

Founding Faith: The Origins of CSE, 30 Years Ago



Hugh Barton, founder and first co-ordinator of the Urban Centre for Appropriate Technology which later became CSE, gives his personal reflection on the politics, the philosophy and the people of the time.

It is fascinating and instructive to look back to the time when CSE was founded, thirty years ago, and remember the ferment of ideas and conflicting principles out of which it emerged. Except of course, it was not CSE then, it was UCAT, the Urban Centre for Appropriate Technology.

A year of crisis and change

1979 was a critical year. It was the time of great instability in the Middle East with the birth of the Islamic Republic in Iran. The hugely destructive Iran/Iraq war that followed the next year led to oil supplies being cut off and reinforced a process of economic change that had started with the first oil crisis of 1973: the long overdue divergence between rates of economic growth and energy consumption. In Britain the need for that divergence was highlighted by the miner's strike and the three day week.

Politically it was a time of turmoil. Maggie Thatcher swept to power in 1979. After a period of consensual social democratic government (Wilson/Heath) and of destabilising economic transition the country was ready for change. The Tories began to roll back the state, dismantling state controls, suppressing union power, privatising everything they could and compounding the already serious problem of unemployment and recession.

It was a time of intellectual polarization too. The dominant academic philosophy in the social science and policy-oriented faculties of the nascent Polytechnics was Marxism. If you wished to be taken seriously as a researcher then the control of the means of production, the power of capital and the malign alliance of market and state interests were your armchair concerns. Ironically, from opposite ends of the value spectrum, Thatcherites and Marxists had the same essential analysis. While the Marxist academics chastised policy-makers for being in the pockets of capitalists, Thatcher said that was exactly where they ought to be.



Below: some of the original volunteers gather outside the Urban Centre for Appropriate Technology

But while all that was happening, the environmental movement was in a different place altogether. Even before the first oil crisis of 1973 there was the deep seated realisation that resource-intensive economic growth was doomed to disaster. Population growth, energy resources and global warming were the three huge elephants in the room that were apparently invisible to most people. Radical environmental action was fired up by two influential books which articulated the desperate urgency of the situation: the 'Limits to Growth' (by the Club of Rome) and the 'Blueprint for Survival' (by The Ecologist magazine). The radical group Friends of the Earth provided a campaigning focus for young idealistic environmentalists.

This dynamic movement had nothing to do with Thatcherism or Marxism. It saw clearly the failure of both market capitalism and state socialism. If you had to put a political name tag onto it then it was social anarchism: a belief in decentralised decision-making, with individuals and communities taking responsibilities for their own future, living in harmony with each other, with the land and the Earth. Schumacher's 'Small is Beautiful' gave the catchphrase to a generation. There was a kind of sophisticated innocence about this. The young people who had experienced the idealistic release of the late 1960s ('make love not war') were now canny realists, but still inspired by visions of social and environmental utopia, determined to catalyse fundamental change.

The dream of decentralized self-sufficiency

The radical vision had one perhaps surprising characteristic: it was rural. Urban living was widely perceived as unsustainable. Cities were resource sinks, consuming the world's scarce assets and fatally polluting their own environment. The answer therefore was to decentralise. Village communities could grow their own food, catch own water and energy, provide the socially supportive and co-operative environment (replacing the moribund extended family) which people need for a fulfilling and happy life.

This self-sufficient principle, vividly expressed by William Morris in Erehwon, and rekindled in the Blueprint for Survival, was put into dynamic practice in a derelict quarry near Machynlleth in North Wales. This 'Village of the Future' became the National Centre for Alternative Technology. The Quarry, as it was called by aficionados, was a living demonstration of the possible – a beacon of hope and inspiration.

But for the majority of people in the country this rural idyll was an idle dream, the preserve of the rich, far from the reality of their lives. It was also based on false logic: that the clock could be somehow rolled back so that people no longer expected the range of employment, education, retail and cultural opportunities that towns provide, but would happily live their lives in small communities, with just virtual connections to the rest of the 'global village'.

Origins of the Urban Centre

The Quarry recognised the limits of its vision, and determined to launch an urban sister project. Following an inspirational visit there, I became their part-time urban outreach worker. The first opportunity presented itself in Bury, north of Manchester, an old declining cotton town on the Lancashire coalfield. Unfortunately we happened upon the wrong local ally. The Director of Leisure Services, who was enthusiastically promoting the idea of an urban centre – was arrested for embezzling the funds.

An alternative possibility was staring me in the face: my home city, Bristol, which at that time had extensive areas of dereliction in the docks and inner city, ripe for creative renewal. By some strange twist of fate, involving a double booking with strangers in a Cornish cottage, I met people who found inspiration in the vision I had been developing with NCAT: an urban centre for appropriate technology. We met in September 1979. In a sequence of meetings we snowballed membership and thrashed out the new philosophy. At first the initiative was home grown, independent of the Quarry, but later linked into the same fount of charitable support.



Hugh Barton speaking at CSE's 30th birthday in June, 2009



Underfloor heating being installed at the Philip Street premises

The concept of an urban centre, providing an holistic demonstration of sustainable living and working, was common ground amongst the new members. Energy was the central theme. But round the principle of energy autonomy were woven many strands of thinking, to provide a rounded vision: we considered food and soils, water, the reuse of old buildings, user-control, satisfying work, access for all, and integration with the wider community.

Appropriate, not alternative

The idea of appropriate – as opposed to ‘alternative’ – technology, was more problematic. For many radicals the idea of being alternative, rejecting the dominant values of society and doing something separate from society, was exactly what they wanted. But for us this alternative was a seductive mirage. We wished to reach out to people, not be estranged from them. We wanted to build bridges to urban communities, to businesses and politicians. More than that, we had a suspicion of the technological imperative. People can all too easily become addicted to technological gadgetry, and in the process sideline human needs and culture.

The whole idea of appropriate technology is that the technical solutions are sensitive to the situation people are actually in, not making a radical (and unrealistic) economic and cultural shift a pre-requisite of engagement. It is about working with people and business as partners.

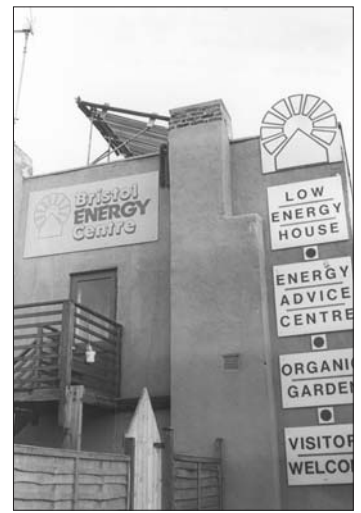
This highlights another dimension to the vision. It was about the way people relate to each other ... how social and initiative groups function. We were inspired by co-operative principles: equality not hierarchy; collaboration not competition. Within the group individuals have distinctive tasks and play to their strengths, but there is equality not hierarchy in decision-making, and a cultivation of natural trust and help. Unpleasant jobs are shared. Stereotypical gender and age roles are rejected and when eventually (in late 1982) we had paid workers, everyone was paid the same.

One great advantage of such an approach was empowerment. Everyone in the group is important, and motivation is high. It was symptomatic of the idealism of the times. But it sits uneasily with the need for effective leadership, with the heavy onus of responsibility on some shoulders, and also with charity structure, which is innately hierarchical. UCAT struggled with forms and processes, and struggled to win support and influence other groups. But through it all there was commitment and steadiness and moments of progress and triumph.

Seizing the initiative

This is not the place to tell the full story of the growth, crises and various transformation of the Urban Centre, which was later to become the Centre for Sustainable Energy. That can wait for another article, perhaps with other authors. But I will sketch the first few years, up to the point when the organization ‘took off’, late in 1982, and ceased to be a purely volunteer organization:

- First meeting of the initiative group, September 1979
- Rapid expansion of membership, making allies, causing a stir
- Accepted into the Quarry's parent charity, the Society for Environmental Improvement, 1980
- Failed negotiation with the Gas Board for a major site in Bristol docks, 1980. Building found to be impregnated with cyanide and arsenic. Decided to be more realistic and pursue smaller projects
- Signed a lease for No. 101 Philip Street, in Bedminster, from Bristol City Council – 1981 – and drew up plans for the ‘Future City Home’
- Volunteers and YOP trainees (from the youth opportunities programme) demolish, clear and start to rebuild the house, and create a garden – the first low energy rehabilitation of an old domestic dwelling in the UK, 1981-2
- Founded the Green Leaf Bookshop and Café in Colston Street, Bristol, as a radical



The original building in Philip Street in it's hey-day, and (below) the house as it looks today

environmental bookshop. Volunteers renovate the space and run the café. The bookshop is established as a worker's co-op, 1982

- Late in 1982: won a grant from the Rowntree Charitable Trust to support two part-time project co-ordinators, and won backing from Manpower Services to launch a Community Programme scheme for the long-term unemployed

The initiative group

I would like to pay tribute to the volunteer group who helped create UCAT and shape its philosophy, and also those in other organisations whose support was critical. Recently I've come across the UCAT Autumn Newsletter from 1982. This was written in the key transition period from armchair planning and fund raising to project realisation. It was just before the Community Programme funding became available, which led to a further step change, drawing in many more people.

The newsletter went out to about 400 members and linked organizations such as Bristol Friends of the Earth and the Quarry. It reveals that UCAT was already punching above its weight, because it was actively doing something about the environmental crisis while others fiddled. Plans for the garden and passive solar design at Phillip Street were discussed. There were appeals for helpers to run the coffee shop, to help with the Barn Dance, to assist at Philip Street. The most active volunteers, the carrying group in effect, were Peter Clegg and Hugh Nettlefield (designers), Phil Dunning and John Read (Builders), Frances Brooke-Popham (plumber), Julian Wood (gardener), Jane Bardsley and Angela Barton (coffee shop), Jan Broom, Irene Galant, Andy King and Dick Sage (bookshop), Sonia Kuznetsov and Tony Laverton (finance and fund-raising), Nigel Heggie (Philip Street manager) and, me, Hugh Barton (co-ordinator).

Many more were important for their support and occasional help. But this is a moment to celebrate the contribution of six people who, from my perception, were critical to the way UCAT evolved. In the sequence of their initial involvement they are: Angela Barton (now Angela Bea) – who shared the initial vision with me, and helped give it momentum; Rod James, Director of the Quarry – who had confidence in the idea and supported its realisation first in Bury, then in Bristol; Martin Large, publisher, who was the catalyst for the first meeting in Bristol; Peter Clegg, architect of low energy buildings, who gave technical credibility to the group; Hugh Nettlefield, architect, who was the social conscience of the group; and Nigel Heggie, ex-army, who managed the process of construction at Philip Street and became financial co-ordinator as the project grew in complexity.

Onwards and upwards

Many others have followed and built on what, despite many trials, has provided firm organisational and philosophical foundations. Martin Large, who has written extensively about social enterprises, cites the growth of UCAT as an exemplar. Undoubtedly the strength and clarity of the founding faith has played a part in the continuing dynamism of CSE. Many of the elements of the original philosophy are still reflected, it seems to me, in the distinctive mission and ethos of CSE, and will help carry it into the future as a radical force for equity and sustainability.

Hugh Barton



CSE current offices are just a few hundred yards from where it began.



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