

The Other Side of the Fence

Melanie Bax

This article reflects upon a personal experience at Climate Camp during the summer of 2009. The Camp took place in a prior non-disclosed location in London to model a temporary self-sustaining community and was a site at which climate change could be discussed in the run up to the Copenhagen climate change conference in December 2009.

The thread that runs throughout the paper questions whether the architecture of the camp expressed the politics of Climate Camp. Climate Camp has been established as an organisation to take direct action on climate change through creating a non-hierarchical, diverse, gender equal and sustainable community. From critiquing my personal experience at the camp I will attempt to conclude whether a temporary camp is a valid option for activists today.

There are four voices present throughout the paper – one of ‘action’, observing the events that occurred during the camp, another of ‘information’ that represents the text messages, meeting announcements and placards that were given by the camp, one of ‘reflection’ which looks at the theoretical context of the camp and finally one of ‘drifting’, describing my personal experience in the camp.

Prelude

V25/08/2009 22:08

Hi Silver & Green swoopers! Your starting point is outside Stratford station. Be there 12 noon tomorrow! Be on time! x

¹ Taken from the Climate Camp web page 'About Us', found at: <http://www.climatecamp.org.uk/about> [accessed 2009].

Climate Camp is one of the most renowned groups of activists committed to confronting the issue of climate change in preparation for Climate Camp 2009. The camp is for anyone, 'who's worried about our future and wants to do something about it.'¹ People joined different 'swoop' colours that corresponded to their geographic location in the country and these swoops met at various places across London.

Text messages flooded through when the time was right to regroup at a secret location in London to set up the sustainable community. Within Climate Camp only a handful of people knew the actual camp site, increasing the anticipation leading up to the swoop; the police and media didn't know where the campers were going and even they didn't know.

a *Climate Camp was founded in 2006 outside the Drax coal-fired power station, Yorkshire. Six hundred people gathered to camp for ten days and learn about sustainable living culminating into a day of mass action against the power station. 2007 saw Heathrow airport become the target and campers set up to help local residents stop the British Airport Authority build another runway. In 2008 campers focussed on the Kingsnorth coal-fired power station and early 2009 the British economic and political system was targeted during the G20 in London on April 1st in Bishopsgate. Every Climate Camp to this date has worked towards a direct action on a clear target. However this time there was no clear target with an ending direct action; why had a camp been arranged with no target and direct action as the result?*

This was the first Climate Camp to not have a direct action as a result of it.^a The camp's duration was for one week offering daily workshops that had been designed to inform campers about the issues surrounding climate change and train them to become more confident members of Climate Camp.^b

Action 01

26/08/2009 11:51

Ten minutes before noon a handful of people were surrounded by camping equipment with a few reporters and policemen lurking on the periphery. The main entrance of Stratford station was kept clear so everyone could wait politely for the remaining campers to arrive. The wait for the remaining campers turned into the wait for the text message that would reveal the secret location.

b *Many of the campers work throughout the year within smaller groups that share the aspirations of Climate Camp and for them the camp is providing a moment in time in which they can regroup, share knowledge and experiences and motivate themselves as a larger group. The more dedicated members of the camp were viewing this time as the lead up to the Copenhagen conference later in the year.*

26/08/2009 12:24

Speakers on: The Importance of Meeting at Stratford Station

To fill this void in time, some members of the group were elected to speak about the importance in meeting at Stratford station, the site of the Olympics 2012. The subject of the speech concerned the communities of people that had been displaced from their homes to provide land for the newly built structures that are part of the vision of the Olympics.^c Reporters were scribbling notes whilst photographers were busy



Fig. 1. The reporters surrounding the campers during speeches given concerning the Olympics 2012. Photo: Melanie Bax

documenting the scene, as no climate campers were willing to discuss the camp with them. Prior to the swoop numerous emails had circulated recommending that swoopers without training should not speak with the press.

- c *The speakers appointed gave their opinions on the resulting problems during the construction of the Olympics in Stratford. They declared that through attending Climate Camp the campers were helping the 'poor people' fight their battle on being displaced from their homes making way for the new structures that are provided for the Olympics. The speech wasn't as informative as it should have been and it made you wonder whether anyone that lived in Stratford had been approached by the campers in the past to join Climate Camp and fight their battle against the Olympics. No one in the Stratford swoop group lived in Stratford.*

26/08/200 13:00

SILVER/GREEN: Get on the DLR from Stratford to Lewisham!
And listen to your instructions from flag people! x

Action 02

26/08/2009 13:03

After a few moments of hesitation and organising tickets everyone piled onto the DLR banging their luggage into passengers and speculating where the site would be.



Fig 2. The topography of the area; Blackheath looking down on Canary Wharf. Image: Melanie Bax

Action 03

26/08/2009 13:05

SILVER/GREEN: Left out of Lewisham stn (DLR) & under bridge. Right up Lewisham Hill, then Wat Tyler Rd, site on your right! x

The campers were heading towards Blackheath, a suitable site in that it was once the location of the Peasant's Revolt led by Wat Tyler in reaction to the oppressive poll tax that King Richard II had imposed in 1381. The Heath is also known to be common land to which everyone has the right to access. It is on high ground with a prominent view over the UK's most symbolic skyline of the financial industry, Canary Wharf. All campers were reminded of one of Climate Camp's reasons to be in London as the tall buildings are considered to be, 'unaccountable, undemocratic and causing catastrophic climate change, these creatures need to be driven into extinction.'² Ian Duff a geography teacher expressed his opinion on the relationship between the camp and it's environment in The Guardian:

The most important thing this year is to draw links between the economic crisis, and political crisis, and the environment. The

² Climate Camp, 'Ten Reasons to be Camping in London', *The Climate Camp Handbook* (2009), p.16.

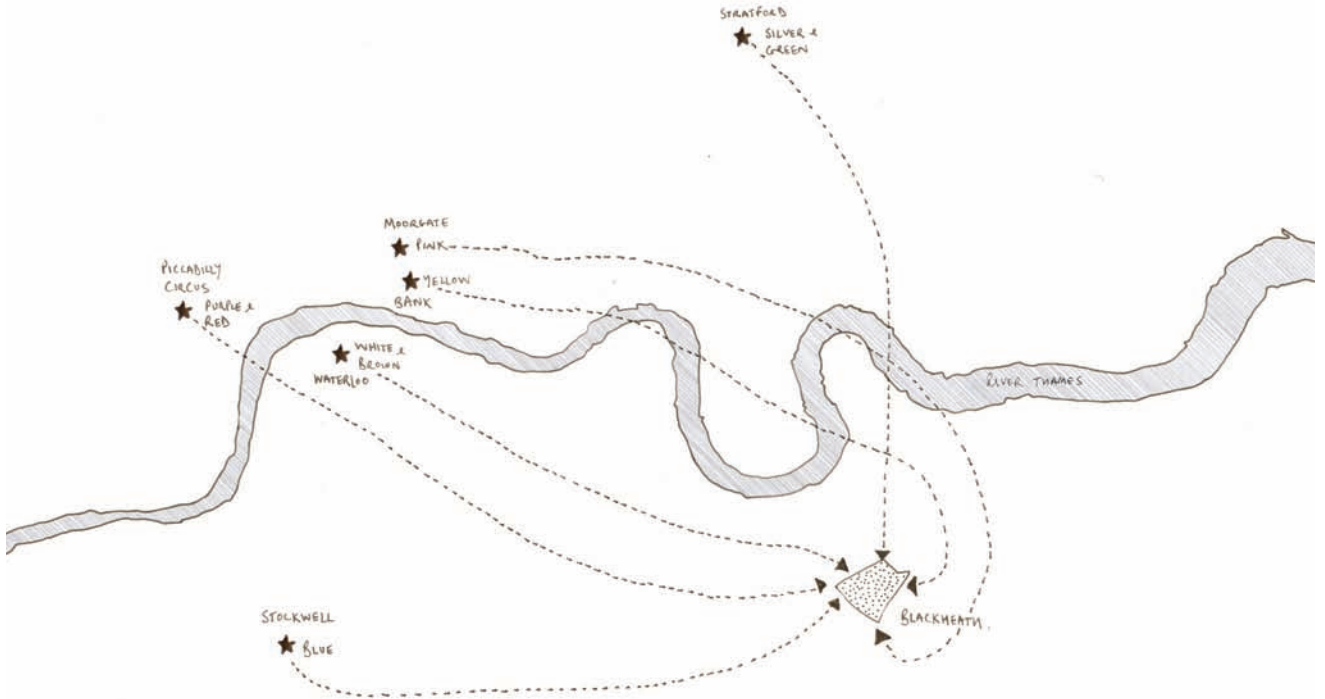


Fig 3. A diagram of the location of all swoop groups that joined and met at the secret location, Blackheath. Image: Melanie Bax



Fig. 4. The financial skyline seen from the tent in the distance. Photo: Melanie Bax

³ 'Police adopt a low profile as 1,000 activists set up base at site of Peasants' revolt', *The Guardian*, (27/08/2009)

desire for infinite growth, encouraged by corporations, leads to climate change. The space is brilliant because you can see the City of London in the background. What we're here to talk about is the connection with climate change.³

There were nine swoop groups located all over London and we crossed paths with the Yellow swoop group travelling from Bank. They were given different instructions so as to approach the site from another direction, giving the campers strength if the police had attempted to stop the camp from being built.

Action 04

26/08/2009 13:29

On arrival there was significant activity on the Heath with removal vans unloading equipment and tape and tripods being used to temporarily mark out the camp's boundary lines. It was clear these decisions had been made by the organisers who knew the location of the site prior to the swoop, and it was these people who started to erect the infrastructure of the camp helped by a mass of campers.^d

^d *Despite Climate Camp promoting it's non-hierarchical nature it was apparent that there was already a hierarchy present- the people that knew how the camp was to be built, people that were trying desperately to help, and the people that didn't know what to do as too many campers were offering help. All that could be done was wait until the primary structures of the camp were erected before individual tents could be pitched.*



Fig. 5. The spatial organisation of the camp with the marquees being laid out in preparation. Photo: Melanie Bax

Drift begins

To free myself from feeling displaced I began to drift and wandered around the surrounding area of Blackheath. The area is full of beautiful Victorian terraces, boutiques and organic food stores with the majority of residents leading a



Fig. 6. The Victorian houses surrounding the heath and the camp.
Photo: Melanie Bax



Fig. 7. The funnelled entrance adorned with 'Welcome to Climate Camp' signage. Photo: Melanie Bax

conveniently 'green' lifestyle. A resident divulged to a reporter that he would be accommodating towards the campers as long as the noise was kept to a minimum. They needn't had worried about noise levels as a noise curfew was in place on the camp from 11pm every evening to be family friendly. I returned to the camp and was astonished that a steel mesh fence had been erected in place of the tape marking the boundary of the site, enabling one access point to the camp that was manned. A group of young campers drinking beer were sitting at the

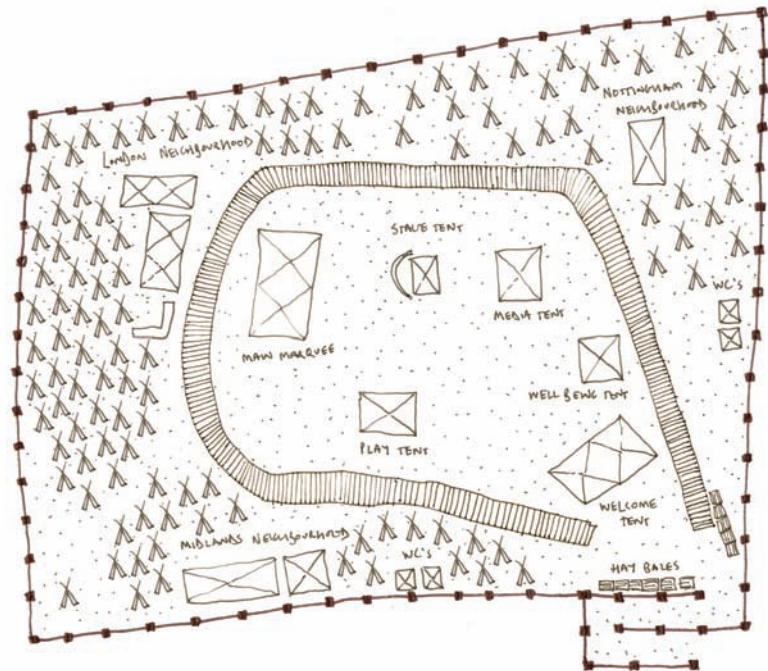


Fig. 8. The layout of the Climate Camp showing different neighbourhoods and entrance marquees. Image: Melanie Bax

entrance allowing single file only. This momentarily gave me a feeling of unease. I walked through the camp and was surprised at how organised the camp had become within a couple of hours; separate neighbourhoods had been established with appropriate signage for the Midlands, Yorkshire, London, Wales, Scotland...

- e *The uniform of the campers promoted the sentiments of 'we-feeling' secured by the similarities in the campers and a fear of the 'other' was symbolised by the steel mesh fence. This was not what the camp claimed to advocate, the camp should have been diverse and reflecting, 'an unpredictable society rather than a dream world of harmony and predetermined order.'*

Richard Sennett, *The Uses of Disorder: Personal Identity and City Life* (London: The Penguin Press, 1971), p.68.

- f *Activism should not be a polite protest amongst a community of like-minded people. The camp needed to be within a diverse environment reaching out to as many different types of people as possible, after all climate change is a global issue.*

26/08/2009 20:14

WELCOME TO THE MIDLANDS NEIGHBOURHOOD!

YOU HAVE ENTERED LONDON NEIGHBOURHOOD!

You could choose a neighbourhood in which to pitch your tent. Some were equipped with kitchens and large marquees that acted as the social spaces of the camp. One of the aspirations of Climate Camp is diversity amongst the campers but this was not evident whilst walking through. A neighbourhood for Oxbridge graduates had been set up and everyone was white, middle-class and dressed in a uniform of heavy boots, organic cotton clothing and dreadlocks.^e I was disappointed in the location of the camp with it being in a white, middle-class area on the outskirts of central London.^f This was not what I had

imagined to be participating in to make a political stand on climate change.

26/08/2009 23:26

'LONDON'S DAILY NEIGHBOURHOOD MEETING AT 9.00AM'

Action 05

27/08/2009 08:22

After a night's sleep the London neighbourhood visited the neighbourhood's main marquee to have breakfast and attend the daily neighbourhood meeting. The London neighbourhood was the most populated with people spilling out trying to listen to the two campers leading the meeting. Meetings attempted to provide a non-hierarchical platform to discuss the concerns of the campers. Guidelines had been issued showing the procedures and hand signals required to speak making it feel like a new language that needed to be mastered before you could express an opinion. The meeting was preoccupied with issues concerning the police and media, in particular whether the police should be allowed on site to have a meeting with Climate Camp. It was decided that the meeting should occur off-site as members of the camp were uncomfortable with the police entering.⁸ There was no mention of climate change or the workshops that would be happening later in the week.

Drift

I left the meeting feeling disappointed as it appeared to me that they wanted to be an insular group of people and I was frustrated that there had been no discussion of the real reason we had all met on the Heath. People dispersed and were involved in erecting another marquee or tent, building more composting toilets, washing up after breakfast or general organisation of the camp. There were plenty of volunteers for all these tasks leaving most campers to sit in the sun and chat. I circulated the campsite and wanted to inquire into whether the campers believed it was necessary to enclose the camp in a fence.

I found an excitable lady that was sharing her knowledge of Climate Camp once I declared it was my first visit. She was delighted and very enthusiastic about the atmosphere generated within the camp. I inquired into why she thought the fence was provided and whether it was needed. She

g *The police had been attempting to co-operate with Climate Camp due to the tragic circumstances of the G20 protests in April and by not allowing the police onto the site they were not embracing this as an advantage. Through the lack of co-operation from the campers with the police the wrong message was given to the public. Climate Camp had decreased its chances in encouraging new members of the public to experience the camp. They seemed to like the exclusivity of the camp and the air of mystery they had.*



Fig. 9. The funnelled entrance adorned with 'Welcome to Climate Camp' signage. Photo: Melanie Bax

admitted it was a defensive structure but believed it made the camp feel 'cosy' enabling everyone to be directed through the funnelled entrance and be welcomed by campers. Moving onto a group of girls washing up in the London neighbourhood I asked for their thoughts on the fence.

They didn't think the fence appeared unwelcoming as they suggested it only required some 'Welcome to Climate Camp' banners. At this moment they only had banners expressing their opinions on climate change and thanking the residents for their stay.

'CAPITALISM IS CRISIS'

'NATURE DOESN'T DO BAILOUTS'

'THANK YOU FOR HAVING US'

This approach can be likened to the gates in a gated community that Peter Marcuse describes in his article, Walls of Fear and Walls of Support,

Granted they may be pleasingly designed, covered with shrubs and flowers, inviting to look at. But their function, certainly as a symbol and generally in reality, is to exclude the unwanted, those feared by residents.⁴

⁴ Peter Maruse, 'Walls of Fear and Walls of Support', *Architecture of Fear*, Nan Ellin (Ed.) (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p.102.

One of the girls perceived the camp to be likened to a prehistoric settlement with a moat or a wall surrounding it, implying that they are happy to promote the exclusivity of the camp to the general public and that the people entering and leaving the camp needed to be monitored. The transparent mesh fence attempted, 'to make them visible enough to serve their function, but transparent enough not to reflect hostility or exclusivity.'^{5 h}

⁵ Peter Maruse, 'Walls of Fear and Walls of Support', *Architecture of Fear*, Nan Ellin (Ed.) (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), p.111.

^h *No consideration had been given to the issue that the wall was two sided and how it was perceived from either side of the fence. They wanted to encourage diversity to promote climate change more effectively, but they needed to take down the walls on the common land. I didn't think they were aware of the strength of the message the fence was giving people that weren't part of climate camp. Nobody felt welcomed enough to look around and join the camp - see fig.10 and fig. 11.*

After being in the camp for a day and a night I realised that I had heard no mention of climate change and the supposed workshops that I wanted to attend to become inspired and gain knowledge. In addition to my confusion about the fence I more worryingly was becoming confused about the reason people were at the camp.

27/08/2009 22:54

'LONDON'S DAILY NEIGHBOURHOOD MEETING AT 9.00AM'

Action 06

27/08/2009 08:39

Campers were waking to attend the second neighbourhood meeting to discover what new issues concerned the camp and needed to be discussed. Everyone remained engrossed by the perceived problem of the police and spent an hour speaking about this.¹

Drift

The meeting ended and I walked around the camp in search of changes and noticed the entrance had grown in height, surpassing the two metre high fence by three metres. Hay bales had been delivered and the campers were stacking them up and using them as seats. Visitors now had to weave through the entrance whilst being observed from above. I didn't see many members of the public enter the camp and despite myself being a camper, I struggled to feel like I belonged.

ⁱ *To my discontent, nothing was mentioned about the workshops and climate change, as a reporter from The Guardian observed, 'The problem with the Climate Campers is not a lack of conviction (as some commentators try to argue); it stems, rather, from an obsession with its own structures and its relationship with the media and the police.' This is a situation when the camp needs to introduce a hierarchy as the groups inner workings is not of interest to all the campers and it becomes a tiresome process. Some campers only want to discuss issues of climate change, not how the police and media are managed*



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discouraging people from joining the camp. When only an hour is dedicated to a neighbourhood meeting in which all campers attend, it should have been used to discuss more interesting ideas concerned with climate change to excite and motivate the campers.

'The Climate Camp is too self-regarding to be effective' by Peter Beaumont, The Guardian Online, Sunday 30th August. Found at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/aug/30/peter-beaumont-climate-camp-protesters> [accessed 2009].

Climate Camp was set up to be a non-hierarchical, diverse, gender equal and sustainable community and I believe this was unachievable by creating an enclosed camp. The steel mesh fence dominated the architecture of the camp and was not a good representation of the ethos of Climate Camp. The campers wanted to be a contained community to feel safer and monitor the 'other' people that entered their utopian community. A temporary camp could be beneficial to the Climate Camp movement but it needs to break down barriers with members of the public and gain their trust.

Meetings were a central aspect to Climate Camp in order to achieve a non-hierarchical group. However, the campers tended to have similar opinions due to the lack of diversity of people and time spent at meetings was consumed by less important issues. In theory, their ethos of achieving a non-hierarchical group is appropriate for Climate Camp but I have reservations whether this can work well in practice. The majority of Climate Campers have a lot of motivation and energy but there is a fear that they are more interested in the Climate Camp institution rather than fighting for the global issue of climate change.

Fig. 10. (Overleaf, above) Looking into the camp, the steel mesh fence is not strong but acts as a symbol.
Photo: Melanie Bax

Fig. 11. (Overleaf, below) A member of the public peering into the camp with curiosity.
Photo: Melanie Bax

