



MIAMI UNIVERSITY'S
**CENTER FOR COMMUNITY
ENGAGEMENT**
IN OVER-THE-RHINE

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**WHY THE DROP INN CENTER SHOULD NOT BE MOVED:
An Open Letter from a Drop Inn Center Supporter**
A Working Paper

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“Can you show me something beautiful?” (Trombone Shorty)

Cincinnati has not heard much lately about the “future” of the Drop Inn Center (DIC). Perhaps we should not mistake perceived inactivity with actual activity going on behind the scenes, as 3CDC’s 2010-11 Annual Report states clearly “there is an ongoing effort to identify a new site for the Drop Inn Center.”

I can certainly imagine that 3CDC would want its “ongoing effort” to remain out of sight. Such is how big, powerful interests play these days (and perhaps how they’ve always played): they would rather get things done stealthily in the shadows out of view. Because, when events come under too much democratic scrutiny, things get messy and shiny reputations tarnish a little. Recall this past summer’s resistance to the 3CDC-encouraged move of the City Gospel Mission by West End property owners who were outraged by the City Council’s dismissal of the Department of City Planning and Buildings’ judgment that such a relocation violated the zoning code. Or recall the aggressive, bully-like behavior of Western/Southern against the owners of the Anna Louise Inn, Cincinnati Union Bethel, and their plans to renovate their building for lower income women in the Lytle Park area. For many this aggression was just too naked, perhaps even for the likes of 3CDC, reinforcing the need to stay undercover and let things cool off.

There are many, many reasons why the Drop Inn Center should not be moved, but allow me to expound on a few of them.

First of all, the idea to move the DIC did not come from the DIC. The pressure to move is external, with Mayor Mark Mallory and Vice-Mayor Roxanne Qualls of the city and Stephen Leeper of

3CDC leading the charge. This became a public fact on March 30, 2010 when Mallory, Qualls, Leeper, others representing 3CDC, and members representing the Continuum of Care issued to members of the DIC Board their marching orders to move from Over-the-Rhine. The great question is Why? Especially when the Drop owns the land it sits on. Especially when the Drop, across its 38-year history, has been such a multi-dimensional, community-based organization that has benefited many, both homeless and non. Especially when “economic mix” and “mixed-income development” leading to “mixed-income neighborhoods” are all the rage among developers and policy-makers. Are people who are homeless allowed to be part of an economically mixed Over-the-Rhine? Apparently not. The two-faced, double speak here is shameful.

Lest you think I’m exaggerating, a recent post by James Pogue, son of DIC board member Elissa Pogue, drives home the point (<http://nplusonemag.com/cincinnati>): “Just a few weeks [after a police officer last year ran over a sleeping woman in Washington Park, killing her] my mom, who is on the Drop-In Center board, got a call from the mayor, under pressure from 3CDC. You have to move this place, he said, somewhere further from all the beautiful new stuff. ‘Don’t you care about the city?’”

Such a comment by the mayor on behalf of the city-corporate alliance, if true, is troubling. It illustrates what many organizers in Over-the-Rhine have long feared, that “economic mix” is little more than cover for a ruthless social cleansing. The pressure on the Drop is not small. And you have to wonder why, especially in light of the Anna Louise Inn situation where a groundswell of public support, including Vice-Mayor Qualls, now stands with the Anna Louise Inn against the Goliath of Western/Southern. Such a courtesy is not afforded to the DIC even though, each in their own ways, the DIC and the Anna Louise Inn tend to our society’s most oppressed and vulnerable. The similarities here are arguably more alike than not, yet 3CDC escapes the label of bully that has befallen Western/Southern. That’s because 3CDC is blessed; it’s doing the city’s dirty work. This city-corporate alliance mobilized against the Drop Inn Center clearly makes things difficult, but social cleansing should never be tolerated.

Secondly, back to economic mix and how it may play out in Over-the-Rhine. Economic mix or mixed-income development have been the preferred consensus on the part of public policy makers for the last 15-20 years to address neighborhood revitalization and poverty amelioration. My fear is that the practices of economic mix are going to fall way short of the ideal. In fact, the research is showing precisely that. In a provocative article by James Fraser and Michael Nelson (www.theyberhood.net/documents/papers/fraser.pdf) titled “Can Mixed-Income Housing Ameliorate Concentrated Poverty?” Fraser and Nelson present compelling empirical evidence that mixed-income neighborhood development

does not automatically produce benefits for lower income residents. “Indeed,” they say, “the empirical research on mixed-income redevelopment of distressed urban neighborhoods suggests that the majority of benefits have been realized by private-sector developers, local government, and other stakeholders who are in the position to benefit from place-based revitalization. Low-income households, on the other hand, do not share in many of these benefits.”

There is another problem that accompanies the discourse of mixed-income development, and this is addressed in another article by Fraser, this time with co-author James DeFilippis, titled “Why Do We Want Mixed-Income Housing and Neighborhoods?” Here, Fraser and DeFilippis grapple directly with the gap they see between the espoused ideal of mixed-income neighborhoods, which they are attracted to, and the reality that contradicts that ideal. “This contradiction,” they go on to say, “could be handled in different ways. We could, for instance, stand behind the veil of ‘imperfect practice,’ as so many have done. Instead, however, we ask if maybe the recurring failure in practice is not simply a result of imperfect practice, but rather a result of flawed theoretical foundations.” One example Fraser and DeFilippis cite is an ideological assumption that damns poor people generally and labels them as “the problem” for concentrated poverty: “As they currently exist, mixed-income housing policies are largely based on the (hegemonic) mantra that low-income people themselves are the problem, and that a benevolent gentry needs to colonize their home space in order to create the conditions necessary to help the poor ‘bootstrap’ themselves into a better socioeconomic position.”

These are troubling concerns, and they should point to the need to hold policy makers and the corporate sector accountable to its own language (that Over-the-Rhine can be a “national model for economic mix”) *and* to usher forth development processes that actually serve lower income people and thus ameliorate poverty. Last February I was on a panel sponsored by Give Back Cincinnati to talk about development in Over-the-Rhine. My accompanying panelists were Steve Leeper of 3CDC, Vice-Mayor Roxanne Qualls, and Mike Moroski, recently appointed to the Drop Inn Center Board. About 70 people attended. I used this opportunity to put a distinction before the panel and the audience. I raised these questions: How does mixed-income development benefit the poor, precisely? How does such development actually ameliorate poverty? What benefits actually accrue to poor people? Through these questions I tried to make clear that “improving” an area does not necessarily improve the lives or opportunities of poor people. These have to be distinguished and cannot be conflated. So, in a newly “mixed neighborhood,” will the poor’s culture be affirmed? You might not think so if you’re a resident of the Drop Inn Center and you know the city and 3CDC are working to move you out. Will there be greater access to jobs and skill development, and will poor people’s incomes rise? With all the millions that have been poured into upscale

development over the last five years, just how many from Over-the-Rhine have been employed? How many from Over-the-Rhine are employed in constructing the parking garage of Washington Park as well as its face-lift (though, to be fair, promising activity is starting to form across such groups as the Coalition for the Homeless, 3CDC, Workforce Development, and Hamilton County Reentry Program to address this question). How many will be hired as ambassadors when the park opens?

My point here is that benefits for poor people in neighborhoods undergoing new development cannot be left to chance. One cannot assume that as a neighborhood experiences upscale development and “improves” that benefits automatically accrue to poor people. My worry is that the powers-that-be think that economic mix is readily achieved simply by adding upscale development in neighborhoods that are mostly of low-incomes, like Over-the-Rhine. Just add in some market-rate condos, stir in some higher-end restaurants, Presto!, economic mix! When the cup of coffee goes from \$1.25 to \$2.25 per cup, or the sandwich goes from \$3.95 to \$7.95, including pickle, when the cost of living goes up generally all across the board, what will ensure the longevity of neighborhood serving businesses? Are the new jobs that become available in the new commercial establishments actually available to neighborhood residents, let alone those homeless? Or will these go to the new, whiter immigrants with surplus cash to spend? These are serious questions that demand serious discussion, and I am not comfortable with the idea that the letting-loose of the market will provide the answers.

After I finished my remarks on the panel, both Leeper and Qualls proceeded with their admiration about the recent changes in Over-the-Rhine—that progress was happening and the tax base will go up, that new businesses are opening, that new housing units are available, that more police are present, that utility wires have been placed underground, that Washington Park will be shiny and new, that the new SCPA is going well (while historic Rothenberg is just beginning its renovation when promised it would be done by now), that Music Hall soon will be investing in improvements, etc. I’m not sure they heard me, or they simply ignored the distinction I made. They conflated general area improvements with benefits for poor people; Fraser’s critique was personified.

And so this brings me to my third point, and perhaps the most important one: the main reason why the Drop should stay is because its removal would be a loss for the neighborhood. There are two ways that I would like to flesh out this point.

The first stems from the comment I’ve heard many times: if the Drop Inn Center decides that in its best interest it should leave Over-the-Rhine, shouldn’t it be able to do that? I would say no, that that would be a mistake, and the reason why is because the DIC would

be violating its own principles of inclusion and social democracy. The Drop Inn Center is part of the history and tapestry of Over-the-Rhine, indeed, I still see it as one of the most important organizations of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement. I would hope people at the Drop understand this history, this tapestry, and that a move would sever those bonds. If the Drop feels it can make a decision unilaterally to move without a wider conversation, especially if residents, staff, and the board of the Drop do not understand this history, then I submit it is acting not so differently than when corporations—like General Motors in Flint in the 1980s, or DHL recently in Wilmington—make their decisions unilaterally to close facilities and leave town. The Drop Inn Center is better than that, and should safeguard its principles for a greater circle of democracy. The DIC historically always stood for an alternative, for what some have called economic democracy, where community citizens are able to voice their preferences in the organizations they helped found and benefit from. The most democratic act the DIC can do now is to reconnect itself to its historical vision and reweave itself into the fabric of Over-the-Rhine to develop citizen power.

The second reason why the Drop Inn Center's removal would be a loss for the neighborhood stems from the fact that it is not just a shelter (though a lot of city-corporate propaganda relentlessly portrays it that way). It is a symbolic and sacred space, a moral beacon that by its very existence challenges society to the vast work it needs to do to address deep social need. On January 19, 2008 the *Cincinnati Enquirer* surprised me and published a short piece I wrote—"The Gift of the Drop Inn Center" (see <http://arts.muohio.edu/cce/papers.html>). What I said then I still believe: that the Drop Inn Center "is a place of compassion, a place of redemption in peoples' struggle to overcome addiction to drugs and alcohol, a healing place. And it is out of this base of interpersonal dynamics that we can see the contribution of the wider political mission of the Drop Inn Center and the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement: to restore Cincinnati's humanity." I continued: "This is the power of the Drop Inn Center. This is the Center's gift to the larger world. And this is why the Center, with its capacity to love, remains for me the lead institution in the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement, in its political mission to restore society's humanity, a humanity that many of us recognize is not possible under current political-economic conditions."

If the Drop Inn Center is moved, it will lose this humane mission and violate its own principles. Because it will be removed from sight, "from all the new beautiful stuff," the values of compassion and empathy so embodied at the Drop Inn Center, and in such short supply these days, may be pushed out of mind. Worse, too many people may actually feel that homelessness has been eradicated.