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The Operation was Successful but the Patient Died: The Politics of Crisis and Homelessness in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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A Thesis

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Abstract

On July 4th, 2007, a small group of housing activists set up a tent city encampment in a plaza adjacent to New Orleans City Hall. The action resulted in the creation of Homeless Pride, a small group of politicized Plaza residents. Six months later, hundreds of homeless people were moved from the park, and it was fenced off. Using archival videos, interviews, and news media, this thesis analyzes the opportunities and constraints that activists, service providers, and local officials faced in light of two intersecting and overlapping contexts. The first context is the immediate crisis of the levee failures after Hurricane Katrina, and the second is the longer-term national political-economic context of "neoliberal urbanism". Because of dire short-term circumstances, Homeless Pride articulated a message of homelessness as a "crisis" even though they had larger structural goals and vision. In light of recent "Occupy" movements, this case study addresses crucial questions for organizers and policymakers attempting to combat poverty and wealth inequality.

Keywords: homelessness, New Orleans, occupations, post-Katrina, public space, housing, organizing, municipal policy, federal policy

Epigraph

"If the ghetto burns down we will not know it because it does not show on the symap. If it is not in the census, it is not sensed. If remote sensing is efficient, and it is, why does it follow, and it does not, that intimate sensing is not? We have become so situational that we have lost sight of the site unless we can cite it in a senseless census. Great God, we have to sneak outdoors."

--William Bunge, <u>Fitzgerald from a Distance</u> (1974)

Already the Great Khan was leafing through his atlas, over the maps of cities that menace in nightmares and maledictions: Enoch, Babylon, Yahooland, Butua, Brave New World. He said, "It is all useless, if the last landing place can only be the infernal city, and it is there that, in ever-narrowing circles, the current is drawing us."

And Polo said: "The inferno of the living is not something that will be; if there is one it is what is already here, the inferno where we live every day, that we form by being together. There are two ways to escape suffering it. The first is easy for many: accept the inferno and become such a part of it that you can no longer see it. The second is risky and demands constant vigilance and apprehension: seek and learn to recognize who and what, in the midst of the inferno, are not inferno, then make them endure, give them space."

--Italo Calvino, <u>Invisible Cities</u> (1972)

"Even a dog could use the park as a bathroom."

--Larry Boley, Homeless New Orleanian (2007)

I. Introduction

On October 6, 2011, less than one month after the start of the "Occupy Wall Street" movement that claimed as its base a privately-owned public space in downtown Manhattan, hundreds of New Orleanians marched in downtown New Orleans to begin their own version of this national and global movement. Just as New York City had Zuccotti Park, "Occupy NOLA" claimed as its base a small inert green space directly in front of the main entrance to City Hall called Duncan Plaza. In selecting Duncan Plaza, Occupy NOLA, like its brethren in cities across the United States, was choosing to emphasize visibility in their strategic choice of territory. These spaces, in addition to being highly visible, also possess a symbolic importance that is difficult to replicate in other public spaces.

After a month of a mixture of hospitality and neglect from the City of New Orleans, Mayor Mitch Landrieu served notice that the people and tents of Occupy NOLA had begun to wear out their welcome: "At some point in time," the Mayor stated, "it's going to get beyond just a First Amendment expression" (Donze 2011b). The mayor's concern was in keeping with the growing "concerns" of mayors around the country, who were noticing an increasingly unwelcome blend of the involuntarily unsheltered—usually known as the homeless—converging with the voluntary protestors in these sites (Nagourney 2011; McKinley and Goodnough 2011). While the city could, in 2011, afford to allow the occupy movement to exist, with its diffuse structure and seeming lack of specific programmatic demands, the recent history of

Duncan Plaza suggested that even a benign action such as Occupy NOLA could quickly become far more of a political problem for local politicians.

Several years earlier, for six months in 2007, Duncan Plaza was a contentious flashpoint of the ongoing drama (and trauma) of the post-Katrina reconstruction of the city of New Orleans. On July 4th, 2007, a small group of housing activists, public housing tenants, and a solidarity delegation of Thai activists from their tsunami-impacted coast, set up a symbolic tent city encampment in the areas of the plaza most visible to pedestrians, traffic, and City Hall.[1] The stated purpose of the occupation was to directly challenge (then) Mayor C. Ray Nagin to resolve several critical housing issues that the flooding of Katrina had created or exacerbated in the city of New Orleans: the closure of public housing, the spike in rents citywide, and the dramatic increase in homelessness since the flooding of the city less than two years earlier. Moreover, the planned encampment sought to make another important political statement: that people who do not have homes still have the same political rights to representation as housed people, and that local elected officials had a duty to represent them.

Over the course of the following six months, the primary objectives of the occupation of Duncan Plaza shifted between the political goals of representation from local government, to focusing on the problems of housing and homelessness, to the strategic importance of *visibility* for people without shelter. Activists, people without

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[1] This legacy was part of the reason that the Occupy NOLA group chose Duncan Plaza as their home base.

homes, and their supporters unilaterally declared the plaza a "free zone" where the homeless could sleep outdoors without fear of arrest or police harassment. This loosely organized collective, whose leadership was drawn from a subset of the Plaza's residents, were calling themselves "Homeless Pride" within a few weeks.

In addition to focusing access to decent and affordable housing as a human right, Homeless Pride's symbolic intervention was also to disrupt the city's overriding narrative of being "recovered" or "in recovery" to a wider national audience. As part of a longer history of urban "occupation" actions, the presence of dozens of tents in a public plaza in the shadows of City Hall was doubly strategic: using a public and symbolic space to bring the "homelessness issue" to the attention of city officials and urge action by visually disrupting tourism and consumption-based economic activity in the downtown area.

The strategy of visibility was indeed effective at getting the attention of the city—but perhaps not in the way that activists had intended or desired. Rather than addressing the issues of homelessness and housing, the visibility of the encampment became the driving concern of city officials. The saving grace of the homeless encampment in Duncan Plaza —and the political problems it posed through its strategic visibility—is that it could be declared quantifiably concluded, regardless of long-term issues of homelessness in the city.

On December 21st, 2007, Duncan Plaza was completely fenced off. Dozens of tents with belongings still inside were tossed into garbage trucks, and the last of the Plaza's hundreds of residents were relocated into various forms of temporary hotel

rooms, shelters, or semi-permanent supportive housing as part of a month-long

intensive rapid re-housing initiative spearheaded by UNITY of Greater New Orleans.[2]

In a press conference that morning, Executive Director Martha Kegel proclaimed to the

assembled crowd and news media that UNITY had worked with numerous agencies

and the city administration towards a "monumental achievement unprecedented

anywhere in America" (UNITY 2007). She did not mention Homeless Pride or the role

that some of its members played in bringing the issue to the attention of the city

through their agitation and focus on visibility. Kegel's silence on the existence and role

of Homeless Pride in the six-month encampment served to diminish the larger

structural and rights-based critiques that Homeless Pride had articulated during the

encampment. The story instead was one of bureaucratic collaboration and triumph over

a temporary crisis. From this dynamic I drew inspiration for the title of this piece: while

the operation to resolve the problem of people sleeping in a public space was indeed

successful, the original sickness that "the patient" complained about—poverty and

structural issues of housing provision and inequality—ultimately went unaddressed.

From the standpoint of current best practices for the delivery of services for

homeless people, UNITY's execution was indeed exemplary. While activists were

stymied in their attempts to make larger policy gains at the city level and inject the

discourse of human rights into the city's framework for housing policy, they considered

their ability to achieve some political influence on a city in flux, and to use that

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[2] UNITY of Greater New Orleans is an award-winning umbrella organization with its own staff and budget that consists of a collaborative of over 60 metropolitan service providers in the area of homelessness.

influence to help activate and mobilize resources to house hundreds of people, to be a qualified, short-term success.

Additionally, housing activists and advocates for the homeless like UNITY were satisfied, if not proud, that unlike many cities in which homelessness and sleeping in public have been met with draconian municipal ordinances that criminalize the homeless (see Mitchell 2003; Arnold 2004), the city of New Orleans permitted—but did not support or condone—an initially small but ultimately significant congregation of over 200 people in various stages of homelessness without calling in the National Guard or police to make mass arrests and move people.[3] Instead, the Nagin administration and City Council dispatched UNITY and emergency shelters to forge a solution to the "crisis" of visibility while petitioning the state and federal government for additional emergency funds and housing vouchers. Since the city's main objective (unlike UNITY, housing activists and Homeless Pride) was to facilitate the invisibility of the encampment, the resolution of this affair satisfied their interests and the use of UNITY was helpful in putting a compassionate face on this dynamic.[4] The repetition of similar situations in cities across the country has led political scientist Leonard Feldman to

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[3] This is particularly notable because these tactics were used periodically against other activists who were concurrently advocating against the demolition of New Orleans public housing during this same period of 2007.

[4] Many critical perspectives on homelessness, as I detail in Chapter two, argue that the interests of service providers such as UNITY are in lock step with city and economic elites to facilitate the invisibility of homelessness. While I am sympathetic to these structural critiques, I attempt to draw a more nuanced understanding of the multiple and variegated interests and prerogatives of an organization such as UNITY, whose interests and allegiances, like the other actors in this story, exist on a fluid spectrum, and are not as rigid as these critiques claim.

inquire if there isn't some "hidden link between charitable appeals for food and shelter…and the punitive policies of displacement, harassment, and exclusion [that] permits the relatively easy slide from calls to *eliminate homelessness* to calls to *eliminate the homeless*" (Feldman 2006: pp. 5-6, emphasis in original). In staking a claim on such a strategically visible space, Homeless Pride and its supporters were forced to reckon with this double-edged sword of strategic visibility.

What happened next? For months following the closure of Duncan Plaza, dozens of the same people and others continued to sleep outdoors under elevated roadways, bridges, and adjacent to formal homeless shelters. For having been such an "unprecedented achievement" at the time, four years later in 2011 there remain just shy of ten thousand people in various stages of homelessness in the New Orleans area on any given night, with most sleeping in abandoned buildings or on the streets (UNITY 2011). This should lead urban scholars, activists, and policymakers to wonder what about the situation in Duncan Plaza was actually a "crisis" that differed from any other period in which thousands of New Orleanians are homeless on any given night. The most clear explanations for this difference lie both in the visibility of the encampment as well as its politics—both of which I address in Chapter two.

This study demonstrates that city officials and housing activists' invocation of Duncan Plaza as an "emergency" or "crisis" situation, while helpful to call attention to the urgency of the housing problems in post-Katrina New Orleans, allowed for the city of New Orleans to more easily justify using short-term, emergency measures to "resolve" it. This hindered a discussion about long-term solution to homelessness in

New Orleans. Despite the tremendous challenges facing these publicly visible struggles for greater social and economic justice, they are also spaces of alternative practice and opportunity. Despite the constraints on local organizing and particularly on organizing within and among the homeless, the post-Katrina situation in New Orleans was a highly dynamic and unstable situation that provided relatively rare opportunities for alternative visions for housing and economic justice and human rights frameworks to be heard. It is this dynamic context of "limits, possibilities, complexities and unpredictabilities" (Zupan 2011) in which I situate the efforts of Homeless Pride in 2007. In doing so, I seek to shed light on both the constraints and opportunities of these local actions to promote new solutions to the various conditions of homelessness and poverty within the political-economic context of neoliberal urbanism as well as the specific upheaval of the post-Katrina moment—a moment that, after several years, continued to morph into a "new normal" (Demos 2009).

In Chapter two, I begin with a literature review on homelessness as a social and political phenomenon. Neoliberalism has been implicated previously in the arena of homelessness, but most critiques address its effect on the criminalization of homeless bodies in public (Mitchell 2003), or on the specific practices of the sheltering industry (Lyon-Callo 2004). Other works on politicized homeless mobilizations (Wright 1997) simply need to be updated into 21st century urban contexts. This thesis fills in the gap in this literature by uniting these literatures to analyze politicized homeless mobilizations in a 21st century context. I also interrogate my own subjectivity in this project, and

briefly detail the ways in which scholars who study homelessness critically approach their own work.

In Chapter three, I empirically analyze what homelessness meant to the organizers of the Duncan Plaza encampment, and how it intersected with other issues of housing instability and injustice. I then begin to examine how organizers created and perpetuated the small, politicized subset of Duncan Plaza encampment, as well as developed leadership among the residents of the Plaza. By seizing a space of strategic visibility and persistently calling attention to the situation of homelessness, they were able to activate themselves as participating citizens in the reconstruction of their hometown, rather than just recipients of charity and clients of services. In building a sense of self-esteem among those without shelter, organizers helped build a sense of political entitlement to representation that the poor and those without homes typically lack. Yet in building a narrative of homelessness as a "crisis", they also impeded their chances of success by creating the opportunity for the city to "solve" the "problem" through just clearing the camp, rather than addressing (even cursorily) the structural issues that Homeless Pride articulated.

In Chapter four, I show how Homeless Pride articulated a political agenda both in unison with, and distinct from, a concurrent movement to prevent the demolition of several thousand public housing apartments in New Orleans, and how the city responded and involved UNITY in its response. As Homeless Pride's political program became more publicized, the city worked with state and local departments and service providers to continue to neutralize this component of the message, even as they actively

collaborated compassionately to offer clothing and food, as well as temporary shelter and housing for Plaza residents. Homeless Pride was able to communicate directly with city officials and with UNITY outreach workers, but their desire to become an active part of the decision-making apparatus was generally stymied or rejected. By December of 2007, the only solution that the city was actively considering involved closing down the Plaza without permanent housing solutions for all of its occupants—much less a larger plan for homelessness in New Orleans.

By way of conclusion, Chapter five returns to fundamental questions. What does a "successful homelessness policy" look like? What would a "successful" organizing campaign look like for and among those who are homeless? How can organizers and policymakers move away from crisis frameworks for mobilization and policy when often—for individuals who are involuntarily living in dangerous conditions— homelessness is *actually* an individual crisis? How can movements for economic and spatial justice, which like any political movement are never without internal inconsistencies and contradictions, be given (or take) space to become a part of shaping the future of our cities? In examining these tensions as they occurred in Duncan Plaza, my goal is to offer a (hopefully) clear articulation of these intertwined problems so that those who are most involved and affected might have greater successes confronting them in the future.

II: A Crisis of Policy and a Policy of Crisis

> *It is tempting to imagine that…our categories and concepts do not need reworking, that all we have is a failure of will, not a failure of thought.*
> (Feldman 2006 p. 22)

It would take an "elastic notion," writes anthropologist Kim Hopper, to understand the various reasons and circumstances of and for homelessness. "Indeed," he argues, "the suspicion quickly mounts that seeking to impose order on the hodgepodge of dislocation, extreme poverty, migrant work, unconventional ways of life, and bureaucratic expediency that have, at one time or another, been labeled homeless may well be a fool's errand" (2003: pp. 17-18). Hopper is pointing to an overriding concern with addressing homelessness as a policy matter. In this chapter I briefly attend to this "fool's errand" and address the *policy of crisis* and the *crisis of policy* that confront our policy approaches specifically to the visible homeless. As Jencks notes, people in jails, detox centers, mental hospitals, and foster homes, lack formal "homes" in a social sense, but their invisibility does not bring them into the public view (1994: p. 7). In this particular case study, the large-scale displacement and instability of communities in post-Katrina New Orleans also complicates how we might approach even a crude heuristic definition of the condition of homelessness.

As Blau notes, the "visibility of the homeless, because even though people on the street make up just one part of the homeless population, it is their public poverty that has shaped virtually everybody else's response to them" (1992: p. *x*). This concern with visibility dates back to the 1980s, when homelessness entered the federal policy arena in a highly politicized way as the result of a 1987 HUD study that identified a notable increase in homelessness. Further investigation and debate found the study to have methodological flaws, which led critics to argue that elements of the Democratic party

in HUD had fabricated the "homeless problem" or had "cooked" the results to purposefully inflate the number of homeless people to embarrass the Reagan administration (Jencks 1994; O'Flaherty 1996).

As a result, a substantial portion of the literature from the late 1980s and early 1990s was focused on metrics and quantification. It addressed the issue of who exactly "the homeless" were, what their "problems" were, and their numbers. In a sampling of literature on homelessness from this era, the most commonly identified root causes are: 1) deinstitutionalization of the mentally ill and failure to provide housing alternatives for these people, 2) increased long-term joblessness in working age men, 3) reduction of cash welfare payments, and 4) the destruction of skid row (Jencks 1994). Other structural explanations typically include deindustrialization of the US economy, job income polarization, and cutbacks in the government's role in providing for affordable housing (Bratt, et al 2006). As several scholars also noted throughout the 1990s, "much of the rise in the new homelessness has occurred in relatively prosperous times" (O'Flaherty 1996: p. 2; Blau 1992: p. 10). Yet while the various explanations offered as causes of homelessness may explain, from structural causes to individual behaviors, the rise in homelessness during the 1980s and 1990s, they do not explain the policy response to it.

Concurrently, federal policy on homelessness was just beginning to emerge during the same period (1980s and early 1990s). From the outset, it was designed to be a temporary supplement to declining federal spending on affordable housing, and what was viewed at the time as a temporary crisis relating to deinstitutionalization of the

mentally ill. As Paul Boden, Organizing Director of the Western Regional Advocacy

Project argues, the principal federal funding stream for homelessness prevention and

shelter services in the United States, the McKinney-Vento act (passed in 1987), was

really passed as an emergency, stop-gap funding source for localities to access federal

resources (NLCHP 2011; NCH 2006).

Even as chronic homelessness continued and grew throughout the nation's

urban areas, federal policy retained the operating assumption that these increases in

homelessness were a temporary phenomenon. This federal policy shortcoming has

undoubtedly hamstrung the capacity for even progressively minded municipal

administrations to effectively tackle or prevent homelessness in its various forms. "This

mistaken notion," writes Hopper, present for decades, "that a passing crisis might be

waited out has not only incurred huge social costs but created a massive artificial relief

industry with a perverse interest in sustaining demand for its services" (2003: pp. 215-

16). Indeed, as Schwartz notes, as of 2005, there were 3,000 cities receiving federal funds

to serve 700,000 people, with a total of $1.67 billion allocated to the McKinney-Vento

stream for rapid rehousing and emergency shelter. Schwartz notes without much shock

that this amount "has not proved sufficient to end homelessness in America" (2010: p.

249).

Since turn of the 21st century, "housing first" programs (Schwartz 2010: 250) have

entered the federal policy lexicon for addressing homelessness. These current best

practices have placed an emphasis on shelter first combined with intensive case

management. This linking of services and bureaucratic streamlining across federal

agencies has been referred to as the "Continuum of Care" model. Municipalities are

seeing success with these service delivery models, but funding streams for these

Continuum of Care programs, some of which have even begun to incorporate the

language of a human right to shelter, remain constrained by a McKinney-Vento funding

structure largely generally unchanged from what first emerged in the response to the

"crisis" of the 1980s. Thus what began in the 1980s as a mechanism for addressing what

was perceived to be a short-term crisis has now, in the first decade of the 21st century,

become the most significant funding stream for managing homelessness in the United

States. This is a crisis of policy.

Well-executed versions of these programs are achieving some promising results,

but they are doing so within a larger political economy that is—by design—prohibiting

not only the growth of these programs in terms of federal dollars, but also their

integration into a larger anti-poverty, low-income housing, human rights-based social

agenda. This is the policy of crisis. This trend of arranging short-term or emergency

policy prescriptions for evidently structural problems has been noted previously, such

as Blau's concise point about expenditures:

> the list of interventions is hardly inconsequential. The local, state, and federal
> governments have spent billions of dollars on the homeless, and those
> expenditures have undoubtedly saved lives. Still, the key question in analyzing
> these social policies is why, *proportionately, so much more money was spent on
> emergency measures* (1992 p. 176, emphasis added).

Furthermore, Hopper states plainly that such "emergency" measures are consistently

"stymied…whenever the generative forces behind the 'crisis' go unchecked" (2003: p.

195). For public policy to have a chance at resolving homelessness issues, even a robust

"evidence-based" (UNITY 2008) set of policies cannot exist successfully or sustainably

outside of a larger suite of federal, state, and local affordable housing, living wage, and

anti-poverty programs. As Sociologist Talmadge Wright notes in his seminal work, *Out*

of Place:

> By separating the poor from the homeless, policy research, which could have
> addressed issues of structural inequality in order to end poverty, shifted into the
> containment of a subset of the poor via the construction of shelters and the
> promotion of job training. *Containment of homelessness, not ending poverty,* became the
> new goal of policy makers and politicians, and ending poverty faded from the
> political agenda (1997: p. 19, emphasis added).

As the policy focus at a national level has moved away from anti-poverty and

affordable housing programs, the dominant trend in homelessness policies has been to

rehabilitate the homeless and focus on individual practices and behaviors, such as

substance abuse. In addition to separating homelessness policy from other housing and

economic issues, federal funding streams further subdivide programs for homelessness

into additional groups such as teenagers, veterans, families, the mentally ill, those with

substance abuse issues, and so forth (Wright 1997: p. 20). While there is nothing

inherently wrong with creating specialized programs to address specific issues, this

segmentation has occurred in concert with the increasing "medicalization" of

homelessness (Lyon-Callo 2004). Indeed, as Blasi points out, in the 1990s there was

more federal financing for research on homelessness from the National Institute of

Mental Health than from HUD (cited in Wright 1997: p. 22).

Other scholars have also linked this inextricably with neoliberalism. In the case of

Duncan Plaza, the neoliberal context at work here is a political-economic system that

undermines the effective execution of social policy through the creation of a paradigm of perpetual financial shortfall. This system has enveloped organizing campaigns like those undertaken in Duncan Plaza, as well as the policy remedies designed to address homelessness over the past several decades.

In the literature addressing neoliberalism, the trend of declining resources and the individualization of social policy at the multiple scales has taken on various names. These range from "neoliberal urbanism" (Brenner, Peck, Theodore 2005, 2009) to "neoliberal cities" (Hackworth 2007), or the "New Urban Politics" (DeFilippis 2004). By whatever name it takes, the general consensus is that this political-economic paradigm has helped construct political definitions of success, failure, and crisis over the past three decades that promote market-based solutions and de-emphasize the role of government in promoting a common or base standard of living. This is not surprising, since neoliberalism and neoliberal urbanism broadly describe the aggressive dismantling, privatization, or retrenching of social safety net services and the constituent organizations and ideologies that support them at global, national, and local scales. The rise of a neoliberal political-economic consensus in the United States, and more specifically, within the municipal policies of urban centers in the United States, has risen at the expense of a political and policy consensus that promotes full employment and combats poverty. The loss of these substantial resources and the political weight they once carried has transformed a suite of large-scale and institutionalized safety net programs into one in which "temporary" or "emergency" measures are commonly used in lieu of longer-term commitments or strategies

(Benjamin 1969: p. 257, cited in DeFilippis et al 2010: p. 7). As Anthropologist Kim

Hopper has argued,

> whatever their immediate value as instruments of relief, these measures fall far
> short of seeking to rectify—or even to address—the structural roots of poverty….
> More pernicious still, *they may have the effect of soothing the abrasion needed to
> motivate the search for a more lasting and inclusive solution*" (p. 214, emphasis
> added).

Since the 1980s when these trends began to be most visible at the national level,

"politicized homeless mobilizations" (Wright 1997) have occurred in several cities

across the country to elevate the discourse on poverty and homelessness beyond one of

reform and minor policy adjustments to larger issues of wealth distribution, and the

rights of poor people and people without shelter in the United States. I argue that the

actions of Homeless Pride in Duncan Plaza are in keeping with this tradition, but as a

result of the further consolidation of the system of neoliberal urbanism in the 21st

century, Homeless Pride faced a more challenging political and economic environment

than its predecessors in the 20th century. As such, this work contributes to this literature

on politicized encampments by updating it to 21st century conditions reflecting the

increased hegemony of this political-economic order.

Others have no limited their critique of neoliberalism to broad changes in

policymaking and political consensus. Within the realm of homelessness policy

specifically, several authors note an increased focus on individual behavior

modifications to recover from homelessness, rather than on larger structural issues that

produce homelessness, as the state's role in providing for the common good is

subordinated to privatized and individually based remedies (Mitchell 2003: p. 179;

Wright 1997: p. 12). In the early 21st century, these practices for managing homelessness

began to face increased scrutiny. These critiques are well-summarized in the passage

from Anthropologist Vincent Lyon-Callo, below:

> [B]y failing to address systemic and discursive inequities, these efforts remain
> ineffective in decreasing homelessness. Education, life skills training, and self-
> improvement efforts are of little real value without collective political
> movements making existing jobs pay living wages. Similarly, efforts to create
> affordable housing, while possibly being a solution to homelessness, will do
> nothing to eliminate poverty without social movements aimed at denaturalizing
> current dominant discourses about the 'rights' of capital and redistributing the
> nation's wealth in a more equitable fashion (2004: p. 155).

Others echo Lyon-Callo's clarion call for a rights-based framework to address

structural deficiencies of the neoliberal order. Geographer David Harvey argues that his

essay on the "Right to the City" functions "both a working slogan and political ideal"

(2008: p. 331). Others, such as Bratt, Stone, and Hartmann, use a human rights

framework to fuse the issues of economic and housing security together "as a basis for a

new social agenda" (2006: p. 414). But there are some slight differences between a

human rights framework that addresses housing or economic rights in accordance with

the UN Declaration on Human Rights. As Harvey asserts,

> [T]he right to the city is a far more than the individual liberty to access urban
> resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is moreover, a
> common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably
> depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of
> urbanization (2008 p. 315).

While calls for more organizing to "take back the city" proceed at the local level (and I

do argue that Homeless Pride was a small and fleeting piece of the larger constellation

of these urban movements), those who call for the redistribution of wealth and income

to address poverty are at the national scale are, at best, perceived as "utopian dreamers", or at worst, declared socialists and locked out of any "serious" conversation on national policy. Simultaneously, within the homeless policy arena, those who build shelters and provide services are then "rewarded for contributing to solving homelessness", while larger issues of "power, property, and poverty are subordinated to technocratic considerations of funding patterns, grant writing, and shelter management" (Wright 1997: p. 1).

As Lyon-Callo further demonstrates in his case study of a shelter in Massachusetts, the persistence of these intractable conflicts in the realm of homelessness frustrate even those on the frontlines. Employees and homeless "clients" who have a more politicized analysis of their situation found it difficult to bring themselves to the level of political activism because of the way they are funded and supported by governments and foundations. Even in New Orleans, Mike Miller, Director of Supportive Housing for UNITY, told the local Times-Picayune newspaper that his job essentially boiled down to playing "cleanup for the whole, broken system" (Reckdahl 2008). So as Lyon-Callo chronicles, unless caseworkers and other workers within this system find outside networks to channel their opinions, their "resistance remains an individual struggle" (2004: pp 153-155). The pervasive sense of frustration and hopelessness is not at all inexplicable. As he concludes,

> [g]iven the dominance of the bio-medical model, the rise of neoliberalism, and the perception of neoliberal globalization as a totalizing, all-encompassing system, it is not surprising that shelter staff, homeless people, and policy makers often have difficulty conceiving of what else they can do (ibid: p. 158).

This analysis calls further attention to the futility of addressing homelessness within even the most progressively minded municipal contexts. Drawing from his experience in the small liberal city of Amherst, Massachusetts, Lyon-Callo notes with some resignation and anger that "A 'caring,' 'helping,' community engaged in 'reasonable' helping efforts and charitable work, even in the 'most enlightened' city in Massachusetts, is not the answer if we hope to see an end to homelessness" (2004: p. 173). In the next section, I problematize a rights-based framework to housing by shedding light on its potential role in perpetuating a cultural binary of housed versus homeless citizens.[5] Through a theoretical analysis of "bare life", I elaborate more on the political nature of homelessness, and the ways in which other scholars have approached politicized encampments such as Duncan Plaza.

Bare Life and an Ethic of Dwelling

As Feldman asserts, "it is time to pry homelessness loose from its usual frame as a social problem" (2004: p. 15). If we plumb the cultural depths of our society with political theory, we uncover a set of assumptions about who "the homeless" are, and how these drive our policy responses, whether they seek to provide sanctuary or criminalize the presence of the homeless. He outlines a coupling of binary oppositions relating to the assumed agency of the homeless.

The first, "free versus unfree," (see Figure 1 below) relate to the assumptions of choice in homelessness, and whether a homeless person has had any active agency in

[5] The word "citizen" is obviously charged with various meanings. I use it here cautiously, while also attempting to enlarge its meaning beyond its typically exclusionary definition as a naturalized member of a nation-state.

the production of their life circumstances. The second binary valuation, "sacred or profane," ascribes a judgment to this agency. As such, a homeless person who possesses sacred freedom is the romanticized migrant "hobo" wanderer of cinematic and 20th century lore, while a homeless person with "sacred unfreedom" is the passive recipient of alms and compassion in the model of Judeo-Christian charity—a human with only "bare life" and nothing else. These cultural conceptions of homelessness promote the more liberal policy responses of service provision and shelter. Contrarily, the profane freedom and "unfreedom" of homelessness see the homeless person's agency or passivity both as threats—one an active criminal threat, the other a visual and economic drain on society driven by behaviors of vice and slothfulness (Feldman 2004).

Sacred Freedom: romantic, wandering "hobo", should be allowed to exist in "natural" state	Profane Freedom: homeless person is active threat to society through criminal actions, panhandling
Sacred Unfreedom: passive recipient of charity, "client" of services. Often associated with religious invocations of "the poor" or "the needy"	Profane Unfreedom: visual/economic drain on downtowns or spaces of consumption through mere presence, even without panhandling or criminal activity

Figure 1 (adapted from Feldman 2004).

The problem with all of these, argues Feldman, is that all of these classifications ignore the deeply political implications of these ascribed identities. Of principal importance to

Feldman is his assessment that "home-dwelling citizen and homeless bare life are

political statuses, not only social statuses or elements of personal identity" (ibid: p. 20;

emphasis added). Expanding on Agamben's "homo sacer" or "sacred being" concept,

Feldman argues that the political status of "bare life," in which a human being is

viewed as only the shell of a human being without a political identity or status, has

been applied to the homeless and has served to strip them of even "the right to have

rights" (quoting Arendt, in Feldman 2004: p. 21). This stripped down form of "bare life"

has serious implications for the spectrum of likely policy outcomes for homelessness,

because it significantly impacts the chances that people who have experienced or are

experiencing homelessness will be able to participate on equal footing in the articulation

of better outcomes. It is worth noting here that the practice of planning in the 20th

century has had a role to play in establishing the "cultural norms concerning what

constitutes a proper home," and consequently, what does not (2004: p. 91).[6] The

implications of this binary of "the housed" and "the homeless" also complicate the

normative visions of a "housing for all" political agenda. As Feldman argues,

> The dream of proper homes—even in its redistributive progressive form—is
> implicated in the production of 'bare life' when grand schemes for ending
> homelessness are based on the destruction or conversion of nonnormative [*sic*]
> dwellings such as residential hotels and collectively organized homeless
> encampments deemed 'substandard housing'" (2004: p. 22)

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[6] While the full extent of the complicity of the practice of planning in the production of
this dynamic is far beyond the scope of this paper, I note the the dynamic as a way to
initiate a discussion of an alternative planning ethos or "ethic of dwelling" as Feldman
describes it.

From a policymaking standpoint, as well as a political action and organizing perspective, the purpose of this critique is not to eschew movements for decent and affordable housing for all people. Rather, the purpose is to ensure that policymakers and organizers alike insist on policies that are developed "in a pluralistic spirit that avoids the production of an excluded bare life as the 'other' against which singular norms of home and home-dwelling citizen stand" (2004: p. 22).[7] Feldman identifies this working goal as an "ethic of dwelling" that promotes an acceptance and understanding of a multiplicity of dwelling forms and statuses. This ethic of dwelling, he argues, is a useful place to begin to consider policies aimed at ending homelessness because its purpose is to deconstruct the "home/homeless opposition" and recognize "our common engagement in the habits of dwelling" (2004: p. 147).

Deeply connected to, and also in direct obstruction of, broadening our conception of the habits of dwelling is the powerful trend in the aestheticization of downtown redevelopment and politicized mobilizations of the homeless. In an effort to connect this invisibilizing force of neoliberal urbanism to the dynamic politics of "crisis" during the six-month Duncan Plaza encampment, I examine some of these literatures below.

The Aesthetics of Neoliberalism: Homelessness in Downtowns

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[7] Feldman uses the terms "pluralistic" not to mean the traditional sense of a pluralistic society in which various interests articulate their positions on an imaginary equal playing field in the public sphere, but rather a political spirit that is encouraging and accepting of plurality, diversity, and nuance.

The importance of visible homelessness, as well as the political tensions over the intentional occupation of public space, has increased in recent years not only because of the growth in homelessness. The "power of aesthetics" in downtown revitalizations and the "landscaping" (sanitizing) of city life also draw this tension into greater relief (Mitchell 2003: pp. 185-6). Especially in the post-Katrina recovery context in New Orleans, many spaces, public and private, took on a greater symbolism because their status helped tell larger stories about the dramatic and tumultuous reconstruction of an already symbolic American city. This particular context gave further credence to Wright's assertion that

> City redevelopment is not a given, but rather a highly strategic process subject to conflicting claims from a multitude of parties exercising differing degrees of power within a highly contested landscape, both culturally and economically. It is this struggle that cities actively work to conceal in their promotional literature, advertising, marketing, and boosterism designed to 'sell the city'" (Wright 1997: p. 115).

As part of an increasing trend in cities to monetize their downtowns for consumption-based economic activity, public spaces in planned spaces of consumption are often subjected to increasingly stringent rules on comportment, appearance, and movement (Mitchell 2003, Vitale 2008). In the case of Duncan Plaza, in the heart of the Central Business District of New Orleans and adjacent to City Hall, one cannot discount the role that downtown business and tourism interests played in the armies of compassion that descended upon the Plaza in such great force in November of 2007. From the perspective of these city boosters, "Homelessness is both bad for business and bad for government" (Blau 1992: p. 111). Furthermore, Blau asserts that in these downtown

contexts, the relative political strength of the business community has been "the fundamental determinant of policies for the homeless" (ibid: p. 132). As many scholars of public space argue, however, these often exclusionary consumption-based visions for downtown vitality—a "consumptive public sphere"—stands in contrast to a more "pluralizing conception of public space that fosters encounters with difference and what Richard Sennet calls 'the visceral experience of freedom'"(Feldman 2004: p. 24). Thus the political tensions and disruptions that these politicized mobilizations create are about challenging an increasingly monolithic and consumerist vision for the future of cities. Through the disruption of these social and physical spaces, new conditions, and thus new visions, can come to life.

Politicized Mobilizations

When viewed through the lens of politics and the development of cities, conceiving of homelessness as "simply a problem for the department of human services or for charity ignores the role city officials, planners, and developers have in structuring city spaces that lead to the exclusion and repression of its poor" (Wright 1997: p. 308). Works that analyze spaces in which the homeless have re-activated or reasserted citizenship through politicized homeless encampments are low in quantity, but their insight into understanding the opportunities and constraints of Homeless Pride are valuable.

As noted above, people who are homeless do not often find their voices being heard in policy discussions at the national level. While there are numerous factors contributing to this dynamic, there is a strong link between this dynamic of invisibility

and the way that people who are homeless are typically treated as clients and not citizens. Indeed, several scholars who have written on the topic of politicized mobilizations have identified that the fundamental challenge of addressing the injustices of homelessness is to establish citizenship (Feldman 2004: p. 86). Others have noted that neediness is no substitute for fundamental political identity; just because someone is lacking material resources does not mean he or she ceases to be occupied with personal freedom (Waldron in Feldman 2004: p. 79). Mitchell notes that beyond the fundamental importance of having a right to politically express oneself, there must be a space to do so. For the homeless, he argues, "only in public space can the homeless represent themselves as being a legitimate part of the public" (2003: p. 129). In these public spaces, the residents of these encampments are able to

> provide a very direct link between home-dwelling and civic involvement not only by making dwelling spaces into an experiment in collective self-governance but also by making this form of housing a very public act of witnessing a dramatization of housing inequalities in American society (Feldman 2004: p. 136).

Perhaps most key to the analysis that Feldman, Wright, Mitchell, and Hopper all share is their acceptance that, despite the normative necessity of the homeless self-organizing for collective rights, they also acknowledge the modest gains that can be accomplished from such mobilizations. Feldman notes that some homeless encampments have positively impacted shelter policies or made improvements in the availability of financial resources for a locality. Indeed, the characterization of the shelter industry and of social workers as an "enemy" is often found in the critical literature, especially from Lyon-Callo and Feldman.

For example, Feldman and Lyon-Callo identify the "secret solidarity" between

service providers and city and capital interests as significant constraint to local

organizing efforts, since they believe these are "the very powers they ought to fight"

(Feldman 2003: p. 19). As a result of these constraints, Feldman claims the most

important contribution of these political mobilizations may be more difficult to

quantify: "these encampments have enabled homeless persons to contest their outlaw

status and to remake themselves as citizens" (2004: p. 103). Wright, in documenting two

separate politicized mobilizations in the late 20th century in Chicago and San Jose, also

noted other important achievements:

> For a brief period Tranquility City [Chicago] and the SHA [San Jose]
> encampment became a mini-movement area in which a different way of living
> poor was experimented with; a possibility was created for the formation of a
> homeless community free of institutional shelter restraints. (1997: pp. 296-7).

Feldman and Wright both agree that this "different way" of living is among the more

important outcomes of such struggles. As Wright argues, groups like Homeless Pride

create "windows of opportunity for urban political work designed to reframe the

debate of homelessness from one of individual pathology to one of land use" (1997 p.

322). As he continues, these "mini-movement" spaces can provide rapid and effective

temporary housing, as well as "the needed space to create resistant heterotopia" and

call in to question the "proper" use of space as planners and politicians typically define

it. (1997: pp. 226-228, 322). In successful politicized temporary encampments, Wright

also notes that some residents feel a sense of pride and self-satisfaction for having

participated in something for the collective betterment of others beyond themselves (1997: p. 291).

Yet as Hopper notes, "success can impose costs of its own", since most "victories" are "tainted by the demoralizing realization that one has once again settled for less than what is really needed—and fought for the privilege of doing so" (2003: p. 183). Or as Mitchell succinctly notes, it is hard to "get excited about the right to beg" (2003: p. 210). Successful or effective leaders—just as rare if not more so among people who are homeless than in society at large—are also likely to convert any social capital from their position into a job or a housing opportunity, despite the collective nature of their struggle. As Hopper laments, "their personal gain is often the movement's loss" (2003: p. 183). Mike Miller of UNITY also notes that because of the limited funding available to address homelessness and the "stop-loss" paradigm that constrains their work, outreach workers do not typically target those who are able to "self-advocate" for assistance (Miller interview 2011).

Even with effective leadership and receptive government, Hopper laments that few demands, "no matter how brilliantly orchestrated, can touch the underlying mechanisms of deindustrialization, government cutbacks, and the depletion of low-income housing" (2003: p. 183). The articulation of demands and the targets of these demands arose as a frequent issue in the Duncan Plaza encampment, and so finally, this work expands upon the growing body of literature on the tensions surrounding local organizing in increasingly globalized urban environments (Hess 2009; DeFilippis, et al 2010).

<u>A Note on Methods and Methodology</u>

My access to these events was built both on luck and a trust that I cultivated both accidentally and intentionally through my consistent presence in Duncan Plaza providing meals, rides, and as a member of a small "copwatch" contingent. However, I was not acting as a researcher at the time, so to go back and review footage and read news articles covering the events of the time is not only to examine the behavior of others but also myself. As such, my relationship falls outside of traditional participant-observation, but could be more adequately described by terms such as "hanging out", "buddy researcher", or even, hesitantly, "ardent activist" (Wright 1997: p. 2).

In the interest of full disclosure, I will outline here my participation in these events as fully as I can. After sleeping in Duncan Plaza with between half a dozen and a dozen activists on July 4th, 2007, I attended numerous planning meetings in the gazebo throughout the summer. Along with other volunteers, I cooked and helped serve a meal on every Monday evening from July until August or September, when it became every other Monday until finally our volunteer organization ran out of food supplies in October. I participated throughout the summer in the "copwatch" contingent, which consisted of mostly young, white, recent New Orleans arrivals like myself sitting on benches in the Plaza in groups of 2-4 between the hours of 10pm and6am, between five and seven nights a week, depending on our numbers. I bought several tents in the early fall as the number of residents in the Plaza grew, and I used my car to take people on trips to the convenience store, to political rallies, and to look at rental units. I became

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friendly with several of the men in leadership, and occasionally contributed my thoughts on strategy, but almost exclusively kept my role to one of logistical support.

The media I have collected is in the form of obtained verité and interview film footage from a documentary film project, news articles, and interviews I have conducted personally. I communicated with the filmmakers (who were also colleagues of mine at the time) and described the footage I would be looking for. For a research fee, I was allowed to copy dozens of hours of footage as well as the log notes that came with them. These provided a basic context for the content of the files, which I then used as a basis for prioritizing which footage to transcribe and examine more closely. In addition, I reviewed an archive of dozens of news articles that I collected on the situation at Duncan Plaza in 2007, and used those articles to complement certain gaps in the video archive. I then conducted additional interviews from August 2011 to October 2011 with key activists and a UNITY employee to understand their perspective on the events in retrospect.

Like any attempt to recoup memories and analysis of events past, my archive of interview subjects, transcripts, news articles, memories, and video materials is of course an incomplete patchwork. Furthermore, because of the nature of UNITY's work as case managers for clients, my ability to access former members of Homeless Pride is limited by confidentiality regulations.[8] As such, not only am I unable to locate them, I am also

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[8] Any names of Homeless Pride members mentioned throughout this work are available due to information obtained from non-privileged sources such as public meetings, video footage, and news articles.

unable to speculate as to whether or not they are still housed or if they have become homeless again in New Orleans or in some other city.

In light of the above cautions against it, it would be rather naïve of me to presume that the dynamics of romanticizing some of the leaders of Homeless Pride (both for being homeless, but also for being black male activists) that Feldman and others identify have not also influenced my own views on the events of those months in 2007 (2004: p. 107). Having been even just a sideline witness to the events of those six months, however, I think, rather than imbuing the residents of Duncan Plaza with some sacred identity, I saw how ordinary they were. In this case, I use the word ordinary neither to demean nor to place them on a pedestal: like anyone else, they are as human as they want and are allowed to be. In order to achieve some amount of personal stability, many in homeless pride leadership behaved hypocritically, engaged in favoritism, deceit, coercion, and other unsavory practices. To ignore this aspect of their lives would be to deny their basic organizing premise: that they too are human. Like tens of thousands of New Orleanians, they wanted to come home, and they were doing what they thought was necessary to achieve that goal. My purpose is to examine the successes and failures of a fleeting moment in time when our paths crossed, not to nominate them for sainthood.

III: The Operation Begins (July 2007 to September 2007)

You don't want to go to war/
with New Orleans/
just give us our homes and we'll be alright!

—Post-Katrina housing rally cry

I WORK BUT CAN'T AFFORD HOUSING
—Homeless Pride poster in Duncan Plaza

The first few months of Homeless Pride illustrate several important themes. First and foremost is that the organizers and other allies who came into the space of Duncan Plaza pervasively used the language of crisis to help build momentum to grow the visibility of the encampment. While this framing helped draw an early contrast between the urgency of the housing situation in New Orleans with the seeming ineptitude of the Nagin administration, the repetition of this message over time had an unpredicted impact on the ultimate range of solutions the city considered in response to the problems Homeless Pride posed.

The sharp contrast was crucial to quickly build up the size, and thus the political and symbolic muscle, of the encampment in Duncan Plaza. This drew homeless men, and very few women, to Duncan Plaza and offered a sense of greater safety in numbers as well as support and respect for the humanity and dignity of each individual's right to participate as full citizens in the politics of their hometown. This was indeed an effective strategy—perhaps too effective—as it brought so much attention to Duncan Plaza that the city acted swiftly to diffuse the political implications of dozens of tents on the front steps of City Hall.

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After attending the first ever United States Social Forum in Atlanta in June of 2007, housing organizers from the People's Hurricane Relief Fund (PHRF), returned to New Orleans with the idea to form a public encampment of at the steps of City Hall to bring their grievances directly to the administration of Mayor C. Ray Nagin. The PHRF was a black socialist organization formed in the wake of the levee breaches to organize the black working classes of New Orleans for a racially and economically just reconstruction. The Gulf Coast delegation received special attention at the historic meeting not only because of the conference site's proximity to the Gulf Coast, but also because the organizing struggles of the post-Katrina context were still commanding national solidarity and attention. Gathering strength from the energy and support of others, the organizers envisioned an encampment of public housing and private market tenants, as well as the homeless.

Less than two years after the levee breaches that occurred during Hurricane Katrina, the housing situation in New Orleans remained dire. Over 80% of the city had flooded, causing an estimated loss of 80,000 rental units, including the closure of thousands of public housing apartments that were relatively undamaged by the hurricane (Fernandez 3/29/07). Because of the shortage in supply, rents rose markedly in certain neighborhoods (Eaton 2007) As a result of the structuring of federal recovery dollars, relief was mostly available to homeowners, but not to renters, despite the fact that pre-Katrina, New Orleans was a majority-renter city (GCR 2010). As such, PHRF had initiated a tenants working group for organizing private market tenants, as well as

working with Survivor's Village and the People's Organizing Committee, both public housing resident groups and their allies. The plan for an encampment in front of City Hall was to organize the people who were homeless in the city, but also to unite all three elements of the housing movement into one united front (see also Duncan Plaza fliers Appendix A).

Echoing the famous Frederick Douglass statement "What to the slave is the fourth of July?" PHRF organizers targeted July 4th as a kickoff date and built the event around the theme of asking "what is the fourth of July to a homeless person or poor person?" (Juakali 7/4/2007). The site was additionally significant because of its proximity to Essence Festival, one of the largest tourism draws for New Orleans, in which tens of thousands of mostly black visitors come to New Orleans for an annual concert and festivities. This strategic timing and location was designed to challenge the narrative of recovery and the economic activities that went with it. As the press gathered for the morning press conference, displaced residents from public housing, the tenants' right working group, the homeless, and other leaders and organizers, including Mtangulizi Sanyika of the African-American Leadership Project, spoke on the topic of housing instability and injustice in the post-Katrina landscape. The press conference also included a solidarity delegation of activists from Tsunami-affected villages in Thailand, who were meeting with housing activists in New Orleans during that week. Malcolm Suber, lead organizer for the PHRF, advised the press that the message of the encampment—which was not intended to last longer than a few days—was that there

was a severe housing problem in the city and that "New Orleans is not alright" (Suber 7/4/11).

Planning for the future of the encampment was a dynamic and unpredictable process. The organizers had to balance their hopes for a sustained encampment and strong numbers with unpredictable levels of support for the action: encampments require lots of bodies and are logistically demanding on activist organizations. There was also the ever-present threat of the National Guard or New Orleans Police Department (NOPD) making mass arrests and confiscating tents and posters, an action authorities in New Orleans had taken previously.[9] Thus while the stated goal was to make demands to local officials in favor of long-term structural changes and policies, the ever-present threat of the termination of the camp fostered a constant underlying ambience of urgency to the duration of the Duncan Plaza encampment.

Organizers faced many challenges both at the beginning as well as near the end of the encampment in November/December 2007. After the fanfare of the July 4th press conference dissipated, and the afternoon rains set in, the occupation of the Plaza was reduced to fewer than half a dozen activists—none of them public housing tenants or homeless residents. While a few homeless people did sleep in the gazebo that night after an evening meal was provided, organizers and activists awoke the morning of July

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[9] This expectation was grounded in the events of a previous action, known as Resurrection City, in which symbolic wooden shelters were constructed in the Gentilly neighborhood on the median adjacent to the St. Bernard public housing development in March of 2007 to represent the ongoing displacement of public housing residents. These makeshift symbolic shelters were deconstructed and removed by City employees within one week of their construction. They were never occupied.

5th to a dozen empty tents, and declared the action a failure, despite a successful press conference the previous day. Indeed, Endesha Juakali, a PHRF organizer and one of the leaders of the planning for the encampment, declared that morning that he would "never try an encampment again" after the failure of that morning, which he likened to "charging at windmills" (Juakali 7/5/11). The rapidity with which the action had gone from success to failure was a persistent source of anxiety for the remainder of the existence of the encampment, as those who slept in the Plaza from the beginning saw how quickly their efforts could evaporate.

Out of the frustration and failure of that morning, organizers and activists returned to the Plaza that evening for a meeting to discuss what, if anything, might become of the action that had taken place the previous day. At the meeting that evening, Suber and Juakali both admitted that the planning for the July 4th event was insufficient, but that a logical action would be to continue to use the Plaza as a space to build a homeless movement since homelessness could be seen as a possible outcome of other housing issues and instability (7/5/07).

Larry Franklin, a homeless New Orleanian, mentioned that the lack of police harassment allowed the few non-activists who had occupied the Plaza the previous night to sleep better because they felt safer with others around. Mr. Franklin further argued that the Plaza would fill up quickly if people thought police might not harass them. Other attendees, including David Nolbert, a homeless New Orleanian who had grown up in public housing and would eventually become a leader of Homeless Pride, agreed, "if you get enough tents, we'll get the people" (*ibid*). It was this set of comments

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that prompted Suber to declare that the Plaza should be declared a "free zone" for the homeless to gather, live, and sleep, without fear of harassment.

By July 9th, less than one week later, the central gazebo in Duncan Plaza was the residence of over a dozen people, mostly black men from the generally working-class 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th wards of New Orleans. Volunteers provided meals at 6pm, and during these times the Plaza attracted dozens more who didn't reside in the Plaza but came for the meal. Some would stay for the meeting that followed, but most did not.

This would become a recurring tension throughout the existence of the encampment, as those would be become the leadership of Homeless Pride insisted as early as July 10th that meals be served after the organizing meeting in order to discourage people from arriving for a meal and then departing. As the leadership became more solidified and confident, they also became increasingly adamant that any goods, such as shelter or a meal, should not be given without requiring participation in organizing meetings and events. These tensions persisted throughout the entire duration of the occupation of the park, as organizers and Homeless Pride leaders weighed the importance of maintaining a politicized space against the symbolic importance of maintaining a space with many dozens of people. In the first weeks, PHRF printed over a thousand leaflets, and an initial unifying task for the group was to take a handful of fliers and pass them out to other homeless people at shelters throughout the city. This active outreach helped grow the presence in the Plaza quickly, and by July 16th—less than two weeks after the July 4th press conference—attendance at evening meetings in the gazebo numbered between 30 and 40.

This new growth was absorbed through meetings several times a week, and every general meeting began the same way: everyone gathered in a circle, someone led the group in prayer, and every single person introduced themselves and their reason for being there. These dynamics promoted an egalitarian atmosphere, as well as allowed the residents of the Plaza to provide support to each other in the form of applause after introductions. Early meetings were also the most structured, as they were crucial for establishing a set of working political goals and the space's intent. This would have both positive and negative consequences over time, as it allowed for those with less political education or background to quickly learn the political analysis that the organizers provided, but it also meant that any shortcomings in messaging would be compounded through its repetition among the Plaza residents.

In the first two weeks, Plaza residents made sanitary facilities a key agenda item, and advocated for petitioning the city for a group of portable toilets. Others asked for cleaning supplies to keep the gazebo and surrounding areas clean in the absence of proper sanitation facilities (7/10/07). Cleanliness also applied to behavior as well. Mr. Nolbert as well as Steve Wheeler, a former Black Panther and resident of the 9th ward, both attempted to convince other Plaza residents that the best way to keep the space safe from police harassment was not to give the police any reason to invade the space, such as violent behavior, public drunkenness or drug use. These statements were not

made in a purist or evangelist manner, however: the common refrain was simply to

"just take that somewhere else" (*ibid*).[10]

Before PHRF organizers introduced the need to choose political targets, Larry

Boyle, a former resident of the Lower 9th ward, made repeated impassioned speeches to

the group about needed to take the fight "across the street" in City Hall (*ibid*). In

organizing meetings, Suber made repeated reference to presenting city employees with

a visual "crisis that they can't escape," as well as forcing the city to confront "how

they're gonna solve this homeless crisis, how they're going to solve this affordable

housing crisis" (*ibid*). The consistent and early use of the word crisis framed Homeless

Pride's messaging.

City Hall was not the only target in early discussions. Conflict began almost

immediately with the sheltering industry in the city, when several homeless men

explained at a meeting that a well-known men's shelter had prohibited a group of them,

including Malcolm Suber, from passing out fliers about Duncan Plaza around the

property. This allowed other Plaza residents to air their complaints about shelter

conditions, but also to voice their criticisms of the sheltering business overall. Suber also

added that while shelters were about people who are in crisis, "the people out here

stand for housing as a human right" (7/10/07). While this type of messaging clearly

resonated with most meeting attendees, large-scale critiques such as human rights were

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[10] This is also not meant to imply that the park was a drug- or alcohol-free space—
merely that the leaders of Homeless Pride maintained a public message of keeping it
that way.

articulated less frequently and forcefully over time as short-term concerns continued to occur and recur.

At the meeting on July 16th, over a dozen men interested in leadership roles with Juakali and Suber to review a document outlining points of unity that had been drafted by a smaller group over the weekend at the nearby PHRF office. This working group model was characteristic of a trend over the first two months, as the agenda items in general meetings shifted from immediate concerns of defending territory to growing intra-group identification and solidarity and articulating a set of demands to local political leaders.

Other important interactions also took place during these early weeks. On July 10th, Sam Scaffini, a Police Technician from the NOPD's Homelessness Assistance Collaborative stopped by the gazebo during a meeting as an invited guest. He provided off-the-cuff information about the status of certain shelters in the city, while also acknowledging that human beings also had "human rights" to shelter and food and that this encampment would hopefully yield positive results on that front. He also added that the park's residents were likely to experience less harassment because the police officers and others in power had all recently experienced the vulnerability of temporary homelessness and displacement, even if only for a few weeks, and that this would likely foster a more supportive environment in the city for the encampment, rather than harsh repression or arrests (7/10/07).

This early and high profile interaction may have also affected Homeless Pride's strategy over time, as they operated under the assumption that the public goodwill that

Mr. Scaffini was describing could only last for so long until the sympathy of public opinion vanished and the city brought the police into to dismantle the space. This added to the perception that the organizers and leaders were operating in a time-sensitive atmosphere in which the greatest visibility had to be gained in the shortest period of time, despite their longer-term goals to build a rights-based movement for housing and economic justice in the city.

While the residents of Duncan Plaza who had invited Mr. Scaffini appreciated his support and applauded his presence, Juakali reiterated that the goal of the encampment was to "go over this guy's head" to affect city policy, so that Scaffini could do the "good things" that he clearly wanted to do to be a part of helping the homeless (*ibid*). In this case, city policies referred to an end to arrests of those sleeping in public places for crimes of "trespassing" as well as advocating for policies that allowed those without homes to occupy vacant buildings and/or to be employed in the construction of new houses in the New Orleans area.

While there is no doubt that the city had the legal authority to advocate such policies, the point Juakali made in urging the residents of Duncan Plaza to think bigger and go "over this guy's head" rarely went above the level of the city. The state and federal institutions and actors above the Mayor's "head" were usually missing from discussions in Duncan Plaza. The absence of this framing is of particular note because both Mr. Suber and Mr. Juakali were part of a local organizing coalition that sought to prevent the demolition of thousands of units of public housing. During discussions in these meetings, and at rallies and marches against the demolition of public housing, the

question of scaled demands was often very clear: the federal government as well as the local government needed to be pressured and targeted. Yet the only time when Homeless Pride ever picketed in front of the Federal building in downtown New Orleans was in support of public housing residents—not for their own messaging on homelessness in New Orleans.

In support of changing city policy, Suber and a group of residents of Duncan Plaza attended a City Council Housing Subcommittee meeting the following week (7/16/07). At the debriefing meeting in the Plaza that evening, Suber informed the larger group that their message to the subcommittee was that the objective of those in the Plaza "isn't just to end police harassment, [but] the objective is to make this space a symbol of the crisis of homelessness in this city." The implication was that homelessness during this period was a crisis while it was not a crisis before Katrina. The implication that mass homelessness was a crisis, rather than a way of life in capitalist societies, also ran counter to the argument that the predominantly Marxist organizers in PHRF would typically make. While these relatively minor internal inconsistencies served no immediate harm, in aggregate they contributed to and reflected the larger context of crisis in New Orleans.

Regardless of these nuances, energy in the space continued to be strong in these early days. There were occasional discussions that were critical of the role of emergency sheltering services. Mr. Boley argued to the group that while certain shelters like the New Orleans Mission has been helpful to people from time to time, "its time for something new…we're fighting for housing now. Those places don't want you to be

independent" (7/16/07). Within a week of this steering committee meeting , residents of the Plaza were running meetings without Mr. Suber's presence and guidance, and by the end of July they had decided on the name Homeless Pride.

The month of August 2007 witnessed several key rallies and pickets in front of official buildings such as City Hall and the Section 8 office of the New Orleans Housing Authority (HANO). These rallies were at times composed of Homeless Pride members and a few activists and supporters (8/15/07), and at other times in conjunction with resident-activists from public housing (8/6/07). In front of City Hall, several members of Homeless Pride, including Leroy Miles, Jr., David Nolbert, and Robert Wells made the repeated statement that despite working—Mr. Wells, for example, worked as a bouncer in the French Quarter and also at the Riverwalk as a custodian—that they could not afford rent. Both in front of City Hall and outside the Housing Authority offices, they demanded the immediate re-opening of thousands of shuttered public housing apartments for those in need of shelter and those displaced/evicted from the developments by Hurricane Katrina. This month leading up to the second anniversary of Hurricane Katrina (August 29th, 2007) was a critical time for displaying the tone and potential power of having a politically motivated corps of homeless (mostly) men living in front of City Hall.[11] By continuously picketing and speaking to the media both on their own and in conjunction with other housing activists, they attracted mostly positive

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[11] I have no intention of invisibilizing the presence and role that women played in supporting the work of Homeless Pride, but the omnipresence and cultivation of black male leadership made for a highly gendered space. Though articulating a vision for a radical transformation in housing rights and distribution, the roles and responsibilities of the various supporters and organizers were easily identifiable within traditional roles of race, gender, and class. The black mothers and grandmothers who were displaced from public housing ended up cooking for the mostly male tent city occupants, while white supporters worked as "copwatch" volunteers, etc.

media attention to their cause. In aligning their messaging in support of public housing, however, Homeless Pride members also complicated their efforts to have city officials understand their separate demands, which while linked, were not as federally targeted and motivated as those of public housing.

While the month of August was an important month for showcasing the political potential of Homeless Pride, it was simultaneously a time of dwindling numbers in the Plaza because of the oppressive August heat and a loss of direct support from PHRF, which was organizing an international tribunal on human rights abuses committed in New Orleans in the two years since Katrina.[12] The population of Duncan Plaza dwindled dramatically towards the second anniversary of Katrina, with a low point of approximately 12-15 full-time residents by the end of the month—essentially the same numbers as during the first week in July. Meeting schedules stalled and provided meals also became less frequent. Morale was extremely low among the occupants who remained. Organizers again became concerned, as they had on the morning of July 5th, that their efforts to display strength in numbers in a strategically visible space were coming undone. This concern on the immediate survival of the encampment adversely impacted the ability of the leadership to maintain a focus on longer-term critiques and messaging.

By the beginning of September, Malcolm Suber had entered into a special election for a city council seat opening to be decided on October 20th, which also temporarily drew some focus away from Homeless Pride's core issues onto his campaign. The efforts to prevent the demolition of thousands of public housing

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[12] Within 6 weeks after the tribunal in the final days of August, PHRF officially folded as an organization due to a collapse in their funding.

apartments, which I discuss in the next chapter, also consumed the energies of Homeless Pride leadership, who advocated to re-open public housing alongside housing and human rights activists.

The above analysis demonstrates that throughout the summer, any foreseeable outcome of the encampment in Duncan Plaza remained tremendously unpredictable and highly contingent upon multiple dynamic variables—the "unpredictabilities" that Zupan describes (2011). While there was a conscious effort to deploy a narrative of crisis and urgency to draw a contrast with the perceived inaction and incompetence of the Nagin administration, the potential effects of this strategy on the long-term success of the encampment were not clear during this period.

The consequences became clearer in the fall of 2007 when homeless service providers became involved. Throughout the summer and fall of 2007, both the Nagin administration and City Council began to see the urgent political problems that the encampment presented. As they continued to use the language of "constraint" to deflect accountability for their actions (as well as their inaction) on Homeless Pride's demands, the city simultaneously and hypocritically began to use the resources and means at their disposal to ramp up efforts to disperse the growing and increasingly visible encampment at their doorstep. It is to that time period that I now turn.

IV: Stitching Up (September to December 2007)

Food is good. Clothes is good. Y'all my family, you know. But I get so upset as soon as they put up some food or some bags, y'all break your neck and run for it. But we don't break our neck and run for the cause.

—Julius Nelson, Homeless Pride (November 2007)

The city just wanted it out of the way. I get it, they have bigger problems. The problem is you do that—it doesn't solve the problem. It just pushes them away.…Duncan Plaza wasn't the sickest of the sick, but more time would have probably helped. But there wasn't an infrastructure in place. The state was gonna do what they were gonna do. I'm not convinced they needed to fence it off. They wanted to clear the space and do it like yesterday.

–Mike Miller, UNITY (August 2011)

The previous chapter detailed the rise of Homeless Pride's message of urgency. This chapter illustrates the implications of that strategy—both in terms of foreseen and unforeseen outcomes. These events in Duncan Plaza careened towards the holiday season of 2007 in a period of relatively high levels of public frustration and anger in the city of New Orleans. As the weather cooled in September, Duncan Plaza and Homeless Pride underwent an unforeseen and rapid resurrection as a prominent public space (Saulny 2007; Reckdahl 2007). Through the fall, the linkages between the struggle to re-open public housing and "end" homelessness in New Orleans continued to become increasingly intertwined, confusing the immediate "crisis" of the demolition of public housing with the perpetual "crisis" of chronic mass homelessness. In light of these increasing linkages and frustrations in dealing with elected officials, Homeless Pride members were left mostly to their own devices as their supporters were pulled away to confront the impending demolition of public housing. The range of options available to

Homeless Pride in the increasing confusion of December 2007 continued to narrow, and

the decision to shutter the Plaza and end the conversation about conditions that

produce homelessness and poverty had been made.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Despite having built a relatively stable core of 3-5 leaders over the course of the

summer months, Homeless Pride remained deeply reliant on a broad network for

supporters and allies for logistical and organizational support. During the fall of 2007,

the entire city of New Orleans became engrossed in a highly polarizing debate about

the imminent demolition of several thousands public housing units that the federal

government (falsely) claimed had been irreparably damaged by Hurricane Katrina. This

threat to affordable housing drew away the energies and efforts many of the same

organizers and supporters upon which Homeless Pride depended. Perhaps not

coincidentally, the city and charitable organizations took note of the absence of these

activists and became more heavily involved in providing goods and services to the

growing population of Duncan Plaza. Homeless Pride had publically condemned and

resisted these throughout the previous months, and the presence of their supporters

had helped reinforce this message.

The increased presence of Church groups and individuals offering charitable

items contributed to the pre-existing tension between the leaders of Homeless Pride and

those who simply wanted to live in the Plaza without being political activists. Yet it

simultaneously generated an encouraging sense among the leaders of Homeless Pride

that their actions were penetrating the public consciousness and having an impact on

the city (11/8/07). By November, the activity in the Plaza was the subject of a front-

page article on Homeless Pride in the Times-Picayune, the New Orleans daily

<p style="text-align:center">47</p>

newspaper, on November 8th, 2007 (Reckdahl 2007). The month of November also

witnessed the launch of a short-lived blog and Facebook page for Homeless Pride

("Homeless Pride" 2007).

In an evening meeting after the publication of the article, Malcolm Suber came

down to the Plaza to meet with Julius Nelson and other members of Homeless Pride

about the increasing attention on the space. Suber and Nelson both delivered

impassioned speeches about the need for unity and caution since the stakes of their

actions were now front page news. Mr. Nelson warned the assembled crowd that the

city was waiting for them to "screw up" and wanted to make the homeless look lazy

and not worthy of assistance. [13] His rhetoric continued to press the consistent themes of

sanitation and no drug use in the immediate area of the Plaza, as well as the need for

daily agitation and pickets in front of City Hall:

> People shouldn't be living out here in tents and on the grass, while the man sits
> on the 2nd floor and does nothing about it. And the only way they're going to
> understand and take notice is if we bind together and start protesting and
> marching on these people daily. And doing what we need to do to allow our
> voice to be heard. …We got to stay the course, we got to let them know we are
> serious. That we are willing to be packaged up and put in a paddy wagon and
> go to jail for this cause. This cause has to be known it can no longer be swept up
> underneath the rug and ignored, we got to let our voices be heard. Secondly, we
> got to start conducting ourselves, listen, you're on the front of the Times
> Picayune, you're on every news channel in the city. You are public now, news
> reporters and cameras are out here daily. We got to learn out to conduct
> ourselves, including myself, in a manner to prove [*sic*]. (11/8/07)

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[13] An example of this was clarified in the day's article, as Ms. Reckdahl asked Homeless
Pride leaders to comment on rumors that all of the tents that began to appear in Duncan
Plaza in October had been donated, and not purchased by the Plaza's residents
themselves. In response, several members of Homeless Pride produced receipts for their
tents, while noting that some had indeed been donated.

Along with the elevated stature of Homeless Pride in the public discourse, Nelson's charisma as a leader also imbued some in Homeless Pride, as well as their supporters, with a sense that the message of the occupation of Duncan Plaza could begin to have a significant impact on the city. The narrative of their action shifted to a sense having accomplished one of their major goals: to place the "crisis" of homelessness and housing at the front of the city's agenda. As much as Mr. Nelson used the front-page article as a cautionary tale of the ongoing necessity of discipline and respectable behavior, it was also a moment of increased energy and optimism that their action, now going on several months, was penetrating the psyche of elected officials.

This energy, however, was not successfully parlayed into action. At the conclusion of this meeting, the group decided to engage in a two-hour picket the following morning from 8 am to 10 am, while acknowledging that those who work at that time could not participate. What followed the next morning illustrated the divide between the politicized members of Homeless Pride and the general population of the Plaza who had less or no political associations with their residence in the space.

By 9am on November 9th, those ready to picket numbered fewer than ten. After 20 minutes of walking through the Plaza with a megaphone urging other Plaza residents to come down for a rally, Rob Wells and Tyrone Collins began calling for a "feed up"—which was their way of saying that charitable donations of food had arrived. Ten minutes later, with nearly two-dozen confused Plaza residents standing with them, the Homeless Pride leaders led the group, some grumbling over the minor deception, across the street to begin the picket in front of City Hall. Later that day, after

the conclusion of the picket, David Nolbert commented on the tremendous growth in the number of residents at Duncan Plaza, but noted, as Mr. Nelson and Mr. Wells did, that the increased numbers had not always resulted in larger protests for housing (11/9/07). This ongoing tension with apolitical Plaza residents may have had the impact of increasing the political analysis of some of the members of Homeless Pride, as the following remark from David Nolbert, a Plaza resident since early July, demonstrates:

> We have to recognize these things that are happening in this city. This should show the whole world what is happening, what our federal government, local and state governments are about. It's about money. You don't have no money, you don't get no honey. That's the bottom line (11/9/07).

This type of rhetoric, suggesting more of an anti-capitalist framework, was not typically heard in meetings in the early days of Homeless Pride. Yet it seems that in the face of continued apathy from other Plaza residents and what they perceived as a lack of respect from local politicians, some in Homeless Pride actually developed a greater analysis of their political and economic status. Although without access to these individuals it is impossible to determine precisely how or why their understanding of their situation may have changed, but the rhetoric among several leading Homeless Pride members transformed.

In mid-November 2007, just ten days after the picketing, three representatives from Homeless Pride including David Nolbert and Julius Nelson again presented their case to the City Council Housing Committee. Statements that day focused on the willingness of Homeless Pride to work with the city and other agencies to forge a

"common ground solution" to the problem of homelessness. Since they were speaking

before a local government body, their words were designed to be of the greatest

relevance to their local context. In his introduction, Julius Nelson described Homeless

Pride as:

> an organization of and for the chronically homeless as well as those who have had changing living conditions post-Katrina. We are made up entirely of individuals who are or once were homeless. Homeless Pride wants the mayor and city council to know that Homeless Pride is a separate sector of Duncan Plaza (Nelson 11/19/07).

Nelson also made the issue of inclusion of people who are homeless into decision-making a key point of his remarks:

> Our request is that the agencies that represent, along with the city council, city leaders, and advocates of the homeless, include Homeless Pride and partner with us, come together with us and join resources with us, that we may be able to provide the best assistance available, to meet the needs and issues of the homeless (*ibid*).

While the three men from Homeless Pride received some warm words of gratitude and

encouragement from Councilperson Cynthia-Willard Lewis, the men noted after the

meeting adjourned Councilperson Stacy Head, the other member of the committee,

walked out in the middle of their allotted time. While it is common for councilpersons

to come and go at certain points during public hearings, the representatives from

Homeless Pride took this gesture as a sign of intentional disrespect and furthered their

opinion that the city government was not interested in working with them to develop a

long-range local plan to end homelessness in New Orleans (11/19/07).

The most critical aspect of the fall revolved around forces that were outside of

the control of the city, Homeless Pride, or UNITY. What occurred cannot be fully

explained without elaborating on the surrounding context of the impending demolition of thousands of public housing apartments in New Orleans. Activism around the public housing demolition occupied much of the attention of the media and city council throughout November and December 2007. This was a result of decisions from the Secretary of HUD at the time, Alphonso Jackson, in 2006 and 2007, to demolish thousands of public housing apartments grouped in four large housing complexes throughout the city of New Orleans and replace them with privatized mixed-income communities in line with federal policies to deconcentrate poverty.

For approximately 18 months, the issue of demolition was framed in terms of the "right of return" for public housing residents, rather than being evicted/displaced by mandatory order and only being allowed *apply* to return to new mixed-income developments. The prospect of demolition became more and more certain in October 2007, when a class-action lawsuit that had been filed on behalf of displaced residents was dismissed from federal court. In early December 2007, attorneys for the displaced residents discovered a local legal loophole that would require the New Orleans City Council to approve the demolition that the federal government and developers eagerly awaited. A final hearing scheduled for December 20th resulted in the forced ejection of, as well as the use of tasers and pepper spray on, anti-demolition protestors both inside and outside council chambers. The vote was 7-0 in favor of demolition. The next morning, Duncan Plaza was fenced off.

The issues of Homeless Pride and the anti-demolition coalition became so intertwined not only because of their relationship as issues of housing for vulnerable

people, but also as part of a larger coalition of groups who asserted that rebuilding

policies in New Orleans were being designed to limit the return of New Orleanians who

were poor and black. While many falsely understood this linkage as an assertion on the

part of activists that those displaced/evicted from public housing were themselves

victims of homelessness, the purpose of the linked messages was to draw a wider

understanding of housing instability in New Orleans. Despite this, as Homeless Pride

leaders such as Julius Nelson, Rob Wells, and David Nolbert continued to appear

alongside public housing activists at City Hall and other symbols of government power,

this linkage was used as an excuse to delegitimize the demands of both Homeless Pride

and the Coalition to Stop the Demolition: if the activists could be shown to not be in

proper command of the facts of their own situation, their grievances would be easier to

dismiss.[14]

The sense of urgency that surrounded the campaign to stop the demolition of

public housing also injected itself into Homeless Pride's daily affairs. Rumored threats

of mass arrests and dislocation (Reckdahl 2007; Suber 11/8/07) continued to keep

Homeless Pride trapped in a mindset of short-term strategy, despite their persistent

desire to articulate a message of larger structural vision. As the holidays approached

and outside activists became occupied with the threat posed to public housing,

Homeless Pride leaders were increasingly left to their own devices and make their own

choices about who to trust and who to target. Given the distractions of their allies in the

housing activist community and their frustrations in dealing with elected officials, the

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[14] See photo in Appendix B as evidence of this interwoven messaging.

remaining leadership of Homeless Pride made the decision to work with the only remaining actor that seemed to care about housing the homeless (even temporarily) and thus worth collaborating with: UNITY.

Homeless Pride leaders engaged in an ongoing feedback process with caseworkers about who had been out in the Plaza for the longest and who in their opinion deserved housing priority. These estimations often conflicted with UNITY guidelines for priority housing, which are based on a series of mortality indices not on political connections and commitment to an organization or cause. In final weeks of the Duncan Plaza encampment, this was a persistent tension between Homeless Pride and UNITY, but one that was subsumed by the urgency of relocation that larger institutions had placed on both parties (Mike Miller interview 2011).

On December 5th, the state of Louisiana told the city of New Orleans that it would be fencing off Duncan Plaza within one week to demolish a long-empty state building that abutted the northern edge of Duncan Plaza. This move was met with skepticism from UNITY, Homeless Pride, housing activists, and even some members of the media, who questioned the sudden urgency of a plan to demolish a building that had been vacant for over two years. Representing the city and service providers, Councilmember Stacy Head, typically not the most supportive Councilperson for Homeless Pride, addressed the sudden urgency of the plan with some skepticism:

> 'The architects have not even settled on a particular design,' Head said. 'So I don't see what the rush is. Why we can't push this back two or three weeks to allow UNITY, the mission, and some other groups that are working actively to get emergency shelter beds' ("Plaza Demolition Looms…" 2007).

This revelation decimated the momentum that Homeless Pride had cultivated amidst less-than-optimal circumstances during the month of November. The situation immediately changed from building partnerships to a sense of desperation, bitterness, and confusion. During the final week of the Duncan Plaza encampment, the support of outside activists withered as most of them were engaged in highly publicized acts of civil disobedience and rallies to prevent the public housing demolitions. Homeless Pride's linkages with the anti-demolition coalition had withered as they became focused almost exclusively on the daily comings-and-goings of UNITY caseworkers and others who were working to clear Duncan Plaza now at a fever pitch.

During the final week of the encampment, Julius Nelson remarked with resignation that while it was good that at least 150 people were being moved into various forms of temporary and supportive housing, but "when you consider the enormity of the problem we have, it's really like a small chip" (12/16/07). He also asserted that Homeless Pride would move with others several blocks away to the new gathering site of the still homeless, under the elevated highway at the intersection of Claiborne Avenue and Canal Street. Once they received temporary housing assistance, however, Homeless Pride members usually only made brief visits in 2008 to the Canal/Claiborne camp. Their presence as a political and organizing force evaporated.

On the final day of clearing the Plaza, December 21st, 2007, David Nolbert paced in the background of the UNITY press conference, musing with frustration that, for all the organizations that Ms. Kegel was praising and thanking, Homeless Pride was notably absent from her list. He snuck up alongside a homeless man that UNITY had seemingly chosen randomly to speak to the press, and as the man addressed the media and thanked UNITY for placing him in an apartment, Mr. Nolbert whispered in his ear

that he should mention Homeless Pride, because, in his opinion, without Homeless Pride, none of this would have happened. After concluding what seemed to be his rehearsed remarks, the man added somewhat hesitantly, after a pause, that he wished to thank and acknowledge Homeless Pride for bringing the issue of homelessness to the attention of the city. His statement was met with mild and cautious smattering of applause (12/21/07).[15] While there were substantial differences in the manner in which both the public housing and Homeless Pride struggles concluded, city officials and proponents of downtown development and consumption breathed easier on December 22nd, as both challenges to their vision of a "new" New Orleans could be declared quantifiably ended. Despite UNITY's larger organizational aims to "end" homelessness in the New Orleans area, in this instance their considerable resources and talents had been deployed to stifle the search for solutions and hide the homeless, rather than to end homelessness as their mission states.

In the days following the Plaza's closure, mischief-makers re-wrote signs announcing the closure of the Plaza to reflect their own interpretation of reality: rather than announcing the Plaza's closure for demolition and reconstruction of the nearby state office building (which was the official reason given at the time), signs offered another interpretation, phrased slightly differently on each sign (Yorks 2007).

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[15] Mr. Nolbert was only audible because he was wearing a remote microphone that had been placed on him by the documentarians responsible for the footage archive that I have been using.

Coda: 2008 and forward

For six months after the closure of Duncan Plaza, dozens of homeless people (some of whom had resided in Duncan Plaza, others who had not) continued to live outdoors in tents underneath an elevated expressway on nearby Claiborne Avenue. Concurrent with the closure of Duncan Plaza, the leadership of Homeless Pride dissolved as some of the men were provided with supportive housing vouchers or other temporary shelter. UNITY continued to work tirelessly to provide services, case-management, and housing for these people as well until this area too was cleared, but not fenced off, in July 2008 (Reckdahl 2008).

In September of 2009, the Times-Picayune ran another article about the clearance of yet another homeless encampment, this time a few blocks further uptown under a different elevated highway in the central business district, across the street from a prominent men's shelter called the New Orleans Mission (Reckdahl 2009). In 2011, UNITY notes that homelessness remains a "pervasive crisis" in the New Orleans area, and estimates over 9,000 people are homeless in the New Orleans region on any given night (UNITY 2011). They began to develop a 10-year plan to end homelessness, which will be announced in 2012.

In the wake of their six month occupation of Duncan Plaza, perhaps the greatest victory that Homeless Pride won was that in occupying such a high-profile public space, they brought stark attention to the "crisis" of homelessness in New Orleans, and demanded that homeless people no longer be ignored or live life in the shadows. Yet the ephemerality of this victory could be felt in the words and tone of most in leadership during the final days of the Duncan Plaza encampment.

From studying Homeless Pride's actions, demands, and positions over several months, what becomes clear is that in addition to asserting themselves and the Plaza's residents as a community of self-determining citizens, their goal was to promote alternative possibilities for addressing homelessness through housing and economic policies. They were demanding, even in a difficult and constrained environment, that their local officials could still make decisions regarding land use and budgeting priorities that would be in the interests of the (mostly black) working class that Mayor Nagin had worked so hard to keep in his political camp.

While they also emphasized the "crisis" and urgency of their situation and demanded action to house people, clearing the Plaza with such urgency was not something they felt was being done in their best interests, as noted above. In acting to "fix the problem" and end the encampment in Duncan Plaza, the city of New Orleans missed an opportunity — to which Mr. Miller and Mr. Nelson both allude in the above epigraph — to cultivate a stable and safe space where a longer-term dialogue about solutions could take place in such a way that not only involved "input" from the homeless but involved their active participation and leadership. Such a conversation is yet to be had in public, so I will attempt to re-initiate it in the following concluding chapter.

V: Life Support

> *Of all the suspect premises in our kit, that government could competently do more for the poor may have proved the lethal one.*
> –Kim Hopper (2003: p. 198)

> *There must be an alternative solution before this park is dismantled.*
> –Julius Nelson, Homeless Pride (11/19/07)

As I discussed in the introduction, policy alone cannot explain the difference between the ongoing "crisis" of thousands of homeless New Orleanians and the "crisis" at Duncan Plaza — only politics can. Within the context of neoliberal urbanism in which I have situated the efforts of Homeless Pride, there exist serious challenges to addressing the grievances of vulnerable people at the local level — of which people without homes are just one sort. Solutions, responses, and alternatives to these

relatively recent challenges are still forming, as the efforts of Homeless Pride demonstrate. Given the energy in social movement circles around the network of "Occupy" manifestations that have arisen as of September 2011, it seems worthwhile to unpack some of the similarities and differences between the two "mini-movements" (from Wright 1997: p. 296), since they both self-identify(ied) as politicized spaces seeking alternatives to widespread and seemingly intractable social-political problems of wealth and equity in society.

In order to effectively draw out these similarities and differences, as well as the respective strengths and weaknesses as approaches to challenging extraordinarily complex and entrenched social and political problems, it is important to take a step back and trace a recent history of encampment/occupation spaces during in the context of neoliberal urbanism. Below, I outline three examples: the earliest, from Chicago, took place in the early stages of the neoliberal political-economic regime. Homeless Pride, the second, took place in what I would deem a zenith of the consolidation of this political economic system. Finally, the third, the Occupy movement, which is now taking place in a post-financial collapse environment, helps to identify some possible opportunities in the wake of the glaring contradictions exposed through the global financial meltdown of 2008.

In his 1997 work *Out of Place*, Sociologist Talmadge Wright chronicles the eerily parallel struggles of a politicized homeless encampment in Chicago during the 1980s. In what became known as "Tranquility City," homeless men and women and their supporters constructed makeshift dwellings both as a symbolic gesture of protest and,

in occupying them, a way to stabilize their own lives for security and privacy. After

several offers of shelter and charity from the city, the squatters articulated an alternative

proposal, including the rehabilitation of abandoned buildings and moving into

apartments, but not shelters (Wright 1997: pp. 245-247). Ultimately acquiescing to the

demands of the residents of Tranquility City, these homeless activists were offered

public housing apartments—again a notable parallel to demands being made by both

anti-demolition activists and Homeless Pride themselves.

Having taken place during the still early stages of neoliberal urbanism, the most

notable difference between this story and the story of Homeless Pride is that public

housing apartments were available to be occupied in Chicago, and the local government

allowed this solution. This difference in outcomes between Tranquility City's

encampment and Homeless Pride's encampment is illustrative of what was outlined in

Chapter two: with the increasing trend and influence of neoliberal urbanism, cities have

experienced a persistent and continuous degradation of social safety nets over the last

several decades. Public housing, a benchmark of the social safety net, was not an option

to Homeless Pride because it would have also made it necessary to re-open it for

thousands of tenants who had been displaced/evicted in August 2005 after Hurricane

Katrina. The federal government would not tolerate any further obstacles to the

immediate demolition of the housing developments in question. This refusal to consider

the temporary use of public housing apartments demonstrates how far the forces of

neoliberal urbanism have come in limiting the options available to localities to address

issues of poverty and wealth inequity. Rather than expending several million dollars in

traditional and emergency federal resources to rehabilitate housing units that were

structurally sound, millions of federal dollars were deployed to demolish and shrink

("redevelop") the public housing stock while also disbursing additional millions in the

form of Emergency Shelter Grants (ESGs) and supportive housing vouchers. The City of

New Orleans tasked UNITY with the execution of this stopgap solution (Reckdahl

2007).[16]

The organizing strategy that brought these issues of housing and homelessness

to the attention of local governments in Chicago and New Orleans were based on the

20th century premise that "better housing will be achieved in the same manner that

workers have made other gains, and that is by organizing and fighting for them" (Hill

1935: p. 39 cited in Yates 2006: pp. 238-9 in Bratt, et al 2006). Yet given the new

alignments and coalitions between capital and the state that are part and parcel of

neoliberal urbanism, the limitations on the potential achievements of this traditional

form of organizing are greater than ever. As Wright notes,

> *Collective empowerment* must be the focus of the continuing struggle to end
> homelessness and achieve social justice. The celebration of democratic self-
> realization and self-management without the necessary public and cultural

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[16] Mike Miller notes that intense debates about UNITY's role in clearing the Duncan
Plaza camp consumed the office for months, but that ultimately the organization
decided to serve the homeless regardless of the nature of the political issues
surrounding their status (Miller interview August 2011). Many in the activist
community use this decision to collaborate with the city as further evidence of the
"secret solidarity" (Hopper 2003) that organizations such as UNITY possess with cities
and states to "discipline dissent" (Choudry and Shragge 2011) or neutralize social
movements such as Homeless Pride. Yet this argument neglects the larger context of
decades of policies of crisis and crises of policy that has placed organizations such as
UNITY in these "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situations in the first place.

spaces that allow that to occur merely reinforces systemic inequities required by the reproduction of capital. (1997: p 324, emphasis added)

As the limitations and constraints on Homeless Pride's actions demonstrate, these "necessary public and cultural spaces" are in short supply. So it seems that policymakers, caseworkers, and organizers are all in need of new tools to address the increasing complexity and intractability of the nature of our urban problems both nationally and globally.

Perhaps a new way to address these problems has arisen in the form of the "Occupy" movement that has now swept into dozens of cities across the United States since September 2011. In New Orleans, "OccupyNOLA" has chosen to set up camp in Duncan Plaza, which now is much larger and fenceless, since the building that was proposed to be demolished in early 2008 came down in 2010. While the Occupy movement differs in critical ways from Homeless Pride in tactics, strategy, and composition, important parallels unite them as well. Immediately notable differences were that in the first week of OccupyNOLA's existence, the city of New Orleans placed four portable toilets in the Plaza for hygiene—a gesture that was never taken for Homeless Pride. In the same week, Mayor Mitch Landrieu walked over to the very same gazebo that Homeless Pride had made their operational center four years earlier, and greeted and spoke with several young white occupants, asking them how things were going, and stating his support for their actions (Donze 2011). As I note in the introduction, Mayor Landrieu's hospitality will likely not extended much past December of 2011.

Mayor Landrieu's "support" of OccupyNOLA is also placed into stark relief when compared to recent city actions regarding homelessness and panhandling. Two ordinances, both passed in 2011, have placed restrictions on "aggressive" panhandling in the downtown areas of New Orleans. The first made it a crime for panhandlers to use a wheelchair to fake an infirmity to gain sympathy from pedestrians (Gadbois 2011). The second places even greater restrictions on panhandling by banning "cursing or swearing" as well as narrowing the geographic locations where panhandling may occur, including "in or near parks, playgrounds, banks, ATMs, bars, liquor stores, convenience stores and gas stations - or within 20 feet of an intersection or marked crosswalk, to people in parked or stopped vehicles, or to people standing in lines" (Eggler 2011).

On October 28th, 2011, the city once again cleared out an encampment under a highway that had been in use continuously since Duncan Plaza was closed off in 2007. In doing so, they did not collaborate with UNITY or any emergency shelter. Of the 85 people the city reported moving, the majority of people were placed in temporary shelters, while 10 were given bus tickets to reunite with family or friends out of town (Dall 2011). Some of those who did not accept temporary shelter moved on to the OccupyNOLA space in Duncan Plaza, and Mike Miller of UNITY suspects that those who were given temporary shelter will end up there once that shelter allowance runs out (Miller personal communication 2011). Thus while offering vague platitudes and a handshake to a group of young white activists, on the other hand his administration, police force, and the legislative branch of city government reach for handcuffs to use on

the city's poor and homeless. These issues of criminalizing and displacing the homeless and the permitted legality of tent-encampment-as-protest are not new, but rather established in recent urban history: Mayor Landrieu's actions were in fact choreographed out for him many years before he even took office.

In the concluding chapter to *Citizens Without Shelter*, Feldman outlines two court cases that illustrate the stark difference between how our society views abstract actions of protest versus those whose existence is a *prima facie* condemnation of our inequitable society. In the first case, *Clark v Community for Creative Nonviolence*, the US Supreme Court denied homeless activists the right to sleep in tents in a park near the White House as a form of protest, instead allowing them only the ability to erect two tents and leave them empty as a gesture of protest. In the second case, *Metropolitan Council v Safir*, a federal district court ruled in favor of another group of housing activists in New York who were protesting against rent increases in rent-controlled apartments in New York City. The activists, who in this case were not homeless, were allowed to sleep outdoors near Gracie Mansion as part of their action.

As Feldman describes, the difference between the rights of housed and un-housed citizens creates an identity of a "demonstrator" that is restricted to those who are housed. Indeed, he argues, "in allowing a housed citizens' overnight vigil while preventing occupation of a homeless tent city, these cases produce an exclusionary vision of 'expressive' citizenship in opposition to a subordinate status of bare life" (2004: p. 141). This tension is best demonstrated in the false binary assumed in this New York Times headline: "Dissenting, or Seeking Shelter? Homeless Stake a Claim at

Protests" (Nagourney 2011). The presumption here is that people who are homeless and sleeping in public are incapable of also having any political identity, or of contributing to the political statements of others.

The omnipresent condescension of the New York Times notwithstanding, the confluence of homelessness with Occupy spaces in cities such as Portland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Washington DC, and New Orleans changes the messaging, limits, and potential of these spaces as well (Craig 2011; Ryan 2011; McKinley and Goodnough 2011). Indeed, Endesha Juakali returned to Duncan Plaza in early October to forewarn the OccupyNOLA crowd that should they decide to once again encourage the poor, homeless, and people of color to join them in the space, that they would find the city's reaction to likely change from its initially warm reception (personal communication 10/25/2011).[17] As Nagourney and McKinley and Goodnough note, these tensions have already begun to arise (2011). Wright and Feldman echo Juakali's analysis of politicized homeless encampments, and Feldman's description of the potential of a politicized homeless encampment seems to dovetail with what is emerging in the space of Duncan Plaza in 2011:

> A politicized homeless encampment troubles the boundary between public and private: it provides needed protection from the elements *and* the space for civic involvement, shields the body *and* facilitates action, provides a space for withdrawal *and* expresses a critique of the injustices of homelessness (Feldman 2004: p. 141, emphasis in original).

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[17] Juakali's prediction proved rather prescient, as I noted in the introduction (Donze 2011b)

In Homeless Pride's determination that tents not be dismantled until an alternative solution was provided, there are the roots of the Occupy movement's defiance of those who argue that there must be some definitive "endgame" to an outdoor occupation—some concrete manifestation of demands, rather than the simple occupation of public space for the sake of using it as a staging ground to *forge* solutions, rather than demand them. I join Feldman in urging that urban scholars and policymakers use these cases of occupation as an opportunity to build a greater and more pluralized understanding of the habits of dwelling: what Feldman calls a "critical responsiveness" that builds towards a stronger and broader "ethic of dwelling" (2004). This ethos among urban professionals should be deployed to counter municipal crackdowns on these spaces in the name of thinly veiled political calculations disguised as concerns for public welfare.

It is important here also to distinguish promoting a broader understanding, or "ethos" of dwelling, from simply romanticizing those who sleep outdoors—the "sacred freedom" quadrant of Feldman's axes (see Chapter two). As Mr. Julius Nelson himself said, even the most politicized leaders of Homeless Pride agreed with city officials and service providers that "a public park is not suitable living conditions [sic] and is inhumane for human life." In saying this, however, Mr. Nelson and the other leaders of Homeless Pride did not shrink from their determination to articulate the need for alternatives. As Mr. Nelson went on to testify to the City Council: "there must be a suitable and concrete alternative solution, not only for the residents of Duncan Plaza

but those that are living in substandard living conditions across our community"

(Nelson 11/19/07).

<center>***</center>

In some of the more activist works on homelessness produced over the last two

decades, the authors typically end with a passionate and/or condemnatory jeremiad on

the nature and failures of our society to provide for the most vulnerable with profound

flourishing quotations such as "we must love one another or die." (Hopper 2003: p. 203)

Despite my best efforts, I find myself unable conclude any differently, although I

suspect the most eloquent and inspirational phrasing has already been used in someone

else's work.

The preceding chapters are chocked full of disillusioning realities: in the rare

cases that local governments and non-profits want to act progressively, they are

constrained; there are insufficient resources allocated to make the changes that activists

and policymakers seek; even in times of general economic growth and prosperity,

homelessness increases. Perhaps this reigning impenetrable fortress of chronic

hopelessness is what promotes such passionate yet impotent rhetorical flourishes

among those who write about homelessness.

Successful homelessness policies cannot be divorced, as they have become, from

a broader social and political commitment to a social contract that declares poverty

illegal, immoral, or otherwise unconstitutional. The current practices that focus on

"housing first", as UNITY has been executing, are indeed improvements on emergency

shelter and rapid-rehousing models. Yet like progressive municipal administrations,

<center>68</center>

these progressive elements of policy remain islands of good practice in a sea of decaying political and economic standards that function to steadily counteract and engulf them. If, like some of the authors in Bratt, Hartmann, and Stone's (2006) volume on Human Rights and a New Social Agenda, we continue to be shocked and dismayed by the ongoing presence of homelessness in a society of such wealth and privilege, it seems unlikely that much can or will change. Massive and chronic homelessness is not an aberration, a mistake, an oversight, or a crisis. It is a way of life that we choose and validate on a daily basis. These types of connections are only just now beginning to seep into a national public discourse that is stacked heavily against allowing such messages to thrive.

Such a broad societal problem can be met and defeated with the solutions that many have advocated over the past several decades: jobs that pay living wages, unconditional and affordable access to healthcare for those with mental and physical illnesses, de-commodified/public housing for all those who need it, and so forth. However, the repetition of demands for these policies from scholars and activists, caseworkers and survivors of homelessness alike, ideologically coherent though they may be, smacks of the most unfortunate form of political posturing: those demands that come from a group of noise-makers with no threatening political base. Without a wider political base for this progressive—nay, socialist—domestic policy agenda at local, regional, and national scales, the policy and operational victories of organizations like UNITY, and the social-political victories of groups like Homeless Pride will continue to be limited and temporary.

And yet, despite the juggernaut of obstacles aligned against these mini-movements, the hope for a different future remains most potent at the local level, where these "resistant heterotopia" (Wright 1997) and broader ethics of dwelling can begin to be built. For all of the increasing limitations on non-consumptive behaviors in urban spaces (freedom to protest, of movement, and to stay put), the city is still the space from which these solutions will emerge and grow upwards to permeate our wider social fabric. From the arc of Tranquility City in Chicago to Homeless Pride in New Orleans, to the national Occupy movement, one can detect the seeds of an emerging understanding of which institutions and actors hold the power to address local grievances.

As I described in chapter four, the nature of Homeless Pride's grievances began a subtle shift from their originally localized beginnings to Mr. Nelson and Mr. Nolbert's eventually broader critiques. Most indicative of this would be in the quote from Mr. Nolbert above: "You don't have no money, you don't get no honey" (11/9/07). If the Occupy movement that now spans dozens of cities across the United States could be said to have a unifying message, Mr. Nolbert's words could be used to express it. This outcome would seem to be the natural extension of an unfolding reaction among social movement activists and organizations to the processes of neoliberalism and neoliberal urbanism: after decades of increasing supremacy and power of the interests of finance and real estate capital, social movements are now broadly turning their critiques and

demands to actors far larger than city, state, or even federal governments. They are

directing them at the trans-local, multi-scalar power structure of finance capital.[18]

Within the context of a debilitated and decayed capitalist welfare state indicative

of this political-economic regime of neoliberalism and neoliberal urbanism,

"homelessness policy" in aggregate amounts to enhanced bureaucratic competence and

client service for those among the temporary and chronically homeless who are capable

enough to navigate bureaucratic systems. Rather than targeting these bureaucratic

systems, which are trapped, like many other social safety net programs in a paradigm of

systematic starvation, the experiences of Homeless Pride—both its failures and its

successes—suggest that the future of urban organizing lies with those groups who are

able to link their concrete grievances to larger structures of power and influence such as

globalized finance and real estate capital.

Rather than addressing issues as "crises", they are being articulated as systemic

injustices that can and must be met and challenged through years of broad-based

organizing and power building. Such work has already begun to be pioneered in the

creation of networks such as the Right to the City Alliance, fittingly named for David

Harvey's 2008 revival of the phrase from its Lefebvrian roots (Harvey 2008). Groups

such as Picture the Homeless in New York City provide a blueprint for organizing with

and among those who have experienced various forms of homelessness, and how to

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[18] This is not to suggest that targeting financial institutions in general is new, but the coordination and coherence of this critique nationally and globally is certainly growing.

unite short-term goals and objectives with the long-term strategic interests of other groups focused on housing and economic justice more broadly.

The confluence of member-based organizing among mostly people of color (of which Homeless Pride was a proto-formation) with the tech-savvy anti-capitalism of mostly white activists remains fraught with conflicting visions of tactics and strategy. Racism further amplifies and reproduces these conflicts (Nagourney 2011). Yet in OccupyNOLA's decision to draw on the history of Homeless Pride to justify the occupation site of Duncan Plaza, those who seek to promote a more just society locally and nationally cannot help but feel a sense of hope—one that is, as always, grounded in the quick-sand of the accumulated knowledge of the failures of the past and the depth of the challenges that lie ahead. Possibly the best hope for all of the future Homeless Pride incarnations that have yet to be shepherded into existence is that, unlike Calvino's insistence in the epigraph that spaces outside the inferno must be "given", these spaces are being *taken*. In taking and (re)making these spaces, rather than waiting for them to be relinquished, they are perhaps more likely to endure.

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regarding this material can be directed to the author at

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Appendix A — Duncan Plaza Activist Fliers

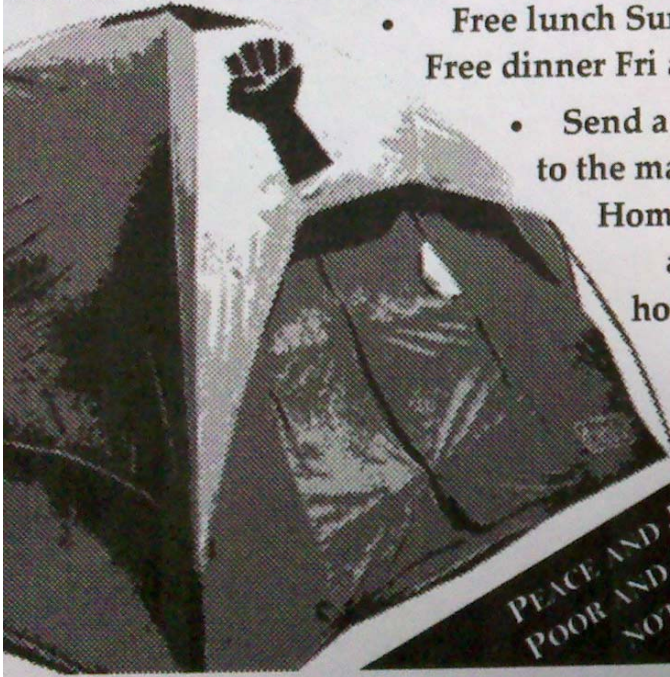DON'T LET THEM REBUILD OUR CITY WITHOUT US!

Join the Survivors Village

NAGIN DOESN'T WANT ANY BAD PRESS DURING ESSENCE.
THIS WEEKEND, COME AND SLEEP IN DUNCAN PLAZA, ACROSS
FROM CITY HALL. TO SHOW THE TOURISTS THAT THE "NEW"
NEW ORLEANS MEANS NEW MASSES OF HOMELESS.
ON SUNDAY THERE WILL BE A PRESS CONFERENCE TO

Expose City Hall Hypocrisy
Sunday, July 8, 1pm

- Free lunch Sunday at 1pm
  Free dinner Fri and Sat at 6pm

- Send a message
  to the mayor about
  Homelessness
  and the
  housing crisis!

PEACE AND JUSTICE FOR THE POOR AND THE HOMELESS — NOT JUST TOURISTS!

DON'T LET THEM REBUILD OUR CITY WITHOUT US.

IF YOU BELIEVE IN JUSTICE, PEACE, AND EQUALITY

Join Survivors Village

ON JULY 4TH 2007, ST. BERNARD DEVELOPMENT RESIDENTS WILL BUILD AND OCCUPY A TENT COMMUNITY IN DUNCAN PLAZA, ACROSS FROM CITY HALL, AS A SYMBOL OF THE CITY'S HOUSING CRISIS. JOIN US THERE FOR

Resurrection City
July 4, 2007

- Support the Rights of all New Orleanians to Return to their Homes

- Tenants Helping Tenants, Neighbors Helping Neighbors

Contact: Endesha Juakali
www.survivorsvillage.com
(504) 239-2907

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Appendix B: Interwoven messaging. Julius Nelson holds two signs with two different but related messages.

Vita

Originally from a small island in New York called Manhattan, Evan Casper-Futterman has lived in Cape Town, Poughkeepsie, Managua, and New Orleans. He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar College in 2007 with honors in Geography. Since 2008, he has been an Assistant Editor and Co-Producer on a multi-platform documentary project about the reconstruction of New Orleans called *Land of Opportunity* (2010). His writings have been published in the *Berkeley Planning Journal* (2011), *The Indypendent*, and *The Lens*.