

The radical history of Centerprise



This photograph (above) was taken at an event in 1985 to mark the launch of writer Pauline Wiltshire's autobiography *Living and Winning*, which was published by Centerprise. Photograph: Maggie Hewitt. Right: An illustration of the cultural centre from a 1980s pamphlet about its work



Dominic Simpson explores the past of the late lamented cultural centre which closed its doors last year

Iconic Dalston bookshop and community centre Centerprise closed late last year after Hackney Council seized its premises amid a bitter rental dispute.

This somewhat ignominious episode marked the closing chapter in the history of a place that was a hub for intellectual activity in the area in the 1970s and 1980s.

Centerprise began its life as a bookshop and café in Dalston Lane circa 1971. It is amazing to think now, given their proliferation in Hackney, but at that time there were virtually no independent bookshops in the borough. My father Robin Simpson was involved in Centerprise for most of the 1970s.

He recalls: "We were told in

1970 that a bookshop would never work in the East End because East Enders didn't read. Well, we proved them wrong."

Centerprise later moved to the Kingsland High Street premises where it was based until its demise last year.

In its heyday the bookshop also contained a coffee bar and ran various youth activities such as chess clubs and drama clubs.

There was a reading project, which taught adult literacy, and a publishing project, where local people wrote their autobiographies, as well as a legal advice centre.

Like a number of organisations in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Centerprise was operated as a collectively-run enterprise as much as a commercial business.

Everyone was on equal pay and rotated duties.

"It was a cooperative", explains my father, "and so we all had the same rates of pay. It had all the benefits and disadvantages that characterised cooperatives."

Rebecca O'Rourke, now a lecturer at Leeds University, was also involved in Centerprise during the 1980s, joining

through her involvement with the Federation of Women Writers and Community Publishers.

"Centerprise was a hub for Hackney life", she says. "It was a cross-cultural space – the publishing and writing projects worked with mixed groupings of men and women, with people who were straight, lesbian, gay, and from a variety of races. Identity politics were strong when I joined the collective, and there were issues about race and sexuality which were sometimes very confrontational amongst staff."

While the publishing arm of Centerprise would turn out to be its most commercially successful venture, the venue was also a meeting point for organisations and writers' groups from all over East London.

Sheltering from Augusto Pinochet's brutal regime at that time, Chilean exiles in London would meet at Centerprise.

However, it would be misleading to brand Centerprise as just a hang-out for hippies, intellectuals and all the non-mainstream groups of the time.

The local Communist Party, for example, didn't meet there, and the Labour Party – then still staunchly

on the Left – nonetheless viewed Centerprise with suspicion.

The pressures of running a collective were not easy to bear, which may explain why its golden days eventually came to an end, taking its toll on many involved.

The move to Kingsland High Street would lead to the organisation ultimately becoming more formal and hierarchical.

In more recent times, Centerprise contained a bookshop specialising in Afro-Caribbean literature and history, accompanied by a Caribbean restaurant and a space for community workshops.

Up until its closure it was paying an annual rent of just £520 (£10 per week) – a situation that Hackney Council was dissatisfied with.

These days, the area has become a strip of nightlife, full of revellers queuing for clubs.

The houses off the main roads, the Hackney Peace Carnival Mural on Dalston Lane and the Rio Cinema are all that really remain as symbols of the Dalston of the 1970s.

No sign pointing to the building's history remains.

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