

KARATE KLUB

A short history of a Dublin DIY punk space

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The Karate Klub began its life during a cold winter in 2007 in Dublin when a group of punks got together and raised the cash to put down a rental deposit on a fairly run-down warehouse in one of the punk parts of town, Phibsboro.

The idea grew out of a smaller space that had been rented in a neighborhood further out of town where some of the same crew, tired of expensive commercial practice spaces, had started their own, in a tiny garage. This project was short-lived due to the slum lord activities of the owner, but the experience fired imaginations and motivated the move to a bigger space, involving more people with much bigger ambitions...After years of punk and anarchist squats being evicted, and even legal social spaces facing harassment from the city council and the cops, the small crew had decided it was time to create a space that would hopefully last and become a safe and fun hub for the Dublin punk community.

At a thousand square feet, the space is relatively big. It had had a previous life as a martial arts dojo, so the name came naturally enough. From day one the

collective was adamant to try to avoid the hierarchies of the society outside the doors and worked to form a consensus driven decision making process, grounded in shared anarchist / anti-authoritarian principals.

The space just so happened to be right by Bohemians football club, a team that is traditionally leftist / Anti-Fascist and has many punks, skins, and herberts in its fan base. There had already been involvement with Boh's in the form of punk gigs in their bar, and since the inception of the Klub cross-collaboration has increased with regular shows, graffiti workshops, vegan barbeques, and other events like punk pub quizzes and even the odd festival. Bohemians has been really supportive of the space over the years and with the looming demolition and re-construction of their stadium, they have assured us that they will make sure the Karate Klub is respected and included in any plans that may impact us.

Once the leases were signed, work began immediately on the construction of a soundproofed room within a room, timber framed and insulated with rockwool, carpet and plasterboard, simple and fast. What followed over the months and years were hundreds of hours of work: installing plumbing, electrics, security doors, roof repairs, shelving, cabinets, endless maintenance, and so much more. The practice room began to fill with individuals, starting bands and making noise, and



discussion and food. We've also shown the Japan punk classic *Burst City*, live coverage of Ireland getting annihilated in the Euro-Cup, Southern Horror-Animal revenge classic *Frogs* and dozens more. We also just featured a 30th anniversary screening of *Akira*, followed by a DJ night of nothing but Burning Spirits hardcore!

In the last few years a bar was built from scrap metal, namely the front of a 1940s Morris Minor (cars that were assembled here in Dublin) and a mountain of other scrap parts. This means we can host really nice events and even serve cold homebrew beer on tap! It's a good spot to plonk your arse on a welded up TCT-saw blade-turned barstool and hang out with mates, before or after a gig (it's also good for stage diving, when your

great turnouts and a friendly atmosphere at Jigsaw (an autonomous DIY venue near the city centre), a chance to play in a stadium...kind of...at the Bohemians Bar, or a packed-to-the-rafters local pub in Phibsboro called the Hut. Most of these shows will end with an after party in the Karate Klub, and you may find yourself there for food before or after...(you should hope it's one of Andrzej & Marcins vegan feasts!)

I can't stress enough how important it's been to have a safe, secure space in this city over the years. All of us have been involved in projects that have been precarious. Whether it was totally illegal barricaded squats, or semi-legal rented social centers where the agreed purpose of the building was pushed to the limit, or the political affiliations and activities were enough for the authorities to shut them down regardless. Time and again the Karate Klub has been able to help these spaces out, whether it's been to just store equipment



until the next place is opened, or to raise badly needed funds, it's somewhere people can rely upon and go for help when the going gets tough. Apart from this, even regular housing is a hard won commodity in Dublin and with a housing crisis that has left thousands homeless, we're lucky to have somewhere to store boxes of stuff or even lay a head for the night when the inevitable eviction notice comes through the door and you find yourself on the hunt for a new place to live.

Our neighborhood has been very supportive, especially Bohemians. Phibsboro is also home to many other spaces run by friends and likeminded people. Down the road is another DIY practice space, the Jam Jar. 'Round the corner is Bang Bang cafe, named after the infamous Dublin street-character who used to "shoot" passersby with a large key. It's a super friendly spot, with good coffee, vegan options and covered in anti-fascist paraphernalia and football memorabilia. There are also a good few squats and countless punk houses, some that have lasted over fifteen years or so.

favorite song comes on the turntable!). Bar Nights have also been used as a nice alternative to gigs for fund-raising events and there have already been many benefits funded by cheap cocktails, food and beer, including Refugee Solidarity Projects in Calais, Need Abortion Ireland, Squat defence funds, ABC and much more.

Speaking of gigs, the crew here organizes many. We've had various spaces over the years that we can put on a show including the infamous Tenterhooks, which was run by our good friends and is now sadly gone. Also Barricade Squat in the heart of the city center and Cafe Smash (Squat city), just down the road, were two inspiring spaces where punk gigs could happen and have also now been resigned to history. Right now touring bands can still expect

One of the biggest challenges to the space has been the size of the collective (which has ranged between twenty and thirty individuals over the years) and how we go about the decision making process, making sure all members' ideas are respected. Monthly meetings were far more common in the beginning, but since the explosion of social media, coupled with members having less free time, we have been constantly drawn toward online discussion and decision-making.

This has had its benefits, especially for people who live in the further flung corners of the city, but on a whole it has meant that a core group of people have become the main activists within the space, while many are peripheral to its day to day workings. This is not to say that shit does not get done or that this has meant a slump in activity. However, the reality of trying to work collectively with more than, say, ten people, without regular general assemblies is almost impossible. What we have instead is smaller groups of people acting independently within the broader collective.

out first. On the flip side, in countries where it is still possible to squat or create truly autonomous spaces there is a lot to be said for avoiding both renting and buying. To be able to secure and maintain a space in the truest sense can allow you to really do whatever you want. The possibilities just open up in front of your eyes. Many of us have experienced and helped to create autonomous spaces and squats here and abroad and there is a lot about these places that I really miss. However in a long term context we just could not foresee those options working here. Because of that choice a lot of compromises had to be made, even within our semi-legit status. There is a lot we can't even mention in this piece for concern over legal / political repercussions. However this is the route we chose, and the one that made the most sense at the time. So far it has served us well.

The Karate Klub has produced so many bands it's impossible to name them all. Something that stands out is the wide variety of styles and sub-genres that can exist under one roof. A lot of these bands have great releases online and on vinyl. Check out podcasts like This Show Rocks on radioactiveinternational.org, Dublin Punk Radio or Cosmetic Plague on dublindigitalradio.com for regular shows



Other challenges include the constant need for hard cash, and the woes of dealing with a building that is beyond below regulations. These have generally been met head on with fundraising such as benefit gigs, merch such as t-shirts and badges, and benefit nights at our "Scrapheap" bar. The repairs to the building have been DIY in every way, including the literal jacking up of the roof with acrojacks, which is now a semi-permanent solution for something that could not be fixed without first tearing down sizeable amounts of the building. Security bars are being fitted in the coming weeks after a break-in attempt, but again, the existing walls and windows could have been constructed to a much more heavy duty spec, had the building been built for purpose. These are all the pitfalls of not owning a space and is something I would definitely consider if we did it all again. We have been in the space long enough now that we could theoretically own it if we had been paying it off rather than paying rent. In that case we could do our own building works and improve the space drastically. However at the time it began, we were basically kids, with no money and no way of obtaining a loan. There are DIY community schemes and even left-wing credit unions in some countries for such projects though and I'd definitely encourage any punks wanting to do something similar to check them

featuring Irish bands. Most of the bands on Distro-y Records can be listened to on their website distroyrecords.com too. My blog, stormhag.tumblr.com often features reviews and links to Irish Punk and hardcore and there are and there are many more including scatalogik.com and the incredible database of Irish punk and hardcore recordings: diyirishhardcorepunkarchive.blogspot.ie.

Here's an attempt at listing our current bands (it would be almost impossible to list all the bands that have shared the space since the beginning!): Sissy, Putrefaction, Dowth, R.A.Z.O.R, Disguise, Grit, Rats Blood, the Whole Sick, Badb, Cyborg A.D., Venā Kava, Surge, The Blow Ins, Żona Żła, Extravision, Strong Boys, the Objectorz, Grave Tide, Pożoga, Vivid Nightmare, Worst, Wizards of Firetop Mountain, Electric Bill & the Meter Readers, Love Scum, Realistic Train. I have to stress that these bands and the Karate Klub are just a small part of the overall DIY scene, and there are a lot more bands in the broader hardcore punk movement here in Dublin. While we are luckily not divided here, there are many sub-scenes that overlap but also have their own specific bands, venues and identities.

In 2017 we reached a decade of activity in the space and decided it was time to celebrate. Plans have been ambitious and



STRONG BOYS



VENA KAVA



RATS BLOOD



DISGUISE



R.A.Z.O.R



GRIT



SURGE



SISSY



therefore slow in the making but we are strongly committed to releasing a 20-song LP compilation featuring many of the current bands that use the space and maybe a few classics from the Dublin Punk scene that graced the Klub at one stage or another. We're hoping to release this ourselves on our own label but we have already had offers of help from good friend Alex over at Distro-y Records here in Ireland, someone who has been instrumental in releasing so many bands that have come out of the space. We feel the compilation is really important for the city of Dublin. There have only been a handful of samplers from here over the years and maybe only one that was released on vinyl that I can think of. There is such a healthy DIY punk scene here, with so many bands that work like dogs and try to get their music across the oceans that surround us and so many dedicated punks that keep this scene motoring along. We're quite isolated geographically and that means we don't get as much traffic from touring bands, but the ones who make the effort are never disappointed. Plans are to hand screen-print a gatefold sleeve and include a large booklet with photos, lyrics, stories from the Klub and our scene in general. We want to create an artefact to celebrate this place, a thing we've carved out of this sometimes grey city.

The Karate Klub is just one part of the Dublin Punk scene, and like all buildings, the potential lies in the people that inhabit it. Right now we're doing well. Some years are better than others.

Sometimes it seems always full of life and noise and fun. Other times it seems impossibly cold and dark, neglected and filled with trash. That's the nature of a Punk space...and maybe the nature of punk in general. It can be the most creative thing you've ever experienced, or a distracting and destructive burden. Either way it always seems worth putting in another day's effort to ignite that feeling which keeps us all involved. Having a space where you can be yourself is so important. It sounds obvious, but to have a place to go that is truly free of cops, bouncers and other negative elements is crucial. A place you can make noise into the night with your friends. A place you can bang out your frustrations on the punch bag, a place you can drown your sorrows and dance the night away or even a place to get some silence...sometimes! Like a lot of cities, Dublin can be unforgiving at times. We needed somewhere to call our own and that is what we have built. Punk spaces never last forever, that's why having friends who act like a family is so important, but for now the Karate Klub is home.

Check out the photographers' work, and more photos from the Dublin Punk scene here:
eddiekenrick.com
photocage.tumblr.com
[facebook.com/shaymurphyphoto](https://www.facebook.com/shaymurphyphoto)
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