

## Space and Time in the Open City.

A psychic convergence between the rigid social spaces held by the native Irish in London and the city's alternative community occurred in December 1966. The significance of this is understated as an aside to the history of English countercultural communities, but it is valid for an alternative historical perspective that focuses on the legacy of an emotional space associated with the Irish in London. A consideration of emotional or psychic place interrogates the radical nature of how the English underground in 1966 initiated a discussion of place and community based on a psychedelic reception of space and time. The event in question can be seen to mark a moment in time where the ideals of alternative modernism intersected with the sense of tradition maintained by the Irish living in displacement.

**Figure 7**

The Blarney Club at the Gala Berkeley cinema.



The event UFO (Unlimited-Freak-Out) – NIGHT TRIPPER took place on December 23rd, 1966 in an Irish owned venue called *The Blarney Club*, located at 31 Tottenham Court Road. The UFO event was conceived by Notting Hill activists Joe Boyd and John Hopkins as a situation that 'catered for the psychedelically minded' (Savage, 20146 p.539). The event also sought to promote the necessity of maintaining the channels opened by the *International Times* as it was the principle medium by which the ethos and values of the counterculture were communicated to the youth. Four years later, the *International Times* registered the coming together of the counterculture in this Irish space as the 'focal point for the emergent British Underground' (1970). The same year *The Observer* (1966)<sup>27</sup> referred to the underground as 'the New Society' with this 'New

<sup>27</sup> The layouts in *The Times* supplement were an important source of underground design, according to journalist David May (Green, 1998 p.225)

Society' having not a single cultural or political agenda other than resistance. By 1966 the *International Times* was 'a member of the Underground Syndicate, a Global Strategy and a repository for those who sought to act on those ideas and impulses within them that were triggered by a fleeting identification with an idea larger than themselves' (Green, 1998 p.126).

The 'Irish' space for the alternative happening of the UFO was described by the *International Times*'s Mick Farren as, 'this old Irish showband ballroom with a revolving mirror and stuff' (Green, 1998 p.132). *The Blarney* was an underground space with a low ceiling underneath the Gala Berkeley cinema. Farren was the archetypical non-conformist, activist, participant, and his dismissive description of *The Blarney* would have been intended to emphasise the impact of how the take-over by the UFO participants changed the space and its straight associations.<sup>28</sup> One could not have had a more dramatic contrast between the freedom of expression sought by the alternative community and a venue that represented a Victorian past embodied in the unchanging rituals of an Irish dancehall. All Irish ballrooms in England stood in the shadow of the famous Galtymore club in Kilburn. For decades, these unchanging social spaces corralled the working-class Irish together at the weekends in vast numbers for decades.<sup>29</sup> The entertainment in the likes of the Galtymore featured visiting Irish artists such as Larry Cunningham, whose uncomplicated 'homestead songs' communicated the unchanging social conditions of the Irish enclaves as a version of home; these were hugely popular songs. 'Michael Murphy's Boy', sung by *The Chessmen* in 1966, was a pathos-driven account of a young boy forced to emigrate to England.

Derek Dean, a singer in the Irish showband *The Freshmen*, recalls the type of limbo perpetrated by these spaces that lasted well into the seventies, 'The halls in London had been a meeting place for emigrants for decades and, in that environment, the music stayed rooted, in their minds and eyes, somewhere back in 1953. It was very simple, beautiful and profitable bit of nostalgia: a homesick reverie with musical accompaniment' (2007 p.126). In the early sixties, Cunningham and his peers would have travelled to the English halls during Lent, when the Catholic Church banned dances on national soil for six weeks. The ban was one of the most high profile manifestations of the social authority of the church in the affairs of the youth (O'Halloran, 2006 p.12).

The Blarney held its identity for decades amongst the Irish diaspora, where one generation initiated another into the social rituals associated with the space. As a venue with long established ties to the Irish community it had no intention of 'upgrading', entering, or acknowledging another social narrative outside the traditions associated with the Irish. In this hall, UFO was a temporary function either side of Christmas 1966, normal service accommodating the weekend Irish would resume after it subsided.

Posters gave the times as '10. 30 and out', a timetable that encouraged an environment where the 'human and social side was almost as important than anything else' (Green, 1998 p.137) and where experiences were to be unique to the night itself. There were to be no social conditions dictated by the 'straight' entertainment and fixed times associated with the usual events held in The Blarney. The transformed space

<sup>28</sup> The Irish Farren refers to here would be to him simply a community unto themselves tied to the English establishment by deed of their anonymous labour.

<sup>29</sup> The social clubs for the Irish middle class were more dignified meeting grounds.

placed the band's sound system around the venue to allow the sound to accentuate the immersive nature of the event and merge with the lightshows. This design completely covered The Blarney's strict 'no Jiving' signs that hung on the wall as a warning to the weekend Irish to behave. This reflected the management's fear of the Teddy Boy 'cult' infiltrating the Irish dance and to keep order they prohibited an excess of jiving or 'Rock 'n' Rolling'. Any representatives of English underground who held the hall for a night were of course exempt from these guidelines.<sup>30</sup>

**Figure 8**

Image of UFO in  
The Blarney Club.



Significantly the 'human side' of the UFO event would have contrasted with the regimentation of the 'men on one side and women on the other of the dance floor' that was embedded in the ritual of Irish dancehalls and practiced by the Irish in The Blarney. This act of crossing the floor and choosing a partner or a dance was completely at odds with new countercultural agendas. Alternative social events promoted them as being an appreciation of space where the public were active spectators.

'(UFO) was a club in the sense that most people knew each other, met there to do their business, arrange their week's appointments, dinners, lunches and hatch out issues of the *International Times*, plans for Arts Lab, Soma and various schemes for turning the Thames yellow and removing all the fences in Notting Hill. The activity and energy was thicker than the incense' (Henry *International Times*, 1968). The tropes of art-led actions that engaged participants to question their ownership of the space of the event, this being a familiar art-led practice in Notting Hill workshops. The experimental cross-disciplinary language that facilitated this type of engagement was already in place. In 1966, Jeff Nuttall, a Free London School associate, ran a performance in London streets called The People Show. Referencing the contemporary American happenings of the early sixties, he used artists, musicians, and performers to stage theatrical interventions that repurposed public phone boxes and public toilets as performance spaces. For many of these types of action performances Nuttall chose a location and a time where the audience was not aware of the nature of the act.

There was an overarching political nature embedded in The Blarney event. The 24 hour programme, instigated by the *International Times*, promoted the idea that London

**30** Certain Irish clubs also hired rooms for the underground to develop. In the early seventies for example, 'weird' English bands such as *Genesis* and *Roxy Music* experimented at a night called 'The Hobbit's Garden' in an Irish Club in Wimbledon.

should have an all-night transport system to encourage the potential of a 24 hour culture. *The International Times* constantly promoted the ideal of the open city, its manifesto was called 'Notes toward a 25 Hour City – Make London a 365 Xmas.' The *International Times* also printed technical information on city planning relevant to their cause referencing European city planners and architects (*International Times*, year). That called for an alternative time, one unshackled from the spectacle's 24 hour culture as maintained by the Establishment. This call contested the Establishment ritual of what the situationist Guy Debord described as 'dead time' (year p.), (regulated life). All the participants in the UFO event signed up to resist the spectacle of the Establishment and dead time by designing an alternative network of socio-cultural-economic conditions to be based around temporary situations. 'The constructed situation would be ephemeral, without a future, passageways – a syntheses of sublime moments when a combination of environment and people produces a transcendent and revolutionary consciousness'.<sup>31</sup> The counterculture acknowledged that the distinction between work time and leisure time, in the specialised conditions of an industrial society, is a type of citizen control. Alienation, the product of these conditions was to be recognised and resisted.

UFO in The Blarney was one of the initial events that were designed to disrupt the ordinary, to focus on an uncorrupted every day and reaffirm civic consciousness. In 1966 non-conformity was the core element of resistance practiced by the counterculture, one that foregrounded a public transformation of the space that promoted the ethos of an open city. For its public UFO sought to reclaim the space between work and play (Debord, year p.105). The Situationists had already pointed to the sterilisation inherent in most of the modern programme of the London rebuild, which compressed any general sense of spontaneity or playfulness.<sup>32</sup> A 1964 proposal by the radical London architects, Archigram, for interconnected 'walking' cities imagined structures in 'a future in which borders and boundaries are abandoned in favour of a nomadic lifestyle among groups of people worldwide' This was an example of the alternative utopian directions mirrored in the UFO exercise by likeminded others who agitated to prevent the dominant form of modernism being represented as a sterile orthodoxy by the Establishment.

The radical implications of time as a commodity for a static workplace would have registered with the migrant Irish. The concept of around the clock shift work in the sixties was an understandable type of a 24 hour culture demanded by Establishment modernity. The American historian Herbert G. Gutman once noted that the emigrant Irish particularly 'clung to their traditional notions of time' (Delaney, 2007 p.60). In this context 24 hour leisure time was conceptually different and potentially radical. The idea of devoting a day to engage with a 'totally unstructured' (Savage, 2016 p.541) psychedelic event in an Irish dancehall with likeminded individuals and generating what John Hopkins called 'collective energy' (year p.) had no Irish precedent in any form. This concept was in the words of an *International Times* slogan 'International Time – a finality that binds things together by communication' (year p.). The flexible social concept of a description of time as revolutionary remained a staple in the editorials and articles of

<sup>31</sup> <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/project.php?id=60>

<sup>32</sup> Footnote to be added.

the *International Times* from 1966–1973. In issue 46 Joseph Berke, a psychiatrist and 'radical educator,' contributed a manifesto titled 'The Creation of an Alternative Society' (*International Times*, 1968). He urged the youth to 'locate themselves in time in order to comprehend and allow for the development and expansion of the struggle... The movement of people into counter society and the erosion of social control will create a highly unstable and explosive situation. This will culminate in the taking of power from Them' (*International Times*, 1968).

The act of the UFO event taking place in The Blarney was unprecedented as the regulation of social boundaries in city venues was relatively strict. In regards to The Blarney, a form of progression making some concession to a time of change would have been briefly acknowledged there when the venue occasionally hosted Irish folk- type events (O'Neill 2011, p.280). On the two UFO nights the presence of heavy bouncers sometimes needed to manage the crowds of working class Irish around these events at the weekend were not needed. For both UFO nights drug use featured to enhance the experience of the films and light shows. LSD was prioritised over alcohol as a stimulant 'You'd drop acid, it was like descending into a subterranean world of dreams' (Fabien in Savage, 2016, p.531). For any young Irish present this alone would have made the UFO events memorable.

The Blarney would have featured in weekend social boundaries of the city. However, the distance between the drink culture associated with the working class Irish and the new psychedelic directions advocated by the drugs of the English youth were most evident at the transitional space of this psychedelic event. In its psychically transformed state, after the UFO, even the space of The Blarney would have suggested the possibility of a cultural cut from the established Irish rituals found in the Irish enclaves

UFO consequently moved to another venue, The Round House, before finishing as an event mid-1967. Reflecting in the *International Times*, (year) the editor Miles J. Henry presented charts that accounted for decreasing numbers based on the geographical location of UFO. This type of internal study by the paper confirms the people behind the counterculture had an agenda regarding the positioning of activity with a particular space in regards to the 'New Society' membership details which were held as data on cards by the UFO organisers. The editor remarked that the data that registered Notting Hill participants for The Blarney event (which would have included Irish youth) was minimal, as those participants would have already gained free entry. Miles was careful to outline how numbers and districts aligned to account for citizen participation, that is, where the counterculture featured in the landscape of the city. Other factors to be taken into account for UFO's closure included the increasing attention shown to the counterculture by the mainstream media and how the consequences of this commodification impacted on the 'underground' agenda. It was said that the 'scene' had become 'seen'.

In the same issue, Mick Farren commented on how the closure of UFO affected the economy of the counterculture now without a base and means of income for those who worked at the events. Farren also states that the underground 'lacks geographical focus' (*International Times*, year) and has no real foundation of a co-ordinated economy.

Again UFO was a radical change from the passive experience one would have encountered in the traditional space of the Irish hall and closed community of the Irish pub. Both in Ireland and England the dance hall held a pervasive sense of community where 'roles were set and explicit' and the notion of the family constituted 'a vast kinship powerfully supported by the great moral edifice of the Catholic Church' (Lee, year p.644).

An Irish participant who sought the environment of the UFO, the concept of exploring an alternative consciousness with likeminded individuals supported by a culture built by said individuals, was tradition breaking. It was possible that an Irish youth who was just familiar with the normal space of The Blarney, but came upon it as a transformed space, would have experienced a radicalisation from the space unknown to previous Irish audiences. Such chanced experience creates activated spectators from passive audiences (McCarthy, 1973 pp.219-20).

The value placed on alternative consciousness in the counterculture reflected a belief that social change had to start with self- knowledge. It was difficult to imagine how society could change unless people changed, but it was equally difficult to see how people could become different unless societal structures allowed them space for growth (Lipsitz, 1994 p.218).

In September 2016, the Victoria and Albert Museum presented an exhibition, *You Say You Want a Revolution*, featuring displays based on the wide ranging socio-cultural changes of the sixties that were played out as a generational mission in alternative spaces. Significantly, the exhibition featured a 1960 streetscape, which includes a replica of the UFO nightclub in The Blarney. In a publicity statement for the exhibition, the director of the V&A, Martin Roth, stated that that the ambitious framing of late 1960s counterculture shows the incredible importance of that revolutionary period to our lives today. This exhibition 'will show how "the optimism, innocence and street-fighting rebellion of the late 60s curdled in the decades which followed' (Author, year p.) It will also feature '3D sound installations' created by the audio specialist company Sennheiser, to give visitors 'a taste of (UFO's) disorienting experience.' The V&A's commemoration of UFO in The Blarney registers this particular moment as historic. It marks the time when the suggestion of uncompromised freedom by the English counterculture intersected with issues of identity that were held in the social agenda of the diaspora. It is not inconceivable that when an Irish youth, freshly arrived to London, was confronted with the audacity of a freak-out in an Irish dancehall, it would provoke many questions relating to identity and the notions of community that one could cultivate abroad. Participation in structured alternative events that had no Irish equivalent contributed to a questioning of both living in displacement and rigid definitions of home immersive events like UFO which were first and foremost youth-based and highly suggestive. For that youth they exemplified an alternative which began with a challenge to the social rituals and regulated behaviour that was expected of the emigrant Irish at home and abroad (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2016-2017).