

THE BRISTOL COMMONS



SAT 18TH NOV 2023

Circomedia, Portland Square, St Pauls, Bristol, BS2 8SJ

**Community Power,
Land Justice & Systemic Change**

Reflections From The Day

A summary report of the second community gathering of The Bristol Commons.

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Produced by [Coexist](#)



The Bristol Commons - Movement Building

9.30am - 5.30pm Saturday, 18th November 2023 - Circomedia, St. Pauls

We are individuals, community groups and organisations from all over the city, and we have the potential to build a network of strength. Neither Bristol City Council nor the government have been able to mitigate the multiple crises we face. These crises are systemic, endemic and intersectional: Many converge and affect the most marginalised people in our city.

We therefore need a new, strategic, dynamic and collaborative movement to tackle these problems. We need people and organisations working together - not competing with each other - to foster a regenerative culture and build a movement for change. Most of all, we need the space and resources to be able to meet the challenges at hand and create a bright future.



In this city there is a great spirit of radicalism. So much good has grown from the grassroots up. Between us all, we have the skills, capacities and hold the possibility for change. Our invitation is that we light a fire of hope for future generations; that we tend to it with love, and kindle it with belief. We need to illuminate these dark times with collective action, experience new ways of working and shaping our shared future, and provide shelter from the various storms that buffet our communities. We will grow a movement of change - re-commoning our city and remembering that collectively we have real power.

Together we will **Rebuild the Commons!**

EVENT OVERVIEW

Set in the generously gifted space of Circomedia, the premise of this event was to crystallise the ideas that came out of our gathering in March and create the beginnings of a framework within which the Bristol Commons project can flourish. As promised to the community that co-created our launch, we dedicated a portion of this day to covering ground we didn't previously find time for – manifesto writing and an open space. Further, the event facilitated the cementing of our current organisational model – operating around three working groups that have been meeting regularly to help coordinate the project. These will be covered in more detail below.

Welcome Session



Guided by Sherien and Sayambrita from the Diverse Artists Network (D.A.N), we were welcomed into the [space](#) with a collective grounding exercise. Giving each other the time to fully land in the room and give our attention wholly to the day ahead.

Commoners were invited to call out greetings in their native tongues, celebrating the many places and paths from which we had walked to make it to this room.

We shared our community agreements – formulated at the first gathering and available on our website – which encourage compassion, respect and the invitation to contribute by stepping forwards or back, according to each individual's needs.

This was followed by a deep dive into the past as we explored the origins of enclosure and the flawed yet unendingly influential concept – “the tragedy of the commons”.





Investigation of these historical moments show how they still exert a powerful influence on our land rights and ownership structures. The economic framework of rentier capitalism that grew out of them is central to our relative lack of community-owned spaces and places, as well as the precarity in which our contemporary commons exist.

A brief introduction was also given for [Evolutesix](#), an organisation we are collaborating with to draft a potential governance structure.

Manifesto Writing

This session involved a participatory social-sculpture that generated offerings for a co-created manifesto. Guided by Danny Balla from Coexist, we cast the chairs aside and rose to our toes for an embodied process of remembrance, respect and imagination.

Commoners were invited to move around the room gently, settling into their bodies and feeling their feet. Gradually, we drifted towards another person and stood back-to-back, supporting each other's weight with our own.



We turned to meet, sharing our names and where we call home, before reaching into our past to share a commons that we hold in our heart. This ranged from a village park to a woodland stream, abandoned warehouse to unnamed patch of green.

This exercise was repeated a further three times, each with a commoner we had not yet met. Sharing heartfelt memories, inspiring individuals and moments of personal empowerment opened a space of intimacy and trust between those in the room. To close the sculpture, we expressed a specific vision for the commons that was important to us.



Holding this vision, we split into groups to discuss our ideas and explore how they were interlinked and wove together. These were condensed into individual mission statements that will now form the basis for the Bristol Commons [manifesto](#).

The aim is to collate this information and produce a working draft in the next few months.

Working Group Sessions

The working groups are the driving force behind the Bristol Commons project and, supported by Coexist, are currently the main organisational structure. Growing out of our event in March, these open-invite groups centre around three dominant themes: Resources & Mapping; Communications & Narrative; Strategy and Membership.

These are fluid and evolving, with anyone who gets involved being free to mould and shape them to our collective needs. Facilitation of these sessions are open to all, contact this email if you're interested: info@coexistuk.org

Commoners were invited to follow their feet and attend a workshop focusing on one of these themes.

Strategy & Membership

This session focused on potential strategies for the Bristol Commons project. Starting with a drawing exercise, we were invited to sketch out, as abstractly as needed, how we envisioned the ecosystem of the commons.



What does it look like?

What elements are essential to its purpose?

Where do we find ourselves in this common space?



We shared our drawings and any reflections in small groups, inspiring each other through the multiplicity of perspectives on what the commons could mean.

Next commoners were asked, *“How do we get there? How can we bring these visions to life?”* These ideas were written on post-its and mapped into different strategic categories such as *“short term concrete”* or *“abstract/big picture”*.

Going forwards, the main focus of this working group will be to collect these ideas and formulate them into an initial strategy for Bristol Commons. The hope will be to shape the direction of the project such that it meets as many needs as possible. Other important questions will be explored such as: *“What is Strategy?”*, *“What kind of membership structure, if any, should we go for?”*, *“Where should we place our energy as this project germinates and grows?”*

If you would like to get involved with this working group, please email:

bc-strategy@coexistuk.org to be added to the group email list..

Communication & Narrative Building



What stories do we want to tell? How can we make the commons relevant in a modern context? What narratives must we co-create to encourage others to recognise our power as a collective?

This group practised a collective visioning exercise to find our personal connection to the commons and understand how it is an essential component of a healthy community.

An open discussion ensued around how to best communicate the commons to the wider public as well as different practises for initiating conversation and incorporating play and creativity into this project.

To get involved with these sessions, please contact:

bc-storytelling@coexistuk.org



Mapping & Resources

This session revolved particularly around mapping, exploring different interpretations of what a map is and seeking to show how they are an indispensable tool for the project of reclaiming the commons. This included an exhibition designed to expand notions of what a map is/can be beyond the traditional imperial model, inspiring new creative mapping approaches.

By expanding our notions of mapping beyond geography, we can identify a multitude of commons that we want to protect, reclaim, or grow.

Commoners were encouraged to draw their own maps relating to prompts such as: *“Who else should be a part of this conversation?”* and *“Which commons need protecting or recreating in Bristol?”*. We then shared our drawings and discussed insights that had arisen from the mapping process.

To get involved with this working group or be added to their mailing list, please email:

bc-mapping@coexistuk.org

Lunch

Essential to any community project is a large dose of delicious food. Lunch was provided by Houria, a catering company dedicated to fighting racism and modern slavery with the power of delicious food. They offer 'training, safe employment and a sense of belonging to migrant women, who are often female survivors of slavery'.

houria

Find Houria at their Easton Community Centre café, open Tuesday to Friday, 9am-3pm.

Houria also runs anti-racism and anti-slavery workshops, drop them an email if this is something that interests you.

Website: <https://www.houria.co.uk/>



Panel Discussion: Lost Spaces, Community Trauma & Collective Resurgence



Following a post-lunch wiggle and stretch, we settled into a panel discussion with Phoenix (Climate Emergency Centre Network), Deasy (D.A.N / Theatre Bristol) and Neil (All Hallows Hall), facilitated by Coexist Co-Director Rachel DeGarang. Both Theatre Bristol and All Hallows Hall have recently been lost to the community of Bristol, after years of amazing work bringing joy and connection to this city.

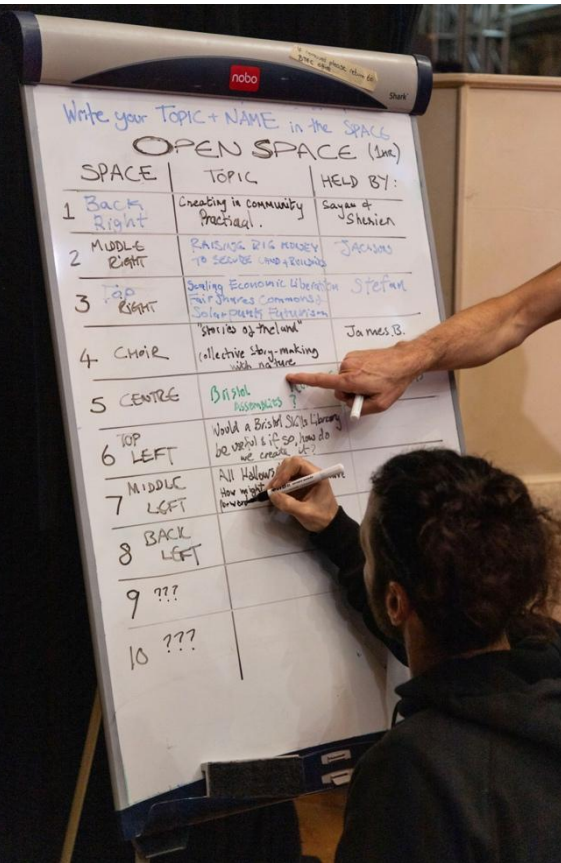
The conversation meandered from funding to landlords, questioning what makes a community space and spiralling around the central themes of loss and grief.

There was a consensus between panellists that **community ownership** was the essential ingredient to any project being truly sustainable in the long term.



Open Space

To close, an 'Open Space' was held so that commoners could raise conversations that they felt were important for the wider community. We ended up with 8 separate discussions on a range of themes, from solarpunk economics to citizens assemblies, big money to skills libraries.



There are many versions of Open Space, but the fundamental principles we used were:

- **Anyone can propose and hold a topic in the Open Space.** If it calls you, go for it! The only responsibility is to hold the space for the conversation that emerges, and to take notes that you can feedback highlights from to the whole group;
- **Whoever shows up is meant to be there.** Even if no-one other than yourself shows up, you are encouraged to take the time you've identified this topic needs for yourself;
- **Rule of 'Two Feet'.** Go where you are drawn to. If you feel saturated, you can move on to another session, take a break or participate in personal reflection;
- **When it's over it's over.** When you feel complete you can close the discussion. Getting the work done is more important than adhering to rigid schedules;
- **Whatever happens, happens.** Let go of your expectations and pay full attention to what is happening in the moment.

Closing

These discussions were followed by feedback to the whole group and a final closing ceremony led by the D.A.N facilitators. In a circle, we shared songs of hope, love and support before moving into a final sculpture – embodying the commons as a whole!





Graphic Recording of the event created by:
BeeintheBig Creative