

GEOGRAPHIES OF DIRECT ACTION AND HOMELESSNESS: THE POLITICAL
IDEOLOGIES AND SPATIAL PRACTICES OF THE MAD HOUSERS AND THE
HOMELESS POPULATION OF ATHENS, GA

by

JAY E. BOWEN

(Under the Direction of Nik Heynen)

ABSTRACT

The Mad Housers is an Atlanta-based non-profit organization dedicated to building free shelters for homeless individuals. They are unique among registered non-profit organizations in that they challenge existing power structures by trespassing onto private land to build their shelters. This project examines the Mad Housers, in light of these actions, in order to determine where they exist on a scale between direct service and direct action. In doing this, the research reviews some of the literature that has defined the concepts of direct service and direct action in the past. While much of this literature poses these concepts as poles that exist in opposition to one another, research on the Mad Housers suggests a new form of community organizing that embodies these concepts in unison with little confrontation between them. Future research on the Mad Housers and other contemporary community organizations could suggest a new trend in civic activism.

INDEX WORDS: Mad Housers, Homelessness, Direct service, Direct action, Charity, Community organizing, Churches, Trespassing, Right to the city, Tent City, Funtown, Georgia, Athens, Atlanta

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JAY E. BOWEN

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JAY E. BOWEN

Major Professor: Nik Heynen

Committee: Andrew J. Herod
Steven R. Holloway

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2010

DEDICATION

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-Jay

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Summary of the Research Problem

On April 16, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. penned a letter from his cell in the city jail of Birmingham, Alabama. In his letter, Dr. King not only confronted the anti-activist stance of his detractors among the clergy, but also the state-sanctioned racial segregation, inequality, and human rights abuses perpetrated within the United States at the time. The sentiment of Dr. King's letter was clear –“justice too long delayed is justice denied.”¹ It was in this spirit that Dr. King stated that you can no longer wait for action when, out of many reasons, “you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children.”² Today, while the Atlanta amusement park known as Funtown is no longer in business, it remains a powerful symbol of contemporary America's continued neglect of universal human rights and equality.

This neglect would become starkly apparent when, on a Saturday afternoon in early November, 2007, I visited a shantytown for the first time. This was not an example of the well-publicized slums of Latin America, Africa, or Asia, which are frequently offered as proof of the oppressive nature and economic instability of the Third World. Instead, it was situated on the grounds of the now defunct Funtown in the midst of urban Atlanta –a city often pointed to as an

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” The Martin Luther King, Jr., Research and Education Institute, Stanford University, 20 Mar. 2008 <http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/popular_requests/>

² Ibid.

example of the economic might of the “New South,” and often referred to as “the city too busy to hate.” The community of homeless citizens that resides there today is comprised almost entirely of African-American men, and continues to bear the name Funtown as a poignant reminder of the intense civil rights struggle that once existed to contest the nature of this space. Seeing Funtown today, it is obviously not enough to desegregate space on the basis of race without examining and confronting some of the greater structural and ideological forces that have continued to oppress large segments of our nation’s people.

Nevertheless, there were several things about Funtown that set it apart from the numerous homeless encampments across America that I have read about and that I would later see with my own eyes. Perhaps the most important of these differences, and indeed the only reason that I was able to see it in the first place, was the relationship between Funtown and a small Atlanta-based direct action and non-profit organization called the Mad Housers. Since its emergence in 1987 as the brain-child of several Georgia Tech architecture graduate students, the Mad Housers have been helping homeless people to build shelters more weather-resistant and secure than the tattered tents constituting the bulk of dwellings in homeless encampments.³ Funtown was unique in that nearly all of its residents lived in their own insulated wooden shelters, which included a loft, a stove, and a padlock. Furthermore, each of these shelters appeared to have become the basis of a degree of spatial appropriation and property improvement, whereupon each resident was able to begin a process towards a greater self-sufficiency within an increasingly well-knit community. Here, homeless residents had managed to create gardens, a social space centered around a grill and fire pit, tables for sitting, reading, and playing board games, and a small

³ Nick Mamatas. “House Rules,” *The Village Voice*, 28 Oct. 2005, *The Village Voice*, 13 Dec. 2007 <<http://www.villagevoice.com/people/0544,interview,69500,24.html>>

library that doubled as a bike storage shed.⁴ However, this was most certainly not the life of comfort of the American Dream, and I have no desire to appear as if I am romanticizing this situation. However, it did appear that there was a recreation of some aspects of that comfort within this marginalized realm, and without the supposed prerequisite of property ownership. It seemed odd that this space could exist within a capital-bound economy that was almost always inhospitable to the needs of homeless people.

Realizing that the kind of vast and far-reaching structural change that could alleviate homelessness across the country is not something that will, or can, take place immediately, I think that the Mad Housers' approach could be an imperfect, yet realistic, grassroots solution. While their approach does not tear down and reconfigure oppressive structures, it does appear to challenge them through finding certain windows of opportunity for direct action within the urban economy. However, what remains unclear is the extent to which homeless people share the political agenda that informs and drives the actions of the Mad Housers.

1.2 Research Question

Fundamentally, I desire to answer one key question that I have identified as being at the heart of my proposed study:

- Do homeless people in Athens share the underlying political ideology behind the spatial practices of the Mad Housers?

⁴ Field notes, 11/03/07

I will examine the ways in which homeless residents of Athens accept the political goals of the Mad Housers' approach to private property, thus attempting to determine where the work of the Mad Housers lies on the continuum between direct service and direct action.

1.3 Organization of the Thesis

The second chapter of my thesis details the literature that will provide the theoretical support behind my analysis of the political interaction between the Mad Housers organization and members of the local homeless population. This chapter is organized into two subsections that contextualize the Mad Housers within previous literature about spatial practice, homelessness, and community organizing. The first subsection lays down fundamental ideas about how social engagement with, and struggle over, space are essential components to defining a particular space. I argue that the overarching framework of private property laws forces homeless people into a constant headfirst struggle with property owners over the definition of certain urban spaces. Therefore, I argue that for direct action regarding issues of rights for homeless people to be successful, it must redefine and reconstruct a space for the purposes of homeless individuals in opposition to the set of laws that attempt to define that space. Then, I begin a description of charity, arguing that, while charity can provide momentary relief, it does not and cannot foment structural change. After a description of the relationship between charity and homelessness, I describe the differences between direct service and direct action. Charity, as a form of direct service, is not interested in contesting current power relations. Here, there is an interesting relationship between direct service, charity, and the Mad Housers. While the Mad Housers don't currently desire to actively protest power dynamics and anger property owners, and they don't seek to politically organize homeless people, they are put in an awkward position

by the nature of their “charity.” Thus, for the Mad Housers to effectively provide free shelter to homeless people, they must share a homeless individual’s lack of obedience on the issue of trespassing and breaking private property restrictions to a certain degree. Instead of this being an explicit representation of either the Mad Housers’, or the homeless person’s, political standpoint, it is really more of a necessary reaction to the condition of homeless individuals with respect to shelter and settlement.

In the second subsection of the chapter, I attempt to assert some general characteristics about the political position of the Mad Housers through a description of the history of the organization. I acknowledge that the organization has taken more directly confrontational approaches in the past, such as during the 1988 Democratic National Convention. However, more commonly, they merely desire to put a roof over someone’s head. If the nature of their huts stirs up controversy by their very existence, then they can be forced into political negotiations, as in Chicago. Nevertheless, they are more likely to dismantle a hut and move it to another location if they are told by the police that its presence is a problem. In this sense, I believe that it is quite difficult to determine where they stand on a continuum between direct service and direct action, in addition to which side they represent, if we see property laws as fundamentally in opposition to a homeless person’s existence.

In the third chapter, I detail my methods of data collection and analysis. Chapter three describes the location of my research, the specific methodological approach that I used to obtain my data, the nature of my data, and the methodological approach that I used for analyzing my data. In this chapter, I also detail the academic sources for my methodological approach. Generally, in my research, I have studied the interactions between the Mad Housers organization and homeless individuals within the spaces of homeless encampments, particularly Tent City in

Athens, Georgia and Funtown in Atlanta. In this chapter, I explain my reasons for using an approach of participant observation within the Mad Housers in order to study the relationship between their work and the beliefs and desires of the homeless people they seek to serve and assist. I also explain my ideas about the importance of specific interview locations regarding the differences between my positionality as a homed graduate student and the positionality of Mad Housers members and homeless individuals. Then, I iterate my reasons for using an active interview style, as well as why I chose my specific method of coding and analysis.

In the fourth chapter, I proceed with the analysis of my data. Here, I use my data to support my findings and establish the basis for my conclusion. Here, I include my interview data, field notes, and personal experiences in order to respond to my initial research question and reflect upon specific concerns from my literature review in the second chapter. Thus, in the fourth chapter, I attempt to determine the ways in which, as well as the degree to which, homeless individuals share the goals of the Mad Housers. This is then the basis of determining the nature of the community organizing that the Mad Housers perform. From this analysis, I have gained insight into how the Mad Housers may represent a new type of community organizing that does not fit the historical mold.

In the fifth and final chapter, I conclude my thesis with a review of my initial research question. Then, I move on to a summary of my main argument in light of my attempts to answer my original research question. Here, I iterate the ways in which my initial research question has led to new findings and questions that could push my research into other related areas of activist research. As a reflection of these findings, I begin to detail how the Mad Housers may be a response to new socioeconomic circumstances. In this way, while they may represent a new type of community organizing, they may also reflect and belong to a larger, increasingly common

trend of combinations of, and alliances between, direct service and direct action responses to the issues surrounding homelessness.

CHAPTER 2: SPATIAL PRACTICE, COMMUNITY ACTION, HOMELESSNESS, AND THE MAD HOUSERS

2.1 Spatial Practice

In order to understand the complicated nature of urban space and the relationship between space and social practice, many scholars have turned to the French theorist Henri Lefebvre. Don Mitchell, in particular, has engaged with Lefebvre's concept of "the right to the city" in his book of the same name. In *The Right to the City*, Mitchell claims that a citizen's right to urban space is dependent upon how urban spaces are formed and challenged through social engagement with those spaces.⁵ Here, Mitchell suggests that for many on the lower end of the social hierarchy, the assertion of this right can only occur through struggle. Thus, there is a "need not just to produce public space... but to actively *take* it."⁶ For Mitchell, cities only represent a social improvement upon the isolation of rural life if they are places of social activism:

In the city, different people with different projects must necessarily struggle with one another over the shape of the city, the terms of access to the public realm, and even the rights of citizenship. Out of this struggle the city as a work –as an *oeuvre*, as a collective if not singular project –emerges.⁷

While urban spaces may be planned, parceled, and intended for specific limited uses, it is ultimately the social engagements with these spaces, whether they accept or contest the intended purposes, that continuously redefine the spaces of the urban *oeuvre*.

⁵ Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 2003) 5.

⁶ Ibid, 5-6.

⁷ Ibid, 18.

While cities concentrate social interaction and lay the foundations for political activism and social movements, Mitchell argues that there is a lurking menace. “More and more the spaces of the modern city are being produced *for* us rather than *by* us.”⁸ As cities seek to rein in their peripheries in search of expanded profits, citizens find that they often have less power to use urban space to serve their wants and needs while facing the precedence taken by the price that urban space could possibly fetch if exchanged on the market. In a seemingly counterintuitive confrontation, it is the idea of private property that runs headfirst into the fruition of liberty and justice concerning freedom of movement and settlement, desegregation, the right to be homeless, and the right to freely access shelter. In contrast to these freedoms, it is the domination of exchange-value, through the concept of private property, which wrenches urban space away from its connection to human needs and full productive capabilities. Such processes come to create the realm of what Lefebvre terms “abstract space.” Encapsulating Lefebvre’s conceptualization of the conflict between abstract spaces of exchange and spaces of social use, Byron A. Miller writes that for Lefebvre:

The essential spatial contradiction of society is the confrontation between *abstract space*, or the externalization of economic and political practices originating with the capitalist class and the state, and *social space* [also called concrete space], or the space of use values produced by the complex interaction of all classes in the pursuit of everyday life.⁹

In light of this essential spatial contradiction, it is possible to see how the space of a homeless encampment precariously offers homeless people a degree of liberty, while simultaneously hyper-accentuating an ever-present tension between property rights and human rights. Although a particular piece of property may hold a great degree of utility for a large number of homeless people, the foremost factor produced by overarching legal and economic structures is the land’s

⁸ Ibid, 18.

⁹ Byron A. Miller, Geography and Social Movements (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 11.

exchange-value. As Don Mitchell affirms, “If a built environment possesses use value to homeless people (for sleeping, for bathing, for panhandling) but that use value threatens what exchange value may still exist, or may be created, then these use values must be shed.”¹⁰ For Mitchell, it is the exchange-value of a parcel of land that ultimately dictates its fate.

However, a space with utility for homeless people may not always have to accept destruction in the face of exchange. Referring to shantytowns and other urban peripheries, Lefebvre agrees that “sooner or later...the existing center and the forces of homogenization must seek to absorb all such differences.”¹¹ Nevertheless, he allows that the homogenizing forces of urban development succeed when peripheral settlements merely “retain a defensive posture and no counterattack is mounted from their side.”¹² Seeing the necessity of action, Lefebvre further asserts that “it is struggle alone which prevents abstract space from taking over the whole planet and papering over all differences.”¹³ What remains to be demonstrated is what type of struggle those disenfranchised by abstract space need to command in reasserting their right to space within the fabric of contemporary urban society.

The capitulation of social space in its confrontation with abstract space is the spatial expression of what Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward introduce as the basic dynamic of power in our society:

Those who control the means of physical coercion, and those who control the means of producing wealth, have power over those who do not... Since coercive force can be used to gain control of the means of producing wealth, and since control of wealth can be used to gain coercive force, these two sources of power tend over time to be drawn together within one ruling class.¹⁴

¹⁰ Mitchell, The Right to the City 176, 177.

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991) 373.

¹² Ibid, 373.

¹³ Ibid, 55.

¹⁴ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail (New York: Vintage, 1979) 1.

Therefore, with wealth and coercive force drawn together, our cities tend towards freezing the spatial fabric in ways that diminish the ability of the majority to access and use space in creative ways. Our faith in private property as an expression of freedom allows for a legal framework to decide what property is and how it can be used, thereby embodying an example of what Piven and Cloward refer to as a ritual that reinforces inequality.¹⁵ Private property and the legal framework encasing it tend to misdirect aggression inward and away from the exploitative sources of power, frequently dividing oppressed people. Neighbors may point to each other when speaking of the sources of their community's problems, while believing that their only recourse to change things for the better is found somewhere in the voting process, or in the established laws, ordinances, and codes of the land.

However, the voting process and legal system do not always serve our needs as well as we think. As Piven and Cloward make clear when speaking of the American political climate of the 1960s, "So long as lower-class groups abided by the norms governing the electoral-representative system, they would have little influence... protest tactics which defied political norms were not simply the recourse of troublemakers and fools. For the poor, they were the only recourse."¹⁶ For the oppressed, different forms of political participation are frequently needed, which not only require a change in consciousness, but also a transformation of behavior. In the eyes of Piven and Cloward, this initiates the emergence of a protest movement whereby "people who ordinarily consider themselves helpless come to believe that they have some capacity to alter their lot."¹⁷ These protest movements do not need to embody any specific form, their forms are "determined by the institutional context in which people live and work."¹⁸ What every

¹⁵ Ibid, 1.

¹⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹⁷ Ibid, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid, 14.

protest movement does necessarily entail, however, is a reassertion of the right to space and a reworking of the definition of their spatial context.

The reworking and redefining of space, along with the transformation of human behavior and consciousness, are, in fact, what Lefebvre once identified as the fundamental ingredients of a successful social movement in *The Production of Space*. For Lefebvre, “Any revolutionary ‘project’ today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.”¹⁹ It is the building of a collective consciousness that believes in self-empowerment along with the building of collective spaces that reinforce this consciousness that interact to produce successful social movements. Citing Manuel Castells,²⁰ Miller highlights a case example of the intersection between place building, consciousness shift, and social organizing within a citizens’ movement in the Madrid neighborhood of Orcasitas:

Orcasitas, in common with most shantytowns in Madrid and elsewhere, was a fragmented, hostile, and alienated world, made up of individuals fighting each other for survival. One of the first initiatives of the association was to break down these inner social walls and to establish a cultural bond... A major element in this strategy was the building of the association’s public hall in the centre of the neighborhood... The hall became the centre of a new communal life, a place where you could take a warm shower, drink beer at a reduced price, play cards, attend meetings, hold discussions with neighbors, and make friends... This way a new social world evolved for the neighborhood with celebrations, picnics, and in shared mobilizations.²¹

In this fashion, Castells demonstrates the theory in action. Here, one gets a good sense of the simultaneity between the reassertion of the right to the city, the reconstruction of social space, the creation of social networks, and the transformed attitudes towards a belief in empowerment

¹⁹ Lefebvre, 166-167.

²⁰ Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1983) 246.

²¹ Miller, 22.

and collective action. But, how does this change in consciousness occur, and why does it occur so infrequently?

Not only do we tend to fear the uncertainty of rebellion, as well as the possible repercussions, but rich and poor citizens alike may believe that their position within the social hierarchy is deserved:

At most times and in most places, and especially in the United States, the poor are led to believe that their destitution is deserved, and that the riches and power that others command are also deserved... Riches and power are ascribed to personal qualities of industry or talent; it follows that those who have little or nothing have only what they deserve.²²

Perhaps guilt and self-loathing among the poor have effectively minimized instances of protest and rebellion in the United States, allowing for few opportunities for equality to arise. If the lower classes tend to resign themselves to their position, our society's leaders can bank on this fatalism and refrain from bargaining with the less privileged over the state's responsibilities to its citizens.

Importantly, these feelings of helplessness, guilt, and the conviction that poverty is a personal fault are often intensified by the proliferation of charitable organizations throughout contemporary American society. In the wake of our government's frequent avoidance of the problem of poverty, organizations of sympathetic and well-meaning people have risen up to fill the gap. However, despite the good intentions of these groups, their actions not only help to wash the government's hands clean of the problem, but they also have the effect of promoting disempowerment by withdrawing any rights under law to necessary services. Understanding this enormous disconnect between the goodwill of the many morally oriented citizens of the United States and the actions of their government, which has sworn to protect them, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once stated:

²² Piven and Cloward, 6.

A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life's roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life's highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.²³

Thus, King sees the compassion of individual people as not only incapable of repairing that which is the responsibility of the whole of organized society, but also as the potential for realizing the need for what he terms a “true revolution of values” that will seek to restructure our society in a more egalitarian manner.

Perhaps acknowledging the necessity for this “true revolution of values” in light of the institutionalized inequality within our society, Janet Poppendieck makes the ironic existence of charity in the United States the subject of an entire book. Early on in her book, Poppendieck writes, “The resurgence of charity is at once a *symptom* and a *cause* of our society’s failure to face up to and deal with the erosion of equality... this massive charitable endeavor serves to relieve pressure for more fundamental solutions.”²⁴ For Poppendieck, these charitable endeavors relieve pressure for fundamental solutions by prioritizing band-aid solutions that confront a persistent systemic problem with a temporary obstruction. Speaking of the proliferation of soup kitchens and food pantries in the early 1980s, Poppendieck asserts, “They were a retreat from rights to gifts. Poor people might be, and often are, very well treated in charitable emergency food programs, but they have no rights, at least no legally enforceable rights, to the benefits such programs provide.”²⁵ As Poppendieck continues, these charities not only reinforce social segregation and disempowerment by eroding the notion of legal entitlement to necessities, but

²³ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Beyond Vietnam,” MLK Online, 27 Mar. 2009
<<http://www.mlkonline.net/vietnam.html>>

²⁴ Janet Poppendieck, Sweet Charity?: Emergency Food and the End of Entitlement (New York: Penguin, 1999) 5.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 12.

also through diminishing convenience and consumer choice, as well as increasing the visibility of the poor.

In terms of homelessness, it is possible to see the rise of charitable housing organizations and Christian shelters as having similar effects. The more the government has refrained from the provision of housing, the more housing has become a privilege. This has then resulted in fewer options for the very poor, and therefore less power, as homeless people must look to the temporary provisions of charities for shelter. Additionally, as homeless people find themselves standing in line for food and shelter, or sleeping in uncomfortable places outside, they consequently find themselves in the public eye under constant public scrutiny. Here, others can not only single them out as the miserable and powerless, but they can also see it as their special right to be able to tell them what to do. As Mitchell relates:

This assault takes the form of passing and implementing a suite of “quality of life” initiatives and laws that seek to highly regulate street behavior, when and where (or if) people can sleep in public, and how people can and cannot beg... The intent is clear: to control behavior and space such that homeless people cannot do what they must do in order to survive without breaking laws. Survival itself is criminalized.²⁶

Although these regulations are often the result of our discomfort in the presence of homelessness, Mitchell emphasizes that these measures, like our reliance upon charity, also fail to restructure what King refers to as “the edifice which produces beggars”:

Criminalizing necessary behaviors does nothing to address such root causes as the lack of affordable, safe housing in most cities, structural unemployment (or, as I would put it, the need to maintain a reserve army of the unemployed), and the pairing of poverty and despair that turns drug and alcohol addiction and mental illness into an issue of *housing* for a significant portion of the population.²⁷

Under these circumstances, whereby their very existence is made illegal, homeless people may find self-empowerment to be an increasingly elusive dream. Here, the rollout of charity and the

²⁶ Mitchell, *The Right to the City* 161, 163.

²⁷ Ibid, 163.

simultaneous withdrawal of rights to food and shelter, working in tandem with the criminalization of an increasingly visible homelessness, widen the rift between homeless people and democratic participation.

Among these contemporary responses of criminalization and charity there arises an additional problem. In the face of the growing trend to criminalize homelessness and activities associated with homelessness, there appears to be a drive to define homelessness within the framework of personal health. In other words, if an individual is homeless, there must be some pathological reason; otherwise, the person is merely exhibiting deviant behaviors that must be dealt with punitively. As Vincent Lyon-Callo writes in his book *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance*:

While many cities have opted to criminalize homelessness, federal agencies and other communities have responded by advocating a “continuum of care” approach. Under this model, communities develop programs to treat symptoms thought to create homelessness, and shelters offer the services understood as necessary to help people obtain housing. As a result, a wide range of social service programs function to help homeless people treat their disorders and “transition” out of homelessness... However, the continuum of care approach does not fundamentally address questions of access to, and distribution of, resources in the community.²⁸

Therefore, citing Vicente Navarro,²⁹ Lyon-Callo continues:

The medicalization of social problems plays the ideological function of legitimizing existing class relations and serves to “depoliticize what is intrinsically a political problem. Thus, within a medical framework, what requires a *collective* answer is presented as an *individual* problem, demanding an *individual* response” (my italics).³⁰

In this way, homelessness is defined as a condition existing almost entirely independent of socioeconomic structures. Instead, the problem is put squarely on the backs of individuals, who

²⁸ Vincent Lyon-Callo, *Inequality, Poverty, and Neoliberal Governance: Activist Ethnography in the Homeless Sheltering Industry* (Orchard Park, NY: Broadview Press, 2004) 51.

²⁹ Vicente Navarro, *Crisis, Health, and Medicine: A Social Critique* (New York: Tavistock, 1986) 40.

³⁰ Lyon-Callo, 51.

are told that their inability to attain shelter is the direct result of a personal condition that must be dealt with on an individual basis.

In light of the deep-seated nature of this point of view, it is rarely surprising when people take an openly callous approach towards homelessness, suggesting that they have no right to interact with the public at all, unless they undergo some sort of conversion to legitimacy that only takes place within the shelters. Speaking in favor of a Las Vegas ordinance intended to prohibit feeding homeless people in city parks, one editorialist lashed out at the public food providers, accusing them of “drawing ‘the homeless’ [editorialist’s quotations] away from such shelters and into city parks and playgrounds, effectively preventing their intended use by the neighborhood children and families.”³¹ The editorialist then pointed out that Las Vegas never banned feeding homeless people, but that the city has “continued to encourage the missions and soup kitchens that feed hundreds while observing sensible health and hygiene regulations, precisely because those are the places where other interventions are made available to those who aim to get back on their feet.”³² Effectively, the editorialist doles out a one-two punch of the type of sensibility that Lyon-Callo identifies as essentially counterproductive. From this viewpoint, homeless people only deserve assistance when they come to the correct place, admit to a personal problem, and conform to an intervention program. However, this does nothing to admit social responsibility for what is essentially a social problem. Instead, it demands that the victims of socioeconomic injustice remove themselves from the civic plane and deal with their supposedly unique pathological problems away from others.

Furthermore, many of the pathological problems associated with homelessness are the result of homelessness, not the cause of it. According to researchers David Snow and Leon

³¹ Editorial, “Feeding the Homeless in Parks,” The Las Vegas Review-Journal, 27 August 2007, reviewjournal.com, 14 Dec. 2009 <<http://www.lvrj.com/opinion/9390871.html>>

³² Ibid.

Anderson, such pathologies, in most instances, “do not flow from frailties of character but are rooted in the profoundly dismal situation in which the homeless find themselves. Confronted with a similar set of circumstances, the behaviors, cognitions, and faces of most citizens would, no doubt, be much the same.”³³ Snow and Anderson’s observations remind me of something a man camping under the North Avenue Bridge in Athens once said. While I was helping a local charity pick up trash at his campsite, the man exclaimed to me, “Of course I drink. I drink because I live under a bridge!” At the time, I laughed with him at the truthful simplicity of his words. Certainly, I would drink in the face of much less dire problems and I haven’t yet lost my home. I have no doubt that homelessness would encourage a more serious habit. Nevertheless, descriptions of how homelessness occurs in the United States frequently point to such personal problems as the source.

When guests arrive at a shelter, they are often asked to state their reason for becoming homeless. However, according to Lyon-Callo, this is rarely an open-ended question. Instead, the intake forms provide suggestions such as: “substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence, eviction, loss of income, being new to the area, or being chronically homeless.”³⁴ For Lyon-Callo, this type of introspective diagnosis helps to further feelings of self-blame and guilt among homeless individuals who seek the assistance of shelters and charities. Such “self-blaming and self-governing subjects who are rewarded for looking within their selves for the solution to their individual homelessness can scarcely be expected to spend time on resisting systemic issues.”³⁵ In this way, such a process of self-diagnosis and self-regulation becomes another important moment in the disempowerment of the extremely poor. With the contextualization of

³³ David A. Snow and Leon Anderson, Down on Their Luck: A Study of Homeless Street People (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993) 315.

³⁴ Ibid, 55.

³⁵ Ibid, 81.

homelessness as a problem that is unique to the individual, a divide and conquer technique is evident. Because many come to attribute their own lack of shelter to situations that have relatively little to do with the homelessness of others, they are unlikely to unite with other homeless individuals in protest against a common enemy or root cause of their condition.

More than being psychologically debilitating, the conflict between charity and the empowerment of poor people is simultaneously the essence of the conflict between the concepts of direct service and direct action. According to the Midwest Academy's manual *Organizing for*

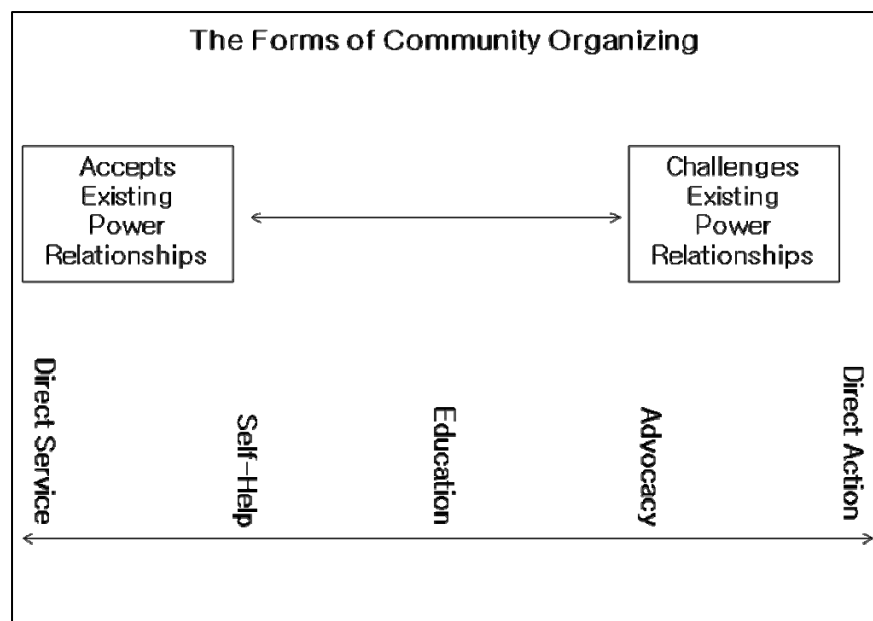


Figure 1: The Forms of Community Organizing

Social Change, a direct action approach requires that “the people directly affected by the problem take action to solve it.”³⁶ Understanding the degree to which poor people share and reproduce the agenda of a specific organization with a direct focus can demonstrate both the efficacy of the organization’s approach in empowering poor people, as well as the extent to which they challenge existing power relationships (see the above figure³⁷). For the Midwest

³⁶ Midwest Academy. *Organize!: Organizing for Social Change, a manual for activists in the 1990’s*, eds. Kim Bobo, Steve Max, and Jackie Kendall (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 1991) 11.

³⁷ Ibid, 11.

Academy, in agreement with King and Poppendieck, the problem is not that the majority of people are apathetic and unconcerned about obtaining a better existence, but that these people must become organized to challenge existing power relationships to obtain the things that they need:

If organizers encounter people who seem apathetic, it is because we haven't been able to convince them that organizing is one way to get what they need. In fact, we usually don't know what they need because we don't understand their self-interest.³⁸

Furthermore, mirroring the opinions of King and Poppendieck, the Midwest Academy identifies a difference between the kinds of organizing that constitute direct service (charities) and those which constitute direct action. From these forms of organizing, the Midwest Academy privileges the direct action approach because it is the one that has the greatest capacity to reverse the marginalization and disempowerment of people.

Although direct service work, such as that of charitable organizations, is adept at identifying and getting some people what they need, a direct action approach attempts to bring about an upwelling of action from among a group of disenfranchised people to find a solution to a structural problem that serves the needs of *many* people. Because a direct action approach seeks to overhaul some aspect of the current power dynamic, such an approach often works to help all members of a class, whether they actively participate in an organization or not. "Whether the improvement is better health-care, lower auto insurance rates, street lighting, or police protection, the direct action organization attempts to win it for large numbers of people."³⁹ However, despite a direct action organization's possibly grandiose ambitions, a direct action strategy must be able to itemize its larger goals into a set of smaller, realistic objectives:

Even when the problem being addressed is very large or long term –crime, unemployment, discrimination, or world hunger, for example– it must be broken down

³⁸ Ibid, 8.

³⁹ Ibid, 11.

into short-term attainable goals, called issues. Without winnable issue goals, there is no reality principle, no way to measure success.⁴⁰

Therefore, if the overarching goal is to win housing and shelter rights for homeless people in a city, we might start by helping the people living in that city's homeless encampments to win a more immediate goal. We may want to organize them to exercise their "right to stay put,"⁴¹ or to assert their control over a particular space by helping them build shelters that are more permanent and fixed in space than a tent. Problems arise when the goals are too broad and no real victory ever appears in sight. As Saul Alinsky states, "*A tactic that drags on too long becomes a drag. Man can sustain militant interest in any issue for only a limited time, after which it becomes a ritualistic commitment, like going to church on Sunday mornings.*"⁴² The people involved begin to lose passion when successes cannot be measured incrementally towards the achievement of the greater goal.

Additionally, since the fear of uncertainty becomes a frequent barrier to direct action organizing, a direct action approach must not only seek short-term winnable goals, but also engage participants within their experience in an amusing way. "When an action or tactic is outside the experience of the people, the result is confusion, fear, and retreat... Go outside the experience of the enemy, stay inside the experience of your people. Emphasize tactics that your people will enjoy."⁴³ These tactics are fundamental for the direct action organizing, because of its requirement that the people directly confronted with the problem take action to eradicate the problem. Identifying the self-interests, life experiences, comfort levels, likes and dislikes of

⁴⁰ Ibid, 11.

⁴¹ Mitchell, *The Right to the City* 220.

⁴² Saul D. Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals: A Practical Primer for Realistic Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989) 128.

⁴³ Ibid, 127, 138-139.

potential participants all contribute to one's ability to successfully mobilize people against an identifiable enemy.

Iterating the importance of tactics that seek realistic goals within the experience of participants, Anders Corr describes the problems that a San Francisco squatter movement had in appealing to homeless minorities:

Homes Not Jails has also had difficulty attracting non-white participants to public takeovers, where the risk of arrest is high and the immediate material benefits usually nonexistent. HNJ and other squatters have tried to form coalitions with non-white groups; but in most cases, non-white groups were generally uninterested in short-term rough squatting, with its risk of weekly eviction. This reflects the larger experience of urban squatting in the United States. Usually, longer-term poor people become interested when chances of success increase, when individual squats last long periods... or when large movements gain permanent and legal rights to a building for a homeless shelter... Otherwise, these groups have better options and no punk ascetic idealism that sees squatting as an esthetic in and of itself.⁴⁴

For non-white homeless people in San Francisco, Homes Not Jails was just another quick way to go to jail –a place that many of them desperately sought to avoid. However, for many of the young white people, who were already engaging in homelessness as a protest against private property, the anticipation of arrest was no great stretch of their comfort zone. As Alinsky asserts, “Men don’t like to step abruptly out of the security of familiar experience; they need a bridge to cross from their own experience to a new way.”⁴⁵

In an example of how Homes Not Jails affected this kind of change in consciousness, Corr describes how one particular building was squatted in a downtrodden neighborhood in the early 1990s. The building that they squatted had been “an eyesore in the neighborhood, the landlord had long abandoned it to drug addicts and the deterioration of San Francisco’s saltwater

⁴⁴ Anders Corr, No Trespassing!: Squatting, Rent Strikes and Land Struggles Worldwide (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1999) 26.

⁴⁵ Alinsky, xxi.

fog and constant drizzle.”⁴⁶ When Homes Not Jails broke in, they organized a workday to refurbish the building. During the process, many neighborhood residents stopped by to meet the renovation crew; “all of them were really happy that this vacant, ugly building was being repainted and would have windows instead of plywood.”⁴⁷ Because of this positive response, the police took a tolerant approach; and, as Corr notes, all of the residents at this squat were African American. In a way, the workday break-in/renovation worked to build a positive perspective on squatting within the wider neighborhood, while it also created a space where the previously victimized felt that they could sleep in safety.

While Homes Not Jails attempts to win rights for homeless people by breaking into, and squatting within, already constructed vacant buildings, the Atlanta-based Mad Housers take a different approach towards achieving the same victories. The Mad Housers do not help homeless people break into vacant buildings, but instead help them to build their own shelters throughout vacant and unused spaces that are relatively unencumbered by anti-homeless measures. Through this action, the Mad Housers hope to help homeless people obtain a degree of social privacy and power over their identity, while simultaneously fostering a greater degree of protection against the threats of weather, theft, and violence.

2.2 The Mad Housers’ Political Ideology and Their Use of Space

The history of the Mad Housers began in 1987 when a group of Georgia Tech architecture students embarked on a building effort, which began as a graduate research

⁴⁶ Corr, 26.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 26.

assignment.⁴⁸ These students, combining service with protest, “realized that homelessness was becoming a problem in the Atlanta area, and that with simple, inexpensive materials they could design and build warmer, safer shelters than what the homeless could do on their own.”⁴⁹ From here, interest spread, and the idea quickly spawned an organization.⁵⁰ On the surface, the Mad Housers operate in a simple and efficient way, directly responding to the needs of Atlanta’s poorest citizens. They trespass onto property where homeless people, who have requested a home, are camping, and they build a six-feet wide by eight-feet long by ten-feet high structure out of a mix of purchased and salvaged materials.⁵¹ The huts cost approximately \$350 for the Mad Housers to build, but because most of their funds come from donations, they ask for nothing in return from those for whom they build.⁵²

In these activities, the Mad Housers are keenly aware of the full assortment of socio-spatial arrangements that urban governments attempt to use in order to make homelessness invisible. Their simple actions directly confront well-established laws and beliefs about property and the aforementioned desires of investment and development. For example, a recent article on the Mad Housers claims that “to even just walk in Downtown Atlanta you must have papers, state issued identification.”⁵³ In response, the Mad Housers help their “clients” to obtain these documents.⁵⁴ City governments know that homeless people often travel without official documents, like driver’s licenses, so they use this secondary characteristic as a way to segregate

⁴⁸ Mamatas. See also: “Atlanta Journal; Raising the Roof To Aid the Homeless,” The New York Times, 15 March 1988, The New York Times, 13 Dec. 2007

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DEFDA1531F936A25750C0A96E948260>>

⁴⁹ Mamatas.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Bo Emerson, “The Shelter People,” ajc.com, 16 October 2002, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 13 Dec. 2007 <<http://madhousers.org/ajc20021016.htm>>

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Joanna Letz, “Mad Houser Huts; On the Other Side of Atlanta’s Air Conditioned Civic Center Walls,” Poor Magazine Online, 31 July 2007, Poor Magazine, 13 Dec. 2007

<<http://www.poormagazine.com/index.cfm?L1=news&story=1813>>

⁵⁴ Ibid.

and exclude homeless people from broad swaths of city space without resorting to prohibitions on “homelessness” itself. Such euphemistic laws are common across the contemporary American urban landscape as central business districts attempt to exclude (through government assistance) those they deem offensive without being explicitly exclusionary.

While some approaches to policing homelessness appear to target behaviors that are most common among homeless people, other approaches cast a wider net that should frighten more of us for their potential ramifications regarding the democratic freedoms of society at large. Here, Don Mitchell and Nik Heynen have pointed to a 2003 U.S. Supreme Court ruling, which responded to the policies put into practice by the city of Richmond, Virginia, stating that “it was perfectly legal for public and semipublic authorities to designate certain public streets and sidewalks as ‘no trespassing zones,’ and to authorize their use only for what the Richmond police called ‘legitimate social and business purposes.’”⁵⁵ In this sense, there seems to be a new strategy of making everyone potential criminals so that the police may selectively enforce laws and ordinances against people who are unwelcome. Thus, when a gay man was unwelcome in the Honolulu Library for signing onto a gay-oriented chat room, the city used Hawaii’s recently passed Act 50 to ban the man from the public space for a year.⁵⁶ While the act was promoted as a response to visible homelessness,⁵⁷ there does not appear to be any hindrance to its application against the freedom of speech and expression. Referring to the rollout of these rather restrictive policies, Mitchell claims:

The goal for cities in the 1990s [and the 21st Century] has been to experiment with new modes of regulation over the bodies and actions of the homeless in the rather desperate

⁵⁵ Don Mitchell and Nik Heynen, “The Geography of Survival and the Right to the City,” *Urban Geography*, 30(6), (Columbia, MD: Bellwether Publishing, 2009) 621.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 620.

⁵⁷ James Gosner, “Suit Challenges Trespass Law,” *The Honolulu Advertiser*, 8 September 2004, The Honolulu Advertiser, 25 Feb. 2010 <<http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com>>

hope that this will maintain or enhance the exchangeability of the urban landscape in the global economy of largely equivalent places.⁵⁸

These new modes of regulation do not merely affect homeless people; instead, they are unveiling a troubling conflict between the market freedoms of the property owners and the social freedoms of the wider citizenry. In response to this isolating cityscape, the Mad Housers have become elastic in their approach.

For example, the Mad Housers' method of assisting homeless people in obtaining legal identification successfully nullifies Atlanta's contemporary pass laws in a manner consistent with the social movement theories of Alinsky. When describing tactics for social change in his book, *Rules for Radicals*, Alinsky delineates thirteen rules of power tactics; the fourth and fifth rules are most applicable here:

The fourth rule is: *Make the enemy live up to their own book of rules*. You can kill them with this, for they can no more obey their own rules than the Christian church can live up to Christianity.

The fourth rule carries with it the fifth rule: *Ridicule is man's most potent weapon*. It is almost impossible to counterattack ridicule. Also it infuriates the opposition, who then react to your advantage.⁵⁹

For the Mad Housers, elasticity and the ability of their work to ridicule the current situation are probably their greatest attributes. In their work, they attempt to find a healthy balance between visible social criticism and survival assistance for the homeless population. This necessarily creates difficult contradictions between attempts to protect squatters from the society that oppresses them and increasing social awareness of the problem of American homelessness. On this topic, Amy Phillips and Susan Hamilton describe a situation that perfectly demonstrates the Mad Housers' elasticity and ability to ridicule the actions of city government:

Before the July 1988 Democratic National Convention in Atlanta, several homeless men were evicted from beneath viaducts near the downtown convention hall but were referred

⁵⁸ Mitchell, *The Right to the City* 177.

⁵⁹ Saul Alinsky, *Rules For Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971, 1989) 128.

to the Mad Housers, who provided them with huts elsewhere. A red, white, and blue hut was erected outside the convention hall and was used as a booth to hand out Mad Housers literature. After the convention, the hut was moved beneath the viaduct, where it remained inhabited and in full view of passing motorists, still painted in its patriotic colors.⁶⁰

Therefore, not only did the Mad Housers succeed in providing new shelters to the homeless men, whom the city evicted from their previous homes, they also succeeded in simultaneously raising awareness of the situation and ridiculing the oppressive nature of a supposedly democratic affair. Furthermore, they countered the government's initial wave of annihilation by moving the newly erected shack to a highly visible location within the same area of eviction. Without any question, this is more than just charity of the sort that one would associate with shelters and soup kitchens. Regardless of what statements some members may make in order to widen their support, there is an inherently political aspect to the Mad Housers. By building in areas with high visibility to regions of intense reinvestment, they have at certain times taken a very confrontational approach, thereby intensifying the shaming of governmental exclusion and societal ignorance of homelessness.

Under past circumstances, the actions of the Mad Housers have even forced city officials to implement change. This was the case when Andy Patrick initiated a chapter of the Mad Housers in Chicago after seeing an exhibit on alternative housing at a local art gallery in 1991.⁶¹ Patrick's Chicago chapter of the Mad Housers quickly began building huts at a site called Tranquility City in a response to their city's lack of affordable housing and refusal to provide available housing. However, with the onset of winter, their huts became visible from the

⁶⁰ Amy Phillips and Susan Hamilton, "Huts for the Homeless: A Low-Technology Approach for Squatters in Atlanta, Georgia," *There's No Place Like Home*, ed. Anna Lou Dehavenon (Westport, CT and London: Bergin & Garvey, 1996) 86.

⁶¹ Don Terry, "Homeless Prefer Huts to Chicago's Public Housing," *The New York Times*, 13 June 1992, *The New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2007
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E0CE7DC1F3CF930A25755C0A964958260&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print>>

windows of Presidential Towers (a nearby luxury apartment building) and they were thrust into overwhelming publicity.⁶² Perhaps because of the severity of the season, the Chicago city government remained momentarily quiet. Nevertheless, with the stirrings of spring and warmer weather, Mayor Daley suddenly issued a statement that it was “not in the best interest of the city to allow these structures.”⁶³ To support his change of opinion, the Mayor cited problems with safety and building code violations.⁶⁴ The Mayor’s new decision resulted in the onset of protracted negotiations between the City of Chicago and the Mad Housers to find an acceptable solution.⁶⁵ While the Mad Housers were unable to change the city’s stance on the huts, effectively dissolving the Chicago chapter, their presence was able to “focus attention on the homeless and forced the city to find public housing for them.”⁶⁶ Thus, as David Wagner and Marcia Cohen suggest, “With just minimal resources and organizational structure, homeless and very poor people can achieve considerable success in affecting resource distribution on a local level.”⁶⁷ In the case of the Mad Housers, their efforts forced the City of Chicago to accept the reality that they had a problem with homelessness. By supporting the motion to dismantle the huts on the grounds that they were unsafe, the city felt compelled to give the inhabitants apartments in the city’s public housing system. In this case, the city’s continued attack on the legality of the huts, and their continued criminalization of homelessness, led to a rare and curious response. Essentially, the city was pressured to realize that, if it continued to call its homeless

⁶² Talmadge Wright, “Tranquility City: Self-Organization, Protest, and Collective Gains within a Chicago Homeless Encampment,” Marginal Spaces vol. 5, ed. Michael Peter Smith (New Brunswick, NJ and London: Transaction Publishers, 1995) 42, 44.

⁶³ Ibid, 43.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 43.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Terry.

⁶⁷ David Wagner and Marcia B. Cohen, “The Power of the People,” Social Problems, 38(4), (University of California Press, 1991)543.

citizens and Mad Housers activists “criminals” in front of great publicity, then it would have to find an effective legal solution to its problem of homelessness.

Thus, the work of the Mad Housers appears to attack the structural problems linked to homelessness on two fronts through their knowledge of the varied designations that property arrangements assign to different urban spaces. On one front, their work directly assists, and can empower, homeless individuals through the construction of functional shelters within spaces where they know that there is less probability of homeless people being forced to move. On the other front, they sometimes seek to promote a humanitarian response from society by constructing their huts as political statements in highly visible locations. In both cases, whether the hut serves a primarily functional purpose away from the public eye, or exists primarily as a visible symbol of civic neglect, the goal is the same: provide shelter to homeless Americans.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

3.1 Study Area

In addition to some comparative discussion about an Atlanta homeless camp known as Funtown, my research mainly focused on a single homeless camp in Athens, Georgia, known as Tent City.⁶⁸ Tent City exists on a combination of private property and public property, which is under the jurisdiction of the Georgia Department of Transportation.⁶⁹ Aside from the dwellings of the squatters, the environs of Tent City are comprised mostly of unimproved forest confined within a triangular space, which is bounded by the Athens Perimeter, Lexington Road, and Winterville Road.

I chose this site for several reasons. First, Tent City is one of most well-known homeless encampments in the area. Nevertheless, it is frequently known by name only. Often, Athens residents have a vague idea that it is a nearby campsite for homeless people; however, many people with whom I have spoken have no clear idea of where it is. Thus, it easily provides a mental canvas upon which people can place many imaginary descriptions of what it means to be homeless in Athens. Therefore, I think that the local focus of this research is of great importance. Through studying an existent space that rarely leaves the realm of local imagination, I desire to solidify the reality of homelessness as a widespread problem that manifests itself in even the smallest American cities. While many tend to overlook them, it requires no great effort to find the squatter camps that harbor our nation's poorest citizens. In this case, Tent City is only a few

⁶⁸ See Figure 1.

⁶⁹ Joe Johnson, "Cops trim borders of Tent City," *OnlineAthens*, 13 March 2008, Athens Banner-Herald, 30 March 2008 <http://www.onlineathens.com/stories/031308/news_2008031300252.shtml>

paces from three well-traveled local thoroughfares. Although many drivers pass by on a regular basis, their movement provides them little opportunity to notice the trail leading into the dense canopy of hardwood trees, bushes, and vines that conceals this space for most of the year. By studying this location, I wanted to observe the results of the Mad Housers' strategy within a focused space where they have not previously been active. Though the Mad Housers have been in existence for more than twenty years in several different cities, only in Atlanta have they been a continuous presence. By bringing the Mad Housers from Atlanta to Athens, I wanted to study the progression of a Mad Housers camp from its beginning. In my observations, I have paid close attention to the interactions between homeless residents and Mad Housers members during hut construction, as well as to the transformations that occurred within Tent City due to this work. In this way, I have become better positioned to judge the successes and failures of the work of the Mad Housers.

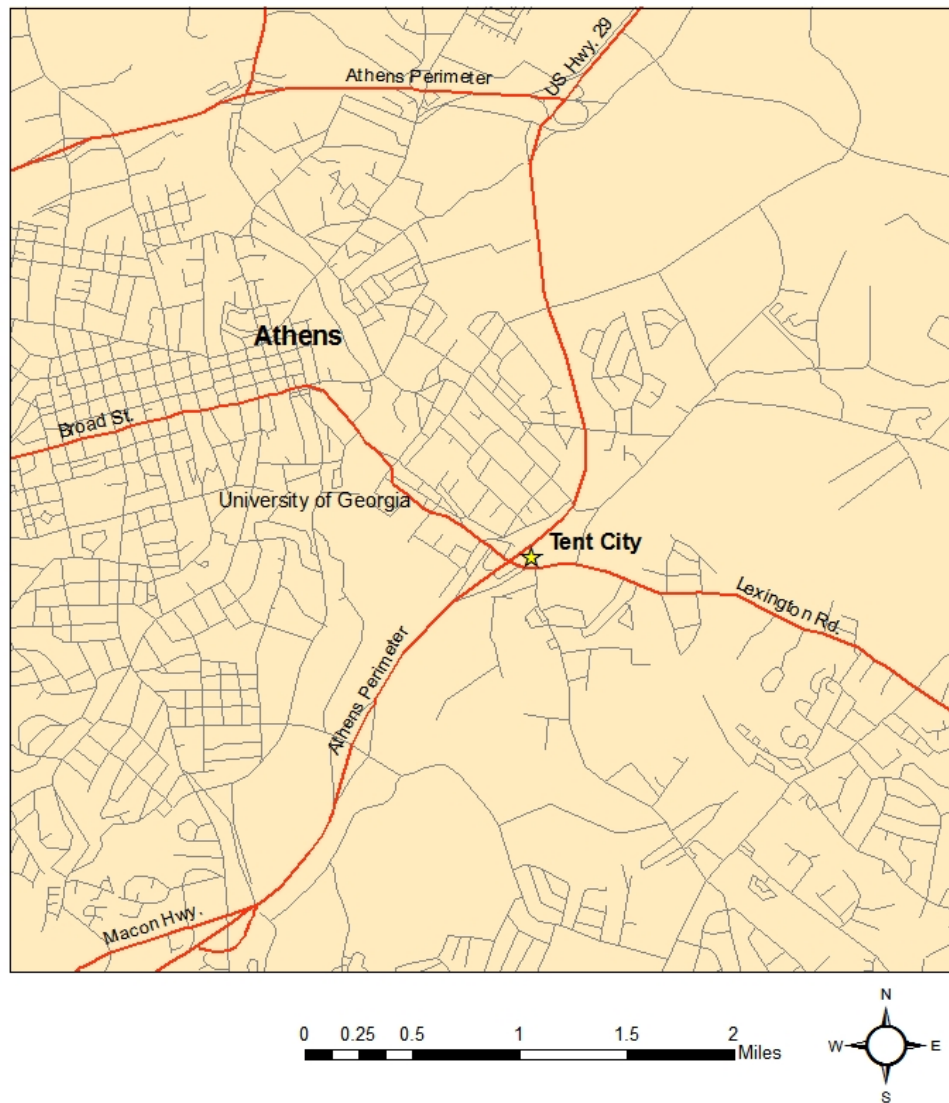


Figure 2: Location of Tent City

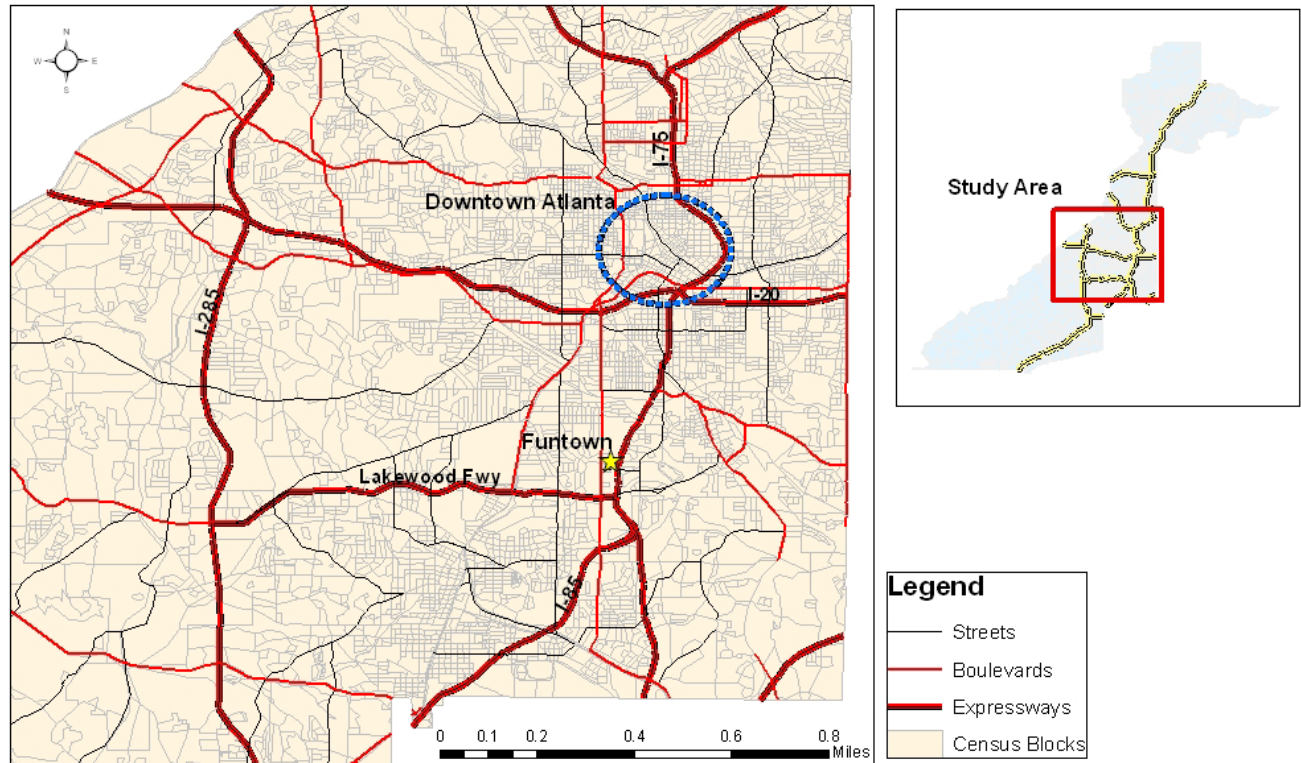


Figure 3: Location of Funtown

3.2 Summary of Personal Participation

For the last two-and-a-half years, I have participated continuously in Mad Housers activities in Athens and Atlanta. My data and personal knowledge are the result of countless hours of effort. This effort has not only resulted in getting to know several Mad Housers members and homeless citizens, but also garnered the efforts of the organization to build their first camp in Athens, Georgia.

My initial meeting with the Mad Housers was on the evening of the 17th of October, 2007 at the Defoor Center in Atlanta during one of their routine monthly meetings that are open to the public. At this meeting, I exchanged contact information with several members of the organization and expressed my interest in bringing the Mad Housers to Athens, Georgia. By

January, we were building the first of the huts at Tent City and have since built nine. Continued work has consisted primarily of completion, renovation, stove installment, and winterization of existing structures. I have compiled a large quantity of field notes extending back to October 2007, and I have added to this research through continued participation in the Mad Housers, as well as through several interviews with Tent City residents and Mad Housers members.

3.3 Participant Observation

I believe that it is important to gain a thorough understanding of the circumstances of American homelessness before making any earnest attempts at interviewing and data collection. Inasmuch as every researcher wishes to avoid being misled, it is important for the researcher to “become the student.”⁷⁰ In my research, this process of becoming the student has sought to uncover the personal narratives of homeless individuals and Mad Housers members through participant-observation under the Mad Housers organization and a comfortable familiarity with potential interviewees. I believe that this participant observation has allowed me to recognize how homeless people accept or reject the political ideology of the Mad Housers through witnessing their actions and conversations regarding the Mad Housers’ practices. Participant observation has given me the ability to observe whether or not members of the homeless population demonstrate a consistent willingness to assist with the building projects of the Mad Housers. It has also allowed me an opportunity to overhear or ask for articulations of why they believe it is right to alter property in this manner. Finally, as I have gleaned from Mike Crang’s essay *Analyzing Qualitative Materials*, every conversation intends to convey particular

⁷⁰ Miranda Miles and Jonathan Crush, “Personal Narratives as Interactive Texts: Collecting and Interpreting Migrant Life-Histories,” *Professional Geographer*, 45(1). (Cambridge, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) 86.

messages.⁷¹ In having “become the student,” I hope that I have become familiar enough with the various fears, desires, and intentions of those I study (as well as having understood the influencing factors of my own position relative to those I study) to identify why interviewees tell me certain things in certain ways, or omit certain things in certain ways. Furthermore, through this awareness of positionality, I desired to maintain a level of consciousness of what was occurring around me so that I did not risk getting in too deep and forcefully negating the null hypothesis.

3.4 Interview Location

Merely being aware of social status and issues of identity is not enough. A location is not solely a container, and one cannot expect a conversation between people to proceed the same way in any given space. On this topic, Elwood and Martin assert that “social divisions have spatial expressions with practical and ethical implications for researchers.”⁷² Both the researcher and the interviewee are interconnected with their mutable surroundings in unique ways that force a responsible geographer to carefully consider questions regarding appropriate places for each interview. On this topic, I perceive a significant alteration of the relations between homeless people and the Mad Housers, and between people and the landscape, through Mad Housers hut builds. The cooperative effort that results from this constructive appropriation of space appears to allow for more balanced conversation between everyone involved. I can recall a prominent example of this during a hut build that took place in November 2008. During that moment, and in that space, homed and homeless people, heterosexuals and homosexuals, women and men,

⁷¹ Mike Crang, “Analyzing Qualitative Materials,” Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project, eds. Robin Flowerdew and David Martin. (London: Sage, 1997) 195.

⁷² Sarah A. Elwood and Deborah G. Martin, “‘Placing’ Interviews: Location and Scales of Power in Qualitative Research,” Professional Geographer, 52(4). (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000) 651.

conservative rent collectors and leftists, Christians and Atheists seemed to speak their minds in a relatively unencumbered way while all believing that they were doing something that needed to be done.⁷³ In light of this, in my research, I thought that it was preferable to conduct interviews with homeless subjects within these spaces that we had collectively constructed. I believed that this helped to offset problems of power imbalances between our possible identities as “employed,” “college graduate,” and “homed” versus “unemployed,” “high school graduate,” and “homeless.” By holding an interview in a location where the interviewee is less burdened by persecution or condescension, and is already accustomed to talking about their condition, I thought that it was possible to break through some of the barriers that may be inherent to an interview conducted on campus or at a place of business.

Nevertheless, there are certainly many sub-locations and temporal circumstances within a homeless encampment that present different costs and benefits to conducting interviews. I intended to conduct some of my interviews at the tents or huts of the individuals (inevitably closer to the ears and activities of other camp members) because I thought that it would be important for gaining an understanding of the community at large, as well as the individual’s role within the community. This would also allow me to achieve a better sense of this particular homeless community’s general response to the remodeling of camp space. Additionally, as Elwood and Martin iterate, “Researchers may observe artifacts such as decorations or posters in a person’s home or office that reveal certain priorities or commitments, or observe interactions with other people that are relevant to understanding a participant’s experiences in a particular place.”⁷⁴ Therefore, this approach is helpful in uncovering the personal politics of homeless individuals. Even so, my experience has told me that some topics of conversation only arise

⁷³ Field Notes, 9 November 2008.

⁷⁴ Elwood and Martin, 652.

when an individual is at some distance from other members of the community. Therefore, I thought that it would be preferable to conduct some interviews in more private areas surrounding the encampment. Having said this, it is obvious that problems are inherent in both of these interview locations. However, it was my goal to minimize these factors while staying conscious of the existence and influence of any remaining problems.

3.5 Payment

In desiring to minimize all obstructions to the collection of narratives, I was aware that some sort of payment for time might have been requested by the interviewee. Nevertheless, I did not want to run into situations where people participated solely for monetary reimbursement and, perhaps, began to fabricate stories that they believed I wanted to hear with the hope that I continued to purchase their fantasies. Additionally, I believed that offering payment could further offset an already fragile balance between a researcher and a homeless subject, as well as intensify a homeless subject's position of dependence. In this sense, I believed that offering payment could create new complications, instead of eliminating existing ones. When Rob Rosenthal began interviewing homeless individuals in Santa Barbara during the early 1980s, he wondered why anyone would agree to be interviewed as it was clear that their participation would do little to immediately and directly change their lives.⁷⁵ Eventually, he began to understand that most homeless people "were glad for the chance to tell a representative of housed society exactly what they thought was going on" merely because they were "generally denied a hearing by most people."⁷⁶ Rosenthal's assertions on this topic reflect my own

⁷⁵ Rob Rosenthal, "Straighter From the Source: Alternative Methods of Researching Homelessness," Urban Anthropology, 20(2), eds. Jack R. Rollwagen and Robert V. Kemper. (Brockport, NY: Institute for the Study of Man, Inc., 1991) 114.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 114.

experiences in talking with homeless individuals. While attempts to interview up the class ladder may confront hesitation, silence, or resentment due to the interviewee's desire to protect their privileged position, homeless people often have less to lose and more to gain by allowing their stories to be heard. It is often the case that the most difficult aspect of conversing with homeless people is saying goodbye.

3.6 Interview Style

Insofar as Tent City in Athens tends to be inhabited by fewer than ten people at any given time, I initially wanted to interview every resident. With respect to the Mad Housers, I hoped to interview the members that I got to know at my house after hut builds. However, I found interviews with both sides to be difficult to initiate. Both sets of people were likely to be reluctant about being recorded and included in a research project. While I did obtain a few interviews, much more of my analysis comes from my long-term personal involvement. Nevertheless, in the interviews that I conducted, I used the active interview style in which both the interviewer and the interviewee contribute to producing meaning through conversation. In this style of interviewing, "the subject behind the respondent is fleshed out –rationally, emotionally, in combination, or otherwise –in relation to the give-and-take of the interview process and the interview's broader research purposes."⁷⁷ I believe that this approach lends itself best to this situation because it builds upon the cooperative familiarity set forward during previous hut builds. Under this approach, Holstein and Gubrium view any attempts by the interviewer to remain uninvolved as futile, since the interviewer's input is often necessary in

⁷⁷ James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium, The Active Interview (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1995) 14.

conducting research.⁷⁸ However, this is not to say that the interview should be void of all structure, but that a rigid question and answer technique presents a serious barrier to the flow of information. Instead, the reader should do some preliminary background reading in order to devise a checklist of issues to cover during the interview. This ensures that “the researcher always meets her/his objectives in each interview, that there is some equivalence across them, and that interviewees are, to a certain extent, allowed to raise their own issues for discussion.”⁷⁹ Therefore, I believe in a semi-structured interviewing technique where my preconceived questions exist merely as guidelines to remind me of the kinds of issues that I want to discuss. As Gill Valentine states, “Interviews do not rely on a rigid set of questions worded beforehand because you want to understand the issues in the interviewee’s own terms; however, it is important to work out a list of themes that you want to cover in each interview.”⁸⁰ When using this technique, the interviewer must walk the delicate boundary between allowing the interviewee to speak as they please and setting certain parameters to provoke responses that conform to the research topic. Realizing this, the ability to hear and record the issues in the interviewee’s own terms is invaluable when trying to determine their political vantage point and reasons for participating in an act that appropriates space through physical manipulation.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 38.

⁷⁹ Mike Crang and Ian Cook, “Doing Ethnographies,” Durham Research Online, Durham University, 08 Apr. 2008 <<http://dro.dur.ac.uk>> 40.

⁸⁰ Gill Valentine, “Tell Me About...: Using Interviews as a Research Methodology,” Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project, eds. Robin Flowerdew and David Martin. (London: Sage, 1997) 118.

3.7 Coding and Analysis

During this process of collecting interviews, I continuously transcribed my tapes and typed my field notes so that they could be easily accessed in “a presentable, readable form.”⁸¹ In this process, I used both inductive and deductive analysis, first identifying themes, patterns, and hypotheses, and then deductively attempting to verify them by returning to the data and research.⁸² When I began to have a substantial amount of readable data, I started a process of open coding, whereby ideas about the topics within the material were noted in the margins of the text.⁸³ I then reread my field notes and margin notes in order to categorize codes. If certain themes, or coded segments, began to seem too general, I subdivided codes through the process of axial coding.⁸⁴ Furthermore, I categorized my codes as “emic” (those that the interviewees provide) or “etic” (those that I applied when tacit connections arose within the data).⁸⁵ For example, an “emic” code of “direct action” would arise if an interviewee articulated their social condition and said that they were involved in shelter building in order to try to change their condition. However, an “etic” code of “direct action” would arise if I decided to classify visual cues, such as Tent City residents picking up tools to build their own shelter, under “direct action” because I assume that the construction of one’s own abode, especially when performed on another person’s private property, is an act of personal empowerment. In this way, I began to synthesize new thoughts and conclusions by interweaving the codes and connections that I perceived with those that my respondents provided. Thus, I believed that I was able to further the

⁸¹ Mike Crang, “Analyzing Qualitative Materials,” Methods in Human Geography: A Guide for Students Doing a Research Project, eds. Robin Flowerdew and David Martin. (London: Sage, 1997) 185.

⁸² A. Michael Huberman and Matthew B. Miles, “Data Management and Analysis Methods,” Handbook of Qualitative Research, eds. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. (Thousand Oaks, CA, London, and New Delhi: Sage, 1994) 431-432.

⁸³ Crang, 186.

⁸⁴ Ibid, 188.

⁸⁵ Ibid, 189.

coproduction of knowledge between researcher and respondent, under the active interview style, into the analytical stages of my study.

3.8 Activist Scholarship and Positionality

While taking on the role of a participant observer carries its own problems, and presents new barriers to effective research, I had come to believe that homelessness was a serious injustice long before I began this project. Therefore, I not only saw the importance of relating my graduate work to this issue, but also becoming personally involved in working towards a solution. Throughout my graduate studies, I have felt very strongly that we should seek to ground the concepts that we learn in academic settings in material actions. In this way, I thought that it would not only be possible to get closer to my concerns, but also to deconstruct some of the boundaries in my research between myself, as a white upper-middle-class graduate researcher, members of the Mad Housers, and the local homeless population. Eventually, I would not only be able to look to myself as a primary source of relevant information, but I would also find it easy to interview human subjects about my research concerns. In a sense, I thought that I could overcome some of the most problematic aspects of my positionality with respect to my research and gain a much deeper understanding than would be possible if I had used only secondary sources.

In many ways, I was able to achieve my goals. Nevertheless, I want to be completely honest about the difficulties of conducting my research as a participant observer. While conducting my research in this way helped me to become extremely well-informed about the workings of the Mad Housers, as well as the specific ways in which homelessness manifests itself locally and changes due to its interactions with the Mad Housers, this style of research

forced me to personally confront some of the most depressing realities of life for homeless people in Athens, Georgia. I continually heard stories and witnessed the effects of violence and abuse among homeless individuals. Burnings of tents and possessions, in addition to physical beatings, theft, and threats were common acts of retribution for perceived wrongdoings. I remember one homeless woman removing her sunglasses to expose two black eyes and a severely bruised face. She went on to explain how she left one man for the protection of another, only to be held to the ground and beaten nearly to her death when she tried to return to her former lover. I remember going to Tent City on cold and rainy days and thinking about the continual discomfort of life there long after I had returned to my heated apartment and attempted to sleep in my dry bed. I also remember the frequent references to prostitution by both sexes as a means of income generation, as well as the visible effects of drug addiction, alcoholism, poor hygiene, and lack of access to comprehensive medical care. All of these things greatly affected my state of mind, as well as my ability to continue my research, recall and record this information, and write my thesis. As I write this paragraph, I realize that it has already taken me more than an hour to commit the included information to writing. Therefore, the depth of my personal involvement did in fact become one of the most significant barriers to the completion of my thesis.

Additionally, while I desired to use participant observation and activist scholarship as a vehicle for overcoming the barriers between me as a researcher and the human subjects involved in my project, I found those barriers becoming obvious and reconstructing themselves once again as soon as I produced a voice recorder, explained a consent form, and attempted to initiate an interview. At this moment, people became very guarded and aware of themselves with respect to me. This was never the case at any of the multiple times when I mentioned that I was researching

Tent City and the Mad Housers during unforced conversations at hut builds or barbeques at Tent City. Thus, while I found initiating and conducting interviews to be a difficult task, I only gained more faith in my method of participant observation, in that it was during my participation in hut builds that I was able to observe and collect the most meaningful and important information. Although these experiences were sometimes difficult to deal with in a way that sticking to my books and an armchair probably would not have been, I think that they provided a depth of knowledge that would not have been possible otherwise.

CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

4.1 A Unique Kind of Community Organizing

When I proposed my research question, I not only believed that defining the political ideology of the Mad Housers would be a relatively straightforward task, but I also believed in the possibility of a rather clear-cut distinction between the forms of community organizing as they are presented by the Midwest Academy. Perhaps, for some organizations, it is a simple task to determine if they fall more closely towards one specific pole or another on a straight-forward continuum between direct service and direct action. However, my work with the Mad Housers has led me to perceive things in a much different way. When attempting to describe the interaction between the Mad Housers, homeless people, and society in a general sense, it becomes a difficult task to map them onto a defining scale.

Perhaps this is because the Mad Housers rarely define a unified political perspective beyond a simple belief that everyone should have a home, along with an evident disrespect for vacant and unproductive private property. Beyond this, they are a loose organization, consisting of individuals who participate for a diverse array of reasons. As a group, they welcome anyone as long as the person helps them somewhere within the process of equipping a homeless person with a personal shelter. However, as individuals, they may reserve some hesitance regarding the different motives of others. Thus, it is evident that their various efforts, in addition to the ideologies of their members, could be scattered at many different points across the aforementioned continuum between direct service and direct action. However, when once again

looked at as a group, the Mad Housers appear to perform direct service and direct action simultaneously. Certainly, merely providing a shelter free of charge is a form of direct service. Nevertheless, this provision almost always requires the Mad Housers to trespass, which is a confrontation with the law that places them on the same side of the power structure as homeless individuals. In this sense, they embody some of the principles of direct action organizing as they share a political position in common with the residents of many homeless encampments – the compulsion, or necessity, to disobey private property laws.

As for the homeless people that exist within the Mad Housers' spectrum of influence, their identities are just as diverse. Painting them with a broad brush does a bit of a disservice to any attempt to understand contemporary homelessness. In this sense, the common pathological description used to define homeless populations in general terms, which often sound scientific, frequently uphold an apathetic approach towards extreme poverty. In other words, when it is said that they did not become homeless because of societal failures, but instead because they can be placed into certain categories that are descriptive of personal shortcomings or failures, such as being mentally or physically deficient, anti-social, drug-addicted, or immature, then the problem is easily placed on the individual, or the individual's family. While drug addiction, psychological problems, and so-called anti-social tendencies may appear to be common among homeless people, these are probably more often the result of being homeless. Furthermore, their life experiences, upbringings, racial identities, perspectives on society, morality, and personal health, as well as their perceived reasons for being homeless, are extremely varied.

Additionally, as Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear note, "Typically, between a quarter and a third of homeless people hold part- or full-time jobs."⁸⁶ While loss or lack of employment

⁸⁶ Jennifer Wolch and Michael Dear, Malign Neglect: Homelessness in an American City (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993) 243.

is commonly thought of as going hand-in-hand with homelessness, local statistics suggest similar findings as those of Wolch and Dear. For example, a representative of the Unified Government of Athens-Clarke County stated in an interview that between 40 and 50 percent of homeless people in Athens are thought to be employed.⁸⁷ Thus, it is not surprising that opinions about economic participation and the proper means of self-sustenance could also be quite different between homeless individuals. Furthermore, even if some large group of people living in a similar condition may self-identify with the often hard-to-define moniker of “homeless,” they may not feel any deep connection to each other. Therefore, because of these differences, which are apparent in homeless populations that are probably at least as diverse as homed populations, typical direct action organizing of and among homeless people is perhaps not as easily accomplished as that of and among other identifiable groups of people.

Remaining mindful of the diversity among members of the Mad Housers organization, as well as within the contemporary homeless populations of cities like Athens and Atlanta, it is no wonder that the interactions between the Mad Housers and homeless people represent an extremely unique form of community organizing. Thus, it is my belief that the Mad Housers represent a more modern trend in community action and service, one which cannot be defined completely by the historical perspectives that laid down frameworks for direct action movements in previous decades.

4.2 The Mad Housers and Christian Charity: Direct Service Reworked

Perhaps, by taking one aspect of the Mad Housers’ cooperative method, I may be able to briefly introduce one way in which they represent a new type of response to inequality. While the Mad Housers have no interest in spreading Christianity, and some members are quite open

⁸⁷ Field Notes, 09/19/07.

about their atheism, they have recently reached out to Atlanta area churches that are willing to assist them in the provision of supplies and the construction of hut panels. With the addition of these new voluntary workers, the Mad Housers have greatly increased their productive potential and, simultaneously, have tapped into a possibly overlooked resource for social change in the United States – Southern churches. While these church-goers will not usually participate in the final hut builds, whereupon the Mad Housers frequently trespass and build shelters without permits, they do lend their support in a way that quietly affirms their moral obligations to serve the poor.

In this relationship, the churches often gather the necessary building materials for a hut build and construct the major hut elements (gables, roof, floor, and walls), while the Mad Housers transport these prefabricated elements to a homeless encampment for final assembly. Therefore, while the service that the churches provide does not directly conflict with existing power relationships, the product of their service is a fundamental component in the Mad Housers' direct confrontation with private property laws. Through a synthesis that combines the charitable inclinations of Christianity with the law-breaking of a small group of non-profit volunteers, the Mad Housers are able to broaden the reach of their work without a corresponding increase in the time and energy that they volunteer. Frequently, they have more constructed panels than they can use at any given hut build. Therefore, they have been able to stockpile a reserve of prefabricated shelter parts for assembly at future builds. This has, in turn, freed them from a lot of the more grueling demands of fundraising that have stymied their efforts to assist potential homeless "clients" in the past.

Even though it may seem surprising that the Mad Housers would receive and accept the cooperation of religious institutions, and vice-versa, I think that this sort of cooperation is

destined to become more common as anti-homeless laws broaden their reach. On this topic, Mitchell contends that “anti-homelessness legislation is not about crime prevention; more likely it is about crime invention.”⁸⁸ In the contemporary urban landscape where, as Mitchell further states, “survival itself is criminalized,” our traditionally enshrined institutions of human assistance, namely Christian churches, are finding themselves pushed into the realm of criminality as it becomes legally impossible for them to fulfill their moral obligations to provide charity to the needy. Perhaps it is only natural that churches would join ranks with direct action movements, especially when many individuals concerned about homelessness would echo the words of an Arcata, California, Food Not Bombs member who said, “We felt that compassion towards the homeless shouldn’t and didn’t require legal approval.”⁸⁹ However, this recent development still brings up some important questions about the future of both charity and direct action organizations that concentrate on issues of homelessness.

In light of the Mad Housers’ most recent metamorphosis out of their esoteric cocoon of gonzo activism into a group that consorts and cooperates with churches, what is unclear is how this will affect the way that the group functions internally, as well as how they interact with homeless people in the long run. Perhaps, this is an ill-advised attempt at greater influence and legitimacy. Inasmuch as some Mad Housers members have expressed a desire to rid their recent hut builds from the presence of beer and the occasional joint, their builds have lost some of the festive atmosphere that the organization has always espoused. In this effort to prune their image, they may be forsaking some of their nonconformist roots and adopting a certain moral superiority in their relationships with homeless “clients.”

⁸⁸ Don Mitchell, “The Annihilation of Space by Law,” *Antipode*, 29(3), (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997) 307.

⁸⁹ Jenna E. Ziman, “Criminalizing the Charitable,” *Z Magazine*, June 1997, Z Magazine, 14 Dec. 2009 <<http://www.zmag.org/zmag/viewArticle/13189>>

In a conversation with one Mad Housers member, who I will call Tim, I found an interesting summary of the identity problems with which the Mad Housers struggle. After an afternoon barbeque we held with Tent City residents on Martin Luther King Day, Tim told me, “I don’t know what these people (some of the other Mad Housers members) think Mad Housers is. We go around, trespassing onto private property, and we build huts for homeless people without permits, and they’re mad at me for smoking and drinking with them?”⁹⁰ Having witnessed Tim’s popularity among many Tent City residents, as well as the natural camaraderie he develops with them as an ex-homeless person himself, I can respect and understand Tim’s frustration. As far as Tim is concerned, as much as the Mad Housers may pride themselves on their official non-profit status, and dream of the security of legitimacy, these beliefs are mere fantasies in light of the fact that they must break the law in order for their organization to fulfill its purpose. For them to deny this very basic aspect of their work may suggest an abandonment of some of the things that liken them to a direct action movement in favor of an approach that gives them more in common with a charity. With their attempt to remove festivity from their builds, what is currently more of a social interaction between the Mad Housers and homeless people may be moving more towards a provision of gifts – strictly the construction of huts and nothing more.

4.3 The Mad Housers, Saul Alinsky, and the Importance of Fun

While it is impossible to predict the future of the Mad Housers, if we return to an important point that Saul Alinsky made in his book, *Rules for Radicals*, any organizer should remember that for a tactic to be a success, it needs to be fun for its participants. Thus, Alinsky writes, “If your people are not having a ball doing it, there is something very wrong with the

⁹⁰ Field Notes, 01/19/09.

tactic.”⁹¹ While there is the small possibility that the Mad Housers are abandoning this approach, most of the builds that I witnessed at Tent City were certainly excuses to socialize as much as they were activities that deliberately sought to improve the lives of homeless people. During these occasions, people took turns between construction work and relaxation. When Mad Housers members were not building, they would share stories and ideas with the homeless people who had gathered to watch the building process and enjoy free beer, soda, and food. Frequently, after enjoying the company of the Mad Housers, some homeless people would pick up a tool and offer to help. Occasionally, those who helped claimed to have had jobs in roofing and carpentry before they became homeless.⁹² In these cases, hut builds proceeded quickly and effortlessly, with homeless participants proud to demonstrate their talents in this field against the many stereotypes used to describe them. Here, I believe that the Mad Housers’ use of enjoyable and non-judgmental interaction played a big role in encouraging Tent City residents to lend a hand. The Mad Housers have always seemed to avoid taking themselves too seriously and, in all of these instances, they never asked for help, nor denied it.

Although they face a depressing reality, their adherence to a lighthearted and often humorous approach has always been the backbone that keeps the Mad Housers intact. From the beginning, their builds were commonly likened to an act of collegiate mischief. As one early article described, “They don’t deny that what they do has the air of a fraternity prank, or that they could face trespassing charges.”⁹³ Moreover, their flippancy in addressing a serious issue has always played an ironically important role in giving their organization meaning. In the words of one early member, “The lesson for him was that ‘human interaction with homeless people is a

⁹¹ Saul Alinsky, *Rules For Radicals* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971, 1989) 128.

⁹² Field Notes, 05/03/08 and 11/09/08.

⁹³ “Atlanta Journal; Raising the Roof To Aid the Homeless,” *The New York Times*, 15 March 1988, *The New York Times*, 13 Dec. 2007

<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=940DEFDA1531F936A25750C0A96E948260>>

neat thing,’ a better way to change lives than the government’s ‘cold, statistical approach.’”⁹⁴ At the same time, other members saw it as “a way of putting pressure on and ‘embarrassing’ government into taking action to deal with Atlanta’s homeless.”⁹⁵ Through the way in which they freely approach a Sisyphean task with their simple tools and donated supplies, along with the fact that they have a little bit of fun doing it, the Mad Housers highlight the absurdity of others’ cold indifference.

4.4 The Mad Housers in Contrast to Civic Priorities

The Mad Housers know that they cannot house everyone, but that is part of the point. Their work is an immense ridicule of the wasteful, insufficient, and callous manner with which our governments respond to the needs of our citizens and denizens. In light of our government’s neglect of extreme poverty, the Mad Housers bypass indirect political representation and respond directly to homeless individuals’ needs for shelter. They ridicule governmental approaches in that they are able to construct a modest shelter for someone in less than two hours using donations of lumber or money, which usually amount to only about \$350 to 400. Meanwhile, taxpayers and politicians are busy arguing that the public provision of housing is too expensive an affair. Thus, the fact that even though these shelters are barely worthy of the name, but that so many homeless people are happy to receive one, ridicules civic notions of “affordable housing” in addition to the shortcomings of charity shelters. As a Tent City resident named Donna remarked:

I see all these empty houses, all these empty buildings that are boarded up. Why not open up some more homeless shelters? You know, there’s only one homeless shelter, or two, for women. One is for women and children. The other is the Salvation Army. You can only stay there 10 days if you don’t have a job... After 10 days, you’re just put out on

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

your ass. Well, with the economy like it is, nobody's hiring... Thank God for the Mad Housers to have what I have. I mean, it's so much better than a tent. At least I can lock my door. When it rains, I don't have to worry about getting wet... Building from a tent, there's not even any comparison... When a windstorm comes up, it completely demolishes some of them. When it snowed, it depleted all the tents.⁹⁶

The fact that the Mad Housers' rather whimsical approach to housing is actually appreciated, and frequently sought by homeless people, is damning of the priorities our communities emphasize through our city governments. This is made all too clear by the fact that our cities are often willing to spend much more than \$400 per homeless person on destroying a site that is amenable to homeless people, even when it means that nothing profitable or productive will be constructed in its place.

In my mind, one notable example of this civic passion for destruction in lieu of a constructive approach to the issue of homelessness comes from a city where much of my family resides – Rochester, New York. From 1927 to 1956, Rochester had an active subway line that served the needs of the expanding metropolis.⁹⁷ However, in the years since the final train run, the hollow tunnels have come to serve the needs of those with few other places to seek shelter. In recent years, this fact has stirred the city to consider a proposal that hopes, in vain, for an ultimate solution to a form of homelessness that is so marginalized that it is already almost invisible:

To city officials, the old tunnel is a monument to decay, a big pothole just begging to be filled.

Fed up with what they call a chronic liability and a headache, city administrators want to pack the tunnel with tons of dirt and seal it up. The state and federal governments would pay 95 percent of the estimated \$21 million cost. City administrators say it is a simple, cheap and permanent fix.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Donna Interview

⁹⁷ Patrick O'Gilfoil Healy, "The End of a Tunnel?" *The New York Times*, 11 August 2005, *The New York Times*, 28 September 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2005/08/11/nyregion/11rochester.html>>

⁹⁸ Ibid.

So, while the Mad Housers' huts may be laughable for their extremely modest response to homelessness, their efforts pale in comparison to the massive shortcomings of civic responses to homelessness in cities like Rochester. For example, the statistics on homelessness for Monroe County, New York, show its chronically homeless population to total around 1,500 people.⁹⁹ Therefore, the so-called "cheap fix," which permanently erases a space that is useful for homeless people, would be carried out at a cost that is roughly equivalent to \$14,000 per chronically homeless person in Rochester's home county. In contrast, the Mad Housers directly shelter people in a much more visible manner than subway squatting, and they do it for much less per person than it often takes for cities to banish homeless people from relatively invisible spaces.

Beyond Rochester, many other American cities engage in phenomenally expensive destruction projects with the result of merely expanding their homeless populations. In New Orleans, for example, in the years following Hurricane Katrina, whereupon an estimated 302,253 people were displaced out of an estimated pre-Katrina population of 458,393,¹⁰⁰ the city has noticeably refrained from revitalizing their public housing units in order to shelter the displaced. Instead, they have wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to the speedy annihilation of both vacant and occupied standing units. Counterproductively, Michelle Chen, a contributor for *The WIP*, emphasizes that estimates based on HUD data indicate that the costs of demolishing the public housing units of New Orleans far outweigh the costs of repairing them.¹⁰¹ Most notably, in the case of the Lafitte projects, the demolition price tag is estimated to be at least five times greater

⁹⁹ United Way of Greater Rochester, "Homelessness Executive Summary," 28 September 2009
<<http://www.uwrochester.org/downloads/HomelessnessExecutiveSummary.pdf>>

¹⁰⁰ John R. Logan, "Population Displacement and Post-Katrina Politics" *Spatial Structures in the Social Sciences* (S4), 1 June 2006 <<http://www.s4.brown.edu/katrina/report2.pdf>>

¹⁰¹ Michelle Chen, "Vanishing City" *The WIP*, 5 February 2008
<http://thewip.net/contributors/2008/02/vanishing_city_postkatrina_red.html>

than the estimated cost of renovation.¹⁰² In light of such essentially wasteful and anti-civilian uses of funding, there are large numbers of people who understand the full extent of not being able to depend upon governing bodies and policies, which are partly funded from income that is generated through their labor. Meanwhile, the kind of work that the Mad Housers perform allows displaced citizens the ability to channel their labor directly towards the provision of their own shelter, constantly turning the vacant property of individual owners into something that is useful and productive for multiple people.

While it seems counterintuitive, perhaps the reason why city administrators in Rochester, New York, and New Orleans, Louisiana, can justify such expenditures to themselves as cheap and simple fixes has something to do with the convincing, yet rather flawed, arguments that are popular in other cities where quality of life has become the paramount concern. Take for example a columnist for the *Seattle Times* named Joni Balter, who Don Mitchell¹⁰³ quotes as asserting:

Seattle's tough laws on panhandling, urinating and drinking in public, and sitting and lying on the sidewalk are cutting-edge stuff. Anybody who doesn't believe in taking tough steps to make downtown more hospitable to shoppers and workers wins two free one-way tickets to Detroit or any other dead urban center of their choice.¹⁰⁴

Maybe some of us would choose a one-way ticket to Atlanta. While quality of life is a rather difficult thing to define, especially when attempting to identify the people who will experience qualitative improvements in their lives, I think the real flaw in such an argument is that it poses the effect (abject poverty) as the cause (urban decay). However, this role-reversal may be intentional in cities across the United States where they find it much easier to simply harass those

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Don Mitchell, "The Annihilation of Space by Law," 312.

¹⁰⁴ Joni Balter, "City's Panhandling Law Becoming a Big Problem for Small Neighbors" *The Seattle Times*, 5 June 1994

experiencing the effects of an economy in distress than to assess and address the real reasons for their growing homeless populations.

4.5 Lefebvrian Reappropriation: The Mad Housers vs. Homeless Shelters

While Rochester is many hundreds of miles from Georgia, there is no reason to believe that equally wasteful projects with the primary goal of moving homeless people are not up for consideration here in Athens. Fortunately, since a strategic dumping of dirt or gravel, an oddly placed piece of road, or an empty parking lot can cost a lot of money, Mad Housers camps can experience a good degree of longevity. Building from this longevity, many homeless people who stay at Mad Housers camps perceive their simple huts to be a great deal more stable, safe, secure, and, most importantly, more liberating than other options that are routinely available to them.

For instance, at the Funtown camp in Atlanta, I met a resident named Tony, who found himself homeless after immigrating to the United States from Ghana. During our conversation, he went into some detail about his reasons for choosing to live in a hut provided by the Mad Housers:

Me: What do you think about the shelter system? Why do you use a hut instead of a shelter?

Tony: Like downtown... the Union Mission? Have you ever been there?

Me: No, I've never been there.

Tony: Okay. You see here? It's solely me. It's more personal. I have a lock on my door. Everything is better. I can go, lock my door, and come when I like. I have my heat. I can cook. I can cook what I want. You can't do that down in a shelter or soup kitchen. At a soup kitchen, the food is not nutritional. It's... what you call it... mass-produced at a very cheap level. And most people there live on their backpacks. I can't go around with everything in my backpack. I keep it right here. My backpack is right here. I like it here. I can cook. I got a garden. I chop wood what gives me exercise. There are benefits to living the Mad Housers' style than living in a shelter downtown. Believe me. It may not be what you need. See, most

people in this environment cannot see beyond what they got. Always look at it, “I ain’t got this, I need money.” This place is a blessing after I been under a bridge, in an abandoned building with leaking... I’ve lived at the shopping center where it was leaking before I came here. It used to leak on me before I got this place-cold and wet. I’m serious.¹⁰⁵

From Tony’s explanation of the differences between his experiences in a Mad Housers camp, a shelter, and sleeping rough on the street, it is possible to see some important developments in his life as a homeless person who is compelled to interact with charitable organizations. Here, his point of view lends greater meaning to the Mad Housers’ existence, while highlighting some of the frequent shortcomings of community potential. As Tony speaks of his condition, one gets a sense that he perceives the work of the Mad Housers as having brought him a greater degree of freedom, self-sufficiency, health, and comfort than he could experience in a shelter.

Tony is not alone among homeless people in avoiding shelter stays. When studying the homeless residents of Austin, Texas, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, David Snow and Leon Anderson described this sentiment as pervasive, “not because of insanity or judgmental incompetence, as some officials would have us believe, but because of the deplorable and often dehumanizing conditions in shelters.”¹⁰⁶ For Snow and Anderson, the reason why homeless people often eschew shelters and seek more makeshift sleeping arrangements is because “they are exercising a bit of autonomy in a world in which their choices and options are highly constrained.”¹⁰⁷ Tony’s statements support this sentiment. Within a Mad Housers camp, Tony has a greater sense of power and responsibility. In fact, through handshake agreements with other camp members, he has assumed the role of camp leader and he attempts to act as a judge over internal disputes. This type of responsibility would probably not present itself to a guest at a charitable shelter.

¹⁰⁵ Tony Interview

¹⁰⁶ Snow and Anderson, 80.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 80.

While Tony maintains a leadership role within his camp, this does not seem to strike him as the most important aspect of his autonomy. In Tony's words, his feelings of freedom stem from the fact that he can now come and go as he pleases. Also, as he says, "It's solely me. It's more personal."¹⁰⁸ This is therefore a space upon which he is able to affix his identity. He actually feels it to be his own- a space that reflects his own character and needs through his ability to return to it as it was, as well as to modify it as he pleases. His ability to cook and garden on the premises, in addition to the screened porch he has constructed in front of his hut, not only affirm his ability to personalize his surroundings, but also to establish his capacity to seize this space for personal recreation and survival. Thus, if we return to Henri Lefebvre, the Mad Housers and Tony have interacted in a way that begins to fulfill the fundamentals of a successful social movement:

Any revolutionary 'project' today, whether utopian or realistic, must, if it is to avoid hopeless banality, make the reappropriation of the body, in association with the reappropriation of space, into a non-negotiable part of its agenda.¹⁰⁹

In their work, the Mad Housers interact with camp members to reappropriate space, building a foundation from which homeless residents have the potential to reappropriate their bodies and empower themselves. For Tony, this bodily reappropriation stems in part from his ability to now eat food of his own choosing through the garden he has constructed and the stove that the Mad Housers installed in his hut.

Tony's current status as a resident in a Mad Housers' camp reflects the mixing of his own labor with that of Mad Housers members and the assistance of charitably minded camp visitors. He realizes that his shelter is not the mere product of others' generosity and he is proud of his

¹⁰⁸ Tony Interview

¹⁰⁹ Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991) 166-167.

own accomplishments, while understanding the importance of others' contributions. While talking to me about his garden, Tony says:

Tony: You know this place used to be an amusement park?

Me: Yeah.

Tony: He (*Tim*) told you that?

Me: Yeah.

Tony: Those are the old buildings. I had to tear it out in order to establish a garden. And every year I grow my... mostly tomato plants, eggplants. This year I added okra, and, um, peppers. And they support me during the summer. I've been trying to can some of the tomatoes through winter. Unfortunately, without electricity and storage space, this place gets so hot and ants come through. We got flooded last time, and there's so much mildew. It's not easy. I just survive from what grows on the vines. Fortunately, we've had people who have come to give some grains like rice and things that I cook it with. In the summer time it's hot. When you cook, you can't store your food, you must eat it within the day. Overnight, it goes bad because it's so hot. There's no refrigerator, so you have to cook everyday fresh. Our food goes too bad. You can't keep nothing unless you have a steady flow of food. On the contrary, in the winter time, you can cook food and store it for a day or two. When the temperatures are a little cooler... see my pots on the floor?

Me: Yeah.

Tony: I have them in the doorway because the air is flowing through. I can preserve a little cooked food and eat it for a day or two... cooked by wood fire. So, we can preserve a little food, and, you know, you don't cook up most of your own stuff. That, basically, is how we survive here, unless you are getting some help by food stamps or stuff and, if you don't abuse it, you can always go to the store and get fresh food.¹¹⁰

Therefore, while Tony gains a lot from acts of charity and even food stamps, his existence in the Mad Housers' camp does not require him to live solely on the handouts of others. Nor does it require him to surrender his unique qualities in order to receive the help he needs to eat, stay warm, and access shelter. Here, he can retain privacy, interact freely with friends or lovers, maintain his religious perspectives, and even have a beer if he wants. Thus, he can reclaim some

¹¹⁰ Tony Interview

of the freedoms granted to the majority of home possessing adults in the United States, but which are so difficult for many homeless people to obtain.

According to Don Mitchell's interpretation of Henri Lefebvre's notion of the "right to the city," this right is predicated on a right to housing. Thus, Mitchell writes, "Any reasonable "right to the city" requires also a right to *inhabit* the city, a right to housing. For Lefebvre, the right to housing was a necessary precondition of the right to the city. So too has it long been for activists."¹¹¹ Lefebvre believes that successful attempts to acquire liberty will always involve struggles revolving around issues of inhabitance.¹¹² In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre echoes this idea by emphasizing his belief that the privacy of the home grants the potential for individuals to appropriate their bodies and space, express themselves, and enjoy self-determination:

Private space is distinct from, but always connected with, public space. In the best of circumstances, the outside space of the community is dominated, while the indoor space of family life is appropriated... Dominated space and appropriated space may in principle be combined – and, ideally at least, they ought to be combined.¹¹³

While the Mad Housers are not fomenting widespread revolution through their humble actions, I believe that their actions, in combination with those of homeless people like Tony, begin to satisfy Lefebvre's desire to combine dominated and appropriated space. While Mitchell begs us to scour the city for spaces that buck the trend towards a "libertarian paradise," in which "every space is governed by something like a private property rule such that there simply are no public spaces in which those without access to private property, or its corollary, highly policed public

¹¹¹ Don Mitchell, *The Right to the City* 220.

¹¹² Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1996) 158-159.

¹¹³ Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 166.

space, simply can be,”¹¹⁴ the Mad Housers are busy attempting to reveal and create such spaces for, and with, the homeless population.

Therefore, as Nicholas Blomley¹¹⁵ states, if “the development and enforcement of laws that, for example, forbid sleeping in public are unproblematic only when one has a private place of one’s own in which to sleep,” then everyone must have some sort of private space to which they can retreat in order to perform the functions that are necessary for the maintenance of their lives. However, this situation remains elusive under a system in which necessities are distributed, and people are arrested, in order to satisfy the generation of profit. Thus, what is emerging, as Jeremy Waldron¹¹⁶ conjectures, “is a state of affairs in which a million or more citizens have no place to perform elementary human activities like urinating, washing, sleeping, cooking, eating, and standing around” because they have limited or no access to private property. For the most part, homeless individuals exist entirely within dominated space. Thus, when asked by an interviewer whether or not the Mad Housers were anti-property because they build shelters on others’ property, Mad Housers president Nick Hess wryly replied with a sense of humor typical of the organization, “We love private property. Everybody should have some.”¹¹⁷ Such a statement does a lot to characterize the Mad Housers; they realize that private property is a boundary to homeless persons attempting to appropriate space, but they appreciate the kind of freedom to which those with private property have access. In this sense, their work is inherently political in a Lefebvrian sense because it attempts to challenge dominated space through the encouragement of its appropriation by homeless people.

¹¹⁴ Mitchell, *The Right to the City* 210.

¹¹⁵ Nicholas Blomley, “Homelessness, Rights, and the Delusions of Property,” *Urban Geography*, 30(6) (Columbia, MD: Bellwether Publishing, Ltd., 2009) 578.

¹¹⁶ Jeremy Waldron, “Homelessness and the Issue of Freedom,” *UCLA Law Review*, 39 (1991) 301.

¹¹⁷ Mamatas.

The work of the Mad Housers, in combination with that of homeless individuals, exemplifies the mixing of dominated and appropriated space. While homeless encampment residents do not need the Mad Housers in order to begin spatial and bodily appropriation, a constructed Mad Housers hut facilitates this process through its physical attributes and its existence as a powerful symbol of the reclamation of land by the property-less. The act of entering private property and replacing nomadic tents with relatively permanent wooden structures begins to encourage people to ask questions about who is actually in control. So, while Wolch and Rowe¹¹⁸ have noted that, “unlike homed individuals, the mobility of the homeless is much more influenced by involuntary forces,” the Mad Housers help homeless individuals to exercise their right to be immobile and reclaim access to the necessities that homed individuals sometimes take for granted. Therefore, I believe that the actions of the Mad Housers encourage some homeless people to take greater command over their own existences.

4.6 Respecting and Encouraging Self-Determination among Homeless People

In a conversation with Tim, of the Mad Housers, I was reminded of one very important aspect of personal liberation that the Mad Housers facilitate – the right to associate freely with others. While many charity-run shelters inhibit a homeless person’s ability to make friends through their stay limits, in addition to preventing couples from being together through their rules and lack of privacy, a Mad Housers camp encourages and enables these basic human desires. Furthermore, while I spoke of how many homeless people are in different circumstances, and maintain different identities, which hinder them from thinking of themselves as a community of like-minded individuals, I think that a Mad Housers camp begins to overcome the social isolation that shelter stay limits reinforce. When I asked Tim if he thought that many people

¹¹⁸Jennifer R. Wolch and Stacy Rowe, “On the Streets,” *City & Society*, 6(2), (1992) 128.

move on to a better existence after moving into a hut, he provided me with an interesting example:

Yeah, they definitely better their existence, that's for sure. You know, they... It's like this one lady I just saw. This couple in Atlanta moved in a hut. They built a little porch on the front with a little fence around it, you know? They just kind of made it their home, you know, and they didn't have that before. So, you know, they're together, they're a couple, so they sit there and enjoy each other's company, and have a safe place to sleep.¹¹⁹

In Tim's example, it is possible to see how the hut became the focal point for one woman to reclaim and realize some aspects of personal liberty in addition to being able to bond with another human being. Here, the efforts of the Mad Housers have intermingled with those of one homeless woman in order to realize both entities' goals simultaneously.

In the above situation, the boundary between direct service and direct action is unclear. The hut was a gift, but it provided the context for one homeless couple to gratify their self-interests. Inasmuch as the appeal to self-interest is a fundamental aspect of direct action organizing,¹²⁰ the Mad Housers consistently maintain a measure of direct action in their work. There is no screening process involved in getting a hut, and there are no strings attached. The Mad Housers are not whistle blowers and they do not post rules. Instead, they hope and intend for homeless people to make the space their own. Furthermore, while the residents did not help build the hut in this situation, I have seen several situations in which homeless people did lend a hand. For example, during one build in Athens, there were four homeless participants, one of whom was Gary, the recipient of the hut. This suggests that, within the Mad Housers, there are not only homed and homeless members and participants, but also that these members and participants share some similar perspectives and goals. In this case, one Mad Housers member had given Gary a coal burning stove a few weeks beforehand. Within that time, Gary had

¹¹⁹ Tim Interview

¹²⁰ Midwest Academy, *Organize!: Organizing for Social Change, a manual for activists in the 1990's*, eds. Kim Bobo, Steve Max, and Jackie Kendall (Santa Ana, CA: Seven Locks Press, 1991) 8.

reworked the ventilation so that it could burn wood in addition to coal.¹²¹ Therefore, the stove had come to represent the joining of the efforts and knowledge of the Mad Housers and the homeless recipient towards a realization of the same goal: the creation and provision of a device for warmth and for cooking food.

Meanwhile, in Tony's situation, his declaration that his condition in a Mad Housers camp is "better" than a shelter, as well as "a blessing," emphasizes not only the vast differences between the Mad Housers and the shelter system, but, more importantly, the inadequacies of that system with respect to Tony's existence. For, when I spoke with Tony, it was in a one-room shack, situated on another person's property, while he was sick with the flu. It is surprising how such a miniscule effort can stand as such a powerful criticism of a developed nation's response to domestic poverty. While it is true that, similar to a charity, the Mad Housers don't offer any suggestions about how to structurally rearrange society, they are something different and new in that they are like a lightning rod for social satire, channeling social criticism into a productive outlet that encourages homeless individuals to act in their own self-interest. As a result, the lowly hut becomes a visible symbol of the grander concepts of individuality and empowerment in the face of civic neglect.

4.7 The Mad Housers vs. Charity and Submission

In the absence of adequate public housing, or affordable private property options, charity soup kitchens and short-term shelters attempt to ease the burdens of the homeless population. However, these charities are frequently guided by an adherence to various religious ideologies, moral tenets, or political philosophies. In this sense, it is not only the withdrawal of government-guaranteed rights, which comes with the rollout of charity, that curbs the freedoms of homeless

¹²¹ Field Notes, 11/09/08.

citizens, but it is also the foundational principles of the charities themselves that constrict the freewill of homeless people. Thus, charities can present homeless populations with certain unseen burdens that many homeless individuals are eager to avoid.

For example, both Donna and Tony emphasize similar frustrations about being reduced to depending on people who feel they have the right and responsibility to determine whether or not their time and money will be used appropriately:

What you do, what you give somebody in money, that's your good deed. Now what they do with it after that, that's on them. Don't ask me what I need, if I tell you what I need, and you're not going to get it because you don't smoke, and you're sober, and you're Christian, well... Don't ask me what I need if you're not going to get where I'm at.¹²²

Meanwhile, Tony echoes Donna's feelings and alludes to the hypocrisy inherent in attaching conditions to donations:

We should not discourage altruism, which means behavior on the homeless man's part. If you have to be altruistic, go on and do it. Don't predetermine what a man may do with it, because all along that will discourage your effort. Because, for example, I'm a homeless man. If I have two dollars here, I'm hiding it for something else, and you come along and give me some food, I can use that two dollars for something else. It doesn't matter for what. For pleasure, for beer... But, you have done your part. You have eased somebody's burden. People smoke, they drink, they eat fat, they drink soda, buy chips. Everybody has an appetite for something.¹²³

According to Tony, we all indulge certain desires that others may consider problematic. In fact, interpreting his previous statement about the unhealthy nature of food at shelters and soup kitchens, I assume that he probably sees eating at these places to be a problematic indulgence. Nevertheless, Tony seems to be saying that fulfilling our desires is an inherent aspect of the leisure that lessens our burdens and helps us to continue to be productive. Making assistance conditional upon obedience and submission turns a charitable act intended to humanize into a starkly dehumanizing act. In this way, charity often merely reinforces the superior position of

¹²² Donna Interview

¹²³ Tony Interview

those on the giving end with individuals and organizations taking a rather sanctimonious approach to their efforts.

During my conversation with Donna, I am reminded of the powerful psychological burdens that certain acts of charity can place upon homeless individuals. While donations can ease the suffering of others, the ways in which donations are given have the potential to negate this effect. In the case of Donna and her boyfriend Sal, one such event took place when a local news station decided to televise a story on Tent City and local homelessness:

Donna: Channel 5 came up here. Sal and I walked down to the church on Sunday to get lunch, and I mentioned to the people down there that Channel 5 was up here. Did you know that the people serving the little sandwiches came walking up here with a few things to bring us? I wanted to... I told Sal, "Please! You'd better do something!" I just wanted to laugh in their faces, and cuss them out. I mean, you come up here with four apples and two sandwiches just because of Channel 5.

Me: Just a publicity stunt?

Donna: Right – to get their church on the map. See? That's what I'm talking about. It was hilarious. It really was four apples and two sandwiches.

Me: What do you think about that kind of charity?

Donna: It's like, you know? If that's love and Christianity... Don't give me hate and, uh, what is... Satanism. It was so obvious that they were up here to parade what church they were from. You know, I felt about two inches high. It's bad enough that we have to live up here, and now they've got to come up here and let everyone know about it. It's a good thing that we're not trying to hide out from the mafia or something, 'cause hell, they showed everyone where we're at! It was embarrassing as hell, really. I felt about two inches high. I'm like, who knows? If this is an attempt to get help, it's a sad attempt.¹²⁴

During this situation, the divide between the givers and receivers of charity was vast. The combination of the self-righteous actions of the church members, along with the media publicity, placed Tent City residents in an awkward and humiliating state of affairs. The uncharacteristic actions of the charity while they postured for the cameras made Donna feel as if her misery had

¹²⁴ Donna Interview

been exploited by people who cared more about the growth of their church than about fulfilling their religious vows to help the poor. She was furious that both the media and the church volunteers had come together at her home to further their own goals, while caring so little about the people that they were supposed to be helping:

That was just a story to them. There were no, at the end, “if you’d like to make a donation to a homeless coalition,” or anything like that. I mean, to me, the reporter that was here, was to make her career advancement. It wasn’t nothing that she really gave a shit about people being homeless.¹²⁵

Instead of this moment being seized as an opportunity for churchgoers and representatives of the media to stand together with homeless people to advocate for assistance or rights, it became a degrading exposé. While many homeless people require donations in order to survive, they understand that this is emblematic of their inferior status. Certainly, the presence of the cameras and the reporter only made Tent City residents more self-aware of their dependent positions with respect to those of the church’s volunteers.

In contrast, the Mad Housers try hard to avoid emphasizing and exploiting the dependence of homeless people by respecting each individual’s privacy and personal wishes. For the most part, the Mad Housers adhere to a policy of non-interference with a camp’s internal politics and dynamics after they build their huts. Instead, they hope that camp members will see their huts as a starting point for building a sense of community and regaining control over their lives. So, while homeless shelters do not usually allow people to bring in their personal belongings, the Mad Housers understand a person’s possessions to be a fundamental aspect of their potential independence. In their own words, as an organization, they state that many of the belongings that charity shelters do not allow “are items that are necessary for their (a homeless person’s) livelihood, such as tools, clothes and paperwork,” and, most importantly, that “if a

¹²⁵ Ibid.

person has a secure and stable place to live, they are much more capable of finding the resources to help themselves.”¹²⁶ When I asked Tim about the Mad Housers’ goals, he echoed this essential sentiment that, in the end, their work should ideally result in homeless individuals making decisions for themselves while also establishing a community of their own:

The biggest hope, I guess, would be that they get a sense of community, or a sense of something different than what they’ve had, and, uh, try to settle down, and figure out how to get at least the basic things in their lives straightened out. You know, it really gives them an opportunity to do that ‘cause you’ve actually got a place to lock your stuff up.¹²⁷

For the Mad Housers, their respect for a homeless person’s right to privacy, as well as their belief that a stable habitation is essential for self-determination, inspires the importance they place upon making sure that people have a safe place to sleep and store possessions. Additionally, as I pointed to in the previous subsection, they hope that their homeless “clients” will begin to use their shelters as a platform for building an identity in common. Thus, while the Mad Housers do not hand out political leaflets to homeless people, rally them in protest, or deliver biblical sermons, they do hope that homeless people get energized by their hut building, gain a feeling of community, and develop a sense of their own worth.

4.8 Positionality, Agency, and the Changes to Tent City During My Research

Although I have claimed that the Mad Housers hope that homeless people begin to empower themselves in a community oriented fashion, perhaps because they do not seek to maintain any controlling interest in the camps after they build their shelters, they seem relatively unconcerned if this does not happen. In this way, I not only recognize a difference between my position and that of the Mad Housers as a whole, but also some reservations about my own

¹²⁶ Mad Housers, “Mad Housers: Building the Invisible City,” Mad Housers, Perforations, 13 Dec. 2007
<<http://www.pd.org/~chea/Perforations/perf30/invisible-city.html>>

¹²⁷ Tim Interview

agency in bringing the Mad Housers to Tent City and helping them build there. While the Mad Housers may express a specific hope about the results of their action, I admit that I not only had a hope, but an expectation, that a greater sense of resident bonding, shared empowerment, and stability would result from these actions beyond the fundamental improvements of replacing a tent with a more secure wooden structure. The fact that this has not ultimately happened at Tent City in a way similar to Funtown in Atlanta is disappointing to me, but it has also forced me to examine what makes these spaces different and to ponder some of the potential shortcomings of the Mad Housers' approach to homelessness.

The most obvious differences between Funtown, which I would describe as a fairly successful camp, and Tent City are their locations and the duration of interaction between the Mad Housers and each camp. For its part, Funtown and the Mad Housers have been involved with one another for almost the entire duration of the existence of the Mad Housers. Because of this long shared history, their relationship has always been of primary importance to both parties. Furthermore, with the Mad Housers being an Atlanta-based organization, and with Funtown being located just a few miles south of downtown Atlanta, the residents of Funtown see a lot of the Mad Housers. Members of the Mad Housers are often at Funtown to maintain huts, to ask residents about how things are going, to drop off supplies and necessary items, or just to have barbeques and socialize. In my opinion, Funtown really benefits from the kind of continuous interaction and external connectivity that is almost impossible to maintain with the rather distant Tent City camp in Athens. Other than that, in terms of either camp's site, there isn't that much difference between their locations within their respective cities. Both camps are located in wooded urban settings in poor neighborhoods next to large thoroughfares, and underneath

expressways. Both camps are close to a combination of inexpensive fast food restaurants, liquor stores, gas stations, dollar stores, and institutions of higher learning.

In terms of race, Funtown is primarily comprised of middle-aged black men, while Tent City has always been primarily middle-aged white men and women. For me, it is difficult to determine the extent to which the racial composition of either camp affects its community organization. Nevertheless, I'm willing to say that the factor of race is potentially a more uniting element for members of an oppressed racial minority than it is for white individuals. Perhaps many white homeless individuals feel more in common with society at large than with each other. Having said this, I want to stress that I don't think that I can come to this conclusion from my observations at Tent City. Tent City's lack of internal community seems to stem more from one woman's (Donna) desire to control the entire space for her goals than from any element of race-based cultural differences.

When we began to build at Tent City in January 2008, the camp was composed entirely of tents that constantly became victims of the weather. While there were commonly a large number of people camping there, with anywhere from ten to fifteen at any given time, the members of the camp were extremely transitory. Most people who came to Tent City stayed for a few weeks or months and travelled on, perhaps to return at a later point in time. As we built more huts, some people began to stay longer, viewing their hut as their home. For a while, Tent City was a mix of wooden huts, occupied by more long-term residents, and tents that were pitched by people who were travelling through. It was at this time that the population was at its largest and most diverse. While it was mostly white, middle-aged, and male, the population included several women, individuals in their twenties, and a black man and woman.

Upon visits to Tent City at this time, I began to feel that our work was achieving positive results. Some of the travelers who were camping in tents wanted to stay and began to ask us to build huts for them too. Residents began to place chairs in front of their huts and use these spaces as settings to socialize with their neighbors. Eventually, however, after a lull in hut building during the summer of 2008, Tent City began to be increasingly controlled by one woman who started to push out those she didn't like in favor of her and her daughter's friends.

As far as the Mad Housers are concerned, such developments are not necessarily troubling. They seem fairly content with their camps taking on lives of their own. Furthermore, in addition to being distant, Tent City was just another building site for them. For me, however, I felt a deep sense of responsibility for the developments that took place there. I often think that something similar to Funtown could have developed if a permanent chapter of the Mad Housers were formed in Athens that would have been able to foster a long-term and continuous interaction between Tent City and the Mad Housers. Having said this, it occurs to me that the success of Mad Housers projects as a form of community organizing partially rests upon a local organization of people and resources, rather than merely a transportation of those resources from another location. In this sense, I blame some of the restrictions inherent to being a researcher, primarily concerned with finishing my research, and secondarily concerned with establishing the Mad Housers in Athens, for the inability of our work to bring about the results that I had hoped for and intended. Still, I think that some of these unintended consequences are, in fact, the result of the Mad Housers' rather hands-off approach, as commendable as this approach is.

4.9 The Unique Position of the Mad Housers Reiterated

Perhaps because they don't want to burden encampments with additional constraints, the Mad Housers have never really defined any sort of unifying political or religious ideology that inspires them to band together to assist homeless people. In this sense, they seem to be a far cry from the social activism of previous generations, as well as from common ideas about what charity entails. They are uniquely comfortable defining themselves as both a charity and direct action organization. Instead of putting any time into dreaming up a manifesto, worrying about soul cleansing, or identifying the key prerequisites to economic success, the Mad Housers simply desire to build a shelter for someone who needs and asks for one, using the donations and hands of anyone willing to help. In this way, the free will and individual integrity of both Mad Housers members and their homeless "clients" is left relatively intact. The resulting hut builds are more of a meeting between independent people, rather than between a powerful entity and a submissive individual.

Meanwhile, one of the reasons for why the Mad Housers don't often dabble in outspoken ideology could be that, for many homeless people, necessity always trumps ideology. "The struggle to subsist at the lowest reaches of society, to make do from one day to the next with minimal resources, almost always ensures a semblance of routine and order... But it is a precarious order, because commitment to it is based on necessity rather than ideology."¹²⁸ During my conversation with Donna at Tent City, the degree to which personal principles can crumble in the face of denied necessities became terrifyingly clear. While many homeless people would never resort to drugs and prostitution if they existed in a state of stability, these things have become commonplace survival strategies among the property-less:

¹²⁸ Snow and Anderson, 314.

Me: So you think a lot of women turn to prostitution in order to get a place to stay?

Donna: Definitely. And, hell, something to eat. I mean, because that's the first thing, you know? And I know of people, people I've known all my life that I thought would help me, and the first thing out of their mouths, "When you going give me something-something?" You'd be surprised. I've known a lot of women who do that. And people talk about drugs and alcohol. Well, I know why pretty much all the homeless people drink and do crack. Hell, they drink so they don't know how bad their life really is, and they smoke crack 'cause they're hungry and want to kill hunger pains.¹²⁹

Thus, for many homeless people, their survival is often characterized by their dependence and subordination, whether it is a dependence upon, or subordination to, a more powerful sexual partner, drugs, or charity. Likewise, for Snow and Anderson, the accommodative work of charities is the weak thread that keeps homeless people dependent upon an order that reproduces the structural precipitants of homelessness, like the lack of affordable housing and fair wages. So, even though the secondary injustices of dependence that result from abject poverty, like compelled or forced prostitution, face homeless men and women constantly, most charitable organizations do little to actively encourage the empowerment of these individuals, failing to respect and understand their individual beliefs and desires. In contrast, when asked by an interviewer from the Village Voice if their shelters merely enable homeless recipients, Mad Housers President Nick Hess replied:

You can't ask a person with absolutely no power to take responsibility for his life. If you have to worry about a place to sleep tonight, you can't be expected to plan out tomorrow or the next week. The Mad Housers are antiauthoritarian in that we work to directly empower the homeless instead of creating our own power structure and telling the homeless to cleave to it.¹³⁰

Perhaps the Mad Housers' way of not gratifying feigned performances, accepting homeless people as they are, and helping them to create a sense of space, from which self-empowerment has a possibility to arise, is a step in the right direction. Homeless people often do not have a

¹²⁹ Donna Interview.

¹³⁰ Mamatas.

chance to express, or adhere to, their personal ideologies because their dependent situation constantly requires them to adapt to the ideologies of each particular donor or powerful entity.

At this moment, I am reminded of the Midwest Academy's demand that in order for social action to satisfy the requirements of direct action, "the people directly affected by the problem take action to solve it."¹³¹ Although the Mad Housers are largely an organization of homed individuals, it can be difficult at times to distinguish a clear division between homed and homeless individuals during the Mad Housers' builds. So, while the Mad Housers may be charitable in that they do not expect any physical or financial contribution from homeless recipients, they can seem more like a direct action organization inasmuch as homeless camp members often help build their own huts in addition to those of other camp members.¹³² Further blurring the boundary and power dynamic between homeless individuals and the Mad Housers is the fact that some currently homed members were once homeless themselves.¹³³ In light of this, it can be difficult to determine if, and how, the goals of the Mad Housers differ from the homeless people that they both serve and work with. Nevertheless, taking their statements and actions into consideration, I believe that the political goals of both groups mesh and complement one another in a general sense.

¹³¹ Midwest Academy, 11.

¹³² Mad Housers.

¹³³ Tim Interview

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In this thesis, I was initially concerned with identifying the degree to which the political ambitions of the Mad Housers coalesce with those of the homeless people with whom they interact. I believed that this would be a relatively straightforward task that would identify the position of the Mad Housers between the two traditional poles of community organizing: direct service and direct action. However, in my research, I have found the Mad Housers and their homeless “clients” to be equally confusing and difficult to pin down in terms of their sociopolitical objectives. This, however, has only encouraged new topics of thought about who the Mad Housers are and what their special position is regarding the homeless population, other direct service and direct action organizations, and American society, as well as questions about whether or not they represent a new trend in community organizing.

In a sense, I believe that the Mad Housers are something like a mutation born out of new socioeconomic circumstances. Generally speaking, they respond to the urgent needs and desires of homeless individuals. The two groups usually see eye-to-eye on the immediate task of hut building, believe that it represents a degree of progress, and, therefore, they frequently work together. This alone would suggest that the Mad Housers fall in line with traditional concepts about direct action. Nevertheless, the Mad Housers often identify themselves as a charity. And, while their work has made political waves and won improvements in housing for large numbers of people in Chicago, my observations in Georgia have shown them to be somewhat disinterested in actively politicizing homeless people.

Traditionally, as the literature on charity work, direct service, and direct action suggests, there is a distance between direct service and direct action. These two concepts are posed as being at opposite ends, therefore suggesting that they cannot be combined in one community organization. However, recent organizations, such as Homes Not Jails, Food Not Bombs, and, in this case, the Mad Housers, may be challenging this conceptualization. From my research on the Mad Housers and the data that I have obtained, I believe that their organization represents a more or less harmonious intermingling of direct service and direct action. In the case of the Mad Housers, it is my opinion that their characteristics of direct action are actually the inevitable result of their position as a group that primarily seeks to provide direct service to homeless individuals. In this sense, while the Mad Housers do not attempt to politically organize homeless people, instead preferring merely to give like any other direct service, they see no reason why their acts of charity should accept existing power structures. In their case, because their acts of charity involve the provision of a free shelter, which is built at minimal cost, they have little recourse but to trespass. Thus, the Mad Housers' actions are inherently entwined with the goals of homeless people in that both are compelled to disobey property laws in order to do what they feel is immediately necessary for survival.

In a United States where Mitchell and Heynen¹³⁴ emphasize that “welfare functions of the state continue to be ‘rolled back’ and new modes of discipline ‘rolled out,’” the rather quiet debate over whether or not our society should once again initiate a roll out of social services may be falling on deaf ears, at least as far as contemporary organizations like the Mad Housers are concerned. This is not to say that members of a society should not expect and demand necessities from their government –we should always be concerned with the degree to which our society cares for its citizens. Nevertheless, when looking back upon the history of our nation, such a

¹³⁴ Mitchell and Heynen, 612.

debate can be disorienting when both charity and social welfare programs have traditionally been primarily accommodative programs that don't necessarily serve to empower the poor.

In fact, in recent times, it has become rather obvious that social provisions, such as public housing, have become less of a foundation for the empowerment of the people they were meant to help and more of an example of their disenfranchisement. In many cases, residents in public housing projects have lost their power to influence decisions on their housing, while city governments have been more than happy to let constructed units crumble so that they may be condemned. This is certainly evident in post-Katrina New Orleans, but also in cities like New York where, as Michelle Chen observes, "New York City's Housing Authority (NYCHA) has all but buried its mandate to foster democratic participation in accordance with federal '964 regs,' which are supposed to provide at least a nominal platform for raising tenant concerns."¹³⁵ Instead, "residents have little meaningful input in housing policy, and the structures that enable dialogue between policymakers and residents are in disrepair."¹³⁶ Thus, while the landscape of remaining social services and securities has become a front of defeat in the battle for poor people's rights, organizations like the Mad Housers may be realizing a necessity for opening up new fronts in this struggle. Instead of waiting for distant governmental responses that can only happen in the face of widespread social pressure, the Mad Housers, as a locally oriented small-scale organization, seek to realize winnable goals right now. They know that winning large-scale social reform is most likely beyond their capabilities, especially when the homeless people with whom they interact are among the most marginalized members of society. Social safety nets, welfare programs, and reform, for their part, are commonly either the results of the actions of extremely empowered and unified social groups and not the initial cause of empowerment, or, as

¹³⁵ Michelle Chen, "Democracy Begins at Home" *RaceWire*, 23 January 2010
<http://www.racewire.org/archives/2010/01/democracy_in_public_housing.html>

¹³⁶ Ibid.

Mike Davis suggests, a long-gone product of the competing national ideologies of the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Describing his understanding of government responses to poverty under the post-Cold War global economy, Davis writes, “The contrast with the 1960s is dramatic: forty years ago ideological warfare between the two great Cold War blocs generated competing visions of abolishing world poverty and rehousing slum-dwellers... But the promised lands of the 1960s no longer appear on neoliberal maps of the future.”¹³⁷ More and more, Davis claims, the new regime of global development creates a reserve army of unemployed potential labor that is no longer on reserve, but instead “a permanently redundant mass” for whom there is “no official scenario” of reincorporation “into the mainstream of the world economy.”¹³⁸ Thus, the main concern for the governments of our time, with respect to members of this population, is how to either contain or eliminate these masses of people who have no place.

In the United States, containment and elimination commonly go hand-in-hand as elimination is normally a visible elimination, rather than a physical elimination of a person’s existence. This is why, for example, as Davis relates, while the hilltop corporate paradise of Bunker Hill in Los Angeles features business people and tourists comfortably basking in the sunshine in California Plaza, city leaders have not only promoted “the ‘containment’ (official term) of the homeless in Skid Row... systematically transforming the neighborhood into an outdoor poorhouse,” but also have deported homeless people and interned them “on a derelict ferry at the Harbor.”¹³⁹ For its part, Athens, Georgia, provides its own examples of such policies with its sidewalk benches partitioned by metal bars, preventing people from reclining lengthwise, as well as the downtown’s homeless parking meters, which encourage charitably minded

¹³⁷ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London and New York: Verso, 2006) 200.

¹³⁸ *Ibid*, 199.

¹³⁹ Mike Davis, *City of Quartz* (London and New York: Verso, 1990) 232.

individuals to deposit their donations there and not in the hands of a panhandler. Therefore, segregationist policies that reinforce an almost constant divide between the wealthy and the poor have become the official business of city governments.

Meanwhile, the reality that contemporary government programs and legal venues for assisting homeless people are, in fact, confining and hindering homeless people is becoming ever more apparent to homeless people and homeless advocates. This is not only because previously legal forms of charity are no longer legal in many parts of the country, but also because, as Mitchell and Heynen state, “increasingly, stringent rules governing funding have the effect of turning social service agencies into outlaws if they continue to serve the very people who may need their services the most.”¹⁴⁰ In this sense, many churches and charities seeking to do what they believe is right have no choice but to embark into the waters of political activism, while casting a suspicious eye at those organizations that remain within the law. Thus, the contemporary political climate of the United States, with respect to homelessness, has done much on its own to foster new relationships between direct service and direct action.

Perhaps Dr. King’s “true revolution of values”¹⁴¹ is closer than we think. While charities have long been a retreat from rights to gifts, they are now being thrown in with the oppressed whom they seek to help. Consequently, their newfound position on the wrong side of the law has started encouraging them to fight for their rights from the government alongside the criminalized poor. Here, charities have become activist organizations. If they find that their accommodative work has become illegal, they may begin to act with homeless people, as well as other traditionally distant direct action organizations, to respond directly to the problem of extreme

¹⁴⁰ Mitchell and Heynen, 612.

¹⁴¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Beyond Vietnam.”

poverty, or to demand that the government produce effective legal remedies to what they consider to be a moral problem.

For the Mad Housers, this situation has already become a real component of their work. Hence, what may once have been a series of relatively individualized responses to what were seen as rather individual problems have begun to make use of a more collective approach of the sort that Lyon-Callo¹⁴² and Navarro¹⁴³ advocate. Here, while the Mad Housers believe in the importance of facilitating the personal freedoms of homeless individuals, they simultaneously embrace collective action in order to encourage this result. Certainly, this can be seen in the way in which they bring together people, homed and homeless, who hold dear many different political and religious perspectives, to confront what all of them believe is a serious problem. Perhaps, in being able to unite their efforts on this issue, these formerly disparate actors may begin to eschew some of their long-held convictions that have prevented them from coming together in the past.

The Mad Housers' ability to merge so many different people may have something to do with the way in which they reflect some of the Midwest Academy's¹⁴⁴ beliefs about successful direct action organizing. Primarily, the Mad Housers appeal to the self-interest of homeless people squatting on vacant land. In fact, I would argue that they respond to a universal human desire (beyond that of the often overlooked, but imperative to state, human need for shelter): the ability to affix one's own identity to their surroundings and make their surroundings a productive element in constructing and sustaining their own identities. Inasmuch as this is a desire that I believe the majority of Americans can understand and appreciate, the actions of the Mad Housers have the ability to appeal to, and incorporate, a wide range of otherwise distinct members of our

¹⁴² Lyon-Callo, 51.

¹⁴³ Navarro, 40.

¹⁴⁴ Midwest Academy, 8.

society. So, if Alinsky once stated that people “don’t like to step abruptly out of the security of familiar experience; they need a bridge to cross from their own experience to a new way,”¹⁴⁵ then the Mad Housers’ appeal to widespread human interests could be said to provide this bridge. Furthermore, for the homeless people who do help in the Mad Housers’ hut builds, their participation is largely within their comfort zones because they are often building within the spaces where they have been camping for long periods of time.

Most importantly, even if we are living in a post-Cold War, neoliberal, globalized dystopia, the Mad Housers prove that there are people from many walks of life within our society who do believe in the necessary importance of a shelter and a place to express one’s independence. Perhaps such beliefs will only grow stronger as more people begin to realize the extremities of the contradictory policies of new urban regimes regarding personal liberties and poverty. In my observations, I believe that this is already becoming apparent in the increasingly comfortable intermingling of charity and direct action. As increasing numbers of people and organizations find themselves fighting the law out of necessity, such a union of charity, religious conviction, direct action, and political conviction could provide a substantial foundation for a newly empowered poor people’s movement to successfully garner effective structural responses to poverty.

In the meantime, while the Mad Housers may not actively involve themselves in politicizing homeless people to fight against the injustices they face through public protest, their simple grassroots activism does hope to encourage homeless individuals to begin refusing their status as “permanently redundant”¹⁴⁶. Thus, the Mad Housers constantly work with homeless people to reassert control over their bodies and to appropriate space, thereby helping them

¹⁴⁵ Alinsky, xxi.

¹⁴⁶ Davis, Planet of Slums 199.

extract personal utility from vacant, redundant urban property. In these actions, they embody extremely progressive ideals, which encourage homeless people to resist their supposedly unnecessary status within the economy by unveiling the ease with which they can begin to control their own livelihoods, without depending on a society that calls them redundant.

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