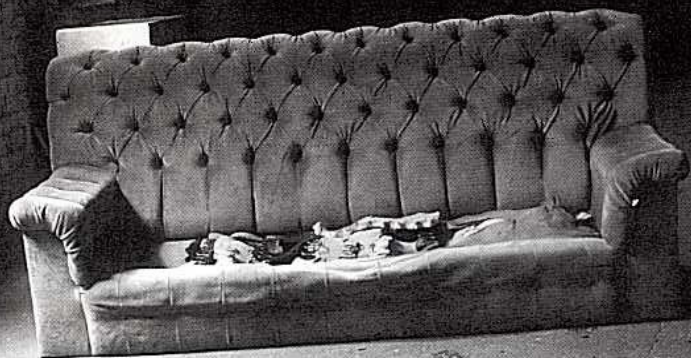


# MATILDA SOCIAL CENTRE IS AN OLD FACTORY WITH A NEW PURPOSE



Down past Gatecrasher on Matilda Street, it's run by people who are trying to provide the space to do something different, outside of the mainstream. This applies to musicians, artists, activists or whoever needs room. It's 'a space for ordinary people to get creative and make something fantastic happen'. It's run on a collective basis, not for profit, and it's pretty cool.

The building is amazing. A warren of rooms, with the kind of in-one-door-and-out-another set up that Scooby Doo used to such effect when escaping from ghosts. Downstairs, in the basement, there's an amazing gig space set up. Before you descend, there's a tiled old furnace room on your right which is basically the perfect sized venue for all kinds of bassy heaviness. Go up here or through there and there's a meeting room, a computer lab, an office. In the front of the building is a new gallery space for artists. And right at the top are four or five beautiful spaces for artists to work. Rooms given over to an Argentinean anarchist, a man working with alternative technology, or cartoonists doing massive poster boards. Then there's the kitchen, which is the sort of post-industrial chic that readers of City Magazine think about as they're drifting off to sleep.

There's a lot of different stuff happening at Matilda, and it's difficult to understand at first. It's run by lots of different collectives, all doing their thing: a gig space collective puts bands on downstairs, the art collective runs the studios and puts on exhibitions. Other active collectives are the café group, the hacklab, who reuse old computers a bit like Access Space down the road, and the building collective, who keep the building standing. All the collectives come together to decide who needs what space, and collectively manage the building at meetings on Mondays.

The legal situation is just as complex. Matilda exists because there's a long term tenant upstairs, who isn't going anywhere. The building was sold from underneath him, to Hallam University, allegedly on the promise that they'd move their Psalter Lane campus there. Instead, they sold the site to Yorkshire Forward, who allegedly paid less than the tenant offered. All this information can be seen plastered on posters around the building. The tenant offered access to the empty building to some people he knew who needed a space to organise protests against the G8 meeting last year. The activists stayed and Matilda was born.

So is this a model for using old factories, for doing something in them that doesn't turn into wankyness,

that doesn't lead to selling out and focussing on money and drugs and lifestyle? Can it work, without going down this route?

The best thing is how it feels. Matilda doesn't feel like a squat. It feels really friendly, clean, beautifully done. This is partly a reflection of the legal situation. As Mozac said, 'everything we do here we do as legal as we can. At every gig there's three or four people who know where the fire exits are.' The collective politics are slow, and there are personal differences between people, but that's nothing new really. Most people just seem to lump the politics for the chance of doing something in the space: the activism has turned into creative work to a degree.

As an art space, it works well. The studios upstairs are just beautiful, and there's less commercial pressure which means people who couldn't afford to work anywhere else can do so here. As a gig-space, too, it's a lifeline for less commercial scenes and bands. The gigs are limited, because they don't want to attract undue attention, but when they go off they really go off. Authentic Sheffield basement techno experiences like C90 are just awesome in that environment.

The issue of access is an important one. You and I couldn't do what we want to do in the Leadmill, say, as we don't have the £10 000. They're private spaces and we can't do shit there. So places like Matilda are really important, because they give us a chance. We went when they opened a new gallery space, by a couple of Hallam art students. They said they couldn't have afforded to have the show anywhere else.

But then, Matilda isn't open to everyone, either. Though it's founded on the idea that it's accessible to everyone, in practice it's accessible to people who fit the anarcho-punk ideals. If you're a gangsta wannabe with a sawn off nova, or a gatecrasher girl with orange skin and white shorts, or an indie kid into tight jeans and irony, you might not feel welcome. Unless you're part of the hardcore/anarcho-punk scene, it isn't very obvious how to get involved: there's no obvious point of contact. It isn't physically that accessible, either. You can't walk down to Matilda after a swift eight pints in the Rutland and just go in, because it's often closed. To be fair, this is because they haven't got a license, and a gig every night would mean that to the police they were an unlicensed venue, no matter what Marxist aphorisms are to hand. They're looking at a café at the moment, which would be a natural start to the process. But it's still tricky.