

Technology Networks for socially useful production (London, 1983 to 1986)

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With unemployment reaching one in eight workers, and manufacturing in steep decline in the city, Londoners voted an avowedly socialist Labour council into power in 1982. Left-wing leaders of the Greater London Council (GLC) were committed to a radical alternative economic strategy compared to the neo-liberalism that the Thatcher government was installing nationally. The GLC quickly instituted a Greater London Enterprise Board (GLEB) committed to job creation, industrial democracy, and socially useful production.

Amongst GLEB's first acts was the creation of Technology Networks. These community-based workshops shared machine tools, access to technical advice, and prototyping services open for anyone to develop socially useful products. GLEB's aim was to combine the 'untapped skill, creativity and sheer enthusiasm' in local communities with the 'reservoir of scientific and innovation knowledge' in local polytechnics. Workshops were linked to GLEB programmes for creating co-operatives and industrially democratic enterprises interested in promising products and services. Representatives from trade unions, community groups, and higher education oversaw workshop management. Workshop users developed various prototypes and initiatives; including, electric bicycles, small-scale wind turbines, energy conservation co-operatives, disability devices, children's play equipment, community computer networks, and a women's IT co-operative. Prototypes were registered in an open access product bank.

Ideas for Technology Networks came from a grassroots movement for new forms of socially useful production. Similar workshops were created in other left-controlled cities in the UK. Drawing upon ideas from worker's 'alternative industrial plans' (especially the Lucas Plan), community development activism, and left environmentalist networks, workshops were conceived in movement terms of providing human-centred, skill-enhancing machine tools; developing socially useful products; and democratising design and production. As such, workshop aspirations extended well beyond local prototyping and manufacturing: Technology Networks were part of an attempt to recalibrate and reconfigure innovation.

Celebrated internationally at the time, Technology Networks are largely forgotten now. Drawing upon interviews and archive material¹, the paper reconsiders this history and explores features relevant to the movement for community-based workshops today. As with the wider movements, workshops in London experienced tensions in terms of social purpose, knowledge production and political economy. Each generated dynamic and complex relationships in and around workshops, and which the paper will illustrate. A social tension was between spaces for product-oriented design activity, and spaces for process-oriented social mobilisation. A knowledge tension was between formal technical expertise and the tacit knowledge of community users. And tensions in political economy - between socialism-in-one-space and the neo-liberal turn nationally and internationally - meant insufficient (public) investment was available to develop initiatives into significant economic activity, and especially without transforming them into capitalist form.

The Thatcher government abolished the GLC in 1986. Activists always sensed their moment was limited. Without funds and political support, the Technology Networks declined. Nevertheless, they generated a burst of ideas and practices that dispersed into other areas, and which forms part of a genealogy of an insistent grassroots innovation even more pervasive today, yet similarly challenged and challenging.

¹ Copies of which JPP could post on its website, e.g. leaflets from the time.