

THE HOXTON PROJECT

An Appraisal

by

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A number of individuals from outside Hoxton, mostly members of "Helping" or "Caretaking" professions, have over a period of many years become increasingly aware of and concerned about the problems of this community.

The outward manifestation of these problems, from the point of view of the society outside Hoxton, is the high delinquency rate of a minority of its members. This acts as an irritant to the outside world, who tend to regard Hoxtonians on the whole as a nuisance - or even as a dangerous nuisance. A very small number of this delinquent minority "the Heavy Mob" are successful criminals. These individuals, although they are indeed a nuisance to society, have found a vocation which satisfies them, they do not regard themselves as in need of help.

A much larger number are unsuccessful, and this includes the great majority of adolescent Hoxtonians who have adopted this way of life. These individuals are not only a nuisance to society but also failures in their own eyes since the solution they have adopted only leads to increasing restrictions on their own liberty and adds nothing to their own lives or those of their fellows.

A closer look at the problem reveals a much deeper malaise. Firstly, despite the strong community feeling that exists within Hoxton, little positive seems to emerge from it. There is a united passive resistance to change imposed from the outside, thus Hoxtonians feel very isolated, they regard outside Authorities (police, professional social workers etc.) with the deepest suspicion, at the same time they are unable apparently to throw up their own leaders except in the field of crime. Those Hoxtonians who "make good" escape from the locality, they are unable either to tolerate or to be tolerated by (which?) their fears. They are allowed to excel only in crime.

Those who remain for the most part "settle down", which means that they give up protesting, give up delinquency (which is a form of protest) and give up any hope that they might as a result of planning and thinking alter the seemingly inevitable course of their own drab, boring lives. They sink back into the apathy and distrust of outsiders which characterizes most adult Hoxtonians.

It was the hope of the committee of the Hoxton Cafe Project that ways might be found to break this vicious circle by the setting up of a centre at which young Hoxtonians might feel comfortable and accepted on their own terms, and exchange thoughts and ideas with a mature adult from outside Hoxton. The Cafe was the framework provided for this purpose. It was recognized that for many who attended little could be done to prevent their immediate progression to penal institutions but that the Cafe might nevertheless be a good experience in their lives, a point to which they could look back in later life and perhaps make use of as showing them that alternative solutions were possible and that it was possible for them to have some say in their own future.

For a very few individuals the Cafe served a more immediate purpose, namely that they were enabled to break out of the vicious circle in which they felt caught. In practice this almost always meant breaking out of Hoxton, this might have been helpful to those particular individuals but the remainder were of course left unchanged.

The success of this endeavour must be judged on its results. The difficulty is that these results may not be apparent for the next 10 years and will probably never be measurable in concrete terms. The project has and must remain something of an act of faith.

There is no doubt however of the strain that working in such a setting has imposed on the workers, a strain that has become increasingly more severe with each charge. Glen Thompson and Nancy Amphoux found this strain intolerable, furthermore they thought it unhelpful and unnecessary. The committee may or may not agree that a Cafe project is worth pursuing, what we have to accept is that it cannot be pursued under the present leadership with their own particular aims and objects.

Glen has asked the committee to have a fresh appraisal of our aims. It must be admitted that we have moved a long way since our original "aims and objects" were drafted. Essentially they were aimed at a minority deviant group who are already part of a larger minority deviant culture (Hoxton).

Glen argues that to provide a setting like the Cafe isolates them from the community and renders it easy for them to be scapegoated by the remainder and by the Authorities (e.g. the Police). It could be regarded as equivalent to the establishment of a Ghetto or leper colony which might render it even more likely that they will be pushed out from more acceptable centres. (An example is that the Warden of the Pittfield Youth Centre attempted to exclude former Cafe users purely on the grounds that they were "members" of the Cafe, even though the Cafe has been closed for 4 months and never in fact had a membership).

Glen argues further that the real problem of Hoxton is not in its delinquent minority but in its apathetic majority. He feels that the real question is how to mobilize the undoubted potential of this majority to take some steps to organize their own future and he would like the project to be involved in this process. He does not believe that this can be achieved from the base line of a cafe.

Glen has presented the committee with a challenge and it is one that must be met now. At the present time the project has no clear goal and this applies equally to the committee, the workers and the former clientele. Meetings with the clientele continue to take place but these tend to be poorly attended since the members are unable to hold on to any abstract ideas about "cooperation" unless there is something concrete such as a camping trip or a van to cooperate about.

Glen has put a possible goal before us - that of "community development" - mobilizing the resources of the community by establishing contact with the natural leaders and supporting them in putting into effect what they want. This is a far cry from our original aims but if the committee reject then then we have to put something concrete in their place.

One possibility is, of course, the re-opening of the Cafe, either in its original form or with modifications. In any case the building is still in our possession and we have to decide what we are going to do with it, how can it be most usefully used.

The youngsters themselves have suggested that an "information centre" could be set up there although they have not thought through what this might mean. Are these ideas reconcilable with the notion of "Community Development" or with the original intention of the project?

Above all the committee has to decide how the project is to be steered in future, what are the limits of its own responsibility at different stages of the project's growth and what specifically is its present role.

My own personal view of the function of the committee of an experimental project is that its role is similar to that of a parent.

A. Gestation

In the first place the committee's task is to formulate the problem, to conceptualise the task and suggest an attempt at a solution. Next it must be able to make the ideas concrete to find the necessary workers and to set up conditions in which they may carry out the task appointed. (In the case of the H.C.P. this gestation period was prolonged - 6 years from conception to birth).

Birth and Childhood

As soon as a worker is appointed the committee's role changes, two new sets of factors now operate, (1) the interaction between the worker and those with whom he is working and (2) the interaction between the worker and the committee. The effects of these interactions cannot be predicted, and the committee has several new tasks.

B. Childhood

1. To maintain the primary task of the project, by establishing a framework within which the workers can work and setting up guide lines for the work.
2. To ensure that the essential conditions, within which the workers can operate comfortably, continue to be met.
3. To keep the primary task of the project constantly under review - so that if it is recognized that a change of direction is necessary this change can be made consciously and deliberately. This requires flexibility and sensitivity on the part of the committee since some changes urged by the workers may be felt to be destructive, while at the same time growth requires a vital degree of freedom.
4. To maintain continuity. This is perhaps the most important and also the hardest of the committee's tasks. It must be recognized that few projects will keep the same workers throughout. Every change is a major setback for the project since people do not easily tolerate changes and in any case the ideas of the new worker seldom coincide with those of his predecessor. At the same time these crisis points can be used productively since they force the committee to re-examine the primary task.

C. Adolescence

If the parent-child analogy is appropriate then the goal of the committee is that the project should become self supporting and independent; that it should no longer require limits, directions and restrictions imposed from outside but that it should be able to survive, progress and grow as a result of its own internal momentum. If indeed this does not happen then the project must be considered a failure.

Growth to adulthood does not occur overnight, adolescence is a long and painful period for both parents and children. Parents find it hard to know how much freedom they should permit their rebellious teenagers in their struggle for independence. They are frequently uneasy about the ways in which their children develop and are forced, often painfully, to examine their own standards - their own "aims and objects". At the same time they also have a responsibility towards their children to prevent them from destroying themselves.

I would suggest that this is the point we have now reached in the Hoxton Cafe Project. The committee is perhaps on its way out and it would be only too easy and tempting to retire blankly. Unfortunately our child still needs us - like most teenagers - for money and perhaps also for our guidance and for our mediation with the outside world. Cooperation between adults and adolescents is seldom easy - yet we still, for the time being, need each other.

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