

Abstract

The Mill is a community initiative that emerged from a campaign to save a local library closed without public consultation, in the London borough of Waltham Forest. After four years of campaigning and pushed by the local authority's decision to sell the building, the community group shifted their focus to keeping it in public hands. A good dose of determination kept the group going, and the coincidental alignment of events and skilled people allowed them to take over the building to provide space and resources for local people to come together and organise interest groups, events and activities in a friendly environment. The events took place between 2007 and 2011, during the global financial crisis, the subsequent change of government in the UK and the country's deficit reduction programme. Thus, The Mill is an extraordinary example that delineates the connection between the withdrawal of public funding for culture, and the emergence of private/collective initiatives that attempt to fill in cultural demands locally. These initiatives are led mostly by volunteers, and were briefly collectively called the "Big Society". In this paper, I consider the relationship between community forms of management and austerity policies, exploring how such policies influence the emerging forms of community management.

“Save our Library!”: Social Action, Austerity and The Big Society

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THE MILL IS A COMMUNITY INITIATIVE that emerged from a campaign to save a local library that was closed without public consultation, in the London borough of Waltham Forest. After four years of campaigning and pushed by the local authority's decision to sell the building, the community group shifted its focus to keeping it in public hands. A good dose of determination kept the group going, and the coincidental alignment of events and skilled people allowed them to take over the building to provide space and resources for local people to come together and organise interest groups, events and activities in a friendly environment.

The events took place between 2007 and 2011, during the global financial crisis, the subsequent change of Government in the UK and the country's deficit reduction programme.¹ Thus, The Mill is an extraordinary example that delineates the connection between the withdrawal of public funding for culture, and the emergence of private/collective initiatives that attempt to respond to cultural demands locally. These initiatives are led mostly by volunteers, and were briefly collectively called the "Big Society" by the UK's then Prime Minister David Cameron. That is, "a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities".² The Big Society slogan has come and gone, but the effect of its rhetoric and accompanying cuts to public spending are alive and well in the form of social capital and the individuals' "responsibility, in which 'people' take ownership of tasks that they might previously have assumed to be the responsibility of government."³

In this paper, I consider the relationship between community forms of management and austerity policies, exploring how such policies influence the emerging forms of community management. Moreover, what are the consequences of stepping in to fill in the State's responsibilities? Is The Mill generating something altogether different from what became known as the Big Society? Can this case be a model for public cultural organisations post-public funding?

April Fool's Day

On the first of April 2007, London Waltham Forest Council's St James Street Library closed down. For a week its users kept returning books by pushing them through the letterbox, but soon they realised this wasn't a short-term closure for refurbishment, as many initially believed. On the contrary, the closure was part of the local council's continuing money-saving plan.⁴ Since 2004–05 the Labour Government implemented an efficiency programme to reduce public spending, named in the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review as the Value for Money Savings Programme.⁵ The concealed decision infuriated local resident Phaik Tan, who initiated the Save St James Street Library campaign.

I started Save St James Street Library Campaign because I wanted to save a beloved 30-year-old library and to rectify an injustice.
Phaik Tan⁶

Tan casually met her local councillor and got to know that the library had been closed for good and without any popular opposition. "How can locals raise their objections when they were not aware of the closure in the first place?"⁷ Going around her neighbourhood, Tan quickly raised 200 signatures for a petition against the closure of the library. A group of local people with very specific skills joined Tan, including journalists, activists, IT specialists etc. Having scheduled a photo shoot with the local newspaper, the *Waltham Forest Guardian*, the group distributed posters in the vicinity of the closed library to get people to gather outside the building on the photo shoot day holding banners and placards.⁸

It was a tricky campaign because the library was already closed. [...] The books were here, everything was here, it was just shut.
Siobhan Hawthorne⁹

Soon after, the Blackhorse Action Group and the Keep Our Museums Open campaign joined forces



"Save St James Street Library Campaign", 2007. Courtesy of The Mill.

in demonstrations and protest actions to save St James Street Library.¹⁰ At the beginning Waltham Forest Council rejected claims that locals had not been consulted. That turned out to be incorrect. Cabinet member for Leisure, Arts and Culture, councillor Geraldine Reardon, later apologised for the lack of consultation and "admitted there had been 'virtually no consultation' on the closure" of the library.¹¹

This was a tiny library, what it did have was a great children's section, and a meeting space that lots of community groups used, and it was also, as we uncovered much later in the campaign, used by a lot of children to do their homework.
Siobhan Hawthorne¹²

1. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/2010-to-2015-government-policy-deficit-reduction/2010-to-2015-government-policy-deficit-reduction> (Accessed 2016-09-28.)

2. The Conservative Party's 2010 General Election Manifesto, in Slocock, Caroline. *The Big Society Audit 2012*. London: Civil Exchange. 2013, p. 23.

3. Rowson, Jonathan *et al.* *Beyond the Big Society: psychological foundations of active citizenship*. London: RSA. 2012, p. 20.

4. Waltham Forest Council was run by a coalition between Labour and Liberal Democrats between 2006 and 2010.

5. "During the 2004-05 to 2007-08 Spending Review period an efficiency programme across government achieved £21.5 billion of annual efficiency gains, reduced the civil service by 70,600 posts and reallocated 13,500 posts to the front line of public services." The Comprehensive Spending Review Value for Money Savings Programme, covering 2008-09 to 2010-11, follows this line designed to improve the efficiency of government operations, where departments were required to commit to save 3% of their spending. See Comptroller and auditor-general. *Independent review of reported CSR07 value for money savings*. London: The Stationery Office. (2010-07-20.)

6. Tan, Phaik, Save St James Street Library campaign initiator. E-mail interview. (2016-03-18.)

7. *Ibid.*

8. For original photo see Cosgrove, Sarah. "Residents campaign for re-opening of St James's Street Library. *Waltham Forest Guardian*. 2007-05-30. http://www.guardian-series.co.uk/news/1435391.Residents_campaign_for_re_opening_of_St_James___s_Street_Library/ (Accessed 2016-04-12.)

9. Hawthorne, Siobhan. Save St James Street Library campaign

initiator. Interview at The Mill (2016-04-27.)

10. The Blackhorse Action Group is a residents association constituted in 2006 that has been primarily set up to oppose a project for building residential tower blocks on what is now the Willowfield School site by Black Horse road. The group mobilised community opposition to this project and since then its role is to work with local groups to encourage and support them by making videos, helping with their campaigns, and featuring them in BAG's website. Meads, Neil. Blackhorse Action Group member. Interview. (2016-07-03.)

See <http://www.blackhorseaction-group.org.uk/> (Accessed 2016-04-10.) Keep Our Museums Open was a campaign set up by local residents to prevent the cutting of the opening hours in half and reducing the staff of the William Morris Gallery and the Vestry House Museum, and later to prevent council plans to sell William Morris collection and the transformation of the Gallery premises into a function space for hire. Gallaccio, Mo. Save St James Street Library campaign member and leader of Art Works. Interview at The Mill. (2016-04-27.) See <http://www.antiscrap.co.uk/> (Accessed 2016-04-10.)

11. Cosgrove, Sarah and Crown, Hannah. "Apology over library debate". *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2007-07-19.)

12. Hawthorne, *op.cit.*

Cllr Reardon justified to the papers that of the borough's eleven libraries, "St James Street was the least used and with very low visitor numbers and very low levels of borrowing",¹³ and told the campaigners that continued service would have required capital investment to improve the building and to ensure Disability Discrimination Act compliance. Moreover, £3.5 million had been invested in nearby Walthamstow Library, and "the Council required the service to contribute to policy review savings for 2007/08."¹⁴

I have been a resident of Walthamstow for 35 years and I have six children who have been and are using the library. [...] We will not stop campaigning until the library is re-opened.
Mazhar Iqbal¹⁵

In 2006 the Cabinet agreed on a range of saving, and the closure of St James Street Library was one of them. Value for money was reaffirmed at that meeting, cuts were necessary, and the council "aimed to make cuts where they would have the least impact on the Service overall."¹⁶ In the meantime, the council was answering accusations from the public of incinerating 250,000 books from all libraries, but mainly from the newly refurbished central library.¹⁷

"SWAP SHOP: Library campaigners get ready for the new open air library", 23 January 2008. Photograph by Roy Tillet, Yellow Advertiser. Courtesy of The Mill.



There was a bit of a view that people don't need libraries anymore. [...] the sort of things that were said to us about the library [by the council, was] that people don't need libraries, they have Google.
Siobhan Hawthorne¹⁸

By holding several community meetings, urging people to sign the petition and to write to their local councillor showing their disapproval, the campaign started to gain traction. In November 2007, the group announced a big public meeting and invited Children's Laureate Michael Rosen to discuss the future of the borough's libraries.¹⁹

I think about 200 people came to that meeting. We began to gather quite a lot of local support [...] and to expose the council and how they were operating at the time.
Siobhan Hawthorne²⁰

The second campaign year started with an open-air library to mark the National Year of Reading, and since then the campaigners held a book swap in front of the old library building once a month over a period of three years. "Waltham Forest's literacy rate is dropping, and the government is trying to increase reading outside school" said the campaigners, urging the council to acknowledge the value of libraries.²¹

We were into public services provided by the council. We wanted people to have jobs, and a group of volunteers can't take over a library. That is the council's responsibility.
Siobhan Hawthorne²²

Local councillors offered the campaigners the opportunity to run the library voluntarily. They refused. The council then started a consultation into the future of Library Provision in the St James Street Area.²³ This in itself was seen as one of the successes of the campaign: that the council "had to acknowledge that they hadn't followed process in terms of consulting the population."²⁴ Around 2009, the building was falling into disrepair, and

the concerned campaigners planned to occupy it. However, suddenly an anti-squat company, AD HOC Property Protection, was hired by the council to take over the building with a live-in security scheme.

Soon after, news circulated that the council was giving the building to Waltham Forest Primary Care Trust to re-open as a drug rehabilitation centre.²⁵ The news gave a new boost of energy to the campaigners. Backed by citizens enraged at the plan of having Class A drug users at their doorstep, and supported by the local ward Liberal Democrat councillor James O'Rourke, the campaigners once again reclaimed community usage for the building.²⁶ Shortly after the plan was shelved "the council decided to withdraw funding following pressure from residents."²⁷ Following this loss, the council decided to sell the building, "effectively ending the hopes of campaigners who want[ed] the building re-opened as a library or other community facility."²⁸

Then the nature of the campaign changed, it wasn't any more about getting the library back but about saving the building, keeping it as a community building.
Mo Gallaccio²⁹

At that moment, the campaigners knew they'd lost the library, and the fight was now to keep it as a community space. The auction of the building galvanised the local community, and "different people, with a different set of skills and interests came in."³⁰ At the time, Labour and the Liberal Democrats – the latter in fact chaired the meeting that decided on the closure of the library – disagreed about the future of the building, with the Lib Dems supporting the campaigners' cause. The popularity of the campaign, together with the nearing of the general and local elections of May 2010, forced all parties to position themselves regarding the future of the building. Labour council leader Cllr Robbins attempted to appease the campaigners by saying that "[n]o council property I'm responsible for will be sold until the review is complete." Conservative group leader Matt Davis, sustained: "It is a shame that there is to be this knee-jerk sale of the property, at a time when its value is so low, when it ought to be returned to being a library as local people want."³¹ Liberal Democrat Cllr John Macklin affirmed: "[w]e want to make sure the possibility of community use has not been excluded."³²

13. Dolton, Martyn. "Campaigners received boost in library battle". *Yellow Advertiser*. (2010-11-04.)

14. London Borough of Waltham Forest Minutes of the meeting of overview and scrutiny management committee. 2007-07-04.

15. Save St James Street Library. 2007.

16. *Ibid.*

17. The council later admitted to have destroyed thousands of books, more specifically "the number of library items fell by 239,344 between 2005 and March 2007." During these two years library staff were told to remove anything that had not been borrowed for three years. The council's defence consisted mainly of the argument that the books had not been incinerated, as campaigners suggested, but pulped in a recycle centre. Cosgrove, Sarah. "Council admits it destroyed books". *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2007-11-29.)

18. Hawthorne. *op.cit.*

19. "The role of Children's Laureate is awarded once every two years to an eminent writer or illustrator of children's books to celebrate outstanding achievement in their field." Michael Rosen was a Laureate between 2007 and 2009. See <http://www.childrenslaureate.org.uk> (Accessed February 2017). The meeting was supported by WF Trades Council with £50 for room hire and leaflet printing, and was held at Blackhorse Road Baptist Church Hall.

20. Hawthorne. *op. cit.*

21. Dolton, Martyn. "We're Open". *Yellow Advertiser*. (2008-01-23.)

22. Hawthorne. *op. cit.*

23. Paralleled with a campaigner's own consultation. See <https://stjamesstlibrary.wordpress.com> (Accessed February 2017)

24. Hawthorne. *op. cit.*

25. Brown, Carl. "Old Library 'will be centre for addicts'". *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2009-02-12.)

26. Dolton, Martyn. "Residents Against Drug Centre Plan". *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2009-02-19.)

27. Brown, Carl. "Cautions victory won in shelving of rehab centre". *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2009-03-05.)

28. Brown, Carl. "Waltham Forest Council's leader Chris Robbins' plan to sell the former St James St library building, in Coppermill Lane, has caused a new row." *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2009-07-02.)

29. Gallaccio, *op. cit.*

30. Hawthorne, *op. cit.*

31. *Ibid.*

32. Brown, Carl. "Labour push to sell off library". *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2009-10-08.)

Selling it is a crazy idea. We would lose the one community centre in a huge area without facilities.
Janet Wright³³

In April 2010, the Lib Dem local councillor invited the local community to visit the building in a charm offensive. The campaigners, who were then looking into a way to revert the sale, visited the building in order to envisage a new usage. A few weeks later, the result of the general and local elections saw the Liberal Democrats both virtually wiped out of the local council and in a coalition with the Conservative Party in the National Government. The Labour Party was from then on running Waltham Forest Council. Two weeks later the Conservative Party's Big Society initiative was launched, with three key aims: give more power to local councils and neighbourhoods, reform public services, and encourage people to play a more active role in communities, while "drastically reducing financial and organisational support".³⁴

In October 2010, Cllr Coghill arranged a meeting with the council member responsible for the sale, and the campaigners asked him "what can we do to

save the building?"³⁵ Cllr Afzal Akram told them that if a long-lease tenant or a buyer for the building were found, it might not be auctioned. Akram gave them until the beginning of January to "put together a viable business plan."³⁶

*Walthamstow campaigners are racing against the clock to save their former library. And they're calling on David Cameron's planned Big Society Bank to back them.*³⁷

MP Stella Creasy "lobbied government officials to meet with the group and urged them to see what can be done to reopen the site as a community facility."³⁸ The concept of the Big Society, which had been the Conservative Party's campaign motto, was put to use by the campaigners. They met with Communities Minister Greg Clark, who was overseeing the Big Society Bank. "A local supporter, working in Brussels, Haroon Khan recommended the group to apply ambitiously to be part of the NESTA [UK National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts] Neighbourhood Challenge".³⁹ Campaigner Alison Griffin, who had a fundraising background,



"Inauguration of 'The Mill' Community Centre", 9 September 2011, <http://mahmoodhussain.mycouncillor.org.uk>. Photograph by Cllr Mahmood Hussain of High Street ward in Walthamstow, London. Courtesy of Mahmood Hussain.

took on the task of “appropriating the new governmental language of the Big Society, such as social capital, public assets, community building, etc.”⁴⁰ The group put in a bid in the name of Blackhorse Action Group (BAG), a constituted Resident’s Association, while urging the community to lobby councillor Akram not to sell the building.⁴¹ In December 2011, BAG and Save St James Street Library Campaign were shortlisted for the NESTA grant. Cllr Akram agreed to postpone the sale until the final decision was made, and the charity Alert Ltd, which owned a community space in Leyton, agreed to sublet the building for at least five years, creating the required partnership. In February 2011, “St James’s Street was recognised by NESTA as having low social capital, particularly due to the loss of the library – a free public space for people and groups to meet”,⁴² and Alison Griffin, in disbelief, called BAG’s members, informing them they’d won £150,000 to take over part of the library building for a year to build relationships and improve the wellbeing of their neighbourhood.

The Rise and Fall of The Big Society

The first step must be a new focus on empowering and enabling individuals, families and communities to take control of their lives so we create the avenues through which responsibility and opportunity can develop. But I also want to argue that the re-imagined state [...] must actively help people take advantage of this new freedom. This means a new role for the state: actively helping to create the big society; directly agitating for, catalysing and galvanising social renewal.
David Cameron⁴³

UK Prime Minister David Cameron first used the phrase Big Society at the annual Hugo Young lecture organised by *The Guardian* in November 2009.⁴⁴ The rationale behind the idea had been in the making for a number of years, and “Labour Government’s Third Way under Tony Blair and policy of ‘civic renewal’ under Gordon Brown [...] had strikingly similar objectives.”⁴⁵ In September 2007, Gordon Brown stated the following, in a speech at the National Council for Voluntary Organisations Annual Conference: “Call it community, call it civic patriotism, call it the giving age, or call it the new active citizenship, call it the great British society – it is Britain becoming Britain again.”⁴⁶

33. Macfarlane, Mhairi. “St James Street Library Campaign access former library”. *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2010-04-26.)

34. Milbourne, Linda and Cushman, Mike. “From the Third Sector to The Big Society: How Changing UK Government Policies Have Eroded Third Sector Trust”. *Volutas: International journal of voluntary and nonprofit organisations*. 2012, p. 3.

35. Gallaccio, *op. cit.*

36. Dolton, Martyn. Glimmer of Hope for old Library Building. *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2010-10-21.)

37. St James Street Library Campaign press release 7 November 2010. See <https://stjamesstreetlibrary.wordpress.com> (Accessed February 2017.)

38. Dolton, Martyn. “Campaigners received boost in library battle”. *Yellow Advertiser*. (2010-11-04.)

39. Griffin, Alison. The founding of The Mill. See <http://themill-coppermill.org/> (Accessed February 2017.)

40. Gallaccio, *op. cit.*

41. BAG is “A Residents Association for the Blackhorse Road area, E17 – from St James Street to Blackhorse Rd tube.” See <http://www.blackhorseactiongroup.org.uk> (Accessed February 2017.)

42. Jackson-Obot, Ima. “New Chapter for library after group secure grant”. *Waltham Forest Guardian*. (2011-02-24.)

43. Cameron, David. Hugo Young Lecture, November 2009. In Slocock, Caroline, *The Big Society Audit 2012*. London: Civic Exchange. 2013, p. 5.

44. David Cameron, Leader of the Conservative Party from December 2005 to July 2016, was UK’s Prime Minister from May 2010 to July 2016.

45. Slocock, *op. cit.* p. 21.

46. Brown, Gordon. Speech at the NCVO Annual Conference, 3 September 2007. In Slocock, *ibid.*, p. 5.

The early 1990s saw the development of a market-making strategy in the third sector in the UK, “in which an expanded role was envisaged for voluntary agencies and private companies in delivering services as part of a ‘mixed economy of welfare.’”⁴⁷ The changing economic climate in the wake of the financial crisis from 2007 onwards saw the debate about the third sector focusing on the capacity of the sector, with the Conservative Party arguing that it was underused, and in 2008 a green paper on civil society was released,⁴⁸ proposing “policies designed to encourage voluntarism, altruism, and the independence and diversity of civil society in the task of tackling social breakdown.”⁴⁹ Note that Third Sector – which is a contested definition and is here understood broadly as “charities, voluntary organisations, informal community groups and social enterprises”⁵⁰ – is re-characterised by the Conservative Party as “civil society”. The Party’s 2010 General Election manifesto reads:

*Our alternative to big government is the Big Society: a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control.*⁵¹

After the 2010 UK General Election, which saw a change in government from Labour to a Coalition between the Conservative and the Liberal Democrats parties, the Big Society became a key element of the Coalition Government policy platform. Although the vision was never entirely clear, “the concept of ‘Big Society’ taps into a powerful tradition of mutualism, co-operatives and the social economy”.⁵² According to Angus McCabe, elements of the Big Society have a long history within conservative political thinking, particularly when looking back to an era pre-welfare state and in search of a private alternative to it. If there were connections between the Coalition Government agenda and the previous New Labour policies on

community engagement, there are substantial discontinuities too – the main being funding. However, the most important was a change of vocabulary.

*Concepts of social justice have been replaced by the use of words such as “fair” or “fairness” alongside terms such as “liberation” and “freedom” [...] Concepts of fairness are much harder to define and therefore legislate for and may, actually, only be in the eye of the beholder rather than based on a rigorous social analysis.*⁵³

A change of the language was not only an attempt to dissociate Big Society from previous New Labour policies; it was also a rhetorical intervention designed to re-brand the Conservative Party. The latter “rather than relying purely on familiar conservative ideological tropes around defence, law and order and free markets”, mobilised the language of social and community “to counter the negative association with fiscal contraction and public spending cuts”, proposed by the Coalition Government.⁵⁴ The state’s withdrawal, not just from service delivery, but also from responsibility for welfare provision, was part of a massive ideological shift.⁵⁵

The Big Society intended to give communities more power, encourage people to take an active role in their communities, transfer power from central to local government, and support co-ops, mutuals, charities and social enterprises.⁵⁶ The plans included setting up a Big Society Bank and a Big Society Network to fund projects.⁵⁷ The Coalition Government’s “new” initiatives for the community and social sector were as follows: the Community Organisers Programme, a national training programme in the grass-roots movement for social action;⁵⁸ Community First, offering small grants for community projects;⁵⁹ the Community Assets Programme, supporting the transfer of assets from local authorities to communities;⁶⁰ Community Budgets, aiming to simplify funding systems from central to local government;⁶¹ the National Citizen Service, encouraging young people to volunteer;⁶²

and more importantly, the Localism Act, which among other things, “provided a ‘right to challenge’ current arrangements for the delivery of local services, a ‘right to buy’ local authority assets such as unused buildings, and a ‘right to provide’ for public sector employees to establish alternative employee-owned delivery agencies.”⁶³

None of these were new; the international trend towards neoliberal political-economic practices and

thinking has been growing steadily since the 1970s and was brought about with “deregulation, privatization and withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provision.”⁶⁴ Under Labour’s government there was already a trend “for outsourcing to third sector providers who secured a level of public trust as acting in the public good.”⁶⁵ But the resources to support the above ideas were drastically reduced under the Coalition Government.⁶⁶

47. Macmillan, Rob. “The third sector delivering public services: an evidence review”. July 2010. Working paper Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. 2010, p. 5.

48. Green Papers are consultation documents produced by the Government. The aim is to allow people both inside and outside Parliament to give feedback on policy or legislative proposals. See <http://www.parliament.uk/site-information/glossary/green-papers/> (Accessed February 2017.)

49. Macmillan, *op. cit.* p. 8.

50. Macmillan, Rob and McLaren, Vic. “Third sector leadership: the power of narrative”. March 2012. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 2.

51. The Conservative Party’s 2010 General Election Manifesto. In Slocock, *op. cit.* p.23.

52. McCabe, Angus. “Bellow the radar in a Big Society?: reflections on community engagement, empowerment and social action in a changing policy context”. December 2010. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 4.

53. McCabe, *ibid.*, p. 6.

54. Macmillan, Rob. “Making Sense of the Big Society: perspectives from the third sector?”. January 2013. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 5.

55. Milbourne and Cushman, *op. cit.* p. 31.

56. Cabinet Office. “Building the Big Society”. Policy Paper. London: Cabinet Office. (2010-05-18.)

57. “Both Labour and the Conservatives supported the long campaigned for Social Investment Bank for the sector, utilizing the balances in dormant bank accounts – although the Conservatives promised to give this a new name, the Big Society Bank.” See Alcock, Pete. “The Big Society a new policy environment for the third sector?” June 2012. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 4. The Society Network Foundation was a social enterprise charity that run the Big Society Network and the Big Society Awards.

58. The role of the community organisers was to listen to people and help them achieve their goals through democratic structures. The first 500 were paid, full-time for 51 weeks, the next 4,500 were volunteers recruited and trained by the original

500. Cameron, David and Rennick, Kimberley. “Community Organisers Programme: Evaluation Summary Report”. March 2015. London: Ipsos MORI. p. 2.

59. “A £80 million government funded initiative to provide small grants to community groups and local social action projects.” In Slocock, *op. cit.* p. 22.

60. “£30 million programme to provide capital grants for refurbishment and to help develop the transfer of assets from local authorities to the community sector.” *Ibid.*

61. “It gives local public service partners the freedom to work together to redesign services around the needs of citizens, improving outcomes, reducing duplication and waste.” *Ibid.*

62. “A programme of activities for 16 years old during the summer including community activities.” *Ibid.*

63. Alcock, *op. cit.* p. 7.

64. Harvey, David. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2005, p. 3. According to Harvey, large sectors of the economy that were in public ownership were privatised in the UK under Margaret Thatcher’s government in the 1980s. “State-run enterprises had to be adequately prepared for privatization, and this meant paring down their debt and improving their efficiency and cost structures, often through shedding labour.” Harvey, p. 60. The legitimacy of this programme was supported through the extensive selling off of public housing to tenants. Harvey suggests that this “satisfied a traditional ideal of individual property ownership as a working-class dream.” *Ibid.*, p.61. This ideal of social mobility will continue through the 1990s onwards in the steadily destruction of the working class, through a double movement of aspiration and vilification. See Jones, Owen. *Chavs: the Demonization of the Working Class*. London: Verso. 2011.

65. Milbourne, *op. cit.* p. 12.

66. In the same field the Labour Government had the following programmes: Grassroots Grant, “A £130 million government funded initiative to support the voluntary sector to build stronger more active communities through small grants.” Advancing Assets for Communities, a “£1m per annum programme to facilitate programmes to transfer assets from local authorities to the community sector.” Total Place for “13 pilots ‘putting citizens at the heart of service and design and working together to improve outcomes and eliminate waste and duplication.” National Community Service “the creation of British national community service: engaging and rewarding a new generation of young people from all backgrounds to serve their communities; demonstrating our practical commitment to cohesive and strong society.” See Slocock, *op. cit.* p. 22.

In a sense the big society has gone sideways now, it didn't work. But I think it was dishonest of the Conservative Party, because people would always volunteer, they didn't create the Big Society.
Siobhan Hawthorne⁶⁷

The Big Society never really gained traction. According to Rob Macmillan this is partly because the vision itself was never totally clear, and because it immediately enticed severe criticism from third sector organisations and the media. *The Guardian* columnist Polly Toynbee pointed out that “the idea that a sector that is just 2.3% of the workforce can replace the welfare state is not so much fanciful as downright dishonest.”⁶⁸ In the meantime the concept of the Big Society was “inexorably linked in the public mind with ‘deficit reduction’, the delivery of services ‘on the cheap’ and the rolling back of the welfare state to a residual role where consumers with resources have more access to quality choices whilst services for the poor become poor services.”⁶⁹ Even with its vague contours, most definitions of the Big Society agreed “it implies a greater role of voluntarism and voluntary organisations [...] and the transfer of public assets and services to the voluntary sector.”⁷⁰ If there was already an element of voluntarism regarding policy towards communities in the Labour governments, the Coalition’s Government introduced “a language of ‘aspirational compulsion [...] creating more responsible and active communities where people play a part in making society a better place’.”⁷¹ Pete Alcock stresses that in fact third sector activity had prospered alongside the welfare support from government, and the reduction of expenditure with the Coalition and now Conservative governments, rather than “promoting further growth [...] could lead to division and decline.”⁷²

Not everyone can volunteer. If people are worried about not having money for the basic things, such as rent, and food on the table, how can they sit at reception [at The Mill]? People need stability [to be able to volunteer on a regular basis].
Mo Gallaccio⁷³

Implicit in the idea of the Big Society is the view that “communities will be the first port of call in responding to social needs.”⁷⁴ However, there are concerns that this will be much easier in some communities than others. “It is well-known that charitable organisations are unevenly distributed,”⁷⁵ and that voluntarism is done mainly by a “civic core”,⁷⁶ i.e. a “small group of people contribute a disproportionate share of voluntary effort.”⁷⁷ Moreover, the UK is already the second most charitable country in the world, thus it is unlikely that charitable giving will rise.⁷⁸ Cameron’s vision of the future based upon the emergence of an army of volunteers was illusory, and the Big Society catchphrase has now, late 2016, more or less been completely eradicated.⁷⁹ However, notions of social capital, and the assumptions of what it can deliver, have not.⁸⁰

Surfing the Waves of the Big Society: The Replication of The Mill Experience

We don't agree with the Big Society, there are lots of issues with it, but it was where the funding was, and we needed the money. There is a point where we have to be pragmatic about it. I think we made it work for us.
Siobhan Hawthorne⁸¹

The Big Society project attempted to engineer social action. But could the experience of The Mill have been engineered? How did it really happen? It is useful here to examine the process by which The Mill came about through the lens of the residual notion of social capital, in interaction with other types of capital. Jenny Phillimore and Angus McCabe argue that a number of ingredients need to be available at the same time for a successful social action to emerge: “the right people, in the right place, at the right time – with a shared cause.”⁸² The different access that communities may

have to social, human, physical and economical capital will make all the difference, regardless of the presence of a strong emotional attachment to a cause and very motivated individuals. Phillimore and McCabe argue that, on the one hand, strong emotional reactions cannot be manufactured, and that these are paramount for social action to happen. On the other hand they argue that without access to free facilities to meet, free expertise and funds, even if the need to act is present, a successful outcome will be accidental.⁸³

I was prepared to stand up to the council – it felt like David fighting the Goliath.
Phaik Tan⁸⁴

The library campaign was initiated, as were many others, because of a strong sense of injustice. Emotions play a big part in triggering social action, and they were present throughout the Save the St James Street Library Campaign. Phaik Tan, the passionate initiator, quickly gathered a group of highly skilled people around her. Tan can be seen as a “community bricoleur”, or a person involved with a wide range of groups at the same time and capable of connecting and recruiting skilful individuals into the group.⁸⁵ Save St James Street Library campaign stated on their NESTA bid that their community had low social capital. According to Bourdieu, social capital is “differential access to resources via the possession of more or less durable relationships, constructed through an endless effort at institution.”⁸⁶ The amount of social capital depends on the volume of human capital that individuals within the network possess. Human capital, is the “knowledge, information, ideas, skills and health of individuals” gained via schooling, training, or work experience.⁸⁷ The area might have been lacking in social capital, but the campaigners did not. The campaigners, for various reasons, had time available.⁸⁸ Time is both human and economic capital, because only those who can afford time will invest it. Moreover, the campaigners had access to resources by overlapping with other campaigns and organisations, which counts as social capital. The campaigners utilised a combination of triggering emotional capital (anger) their economical capital (time), and their social capital (networks), to recruit support from the outset. Later, they used affective emotions towards the community and their lost asset to keep the campaign going. Phillimore and McCabe also consider personal traits, such as being determined, assertive, enthusiastic, to be important, and

67. Hawthorne, *op. cit.*

68. Toynbee, Polly. In McCabe, *op. cit.* p. 9.

69. McCabe, *op. cit.* p. 14.

70. Mohan, John. “Mapping the Big Society: perspectives from the Third Sector Research Centre, July 2011 working paper”. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. 2011, p. 3.

71. McCabe, *op. cit.* p.5.

72. Alcock, *op. cit.* p.9.

73. Gallaccio, *op. cit.*

74. Mohan, *op. cit.* p. 2.

75. *Ibid.*, p. 6.

76. “The civic core is composed of people who are more likely... to be middle-aged, have higher education qualifications, are owner occupiers, actively practice their religion, and have lived in the same neighbourhood for at least 10 years.” According to Mohan, 31% of the population provide 87% of volunteer hours, 79% of charitable giving, and 72% of civic participation. See Mohan, *ibid.*, p. 9.

77. Mohan, *ibid.*, p. 3.

78. ACEVO. *Powerful People, Responsible Society: The Report of the Commission on Big Society*. London: ACEVO. 2011, p. 19.

79. David Cameron left office as Prime Minister on 13 July 2016, after the UK voted to leave the European Union in 23 June 2016 EU referendum, being substituted by the new Leader of the Conservative Party, Theresa May.

80. Milbourne and Cushman, *op. cit.* p.34.

81. Hawthorne, *op. cit.*

82. Phillimore, Jenny and McCabe, Angus. “Luck, passion, networks and skills: the recipe for action below the radar?”. January 2015. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 22.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Tan, *op. cit.*

85. Soteri-Proctor, Andri. “Little big societies: micro-mapping of organisations operating below the radar”. November 2011. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 6.

86. Phillimore and McCabe, *op. cit.* p. 4.

87. *Ibid.*

88. Some of the reasons are: being on maternity leave, being a stay-at-home parent, being a free-lancer, being a post-degree student, and being retired.

affirm that it is critical to have the right communication skills. The fact that three journalists were part of the initial campaign group, which fed the local and national press with constant press releases, was then paramount to the success of this campaign. Later on, access to “vertical” networks with politicians, and local people with specific skills, such as fundraising, administrative, research and IT skills were instrumental in turning the campaign around, from reopening the library to keeping the building in public hands. The campaigners lacked financial capital, but due to their wealth in human capital, they managed to secure a partnership and a large public grant to prevent the sale of the building.

That the key ingredients for success were present at The Mill’s emergence, is more accidental than not, and can hardly be seen to be engineered by the Big Society programme. Rather, it was the community taking advantage of new policies and terminology.

We didn’t really want to set up a community centre. Part of the NESTA opportunity [...] was to take the building back to the community and to keep it in public hands. We didn’t necessarily believe in it [the bid], but we just thought, if we can get our hands on the building, we’d bought time.

*Alison Griffin*⁸⁹



Carla Cruz, “The Mill Stories”, 2016, <http://the-mill-stories.carlacruz.net/about>. Courtesy of the artist.

Learning from The Mill

As with other public services, the privatisation of the arts that has been effected by reductions in public funding means that many small-scale cultural organisations have seen their public programmes reduced and their human resources redirected to fundraising activities. The pressure on such organisations – just like The Mill after NESTA’s money was gone – to meet existing public funding imperatives and adapt to pre-established organisational models means that they struggle to earn public funding. Many people involved with UK-based small-scale arts organisations have discussed the nature of their existence on a post-public funding future.⁹⁰ What can art organisations and funding bodies learn from The Mill’s case?

After St James Street Library had been lost, what mattered most for the campaigners was keeping the building as public property. Realising this is in itself a success, since reversing privatisation is extremely unlikely. If today The Mill is a tenant of Waltham Forest Council, the campaigners saved the building with the hope for future use with public funding. Although they have lost the public service, through The Mill the campaigners kept something of its essence: just like the library, The Mill is now a non-market oriented public space.

Despite its success, The Mill cannot constitute a model to survive the financial crisis. As discussed earlier, the mechanisms that led to the rescue of this building for use by the local community are not necessarily duplicable. Likewise, expecting non-profit cultural organisations to become suddenly independent of public funding without losing their central mission is equally naive. This makes the struggle for the maintenance and financing of public services and spaces increasingly important, for its future outside a purely market oriented setting is increasingly under threat.

The future of The Mill and the compromises the group may have to make to keep the public building public are still unknown. However, as public spaces consultant Julian Dobson says:

In a world where we have to be more self-reliant, it’s more important than ever that we are not only self-reliant but find ways to help each other. You could call it the Big Society. You could call it cooperation. I prefer the concept of solidarity, because it is about people coming together from shared experiences and hopes rather than out of a sense of duty or philanthropy.⁹¹

In the meantime, different forms of management, caring and of being together are rehearsed.⁹²

89. Griffin, *op.cit.*

90. See Common Practice’s Research papers on this matter, available from <http://www.commonpractice.org.uk/research-papers/> (Accessed February 2017). Common Practice is an advocacy group working for the recognition and fostering of the small-scale contemporary visual arts sector.

91. Macmillan, Rob. “Making Sense of the Big Society: perspectives from the third sector”. January 2013. Working paper. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre. p. 7.

92. I thank Andrea Phillips for the idea of rehearsing. In her article “Remaking the Arts Centre”, Phillips argues that arts centre can be the stage for “other forms of thought and action” in opposition to the dominant neoliberal culture. Phillips, Andrea. “Remaking the Arts Centre”. In *Cluster: Dialectionary*. Binna Choi, Maria Lind, Emily Pethick and Nataša Petrešsin-Bachelez (eds.). Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2014. p. 230.