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## **BUILDING OUR URBAN FUTURES**

Geoffrion Scholars Public Humanities Project



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## I N T R O

## BUILDING

As our world becomes increasingly urban and globalized, our feet more frequently find themselves wandering through the worn streets of our urban centers. Drawn together by work, travel, and inhabitation, the city has become a connective tissue, a fabric woven with all our stories—successes and defeats. The urban is where many of us build our lives, and where many of us will find ourselves in the coming years. The urban is a space that seeps into and fills in the gaps between us.

Yet growing cities are not solely driven by a desire for connection. Historically, cities are the drivers of our economy, cultural centers, and homes to the working class, immigrants, and financial juggernauts alike. Cities are a space of productivity, but productivity run amok. New York is ‘the city that never sleeps’ and LA is ‘the entertainment capital of the world.’ Our urban centers have been structured around this drive to produce, to generate capital both economically and culturally. However this “progress” has come at a cost as urban spaces are shaped from the outside-in, and as local communities are displaced and torn apart by various investment schemes and beautification projects. As the forces of neoliberalism twist our urban fabric, a mounting tension grows. In this tension lies a resistance, a space to push back against the push and pull of neoliberal progress. This is our space.

This project seeks to replicate the urban tissue that draws us together, a piece woven together with stories and histories of our shared spaces—wandering through this space that joins us. Within our cities there is still space for us, space for us to push back against the powers that be for, “cities are the spaces where those without power get to make a history and a culture, thereby making their powerlessness complex.<sup>1</sup>” We hope our work has done just this, has complexified our powerlessness against those which seek to tear apart our very tissue. In our complexity—our resistance—we hope to knit together our paths and to build our own urban future.

And so we begin:

I almost got hit on the corner of 7th and Main. I was walking back from a bookstore. I just stumbled through the door. It was raining, and the small store front looked harmless enough. What a lie. The inside was enormous, and a little too well-lit for my taste. I found a box full of old maps. Matted and sealed away in plastic sleeves, toting price tags that were well beyond my means. There was one of Chicago, nestled up against the lake. I’d always loved the way the city hugged the water. I pulled the map out and ran my fingers over it, tracing the straight streets...

# RACIAL BANISHMENT AND LINES IN CHICAGO

A Story of Cabrini Green

Rachel Wydra

Chicago is a city of lines. The streets are laid out in a square grid, logical and orderly. The great buildings that line the downtown streets are vertical lines, shooting up into the sky. Giant lines crisscross the John Hancock Tower. The great highways of Chicago are the first things that catch your eye when you look at the city on a map. When you go out to the suburbs, the streets are lined with rows of homes and none of the grass is allowed to grow free. It is all green and short. There's an invisible line dictating its height. Even my high school in the western suburb of Downers Grove was designed as a square: A hallway, B hallway, C hallway, D hallway. I grew up as a swimmer, and so much of my youth was spent staying between two lane lines in the square school in the greater Chicagoland area of lines.

Lines keep Chicago organized. They make it easy to navigate in a geographical sense and in a metaphorical sense. It's easy to get from point A to point B in the city and it's also easy to know where you aren't supposed to go. The "bad" lines have been hammered into my head since I was a child. Division Street- bad. Cermak Road – bad. Anything south of the Dan Ryan is best to avoid. Make sure there are other white people around. At least that's the advice I've been given as a young white woman from the suburbs. You should stay inside your own lines. This is both advice and a warning that is given to every Chicagoland resident, regardless of which side of the Dan Ryan you fall on.

A lot of the line building began after the old lines were destroyed. You see lines aren't fireproof. In 1871 the Great Chicago Fire destroyed much of the city. The grid pattern from before the fire remained but in the fire's wake, the city's innovators started building skyscrapers, initiating the tradition of great Chicago architecture. While much of Chicago was innovating at the turn of the century and throughout the twentieth century, other areas of the city were becoming more and more overcrowded and rundown, moving backward instead of forward. This is where the story of lines moves beyond impressive architecture and easy-to-navigate streets. Immigrants and African Americans who came to the city in the twentieth century were pushed into aging neighborhoods that were becoming more populated by the day. Xenophobia combined with local and federal policies to ensure that these neighborhood lines could not be crossed. While most of the city's "undesirables" – Jews, Italians, and African Americans – were pushed into the South and West sides, there was another area where historically this group has been confined.

A smaller neighborhood on Chicago's Near North Side represents the urban segregation that has characterized America's cities for more than a century. Known as Little Sicily in the early 1900s and now known as Cabrini-Green, this neighborhood is no stranger to lines.

Following the First World War, millions of African Americans moved from the South to the North seeking better jobs, better lives, and safety from the violent racism on the South in a movement called the "Great Migration". New York and Chicago were the most desirable destinations for these hopeful Americans. Many immigrants also poured into Chicago in the first decades of the twentieth century. Both these groups flocked to the South and West sides of the city, exacerbating the already existing overcrowding. For most immigrants, with the exception of Italians, who faced heavy discrimination by native Chicagoans because of their origin in Southern, not Northern Europe, economic success in their new country meant they could move out of the overpopulated South side and into a nicer, whiter neighborhood. African Americans, however, did not have this option. Policy, laws, and discrimination by the general public prevented their social mobility. The poor and crowded living conditions of the South and West sides came to a head when the Great Depression struck the city in the 1930s. The entire city was devastated by the economic collapse, with the South and West sides hit the hardest. For politicians and authorities, this was rock bottom. Something needed to be done.

Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal forever changed the city of Chicago. The Housing Act of 1937, which created the United States Housing Authority and, subsequently, the Chicago Housing Authority (CHA), ushered in the era of public housing and slum clearance. On the surface, this act seems amazing. Modern, safe housing for America's poor – what could go wrong? In short: a lot. Through the next couple decades, the CHA, supported by funds from the federal government, began to build public housing. One of the first areas targeted was a neighborhood, originally a shantytown, nicknamed "Little Hell" both because of its proximity to a gas refinery and because of the high levels of violence and gang activity that plagued the area.



By the time of the Housing Act of 1937, it was known as “Little Sicily”; a place where poor Italian immigrants lived in desperate poverty, less than a mile from the city’s wealthy Gold Coast. The CHA decided that this slum needed to be cleared and, in its place, would be built lovely row homes to house the nation’s brave veterans after they returned from World War II. The former residents were forced out of their homes and displaced. We do not know what happened to them. Likely, they headed to the South and West sides and moved into overcrowded, unsafe housing. The neighborhood became known as Cabrini-Green, the names of the public housing that would be built. Thus, began the cycle of displacement that plagues this neighborhood even today.

The first homes to be built on top of the former Little Sicily were the Frances Cabrini Row-houses. These homes, completed in 1942, were the first integrated homes in Chicago with 75% white residents and 25% black residents. Many veterans returning from the Second World War lived in these houses. Despite the integration of these homes, racism in Chicago was alive and well in 1942. It was more hidden. It wasn’t like the racism in the South. It was quieter, not as obvious, but its lines were deadly. For the white residents, the Cabrini Row-houses were a temporary home. As soon as their finances stabilized, white residents moved out of the homes to wealthier areas of the city or to the suburbs, which were booming in the wake of the war due to federal housing policies. Black residents did not have these options.

Policies created by the local and federal governments prevented black residents from moving out of areas like Cabrini-Green. Neighborhoods were considered to have “blight”, or urban decay, if too many African American families moved in. This wasn’t just a fancy term used by urban planners: home values would plummet as soon as an African American family moved on to the block. Thus, began a process of racial banishment. Policies of redlining, implemented by the CHA and the Housing and Home Finance Agency (HHFA), which would become the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1965, meant that African Americans were not allowed to move into certain areas of the cities and suburbs. African American veterans did not get the same benefits as white veterans under the GI Bill, meaning they didn’t get the same funding to buy a home. Rioting by white Chicagoans made everything worse. The second wave of the Great Migration of African Americans to the North following the end of World War II meant that more and more people were forced into the overcrowded black neighborhoods of Chicago.

In response to these issues, the CHA decided to build public high-rise buildings all around Chicago to house the city’s poor. By building up, Chicago’s space could be maximized – more lines. Some urban planners dreamed of integrated public high-rises in integrated neighborhoods, but this

was not to be. Both racist politicians and city and federal officials, as well as racist everyday Chicagoans, meant that these massive high-rises, housing thousands of residents, would be segregated. Black Chicagoans had to move into the high-rises in the black neighborhoods. Most of the high-rises were home to black Chicagoans because white Chicagoans had a myriad of affordable housing options that were not available to African Americans. The city of Chicago and the United States federal government created deep systematic racism through their policies. White Chicagoans could buy houses in the suburbs with mortgages that were cheaper than rent while black Chicagoans could not receive loans to finance these houses and were forced to stay in Chicago’s slums or move into public high rises. By 1962, 22 high-rise and mid-rise buildings were built at Cabrini-Green.

For many Chicagoans, Cabrini-Green represented hope. The high-rises were modern and beautiful and affordable. Residents moving in were enamored with the pristine new neighborhood. The grass was green and well-kept and there were brand new kitchen appliances and spacious bedrooms. Community life was bustling, and children played outside the high-rises. Life was a paradise for the thousands of residents who made Cabrini-Green their new home. However, Cabrini-Green was boxed in by lines: Clybourn Avenue, Larrabee Street, Chicago Avenue, Halsted Street. At its height, Cabrini-Green housed more than 15,000 people and more than 99% of them were African Americans. When the economic boom of post-war America wore off, the green grass of Cabrini-Green wilted.

In the 1970s, Chicago faced an economic downturn. Steel mills and factories closed, leaving many workers unemployed. The city stopped funding maintenance and upkeep at Cabrini-Green and the high-rises quickly fell into disrepair. Impoverished and isolated, Cabrini-Green began to attract more and more violence. Snipers on the roof were a constant threat, sometimes killing children, and elevators became dangerous places. Cabrini-Green would eventually become the most notorious public project in Chicago and in the United States. It became synonymous with violence and gang activity and it came to symbolize the fall of public housing projects all across the United States. Its story was not unique. A similar story unfolded at the notorious Pruitt-Igoe project in St. Louis.

The failure of public housing projects in Chicago begs the question of “why?”. Many people have blamed it on the residents and their poverty, claiming because of their lower-class status they couldn’t maintain a home or a job. People living in the high rises were seen as lazy, poor, careless, and violent - stereotypes that have always plagued the urban poor. Others blamed it on the state of disrepair that the CHA had left it in. Maintenance was virtually nonexistent after the first few years of the project’s existence. The CHA lost money in the wake of an economic crisis in the 1970s and it forgot about the people it had banished to the projects.

Certainly, disrepair exacerbated the issues faced by Cabrini-Green, but it wasn't the root cause. The root cause of Cabrini-Green's troubled past was the lines of Chicago.

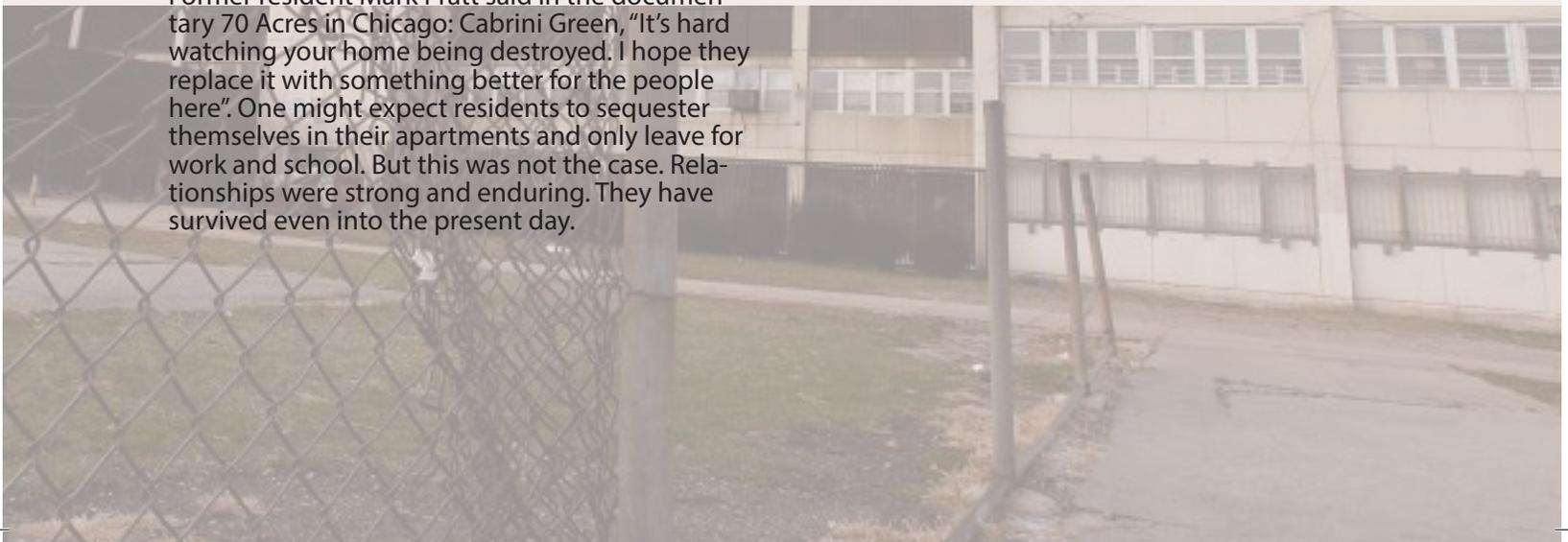
In 1966, a lawsuit entitled *Gautreaux et al. vs. Chicago Housing Authority* was filed. Residents accused the CHA of intentionally segregating public housing and reinforcing the existing boundaries between black and white neighborhoods. In 1969, the CHA was found liable. The case continued on to the Supreme Court, with the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) joining the CHA.

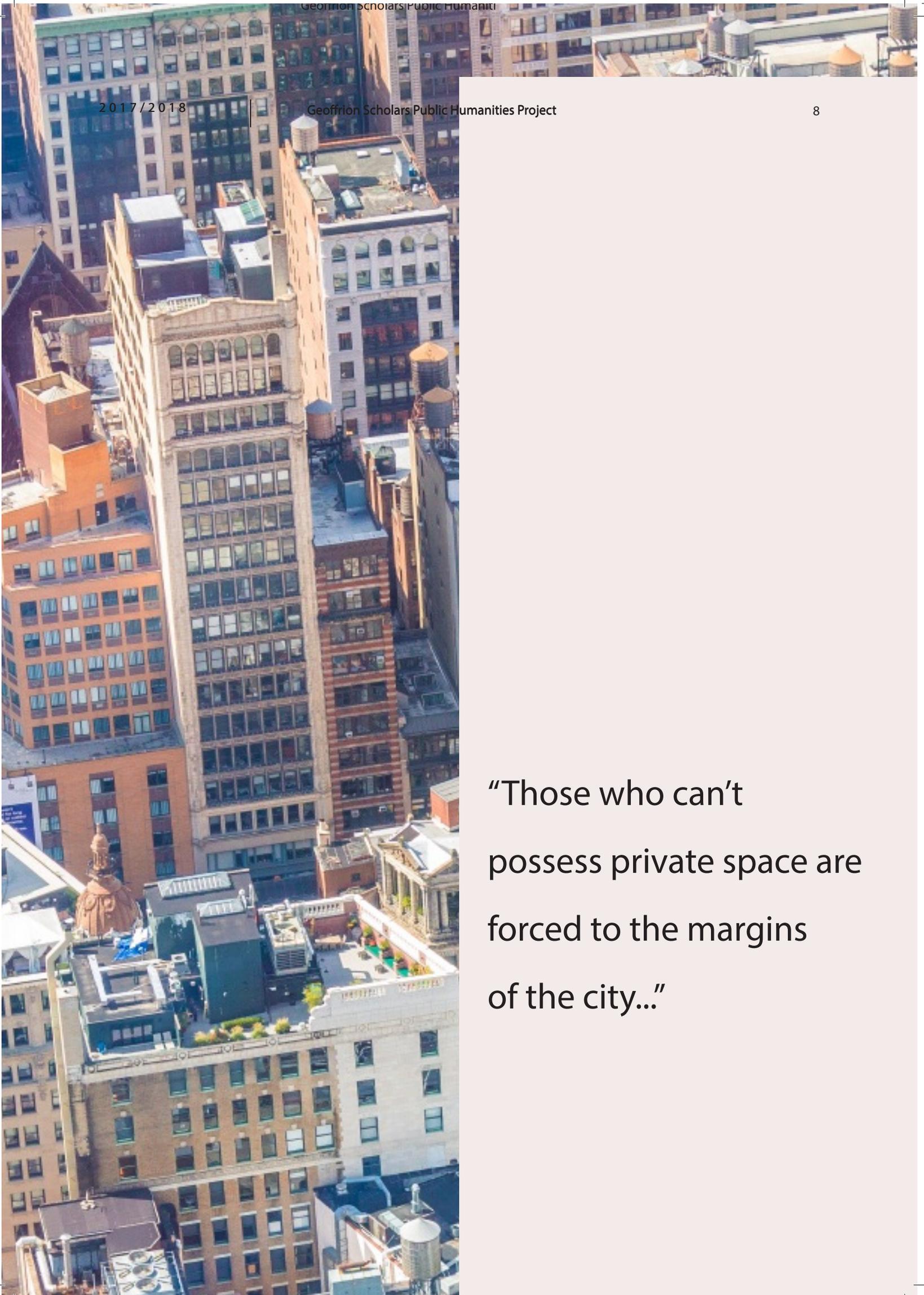
In 1976, the Supreme Court found that HUD and the CHA had violated the Fifth Amendment and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 in the building of the high-rises in predominantly black neighborhoods. In other words, HUD and the CHA had reinforced the lines that had divided, and still divide, white Chicago from black Chicago. Despite this victory for high-rise residents, it was too late to undo the damage that had been done. Many residents of the class-action lawsuit were offered Section 8 housing vouchers, allowing them to move throughout Chicago and into the suburbs. This however, was a new form of displacement as residents who moved to the suburbs were isolated from their families. Also, many lacked cars, a near necessity in the suburbs. Finally, Section 8 vouchers were contained by lines. They could not be used at any apartment and it was often up to the landlord to decide if he or she wanted to accept them.

Displacement is an enduring theme in the history of Cabrini-Green. In the 1990s, the CHA and Chicago politicians decided that it was time to do something about the terrible violence at Cabrini-Green. Instead of trying to repair the buildings or offer support to the residents, it was decided that Cabrini-Green would be demolished. From 1995 to 2011, the buildings were gradually cleared and then destroyed. Many Cabrini-Green residents came to watch their former homes be destroyed. Perhaps this is the most interesting thing about the history of this housing project. Despite the violence, the gang activity, and the poverty, the community at Cabrini-Green thrived. People living there formed incredibly strong connections and they were devastated when their neighborhood was torn down. Former resident Mark Pratt said in the documentary *70 Acres in Chicago: Cabrini Green*, "It's hard watching your home being destroyed. I hope they replace it with something better for the people here". One might expect residents to sequester themselves in their apartments and only leave for work and school. But this was not the case. Relationships were strong and enduring. They have survived even into the present day.

Following the decision to demolish the high-rises, residents protested, attended city council meetings, and filed lawsuits but to no avail. In March 2011, the last building fell to the ground. Can you imagine? Watching your home and the homes of your closest friends be destroyed? Chicago did not provide immediate housing for the displaced residents. Plans were made to build mixed income housing on the former site of Cabrini-Green. 50% of units would be sold at market rate, 30% would go to former Cabrini-Green residents, and 20% would be rented at an affordable rate. These units have just opened in the last few years and the application requirements for Cabrini-Green residents are ridiculous. They are subjected to regular drug tests, frequent home inspections, and rigorous background tests. If one member of the family has a misdemeanor from high school, the entire family is disqualified from living there. As one Cabrini resident put it "you have to be a nun." Most Cabrini-Green residents were displaced. They moved to the South and West sides and some moved out to the suburbs. The rich and historic community was mostly destroyed. All that remains today are the Row-houses.

For the former residents that now live in the mixed income housing a sliver of community remains. Despite the racist suspicions of some white, market-rate residents, Cabrini-Green residents gather together on the lawns surrounding their new homes to reminisce and support each other. Former residents from around the city meet at Cabrini-Green to keep the community alive. There is a lot of love there. This resilient community tried to fight the neglect of Cabrini-Green and the demolition of the high-rises. It is important to understand the ongoing saga of Cabrini-Green in order to combat the racism and segregation that exists in American cities today. It is also important to understand that these are not places of careless, lazy, violent residents. They are places of strong residents who, despite the segregation and the violence and the isolation, managed to build a home for their families. Instead of staying in the square lines of their apartments they fought for their community and for a better life. Racial banishment and gentrification remain major destructive forces today. By studying Cabrini-Green and other high-rise projects we can better understand what works and what doesn't work in order to develop more equitable housing for the future.





“Those who can’t possess private space are forced to the margins of the city..”



A figure appeared to my left and I jumped. One of the employees directed me upstairs. Or more accurately: up some stairs to an intermediary floor filled with shelves, and a heavy door. There was a little piece of paper taped to the door that read, "Not stuck, just push." Behind the door was an old cast-iron staircase, jetting upwards through the ceiling. It looked like it went on forever, but I stopped at the second floor, passed through one heavier door, and entered a narrower room. It was just as full of books. The shelves towered over me and I covered my mouth to keep from suffocating in the dust. I thought I might.

I slowly began pacing through the stacks, pawing at the yellowed pages of these discarded volumes. One of them had clearly been a textbook. It was filled with highlighting and notes. As I was thumbing through it I came across some folded-up sheets of paper tucked into the pages. I pulled them out and began reading through them. It was an article on sexuality and the city...

## THE HOUSE IS ON FIRE

Sexuality and the City in *Paris is Burning*

Sam Hunter

The city is soaked in sexuality. Sexuality pervades the streets, sidewalks and walls that constitute the city. The city's boundaries, its buildings and streets, divide sexual practices and sexual desires into "appropriate spaces", meaning that subversive spaces and mainstream spaces alike are charged with sexuality. Sexuality thus affects habitation, movement, and virtually any other aspect of urban life

When I write of "sexuality," I'm not referring to sex acts or to sexual identities such as hetero/homo/bisexual. Philosopher Michel Foucault used the term "sexuality" to refer to the extended network of interactions, regulations, and ideas that both individuals and society at-large attach to sex acts.<sup>2</sup> Sexuality allows for pleasure to be controlled at many different levels: laws against indecent exposure keep sex out of public space, but privatizing sex has the effect of allowing sex only between those with sufficient economic means to own private space. In the urban United States, intersectional systems of oppression result in private space—and by extension, permissible pleasure—being restricted to an upper echelon. Those who can't possess private space are forced to the margins of the city and the margins of sexuality.

The documentary film *Paris Is Burning* (1990, dir. Jennie Livingston) shows how some inhabitants of 1980's New York City built a life at the margins. At a time when the AIDS crisis and Ronald Reagan's moral majority mandated more state control in sexuality than perhaps ever before, *Paris Is Burning* follows a collection of queer, non-white, gender transgressive New Yorkers who use urban geography in subversive ways to survive in the face of a hostile system of oppression.

The film's opening montage begins weaving the tapestry of the queer cityscape into existing narratives about NYC. An intertitle reading "NEW YORK 1987" is followed by images of New York at night: a skyline, the Twin Towers, a billboard featuring the Statue of Liberty's iconic face, a news crawler on the side of a building informing passers-by about the national conference of a white supremacist church. This is a quick sketch of the New York everybody knows: the city that never sleeps, home to numerous landmarks endlessly replicated for tourist dollars, a bastion of liberal intellectualism.

This illustration of New York is followed by a sequence of images from the street level: young men of color on the sidewalk, standing in small groups or walking in pairs. Several shots center the points of contact between them: locked hands, arms around shoulders, heads pressed together. Two trans women of color examine their hair and makeup in a storefront window. Another young trans woman stands outside a flickering neon sign reading: "BALLROOM."

This second series fills in the previous sketch of New York with detail. Michel de Certeau argues that while it is possible to see the planned city—the grid of streets and buildings—from the birds-eye view, it is only on the level of the street where the day-to-day lives of city dwellers can be observed<sup>3</sup>. While the first sequence opening *Paris Is Burning* invokes the mythic Big Apple, the images of young queers of color engaged in everyday life—holding their lover's hand or checking their makeup—shows how the city's sidewalks and storefronts can be refashioned for queer purposes. In just a minute-and-a-half of footage, *Paris Is Burning* demonstrates how marginal individuals exist on the city streets before turning to the central location of the film: the ballroom.

The ballroom is first shown as Pepper LaBeija, an older black drag queen<sup>4</sup>, walks down the sidewalk. She is shot in close-up, her surroundings outside of the frame. She pauses and points forward. The counter-shot shows a pair of double doors being opened. The film's title card interrupts the sequence, but the next shot shows LaBeija entering the ballroom to thunderous applause. She passes through a crowd of admirers before arriving at the dance floor where she begins voguing, a dance style emphasizing exaggerated posing and angular movement.

Ballroom performance, featuring not just voguing, but also categories such as "Executive Realness," "Butch Queen," and "Banjee," or urban streetwear, becomes the organizing motif of the film. The highly stylized performances on the ballroom floor are juxtaposed with numerous personal interviews between the film's director, Jennie Livingston, and ballroom performers. While the spectacle of the ball consumes the visual register, it is largely through the interviews and interstitial stock footage that the urbanity of the film's subjects is explored.<sup>5</sup>





Pepper LaBeija conducts her interview segments sitting in a chair in a scene packed with kitsch. A replica sphynx head sits in the foreground; in the background, roses in a gilded vase sit near a lamp with a dress draped around it and an unhung painting leans against the wall. In this space that is presumably her home, LaBeija discusses how her family discovered her queerness:

I was walking up 145th Street with my girlfriends. I had on white hot pants, a chiffon blouse, a ponytail. And my father was waiting for the light in his car and he saw me, he recognized me... When I had women's clothes stashed in my closet and [my mother] found them she would destroy them. She burnt up a mink coat. I was so devastated... She said 'this ain't no girl's coat, this is your coat,' took it downstairs in the backyard of the building and burnt.

Foucault identifies the family unit as a locus of sexuality and power where normative gender roles and sexual practices are strongly reinforced.<sup>6</sup> In familial cohabitation—an economic necessity for many marginalized urbanites—LaBeija found only rejection and pain. In ball culture, she is “mother” of the House of LaBeija, a role she takes very seriously; as she gives her interview, several young protégés sit and observe. By eventually claiming her own space that

she decorates as she likes, LaBeija is able to construct a queer family in opposition to normative sexuality

Queer family and queer space are deeply entangled, each sustaining the other in opposition to normal urban flows. Marlon M. Bailey writes that for the queers of color who frequent ballrooms, space is about the production of culture rather than a fixed location.<sup>7</sup> The material aspects of LaBeija's queer space—her kitsch, her apartment, and her ballroom—are created by the queers who flock to her and treat her as mother. In turn, queer space sustains those who have nowhere else to go. Dorian Corey, a drag queen of similar status to LaBeija, remarks that “some of these kids don't even eat—they come to the ball starving,” a comment reinforced by several interviews where young queers describe stealing not just designer clothing for the balls, but also food. Where these queers have been forced to the margins of the city—a push augmented by racism and classism—they build queer space out of what they find, building new families to replace those they lost. While this marginal existence is far from ideal, *Paris Is Burning* shows how oppressed queers of color claim parcels of urban space to not just survive, but also create vibrant, dynamic culture in the face of oppression.

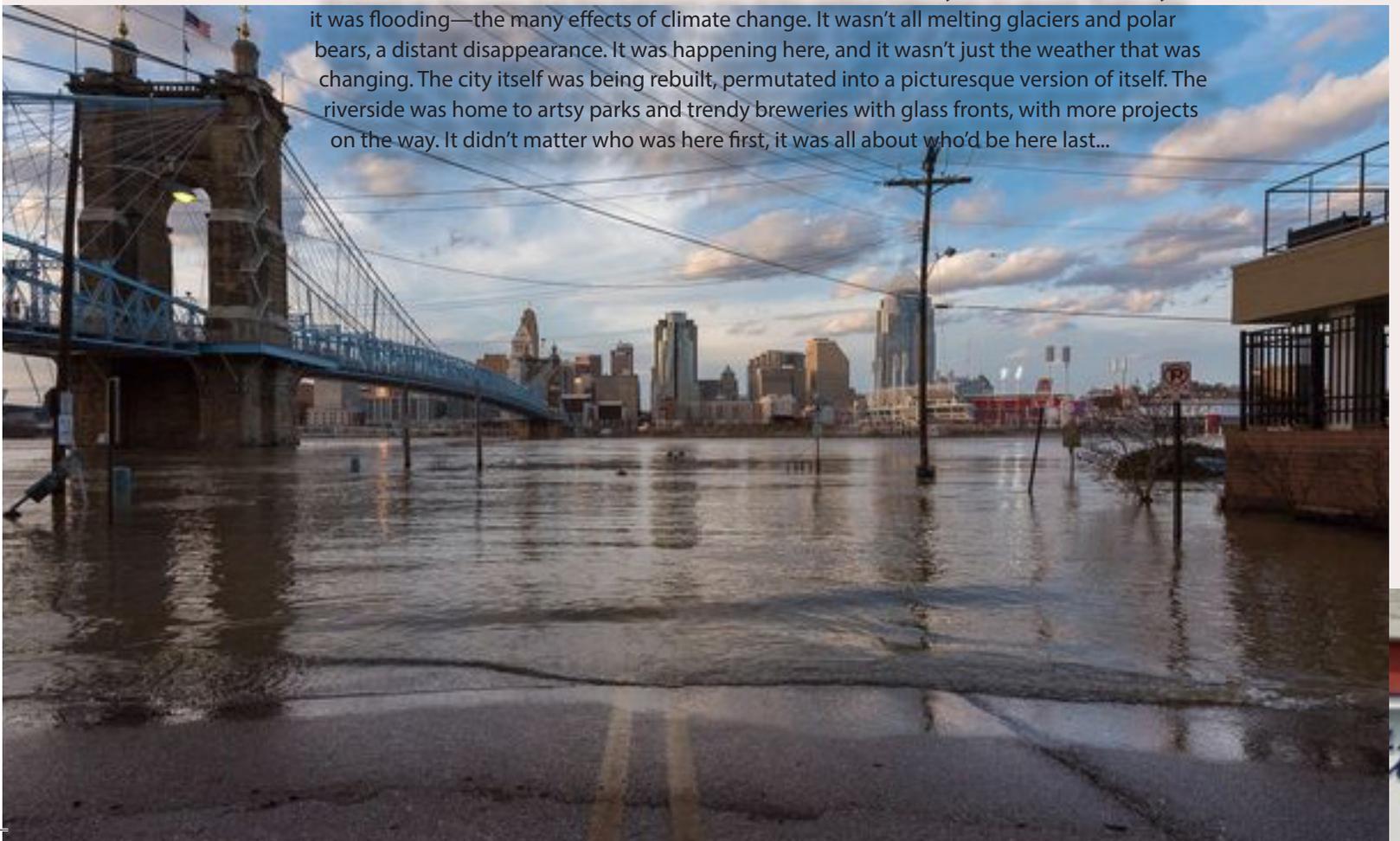
Anyway,

I almost got hit by a car on the corner of 7th street. I was walking back towards the river, reading through the book. It's hard to leave such a collection of books intact. I've been trying to figure out where I was: in the book that is. I thought the light said I could go. They should've been paying better attention—I wasn't the one driving a multi-ton death machine. Then I wouldn't have lost my place. It was something about building. I'll find it eventually.

I spent the rest of the afternoon by the river writing, and reading, and reading, and writing. Sometimes writing in the book—on the text—between the lines. Writing and reading just seemed so close. I was struck by one passage about poetry. It said that poetry is a way of being in proximity with the world. I liked that—quite similar to that building passage I'd found earlier. Poetry. Dwelling. Bauen.<sup>8</sup> I'm sure I'll find it again. It also made me think of Baudelaire and the poem about the swan who escaped the zoo. Poor thing, so lost. It was looking for water in the middle of a dry street, stuck on high ground—no dry ground.

I looked back at the river, rushing beyond its banks. A single lamp post was stranded about 30 feet out. Stuck in the water, a contre-cygne, black and white like the swan. Maybe that swan wasn't lost after all. Perhaps the surroundings had just changed too quickly, like that other swan, the frozen one, like the lamppost. Or maybe still like Baudelaire, stuck in a place that had since changed. After all, he was writing about a displacement of sorts, the clearing out of le quartier du Doyenné, a place where artists, writers, and poets dwelled. Where they built poems (like the book said, "Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building..."<sup>9</sup>). I kept coming back to that building thing. I paged through the book some more, but still couldn't find the passage. So, I looked back across the river, at that lamppost, desperately clinging on to an aqueous territory that was quickly moving past it.

I'd heard on the news that this had been one of the wettest Februarys on record. That's why it was flooding—the many effects of climate change. It wasn't all melting glaciers and polar bears, a distant disappearance. It was happening here, and it wasn't just the weather that was changing. The city itself was being rebuilt, permutated into a picturesque version of itself. The riverside was home to artsy parks and trendy breweries with glass fronts, with more projects on the way. It didn't matter who was here first, it was all about who'd be here last...



# COMMUNITY BEYOND CONDEMNATION

Phoebe Myers

As of January 2018, the 319-acre neighborhood in Cincinnati called “Over-the Rhine” had 266 buildings waiting to be demolished. For a variety of reasons ranging from old support beams to chemical contamination, they had been marked by the city as condemned. In a recent uptick in development in a neighborhood once labeled as the most dangerous in the United States, the turnover of these buildings can be astonishingly fast. Regardless of the demolitions, many buildings in Over-the-Rhine are classified as historic. They are relics speaking to the neighborhood’s long roots spanning back to the mid-1800s when the population of OTR was largely German immigrants. For this reason, it can be difficult to finance repairs while following the building codes of a preserved building. Larry Ashford faced this issue when a fire blazed through his storefront, Smitty’s Men’s and Boy’s Wear. The cost of repairs in cooperation with the city’s guidelines of preservation was more than he could afford, and he sold the building off to a developer and relocated his store after sixty-one years of working at the historic location.

Ashford was store-owner and landlord, renting out twelve apartments above the shop at its old location. “We didn’t rent to just anybody,” he told me. “We rented to people we knew, who we knew worked hard in the neighborhood.” Century 21 Real Estate now lists the one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartments across the street from Smitty’s at \$995 a month. According to the 2010 Census, the median annual household income in Over-the-Rhine was \$13,388 with 556 households making less than \$10,000. The Census also revealed that OTR residents were generally paying around 50% of their income on rent, and with recent development leading to higher rent price points, that percentage is likely even larger now. Given the statistics, it’s hard to imagine an average OTR resident being able to afford nearly a thousand dollars for rent every month.

Ashford started at Smitty’s as a clerk sixty-one years ago, when he was only sixteen, but it wasn’t his first job. “I’ve made money all my life,” he told me proudly.

“Since I was eight years old,” he continued, dropping his finished cigarette into an ashtray on the counter. One of ten children growing up in West End, Ashford didn’t continue school after graduating the eighth grade. Smitty’s new location is seemingly full of kids as well, though not directly related to Ashford. About half an hour into the interview he asked me, “Have you seen the babies yet?” I had glimpsed a small playpen and some stuffed animals in the back room when I had walked in, but I hadn’t gone to see them. “Not yet,” I replied. “But I’ll go say hi.” I put my coat on the counter, now blazing hot in the shop, and walked past the large men’s shirts hanging on racks. I ducked under small a plastic tube spanning the edge of a rack and the wall to get to the back room, where there were two kids: one a baby, maybe a year and a half old, in a crib surrounded by worn toys. The other was a boy running around, maybe three, with a mischievous grin. They both had brown hair and big eyes. The baby gave me a stuffed animal from her playpen repeatedly as I talked with Terry, an employee who used to live in the apartments above the old location. She reached her arms out to me, so I picked her up and put her on my knee, making it impossible to take any more notes. “She must trust you!” Terry said. He told me she doesn’t let most people hold her.

Ashford and his employees look after them frequently while their mom goes to work at the Cincinnati Zoo in the janitorial services. He told me if I had come an hour or two later I would find about six kids from the neighborhood in the back room playing until their parents got off work and could come pick them up. Smitty’s, even in its new location, is a community cornerstone. In the brief time I was there a few people came in, greeting Ashford by name. Ebony, Ashford’s dog, was curled happily in her dog bed at the window when an older man walked in the door wearing a puffy blue coat and earmuffs. “Hey Doug!”, Ashford greeted him. Doug had come in to take Ebony on a walk.



The neighborhood all chips in to take care of her, Ashford informed me that just the week before someone came in with a few cans of dog food, a regular occurrence that he's grateful for.

Doug is also a native to the neighborhood, while not growing up in Cincinnati as Ashford did, he moved to OTR in 1980. He joined Ashford and I in our discussion of the development that had been increasing down the block. Cincinnati is in the midst of a variety of development plans in its downtown areas, totaling at a cost of around \$2.3 billion. As it was nearing lunch time, I asked Doug if he ever went to the new restaurants down the block, and if he did which would he recommend. "They're too expensive," he said, and went on to bring up the price point of hot dogs which I'd heard about through the grapevine. Kathleen Norris (a former consultant to non-profit development firm 3CDC) helped recruit chef Dan Wright to open Senate, the first restaurant deals in the organization's development push. In an interview with *The Cincinnati Enquirer* for an article titled "How the miracle on Vine St. evolved", she had the following statement on the restaurant's hot dogs: "Some people were outraged by the \$10 hot dogs," said Norris, "even though they had foie gras on them."

Regardless of potential issues of accessibility, both Doug and Ashford agreed that the changes in the neighborhood were probably for the best, although the potential results were still unclear to them. The longevity of the seemingly sudden interest in Vine Street, however, seemed suspect to the men. Doug mentioned that he'd seen development plans in the area a few times before, but for one reason or another, they fizzled out after a few years. Another location invariably became the hot spot. Ashford and Doug's suspicion about the lasting interest in Vine Street is contrasted by Norris in her *Enquirer* statement. "There was a time when people said, 'oh, one shooting, and it will all be gone,'" she said. "That's not going to happen. Do you know how much money is in the ground?" Norris is referring to the crime rates in OTR, and elsewhere in the article she discussed the difficulty in getting investors interested in opening businesses there for that reason.

I asked Ashford if he thought the reputation Over-the-Rhine had as being a dangerous place was well founded, and he adamantly shook his head in disagreement. "I've never had any problems." After a minute of thought, he told me there was one time a man was shot dead on the corner, he turned and pointed out the window behind him to the corner in question that couldn't have been more than fifteen feet from where he sat. "But, me, I've never had any problems."

Crime rates aside, 3CDC (Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation) has been active in construction around OTR, particularly on Vine and

Race Street. They currently have six building projects in the works and have completed fifty-eight projects in Downtown Cincinnati and OTR combined since 2004. Just across the street from Smitty's old location, they are currently combining the buildings and vacant lots from 1425-1437 Vine Street and 5 W. 15th Street into a single, five-story building containing 45,000 square feet of open office space and 10,000 square space of ground floor retail space. This \$19 million project is typical of the organization, which frequently utilizes the urban-planning practice of "land-banking." The term means buying properties in bulk, rather than one parcel at a time, and saving them for later development. In this manner, large chunks or entire blocks can be bought at one time, sometimes leading to dramatically different neighborhoods with just a few large-scale projects (once they are developed).

3CDC is funded by both private and corporate money in addition to the government tax credits given to non-profits. As a non-profit corporation 3CDC answers to a board of directors, not to voters, as a city planning office within the government would. Some members of the board include representatives from companies like Macy's, Proctor & Gamble, and Kroger. This aspect of 3CDC has brought about a certain level of criticism of their lack of transparency to the residents of Cincinnati, as they don't have the same requirements for transparency or involvement with the community that the government has. Ashford, however, feels well informed about the development in his neighborhood. "I know all the developers. Nothing happens around here that I don't know about," he said.

The tenants above the old store had to find new places to live in an area with skyrocketing rents, and where they ended up is largely unknown. Ultimately, Smitty's itself doesn't seem too worse for wear for having relocated to a smaller location. Their regulars can still find them a few blocks down, where a new neighborhood may be forming as people get bumped from the central real estate on Vine. New peripheries of a once condemned neighborhood are forming. The stereotypes of Over-the-Rhine as being drug and crime addled for decades past labeled it as a place to avoid, desolate, without hope. A key fact that cannot be overlooked in this narrative is that according to Census data, in 2010, Over-the-Rhine had nearly four times as many black residents as white (4,437 black residents to 1,597 white residents).



How much the racial demographics of the neighborhood influenced its reputation cannot be measured, while the “renaissance framing” of the development projects such as article headlines “the miracle on Vine” imply that development means building something from nothing.

Ashford did not stay at Smitty’s for sixty-plus years for nothing. A business can’t exist if there are no customers or purpose to serve. There were regulars to help, children to mind, the breeze to shoot. Lives were lived during the highest crime rates when investors wouldn’t dare risk money in Over-the-Rhine, and when they later did, they were championed as pioneers who braved where no one had gone before. Long time Cincinnati activist Buddy Gray was quoted in 1994: “We’re much like a colony far away in the Third World who’s being attacked by outsiders who want our land. Our land is really valuable now, and we are not.” Will the condemnation follow the old neighborhood into what comes next, where development hasn’t yet reached? Despite reporting relatively few problems in the new location, I notice behind the counter where Ashford sits, he’s hung a framed photo of the store’s original, historic location. Perhaps there is a place for nostalgia even in a neighborhood of desolation.

A nostalgia of place, like that Baudelaire poem. I could only remember pieces of the beginning. It went something like this, “Andromache, I think of you! — That little stream, that mirror, poor and sad, which glittered long ago... Suddenly made fruitful my teeming memory...— Old Paris is no more (the form of a city Changes more quickly, alas! than the human heart) ...<sup>10</sup>” I looked back at the river. This place was changing too: growing, conglomerating, reconfiguring space. It left things out in the process, displaced them, or sometimes even erased them from the landscape, like Smitty’s, like the lamppost, like the geography of diverse sexualities. Some people fought back, many out of necessity, reclaiming and reconstructing space in their own ways. I’d recently read a newspaper article about the ways in which the homeless resist these forces reforming their cities...



# VAGRANCY LAWS AND THE CRIMINALIZATION OF HOMELESSNESS

In the Late 20th Century

Jacob Bruggeman

## Introduction

On July 4th, 1986, many Americans celebrated the Declaration of Independence in the annual fete that is Independence Day, partaking across the country in recognizable patriotic festivities with a “we only do this once a year” ferocity. On July 5th, The Akron Beacon Journal ran a piece “July Fourth a splash on nation’s waterfronts.”<sup>11</sup> Written with a kind of day-after reflective patriotism, the piece tells its readers of “Old Ironsides booming” their cannons in Boston’s Harbor as if it were the 1770s, of “windjammers racing” through the waters off Maine’s coast. In Nashville, Tennessee, “red, white, and blue” sailboats were scattered over the Cumberland River. These colors, and citizens’ celebrations of them, dotted the United States.

As the USS Constitution wove in and out of Boston’s Harbor, “booming” as it fired a salute, “about a dozen members of the Greater Boston Union of the Homeless mounted a quiet protest.”<sup>12</sup> They stood not far from the birthplace of the Constitution, the Charlestown Navy Yard. “We’re saying,” explained an organizer of the group, “what about giving meaning to those symbols?”<sup>13</sup> With this brief note of the protesting cohort of the homeless and their advocates, the piece rolls onward in reports of Independence Day celebrations in other corners of the United States. Reflective though this writing may be on the maypole merriments of the Fourth of July, it gives only a fly-over mention of the protestors, and although the homeless were not a part of the great American airshow described in this account of July 4th, 1986, they represented crisis convulsing a nation.

## Policing the Homeless

The 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s were decades in which activists and the homeless alike assailed centuries-old cultural understandings of the poor as unconstitutional, unjust, and inhuman. Early on in these decades, “the vagrancy law regime” (the laws by which vagabonds, vagrants, tramps, and hoboes were historically fined or imprisoned based on the public’s criminalization of their actions, and that, by the late 20th century, often made them reliant upon “institutional circuits” within city limits)<sup>14</sup> caught the attention of many Americans.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, even when they were not stuck in cities’ institutional circuits, the homeless gathered in homeless encampments, parks, and street corners, often forming their own communities and informal networks of support.<sup>16</sup> One sociologist has called networks like these “floating communities”: fragile, transient groups whose existence, in the case of homeless communities and encampments, was often predicated upon finding spaces in which the public and police left them unperturbed.<sup>17</sup>

Crucially, this ubiquitous policing of homeless protestors and activists was inherited from earlier decades’ vagrancy. In the vagrancy law regime, though, there were almost no spaces in which the homeless could not be policed. laws, which were rooted in the cultural definition of homelessness and the labels that preceded it. In *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s*, historian Risa Goluboff exposes, among many things, the United States’ legal definition of vagrancy “as a crime of status of condition,” thus making violations of vagrancy laws distinct “from the usual type of crime, the crime of “conduct.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, “where most criminal laws required that a person commit certain acts, vagrancy laws criminalized the people themselves”; one could be arrested “simply from being a particular type of person, regardless of mental state.”<sup>19</sup>

In fact, it is probable that Americans who kept up with the news or lived in cities during the 1950s and 1960s would recognize as familiar famous cases that challenged these laws as violations of constitutional rights (culminating in 1971 and 1972 when the Supreme Court ruled that laws designed to prevent vagrancy, loitering, and suspicious persons laws were unconstitutional). At the very least, these individuals would be aware the arrests of “queers,” “Commies,” “uppity” African Americans, and “scruffy” whites, which were often justified through vagrancy laws.<sup>20</sup>

As in these cases, one could be arrested “simply from being a particular type of person, regardless of mental state” or any specific kind of conduct.<sup>21</sup> It is clear that enactment and enforcement of vagrancy laws were an apparatus through which society understood and gave meanings to a condition of vagrancy, a condition through which vagrants were understood as criminals, bums, drug addicts, and as examples of personal failures worthy of frequent policing. In this way, “vagrants,” per the application of vagrancy laws, encapsulated a multiplicity of groups, not just those wandering about cities and towns.

So, when the vagrancy law regime with which homeless individuals (vagrants, tramps, and hobos) were previously controlled and policed were ruled unconstitutional in the early 1970s, our newly neoliberal cities turned to other methods for policing the homeless. Cities took to what scholars have called “the criminalization of homelessness” (a post-vagrancy law regime criminalization): a process in which city governments criminalized the various actions and occupations of space characteristically associated with the homeless in American cities. At the same time, policy makers revived and drew attention to older aspects of the cultural definition of homelessness.

Take, for example, the language of Henry G. Cisneros, a Secretary of Housing and Urban Development who served under President Bill Clinton in the late 1990s, in a December 1996 publication of the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development:

Mentally ill homeless people tend to be the sickest, the most ragged, and the most difficult people for society to accept [...] they are often the least able to help themselves, either economically or medically, and thus they slide more deeply into danger [...] and many use substances as a method of self-medication [...] the greatest threat many mentally ill homeless people pose is to themselves<sup>22</sup>.

With a vision of the homeless as an addicted, dangerous, and mentally ill class of moral failures in mind, various activities like panhandling or begging were outlawed in myriad

municipalities, and even though the legality of cities outlawing such behaviors is tenuous, cities nevertheless continue to do so. In a related analysis, urbanist Neil Smith describes this paradigm shift as the advent of “revanchist” city policies: city agendas for economic development (gentrification, in Smith’s words) in which the disenfranchised, hypermarginalized, and vulnerable groups in cities, the homeless included, were removed to make way for investment.

### The “New” Homelessness

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, cities saw the emergence of a “new” homelessness, a wave of rapidly increasing numbers of unhoused people populating the streets of America’s largest cities. Estimates of the homeless population in the 1980s vary widely, ranging from low counts of 250,000 to high counts of 3 million, the only constant being projected annual homeless population increases of 24%. These estimates included counts of those homeless for the first time, those chronically homeless, and those experiencing episodic homelessness, and all of these groups are difficult to accurately count because the U.S. Census and other surveys are not well-equipped to measure these high mobile groups<sup>23</sup>.

The homeless of the late 20th century, like the vagabond and vagrant before them, were a nuisance, wandering around the city sinning in their idleness, only this time representing more immovable obstacle to neoliberal city governments. Just as the poor in American history were hated for their moral failure in adhering to the dominant Protestant work ethic, the homeless were detested in the late decades of the 20th century not only for their failure to uphold the Protestant ideal of the good and godly man for whom “hard work and commitment to others” carried the day, but also because their very existence defied the status of American capitalism as an unquestionable societal good. The homeless, per their common cultural definition as failures, remained an obstacle for city governments.

In the face of far more homeless and already-strained city budgets, American cities thus turned to more sinister and systematic techniques for dealing with the homeless. Drawing on the cultural definition of the homeless as alcoholics, criminals, and loiterers, American cities transformed homelessness from an on-paper, mostly unacknowledged obstacle to investment into a public health problem plaguing modern cities (largely through the aforementioned criminalization of homelessness), often resulting in massive influxes of law enforcement resources to police the poor and an appropriation of social services as a means of displacing the poor from areas of concern or potential investment.

All the attention in the early 1980s brought on the beginnings of a reinvigorated, serious public discussions of the urban poor, an underclass almost ubiquitous in urban centers, they were everywhere; “sleeping on a riverbank in San Jose, Calif. Underneath freeway bridges in Florida. In tents pitched outside Houston. In parks all over the country.” The winter of 1982-1983 saw the homeless “in numbers not seen for half a century.” Urban poverty was so deep that the increasing demand for aid programs in American cities made their inadequate supply a dire reality in

the lives of homeless individuals across the country. The cold crept up on cities unprepared to handle huge inflows of homeless individuals: "Rescue missions are pressed beyond limits. City warehouses and church basements are open for overnight guests. And vacationers share their campgrounds with those who have nowhere else to go." Robert M. Hayes of the National Coalition for the Homeless declared that "Without question, this winter will be the worst for the homeless since the height of the Great Depression"; the Coalition estimated that the homeless population had doubled since 1982. Already increasing due to cutbacks, structural changes in the economy and American mental health institutions, the homeless population would further increase due to Reagan Administration

### The Reagan Administration

Arguments that the Reagan Administration wreaked havoc on social programs in the United States are not controversial. As Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward claim in *The New Class War: Reagan's Attack on the Welfare State and Its Consequences*, Reagan and his "big business allies declared a new class war on the unemployed, the unemployable, and the working-poor."<sup>33</sup> Whether or not we can indict Reagan as instigating a new class war, the data on his Administration's agenda to cut social programs are clear: With both support and pressure from the White House, Congress cut \$140 billion from America's social programs from 1982–1984, half of which would come out of the programs that provided the poor with housing, health care, foodstuffs, and financial assistance.<sup>34</sup>

As a response to such cutbacks, the homeless and their advocates built spaces and occupied places to protest their treatment, push back against their apparent dismissal by city and federal governments, and thus defy the cultural definition of homelessness. Let's look at some examples. On May 11th, 1985, *The Cincinnati Inquirer* reported that "Protestors' Shantytown Bulldozed By City."<sup>35</sup> A group of 63 homeless people in Los Angeles, California, built Justiceville, "a Skid Row shantytown," to protest "inadequate shelter in the city."<sup>36</sup> Using a bulldozer, the Los Angeles Police Department demolished Justiceville, returning a few short hours later to evict those still searching for the "remains" of the former community of "cardboard and wooden shacks."<sup>37</sup> The city also took action against the residents: 12 of the 63 residents of Justiceville were arrested for trespassing. One of the arrested called the demolition "sad, stupid and unnecessary," vowing that, "one way or another," Justiceville would be rebuilt<sup>38</sup>. In this case, the homeless lashed out against their treatment from the state and were policed as a result of their break from the norm, and yet vowed to continue to fight for economic justice.

Unfortunately, such justice was not easy to come by. In another example, the budget cuts made by President Reagan four years earlier in 1981, outlined in more detail earlier, prompted a small group of twenty people erected "Reaganville," in Lafayette Park, Washington, D.C., right across from the White House.<sup>39</sup> This "tent city," reads the description of photo at the bottom right, "was put up for Washington area homeless as a protest against President Reagan's cutbacks."<sup>40</sup>

Police had warned these protestors that "arrests were eminent," prompting many of them to desert the encampment, but some remained.<sup>41</sup> "PEACEFUL END," begins the description of the photo at the bottom right of the last page— "six of 20 participants were arrested."<sup>42</sup> As police officers "lifted up" these six individuals from the park grounds, they sang "protest songs" in a circle. The six arrested in Reaganville would be charged with camping and demonstrating without proper permits on national park grounds, and for acting against D.C.'s disorderly conduct, both of which were federal misdemeanors; the three sidewalk-settlers faced the same charges for camping without a permit.<sup>43</sup> Although Reaganville ended with the arrest of the activist-organizers and protestors, they vowed that "the tents will go up again next Thanksgiving Day, and in great numbers."<sup>44</sup> "This is an end to Reaganville," said another involved activist,

I got up and started walking along the riverside. There were trash cans buried underwater. Their little black tops stuck out like periscopes. I wonder who was looking out of them. Perhaps a fish or turtle had wandered inside. Hopefully they don't get stuck. I wondered if all the trash had already floated away, spewed out into the river. What irony. I thought about the trash mountain I'd passed on the way down here, a displacement of earth by trash. Now there was a displacement of trash by earth, a literal reterritorialization. I smiled at the thought. Maybe there was hope for these sprawling cityscapes. Maybe we could take them back, little by little, starting at the roots.

I turned away from the river and walked back into the city, pattering through its checkerboard grid. This time I paid extra attention to the signals, walking carefully across the painted white pathways.

Abby Culpepper



## Endnotes

1 Sassen, Saskia. "Who Owns Our Cities – and Why This Urban Takeover Should Concern Us All." *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 24 Nov. 2015, [www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/24/who-owns-our-cities-and-why-this-urban-takeover-should-concern-us-all](http://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/nov/24/who-owns-our-cities-and-why-this-urban-takeover-should-concern-us-all).

2 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume One*. Random House: 1978, 105-106.

3 Michel de Certeau, trans. Steven Randall, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. University of California Press: 1984, 91-93.

4 In the era before the popularization of queer theory created a more specific taxonomy of deviance, drag queen and trans woman were frequently used interchangeably. I chose to refer to Pepper LaBeija as a drag queen due to the ballroom context. However, her obituary in *The New York Times* indicates a preference for she/her pronouns.

5 For additional commentary on Livingston's interviews, see bell hooks (1992, Chap. 9) and Judith Butler (1993, Chap. 4).

6 Foucault 108.

7 Marlon M. Bailey, "Engendering Space: Ballroom culture and the spatial practice of possibility in Detroit." *Gender, Place and Culture* 21:4, 2014, 490.

8 Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought* 216

9 Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking" 21

10 Aggeler

11 *The Akron Beacon Journal*, "July Fourth a splash on nation's waterfronts," July 5th, 1986.

12 *Ibid.*

13 *Ibid.*

14 Hopper, Kim, John Jost, Terri Hay, Susan Welber, and Gary Haugland. 1997. "Homelessness, Severe Mental Illness, and the Institutional Circuit." *Psychiatric Services* 48(5): 659-65. For more the institutions serving the poor cities and, in a broader sense, to explore the literature on the institutions serving the poor in American cities (which reveals truly dense networks of social service and public policy actors, of city, state, and federal agencies and programs facing the poor and homeless) see Buckley, Ralph, and Douglas A. Bigelow. 1992. "The Multi-Service Network: Reaching the Unserved Multi-Problem Individual." *Community Mental Health Journal* 28(1): 43-50; See also Lipsky, Michael. 1980. "Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Services." New York: Russell Sage Foundation; finally, see Wacquant, Loïc. 2010. "Crafting the Neoliberal State: Workfare, Prisonfare, Social Insecurity." *Sociological Forum* 25(2): 197-220 and 2014 and "Marginality, Ethnicity, and Penalty in the Neoliberal City: An Analytic Cartography." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 37(10): 1687-1711 for a broader overview of these institutions.

15 Goluboff, Risa. *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. Pg. 4.

16 The act of creating networks is further explored through the following theoretical framework of Urban Interstices, but it is worth footnoting that through performance, private transcripts of all kinds are acts of creation. A different project could analyze unsanctioned artworks (be they pieces of graffiti, public readings, or protests through song) in the city of Cincinnati as an informal network of creative resistance, a private transcript of artistic autonomy and resistance. Similarly, there are also possibilities of comparison with Duncan McLaren's and Julian Agyeman's *Sharing Cities: A Case for Truly Smart and Sustainable Cities*, which details "collaborative lifestyles," or sustainable living patterns, that do not conform to current models of urban living and consumption. Finally, one might also think of Stephen Graham's and Nigel Thrift's *Out of Order: Understanding Repair and Maintenance*, a work of scholarship that delves into, through looking at the contemporary city, the "processes of maintenance and repair that keep modern societies going" and the status of these processes as unorthodox when compared with contemporary consumption patterns. The practice of repair and maintenance is thus a private transcript unto itself.

17 Venkatesh, Sudhir Alladi. *Floating City: A Rogue Sociologist Lost and Found in New York's Underground Economy*. New York: Penguin Books, 2014. P. 53.

18 Goluboff, Risa L., *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (August 26, 2016). *Vagrant Nation: Police Power, Constitutional Change, and the Making of the 1960s* (Oxford 2016).; Virginia Public Law and Legal Theory Research Paper No. 2016-49. P. 27.

19 Ibid.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Henry Cisneros, "Searching for Home: Mentally Ill Homeless People in America," *Cityscape*, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Planning (December 1996), Pg. 156.

23 Foscarinis, Maria (1996) "Downward Spiral: Homelessness and Its Criminalization," *Yale Law & Policy Review*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 2. Pg. 27.

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32 Ibid.

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36 Ibid.

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38 Associated Press, "'Reaganville' Erected To Protest Budget Cuts," *The Marion Star*, November 27, 1981.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 "'Reaganville': A Tent City In D.C. Park." *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, March 26, 1982.

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