The Cube's not-for-profit policy, its sole reliance on volunteers and worker equality are clearly transformative actions. For me the key factor is agency, by constantly interacting with an environment that perpetuates social change the volunteers begin to be a part of the process themselves and start to have "tangible impacts on their local environment" (Levitas and Sargisson, 2003, 17 (Edt Baccolini and Moyland)). The impacts in this case are often social ones, such as The Cube Orchestra, which is open for anyone to join and The Noisy Bike Workshop where people are encouraged to do up old bikes and parade through the city, making as much bike related noise as possible (cubecinema.com). The Cube also has social outreach programmes that affect lives far beyond the local area, the best example of this is the Haiti Kids Kino Project:

"(The project involves) volunteers go(ing) over to Haiti to screen films to children and also allowing the children to make their own films ... Haiti now is much less present in people's minds, if at all present on the news, and it's just to provide entertainment for children ... something fun, to give the parents a break, to give the kids something to occupy themselves." (Bea McMahon)

The Cube is not a charity and it has no obligation to keep its prices as low as it does or offer free tickets to asylum seekers, but making money is not The Cube's prerogative³:

"We don't want money, but we do want to survive." (Simone)

"I don't think that money is the goal, it's to get people involved and to show them things that they may not have access to anywhere else I suppose." (Littlest Mi)

Any profit The Cube does make goes back into the organisation, although there is not often any excess capital.

³ The costs are £1 for membership, £2-4 for a film and from £5 to a high of £12 for a gig. The offer of free tickets for asylum seekers is probably the most overtly political message The Cube asserts.

“There is no profit, there was about £25 in the bank a few weeks ago and there was a complete halt on spending, but we’ve now had a good weekend and had some money come in so, we will pay some bills, the money and bills are usually around the same. If there was a profit the money would go back into The Cube.” (Simone)

The Cube’s primary aim is none of these things, the main goal is to give individuals access to a cultural enterprise they would otherwise be unable to experience. This goal resonated through all the interviews:

“ It’s culturally challenging events that, challenging in that it enhances people’s lives in some way or another, its being at the fringes of the general cultural sector, by being at the fringes you can experiment and challenge.” (Emma)

As an alternative cinema and performance space it is unsurprising that the primary goal is a cultural one. The Cube’s mission statement confirms the desire to showcase fringe films and transform cinema:

“Our mission: To reinvent the notion of cinema as a shared social space for the people within the local community and provide a greater choice of programs for the people of Bristol” (The Cube Volunteer Handbook, 3)

It is cultural enterprises such as The Cube that hold the torch for utopia in the modern day. The very fact it is a public space where everyone is free, not only to attend screenings and gigs, but to be directly involved in the utopian process themselves, elevates The Cube above traditional utopian associations as it engages not only the volunteers, but the public as well. Many conventional utopian settlements, which tend to be closed off from public life and therefore are not accessible and do not hold transformative value. By ‘conventional utopian settlements’ I mean organisations such as those studied by Sargisson (2000), these communities tend to be lived in and are often very isolated from society. For example the utopian settlement on the Isle of Erraid is the only community on the island at all (Ibid, 39), this makes it very hard to be transformative. I believe that being transformative is the key to utopia in the present day. Utopia must not only affect itself, but the communities that surround it, and this is what The Cube is about:

“We need to be providing alternative cinema and music space. For me we would ideally be doing that for the local area.” (Stephen)

The Cube differentiates itself from “traditional” intentional communities, most noticeably because it is not a live-in commune or settlement. Despite the lack of attention given to organisations such as The Cube the utopian element is strong because of the drive for social change. This desire for change is what also motivate the anarchist thinkers Nozick and Ward and it is associations such as the Cube that they champion and believe can bring utopian change to contemporary society. Ward is famous for stating that utopia “is already here, apart from a few little, local difficulties like exploitation, war, dictatorship and starvation” (Ward, 1973, 14). Ward argued that voluntary co-operatives that operated without hierarchy were all around breaking down social and political barriers.

Utopian retreats are as such, they are places of refuge, which are often difficult or even impossible to access they are not actively seeking change as Ward claims utopian organisations need to do. Kanter (1973) writes that retreat for utopian communes “involves rejection of all places, behaviours, and values most characteristic of modern society” (Ibid, 177). This is not a progressive attitude and is summed up well in one of my interviews with one of the patrons of the Cube:

“(Utopia is) not a cellular closed gate community, I suppose it might work then, but its not addressing other issues, you’re kind of lying to yourself that you’ve reached utopia and your just getting a better deal for yourself ... you should be trying to integrate and get a better understanding and see how you as an individual can improve your community and how you can be a part of that.”
(Demolition Man)

Becoming a separatist community means not having any transformative affect on a local populous. People may see these settlements and be interested or inspired by them, but this effect is second hand and not the primary goal. Utopian communities need to be actively implementing social change, not hiding from the real world. Here I feel it is again necessary to reiterate the non perfect nature of utopian communities. In the majority of cases individuals join intentional communities because they want to live in a better way or show

that alternative ways of living are possible. They are not interested in a perfection (Levitas and Sargisson, 2003, 21 (Edt: Baccolini and Moyland)). This interest in change and disinterest or disbelief in perfection was reflected by The Cube's community:

“Striving towards something means you’ve made a difference, we’re not perfect.” (Stephen)
“You’ll never achieve perfection, but if people are thinking about how we can make things better, that’s a good step, I think a lot of the time people aren’t aware of how much better things could be and that there is another way.” (Littlest Mi)

The Cube and Politics.

It is probably fairly obvious that The Cube may be said to be a left-wing organisation. The relation between politics and utopia is odd, because politics is built on utopian ambition but often rejects utopia out hand (Sargisson, 2007, 25 (edt: Moylan and Baccolini)). What I see as the separation of utopia from politics is that utopia actually offers change, whereas politics claims to offer it but rarely does. The Cube makes us think about our own practices and about the world in a different way, by showing that an alternative is possible, not just in theory but in practice. Utopias are places where desires can be trialled, political and economic alternatives explored and where power structures can be rewritten (Ibid, 40 – 43).

The political status of The Cube is an interesting area as on the one hand it seems to be a fairly radical, lots of left wing documentaries screened and there are a number of left wing ideas in place, but on the other hand there is no *overt* political activism:

“Interviewer: Do you think the cube has a political agenda?”

Emma: Of course, it tries to be anti-capitalistic and humane, it tries to embrace social values, it tries to embrace the value of a person as opposed to the value of a worker or a member of the workforce. You know, it’s being humane.”

“I’m not aware of a political message.” (Littlest Mi)

“Interviewer: So, do you think the Cube has a political stance?”

Sparky: No, you know, come on, I work in a bank, and the sort of political s*** you would get in a volunteer thing you would assume would be the s*** that was anti-banks, anti- capitalist blah blah blah. And I've not had any attitude towards me like that."

"I would say it does (have a political stance), I guess we are left wing." (Bea McMahon)

In many ways it would seem wrong for The Cube to be an overtly political organisation, part of its charm lies in flirting between the lines of activism and art and a step too far in either direction would alienate a large proportion of volunteers and patrons, both of whom are vital to The Cube. As Simone points out "it almost goes without saying" that the Cube is a left wing organisation. Politics and utopia naturally overlap and share each other's concerns, as Bridges pointed out "we are never outside of politics" and I think that The Cube is in a good place. It does not push an agenda on anyone, but at the same there are strong political messages, as Stephen puts it:

"The fact that nobody gets paid is a political stance, it puts us outside the monetary system. We offer free screenings to asylum seekers ... The place has got an obligation to serve the community and be ethical in its pricing and what it offers."

By offering their services The Cube volunteers are necessarily helping transform a cinema into a utopian process. This may not be their intention but I feel that the combination of themes explored here holds a very definite utopian element. Through the many small actions, that may seem insignificant, they make a big effect on the surrounding community, as Littlest Mi points out, "in the little ways that they can, they try and make changes."

The Cube and Utopia

Rather surprisingly an appreciation of The Cube's application of utopian aims is reflected by three of the members of the public I interviewed:

“If you’re ever going to get a utopia you need to put the ideas into reality, using utopian ideas could also be an inspiration to others as well, make them look at what they’re doing a bit differently, change, you know, I guess that is what utopia is really about.” (Snoopy)

“You could say they are using utopian goals or trying to put utopian ideas into practice, maybe, you know that’s more important than the final goal.” (Frank)

“A vision of utopia is definitely possible, trying to create utopia is possible, there are many examples of utopian communities and communes and stuff. I suppose the Cube *may* be seen as attempting to put into place utopian ideas.” (Snow)

I found this surprising because only two of the volunteers suggested that The Cube may have utopian goals:

“(Utopia is) one of those things you may always be striving for and towards and that’s the important part about it ... the activation of those (ideas), so as long as you’re trying, you’ve got that direction.”
(Rusty Bridges)

“It was an experiment we were excited by the idea of running our own cultural constitution so whether the utopian roots go down to the individuals that happen to do doing that, we were idealistic and had certain ideas about culture that are perhaps part of a broad movement in society, the left movement that utopia would be in.” (Rusty Bridges)

“Interviewer: So, quickly going back to this utopia idea, do you think it’s possible, either on a large or small scale?”

Bea McMahon: I defiantly think it’s possible on a small scale, I think the Cube is evidence of that. I think that the Cube contains quite a lot of utopian ideals and beliefs really.

Interviewer: What would you say those are?

Bea McMahon: Working for the love of it, rather than feeling that you’re working towards a financial goal you’re working towards a cultural goal or towards a community goal, that’s much more important.”

It was exciting for me to hear McMahon talking about The Cube in this way, as up until this point I was worried that my utopia ideas about The Cube were going to be rejected by everyone I interviewed:

“Utopia brings up an ideal that can’t exist in reality.” (Emma)

“Utopia, in my opinion is never going to happen.” (Sparky)

And the members of the public aside from the three above were also very cautious about utopia:

“Well, I see utopia as a negative

Interviewer: Why does it bring negative images?

Peggy: I see it as a society that’s evolved into, not a society, but into a kind of machine, it doesn’t sound natural or human.”

“Well, I don’t really know, the image I get from media is a negative one I suppose, *1984* and that sort of totalitarian thing.” (Alex)

“I see utopia as also an idea of harmony.” (Demolition Man)

This reaction is understandable and demonstrates well the classic utopian form and some of the ideas about utopia that need to be changed. The Cube is not set out as a utopian association and I don’t think any such suggestions have been made before.

However, if we are willing to understand utopia in a new way, as praxis and not as an end goal or a blueprint it is undeniable that The Cube exhibits many utopian goals. The Cube’s aim is certainly the implementation of social change through the various utopian actions discussed here and cultural awakening through its screenings and gigs.

Conclusion.

In the everyday mind's eye utopia is often a place of perfect cooperation. Individuals living together in a self sustainable way, a higher order has taken over and human behaviour has been transformed. However, the reality is not really like this. What we call utopia cannot be some wonderland guided by a higher spiritual force and a perfect natural order. Utopia must be strived for, it is held together by dedication rather than compulsion.

Utopian ideas needs to be maintained, individuals and groups must put utopian ideas into place. Utopia cannot be conjured like the fantasies of Bellamy (1888) and Morris (1890). The interest of the individual and the individual's ideas must become transcendent. Utopia and the practice of utopian ideas must be holistic. However, there must also be room for personal and social growth. Skills and knowledge need to be circulated; there must be freedom for the individual but dedication to the goal.

It is the common misconception that utopia and utopian ideas should exist without human effort which stunts utopian progress. It is the vision of paradise like the island of Cockaigne, where physical and mental comfort and pleasure are at one's fingertips, which isolates utopia from the realm of present day reality. Utopian ideas need to be incorporated into physical life, as real concepts, as real aspirations. The basic assumption underpinning utopian ideas is that cooperation and harmonious relationships with other human beings are beneficial to all; rather than war, conflict, exploitation and aggressive competition, these are components of a dysfunctional society (Kanter, 1972, 1).

Utopia is a reaction to the negatives in current society; it poses questions about other ways of living and showcases different ideologies that may be possible. Utopia is often seen as an escapist pastime, especially due to the amount of utopian and dystopian literature that has been produced since More's *Utopia* (1516). To some extent *The Cube* may be seen as an escapist heaven. It is a cinema, which is almost as escapist as it gets. It is also an oasis of community spirit and transformative counter culture in the middle of a large urban environment.

Some of the Cube's appeal to both volunteers and patrons is undoubtedly being able to escape from everyday life, whether it is by watching a film, seeing a band or just being in the building. There is a large community aspect to the Cube, volunteers will often pop in randomly to say hello, see what's going on or to offer a helping hand if it's needed. This escapism and the sense of community are certainly reasons why volunteers do keep coming back and is probably the main reason the organisation has continued for so long.

Grassroots associations take the utopia incentive and drive it forward, they put into practice ideas and visions of better communities and societies. Whether through deliberate activation or not, The Cube pushes the utopian agenda. For example, utopian ideas reject the established order that values profit over human life, grassroots associations assert that profit "is far from the "end all" and the "be all" of human existence" (Smith, 2000a, 231). Grassroots associations are excellent tools upon which utopian ideas can be utilised in the present day. There is no need for utopia to be confined to the realms of literature and future dreaming. Desire and imagination are important aspects of utopia but the key is activation via human agency.

The Cube is certainly a utopian agent, through its many political, social and cultural actions it holds a transformative potency on the local community. The standout utopian actions it participates in are as follows: The Cube is non-profit, this entails that the organisation is outside of money greed and profiteering, the drive for money has done more damage to the world than any other desire, being as removed as possible from capital gain revitalises utopian desire (Harvey, 2000, 156). Being a volunteer run organisation is a utopian facet, as Nozick (1974) points out voluntary action and utopia are intertwined by the desire to follow our own paths and create opportunities social change in the present day.

The political construction of the organisation itself, that is, its flat power structure is a utopian idea put into practice. As admitted by the volunteers it may not run perfectly, but it continually evolves and unstructured rolling leadership naturally shifts with time. This is an idea that is classically utopian, in *News from Nowhere* (1890) there is no leadership structure. However, this is impossible in The Cube, where decisions have to be made and

individuals have to act alone at times. The volunteers “agree on matters by consensus, there is no majority vote” (Emma), this is a very utopian decision making process, Sargisson quotes from James and Robert that “the essence of consensus is the ability to extract something from each opinion in a group, and mould it into a statement or plan of action that each member can agree with and promote” (Sargisson , 2007, 40 (edt: Moylan and Baccolini)). Consensus based decision making is aimed at giving individuals ownership and attempting to spread power evenly throughout an organisation. These are two key aims of The Cube:

“My hope is that people take ownership.” (Rusty Bridges)

“If you were just being a cleaner here you’re on equal terms to a person who’s here every day programming film.” (Rusty Bridges)

The Cube rejects Coca-Cola and actively engineering its own Cola as well as directly importing coffee from El Salvador in order to bypass unethical corporations. These are left-wing utopian ideas and they seek methods of operating as a business and go beyond the simple rejection of big corporation and implement direct change themselves. The Cube offers free films to asylum seekers, this probably the most left-wing of all the utopian practices at The Cube, it is again intrinsically linked with valuing human life over profiteering. The Cube’s no advertising policy was also born out of utopian desire and the rejection of multi-national companies. Once the business was self sustaining and did not need the money to pay bills the adverts could no longer be justified, yet again it comes down to a lack of interest in economic gain. All of these actions are self reflexive and aimed at a better, more ethical way of living and working. This is utopia in progress.

Socially The Cube has several programmes aimed at creating better links with the community including the bike workshops and The Cube Orchestra as well as the Haiti Kids Project, these programmes all aim to bring people together outside of the physical boundaries of The Cube, whether it be through painting up some bikes and parading through town, or taking cinema to a country recovering from a natural disaster.

Alternative culture is The Cube's main priority and has largely been ignored in this paper due to spatial limitations. However, the spreading of alternate culture is a utopian action in itself in that The Cube spreads unusual and sometimes revolutionary ideas⁴. The Cube offers a great variety of film, music and performance and gives the public an opportunity to see programming they would otherwise not been able to.

Utopia is about integrity. Discerning that which one believes to be right from wrong and acting upon it. Utopia means not only desiring for a better society, but acting upon those desires and this is what The Cube offers through the processes outlined above and discussed throughout this paper. The Cube is socially, politically and culturally utopian in many differing ways. A new idea of utopia can be reached, via the work of Sargisson (2000), Ward (1973) and Nozick (1972) I hope to have shown the grassroots associations, such as The Cube, are capable of creating utopian transformations in the present day by the activation of utopian ideas with the aim of changing the local community for the better and offering a different way of operating within society.

⁴ The best example of this is the IndyMedia nights that occur every month or so, usually on a Monday.

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Appendix

My Interviews were semi structured, below is the rough outline of questions for interviews with the volunteers:

How long have you been working / volunteering at Cube?

Have/do you volunteered anywhere else?

If they have you can probe further as to how the different experiences of volunteering compare.

What attracted you to Cube?

Probe to see how much they know about Cube's history/structure etc rather than asking it directly.

Can you tell me about your experiences of volunteering at Cube?

Probe here based on the answers given about feeling valued, involved etc.

How much time do you spend volunteering at Cube?

Probe here about formal arrangements and the social aspects

What do you think the goals of Cube are?

Utopian themes

This is the vague outline I used when interviewing the patrons:

How often do you visit cube and why?

Are the interested in the specific films or something else?

Do you know anything about the structure / history of The Cube?

Do you think The Cube has a political agenda?

What do you think The Cube's goals are?

Discussion of utopia and utopian themes