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## CRE8 SUMMAT: PLANTING A GARDEN OF ACTIVISM

**Leon Roman**

Long before the G8 came to Scotland, a plan emerged for a creative action around the summit. The goals of the action were three-fold. First, to not only say that ‘a better world is possible’, but to build the foundations of that world in the here and now. Second, to use activism as a means of supporting and strengthening local issues and to empower those already involved with these issues. And third, to demonstrate that radical resistance can be part of our everyday lives.

The goals started lofty, and we continued to meet at each national Dissent! gathering to discuss these ideas. But how could they be put into practice? What should be our project? For months, we continued to discuss guerrilla gardening tactics, community murals, street performances and the like. However, one major thing was missing... we had no idea where we would focus our energies, or where our project would be based.

During a meeting at the Festival of Dissent!, a project finally emerged. One Glasgow-based activist explained that there was a derelict piece of land in the Southside of Glasgow that had been left unused for over twenty years. It was one of the sites for a pillar for the proposed M74, a raised motorway which would tear through that part of the city. Moreover, this land sat in between some of the city’s most deprived communities. Slowly, the council had been disinvesting in the services for these communities in an attempt to push them out. Tensions between the city and the locals had recently reached boiling point when threats of closure

for the local swimming pool ended in an occupation. There had been a recent upsurge in the campaign to stop the M74, and it was clear that the ongoing legal campaign could be effectively supported by a diversity of tactics. And so the idea to build a community garden on this land was hatched, and 'Cre8 Summat' was born as an idea.

We agreed that this project had huge potential and quickly abandoned the idea of organising further actions in Edinburgh as the enormity of our task began to dawn on us. Shortly after the Festival, we held meetings near the site where activists were able to familiarise themselves with the site and our possible courses of action. A core group of about a dozen organisers emerged as those who were going to be able to put in the planning and coordinating time over the next few months, yet we were also depending on a much larger number of interested activists joining in later.

As the format for the Cre8 Summat emerged, we were aiming at a complete community festival. For a week in the middle of June, we would start by building a community garden. However, we also wanted to hold workshops on a variety of topics from herbal medicine to tile mosaics and tenants' rights to Zapatista solidarity; to have music, entertainment, art and to create a space for social interaction. The week was planned early in the run-up to the G8 to allow activists who would be otherwise engaged in the following weeks to participate in the project, but we soon realised that by scheduling so early we had neglected to take into account the start of the school holidays. So it was also decided to hold a Family Festival in the gardens just before the summit started.

For the small group of dedicated organisers there was a huge list of things that had to be done to make this action a success, so each individual had to take on a separate role in the early planning. We had to cover the gardening aspects (making sure plants were propagated, that we had all the necessary materials and tools, etc.) and the workshop schedule; but we also needed to coordinate the entertainment (contacting and booking sound systems, organising power supplies and so on), and secure early participation from local people. Publicising the events to the local community was a high priority, along with the multiple days of dreaded litter removal from the site. As the start of the actual gardening got closer and closer, panic grew as we realised how much was still left to do. We had almost forgotten to consider how we were going to meet the needs of all the activists who planned on living on the site during our week-long occupation. Luckily, after a few calls, we managed to book marquees and the London-based Kaos Kafé said that they would be up for catering. And at extremely short notice, hundreds of plants were pledged by people as far away as Cardiff and Devon. But we still didn't know where we were going to get water from!

We organised a number of presentations about the Cre8 Summat with the aim of getting the local community involved in the early planning stages of the event, but the turn-out was always extremely low. Had we not done enough to



get the local communities involved? Were they even interested? Those who did come to the meetings and those we talked to during the days of the litter-pick offered a sense of hope as a counter-balance to our growing panic. People might have been a bit confused about the idea; how were a bunch of activists going to transform a derelict piece of land into a community garden? But even the sight of people removing all the rubbish from the site that had been used for fly-tipping for years brought kind remarks. And, as the final weeks counted down into days, it was possible to see the plans coming together, not least because the arrival of groups and individuals from all over the UK, and from further afield, meant that we could pass on some of the last minute jobs to others.

Around 5am on a damp and rainy Sunday morning, whilst most of Glasgow was still asleep, the vans of tools and plants pulled up to the site. Groups of people began shifting gear and soon our first marquee was in place. We had arrived, and for the next week this piece of land was to be not only our home but the place where our dreams would become reality. At this point we were still not sure what the reaction would be. How quickly would the police show up and what would they do? By the time we had set up our camp in the gardens and were ready to hold our workshop on creating a participatory design for the gardens, no one else had arrived. No locals, no police. So we went ahead and designed some ideas for the garden and work began on the first day's projects – a herb spiral, a willow entry arch and a circle of planted tyre seating.



Sometime during the afternoon, people started to show up. A bike ride of the Jam 74 campaign group ended their ride of the proposed M74 route in the gardens, community members were helping to build the herb spiral, and local kids were cutting out the bank with pick and shovel to create a new entrance to the land. Later in the afternoon, the first police arrived and, to our surprise, wished us luck with the project. By the second day, we had a liaison officer who was having a cup of tea with us each morning.

The work continued through the week at a tremendous pace, and after dinner each day it was quite rewarding to walk around the land taking stock of the recent additions – wood-chip lined paths, sensory gardens, new murals, a performance stage, a few more garden beds, a labyrinth, information signs, lots of tree planting, and a swing hanging from a tripod.

Throughout the week, there was a steady stream of wheelbarrows running to and fro, bringing all types of scrap materials for constructing garden beds – scrap wood, tyres, stones and bricks. However, one problem became evident: we needed soil and lots of it. Because the land we were working on was toxic, we had reluctantly decided to construct all planting areas as raised beds. By the second day we were buying in dump truck loads of soil, and almost every penny of our limited funds and donations went to the cause of non-toxic soil.

As Saturday came around, the land was looking full of life and vigour. The space was inspiring, and we were preparing for one hell of a celebration. There

were, after all, plenty of reasons to celebrate! For a week, about thirty (maybe a total of about fifty or sixty weaved in and out) activists had organised in a cooperative and collective manner, with no hierarchy and no leaders, to create something that was well beyond what we had believed was possible.

Each individual could feel rewarded in the fact that a part of these gardens was defined by their labour, their passion and their creativity. Uniqueness and beauty cried out from each corner of this garden. And as the bands began to play and the clowns began to display their red noses and floppy shoes, the people who had spent a week living on that land were continually greeted and thanked by so many of the friends we had made from the surrounding area. As the day grew on, so did the number of new faces who were joining the celebrations.

That night, the energy was amazing – people around a fire passing the guitar and singing songs, films and bands and a sound system – and it seemed quite odd to realise this was all happening against the backdrop of city lights and tower blocks. The gardens had become a place where you could lose yourself and forget the traffic or the hassles of the working day.

## **PUSHING THE BOUNDARIES**

There is no way I could describe the Cre8 Summit as anything but an amazing success. However, there are still a lot of things we learned and a lot of things we would do better next time. The most important thing to acknowledge is that an action like this, that intends to create something and to leave something positive behind, takes a lot of time and energy to make happen. Protesting *against* something is, in a way, a simpler objective than protesting *for* something, but the rewards of the latter are well worth it. With a goal of empowering the local community and getting them involved in the action, we learned that the most effective thing was to just start the actual work. Talking to people beforehand wasn't enough to excite them. But being on the land, doing work, and enjoying ourselves was the most effective way to get people involved. It would have been nice to have had more input into how the gardens were designed, what types of needs and desires we were catering for, understanding how the local community wanted to use their garden, but ironically doing this before the gardens actually started seemed almost impossible. This isn't really an excuse for not making those attempts at pre-work participation. However, for those attempts to be meaningful, it would either take months and months of early interaction or some better methods than leafleting door-to-door and holding public meetings.

There are a couple of things we could clearly have handled better. First, for some reason, no local people attended the workshops we organised. They did come and get involved in working on a project that was essentially the idea of a workshop, but the workshop schedule that looked really good from an activist point of view didn't create any interest. Again, if we had been able to talk to people earlier, maybe we could have found out what they were interested in. However,

in one way our experience showed us that it is better in terms of scheduling events to worry about the entertainment side and ensure that each day several interesting projects are going to be happening that people can get involved with. Second, media relations could have been smoother. Before we felt ready to communicate with the media, they were contacting us. Our plan had been to allow the media to visit the site while we were working on it, but when they contacted us we were still in panic mode trying to sort things out and we just didn't respond. By the time we did get back to them, they were no longer so interested. Luckily, we didn't have to deal with them as much as we feared we may have to, but part of the reason for carrying out a creative action such as the Cre8 Summat is to generate interest and the media could have been a tool in doing so.

On the positive side, there were three areas that worked really well. First, it was great to not have a 'project coordinator'. We had talked about having one person nominated as a 'jobs coordinator' each day, in case people turned up and wanted something to do. However, none of us were interested in taking on this formal leadership role and the project worked brilliantly without it. One of the first things people would ask when they wanted to get involved in the work was, 'Who's in charge?' And our answer of 'Nobody!' always shocked them: they were amazed that so much work could be happening without a leader. We would explain to them that they could get involved with any of the work happening by just asking someone what they were up to, or that they were welcome to start a new project if they desired. Most would choose the former rather than the latter, but a few people who spent many days working in the gardens were inspired to take on one of their own ideas.

Second, planning was crucial. Although at times we worried that we were never going to reach the level of 'organised chaos' to which we were aspiring, the degree of planning which went into the action was the key to its eventual success. To use a metaphor, if the garden could be thought of as a painting, the organisers saw their role as providing the canvas, paints and brushes and very little more. We provided the tools and the plants with which the garden was built, and food and shelter for those who would take part. But the final product was the creation of all of those who got involved. Finally, celebration was a key theme throughout the project. Make sure you have as much fun as work; this is what really attracts people and draws them in. Besides, it's great to see something special form through your hard work but it is even more wonderful to see people enjoying what has been created.

There are five important things to consider for an action like this:

- *Start preparing early*: unlike lock-ons and banners, plants cannot be propagated at the last minute.
- *Diversify*: a one-dimensional action will appeal to a few, a multi-dimensional project will appeal to many.
- *Be friendly and fluffy*: just because it's fluffy doesn't mean it isn't radical. If you



put a friendly face on an idea like land reclamation, even the cops will start offering police horse manure for garden fertiliser!

- *Push the boundaries*: do not limit the possibilities to the easy things. Hearing local people comment that what we created was something they never would have dreamed possible (especially in one week) was really rewarding.
- *Let it go*: prepare the action as much as possible (get the venue ready, provide the materials, feed people, etc), but once it starts, let go – let the project become a mixture of everyone’s input, time and labour.

The Cre8 Summat was a powerful experience to be part of. It was inspiring to see so many activists coming together to create and being joined by so many interested local people. And there was something really special about not directing our energies towards just attacking the powers-that-be but using them to build an example of the positive world we believe is possible.