

Published in *Z Magazine* (July/August 1999)

## **CORPORATE LIBERALISM IN CINCINNATI**

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1996 will go down in the annals of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement (OTRPM) as an especially dark year. From then to now, a discursive front has coalesced around traditional liberal notions of "integration," "win/win consensus," "mixed income and racial development," and "public good." Armed with such a language, a corporate liberal coalition now threatens to steamroll the grassroots organizations that constitute the OTRPM, now vilified as "ghetto mongers and separatists." No stranger to controversy and ongoing struggle for affordable housing and all matters of social justice stemming from its roots in the Anti-War and Civil Rights movements, the People's Movement is now in its 29th year. My affiliation with the OTRPM dates from 1981. Based in the inner city neighborhood called Over-the-Rhine which is adjacent to the central business district of Cincinnati and listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the People's Movement is composed of approximately ten progressive groups based in social service, community education, landlord/tenant relations, religion, and affordable housing development. The Movement is constantly under attack as it counters gentrification, displacement, homelessness, housing abandonment, the neglect of absentee landlords, and a vast swelling nihilism. 1996 marks the coming-to-town of the Urban Land Institute (ULI) and in its aftermath the shooting death of People's Movement leader buddy gray. Many in the OTRPM consider buddy's death a political assassination.

Motivated by the void left by buddy's death as well as the publication of ULI's report in late 1996, corporate, commercial, and city powers have intensified their efforts to effect their agenda for Over-the-Rhine. The latest in this struggle is the desire of Erich Kunzel, director of the Cincinnati Pops, to build his "dream" in Over-the-Rhine. This dream takes the form of a \$99.2 million Greater Cincinnati Fine Arts and Education Campus (GCAEC) linked to the historic Music Hall, home of the Cincinnati Ballet, Opera, and Symphony. The issue? A block south of Music Hall stands the Drop Inn Center Shelterhouse



on its own property, which houses 16,000 different homeless persons yearly, and is the core institution of the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement. After initially promising no displacement and speaking respectfully for the Drop Inn Center and its mission, Kunzel and many on his Board of Trustees composed of some of Cincinnati's most powerful CEOs now state "the Drop Inn Center must move." Both major city newspapers--the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and the *Cincinnati Post*--have followed suit in their calls to displace the Drop Inn Center.

### **Corporate Liberalism**

On one level, Cincinnati is a conservative town, which helps explain how this fight has become so one-sided. Cincinnati is home to Marge Schott, Simon Leis the sheriff who pressed the court case that equated Mapplethorpe to pornography, the KKK's annual Christmas effort to erect wooden crosses on the city's Fountain Square, the active refusal on the part of City Council to incorporate gays and lesbians into the city's Human Rights Ordinance, and newspapers that feed their readers a constant editorial diet of Cal Thomas, Walter Williams, Charles Krauthammer, Tony Snow, William Safire, James Kilpatrick, and Georgie Ann Geyer.

All this conservatism veils the shameful role that liberalism has come to play in this drama. The People's Movement and Drop Inn Center now face an unexpected enemy--liberals--with a whole new language needing dissection in order to reveal its politically regressive meanings. Most of the terminology employed in the initial skirmishes of this battle has not been the right-wing mainstays of "free markets," "private property," "private enterprise," and so on. No, most of the language used against the Drop Inn Center has relied upon reference to the common good and public welfare. That is, the "high ideals" of Kunzel and other interested in developing Over-the-Rhine are offered in the names of "integration," "economic mix and balanced development," and the public good."

The mobilization of these terms in the service of forces trying to displace the Drop Inn Center is an affront to the People's Movement. Though this twist is happening everywhere and is no longer shocking, it is still off-putting to have your terms discursively appropriated for other ends. The OTRPM tends towards a progressive politics. It believes in integration and that communities can be composed of a mixture of races and incomes. While Over-the-Rhine is roughly 70% African American, within the network of non-profit housing development



corporations concern is explicit to achieve some racial balance in every building that undergoes rehabilitation.

With the large number of abandoned buildings and vacant lots, the People's Movement feels there is plenty of room for "private investment and development," *provided* policies are put in place that explicitly secure the tenure of low-income people and their community institutions. But the gentrification that accompanies economic development is clearly not in the interest of the People's Movement: the ULI report has unleashed an "anything-goes-free-market-orgy," and given the fact the private market cannot reach residents of low-income, massive displacement of existing residents will result, and has resulted. Worse, instead of directing public monies to support those who have fallen beyond the reach of the market, ULI-inspired reformers are using public monies to underwrite private initiatives, creating not only displacement but exclusivity.

From my perspective, the People's Movement also believes in a "public good," but it is not based upon notions of win/win pluralism, the reification of individual rights, and mainstream business and corporate strategies to release market forces from any kind of regulation. The People's Movement's conception of public good argues that the valorization of individual rights and the freeing of market forces are at odds with the expansion of civil rights. Privatizing public functions and deregulating market forces are not answers to the questions facing a nation geographically segregated, severely divided between its rich and poor, and where the corporate goal remains profit by any means. Accordingly, the People's Movement places civil rights as its core conception of the public good, arguing that Over-the-Rhine residents unequivocally should have rights to housing, a livable wage, health care, education, a job with a future.

The Over-the-Rhine People's Movement has consistently articulated these positions over its entire history. Through community based newspapers, videos, radio talk shows, letters to the metropolitan newspapers, guest columns, and press conferences, the People's Movement constantly tries to get its positions out to the larger public. But one would never know this to be the case by analyzing the views and goals of the outside interests currently opposing the Drop Inn Center and by extension the People's Movement. The playing field of public opinion is not level in terms of access to power to represent competing ideas. The People's Movement holds no naiveté about this, but the extent to which the Movement's positions are continually distorted never cease to amaze. Hence as the neighborhood argues for



economic diversity, dominant forces distort that position to say that neighborhood leaders want Over-the-Rhine to "remain as a haven of the poor and downtrodden," or they had "chosen a life style of poverty and picked that neighborhood as a good place to pursue it." And as the neighborhood argues its constitutive role of the public good, dominant forces reposition that articulation to say that Movement leaders desire "racial and socioeconomic separatism."

### **Systematic Refusal**

The project of city and corporate forces can be characterized in two ways. The first can be called "systematic refusal," which is the orchestrated effort to avoid seeing an organized community and Movement. This is not an ignorance that comes simply from not knowing. It is an active ignorance, an avoidance that is constructed as a systematic erasure of the community in order to make it invisible. For example, in all the ink that has been spilled about Over-the-Rhine, no mention is made of the People's Movement. It receives no mention in the ULI report. Nor is it mentioned in the 1998 *Changing Plans for America's Inner Cities: Cincinnati's Over-the-Rhine and Twentieth-Century Urbanism*, a book that now circulates as the reference of choice among the city's elite. The most explicit example of invisibility is expressed in the *Cincinnati Enquirer's* three-part, "in-depth" front-page coverage of Over-the-Rhine (July 16-18, 1995). Within the first three paragraphs of the lead article, the calculated erasure was apparent:

One hundred years ago, the 110-block neighborhood north of Central Parkway was a foreign country of fun for the normally reserved, hard-working Queen City. Beer gardens, concert halls, restaurants and theaters were all set amid the atmosphere of a German burg.

Then something went terribly wrong, terribly wrong. In this century, Cincinnati lost a magical place. In its headlong rush toward prosperity, Cincinnati grew up around the old neighborhood, leaving it to wallow as a backwater. The beer gardens, concert halls, restaurants and theaters left, along with the Germans, replaced by dives, prostitutes, drug addicts and alcoholics.

Now, a vanguard of entrepreneurs and self-styled bohemians are trying to return Over-the-Rhine to its past glory. They have moved in and set up art galleries, bars, coffeehouses and rehabbed apartments.

Now there's a binary! On the one hand we have dives, prostitutes, drug addicts and alcoholics, and on the other, a vanguard of entrepreneurs and self-styled bohemians. In one quick stroke of the pen, everything and everyone



associated with the existing community is dirty, black, dangerous, without structure, summarily dismissed, while everything associated with the "vanguard" is clean, white, safe, with money and future, something to be furthered. In one quick stroke, a whole history of Appalachians, families, and working class people of color is cast aside, passed off into oblivion by a simple mindedness that in no way can capture the nuanced complexity that *is* Over-the-Rhine.

### **Systematic Destruction**

The second tactic of corporate liberal forces can be characterized as "systematic destruction," which has escalated since 1996. This move from systematic refusal to systematic destruction has been swift and thorough. Want to destroy a community? This is what you do:

In November 1995 you begin by having a representative from Downtown Cincinnati Inc.--a private entity which represents corporate power in downtown development--meet with a representative from the Department of Economic Development of the City of Cincinnati to discuss the idea of bringing ULI to Over-the-Rhine. You next talk to the Chamber of Commerce in Over-the-Rhine, not the Over-the-Rhine Community Council which is the official political voice of the neighborhood as recognized by the city's community council system of land-use planning governance. After garnering the Chamber's support and now operating as a united front you approach the Community Council in April 1996 to inform it of your intention to bring ULI to town. The Community Council asks why weren't we informed of this earlier? In fact, why weren't we approached first? Why ULI? Why not the Center for Popular Economics or the Institute for Community Economics? In June, ULI comes to Over-the-Rhine as part of its "Advisory Services Program" to conduct a five-day charrette. As part of ULI's briefing you put together a 400 page book. Of the 70 pages that contain newspaper articles on housing, only 5 portray low income housing strategies positively. In a neighborhood that is 70% black, you interview 83% white. You interview more people from outside the community than from within it. On the morning of the 5th day of ULI's visit, you assemble a crowd of corporate executives, business leaders, foundation moguls, and city staff to hear the wisdom of a team that believes that free market strategies are at the heart of solving Over-the-Rhine's problems. One specific that you hear is the call for a new mass organization: the "Over-the-Rhine Coalition," which is to be a new planning and development body open to any individual, business, or institution that elects to join. In September you issue ULI's preliminary report, but



because you have the alignment of corporate, city, and business power you can ignore the argument that the Over-the-Rhine Coalition is not a true coalition because it does not build upon the infrastructure of institutions already present in the neighborhood. In the fall, you initiate a hate campaign against People's Movement leader buddy gray. You print bumper stickers that say "No Way Buddy Gray," and you post them around the neighborhood and downtown. You also print a phone number on that bumper sticker, so that when people call, they listen to half-truths and lies impugning buddy. And if character assassination is not enough, you can follow through with the real thing. On November 15, 1996 Wilber Worthen, a homeless friend of buddy's with a history of mental illness, shot buddy three times with a .357 magnum pistol. Because the police have their perpetrator, no in-depth investigation is pursued. The fact that police still cannot explain how Wilber acquired an unregistered weapon is of no concern to the Cincinnati citizenry.

### **Racism and Classism**

As the project of systematic destruction escalates, personal pejorative attacks become the norm; neighborhood leaders become "poverty pimps" and homeless folks and low income families become "alcoholics," "drug addicts," "mentally ill wanderers," and "substance abusers." Motivated by such media characterizations, GCAEC advocates deliver what they consider to be their death blow for the Drop Inn Center and the reason for its removal: the safety of children. As Erich Kunzel himself recently put it: "Any time you build a school, the prime issue is safety. The location has to be safe for children." *Cincinnati Enquirer's* lead editorial was less diplomatic: "Can anyone blame them [GCAEC planners] for not wanting kids to face the substance abusers the Drop Inn Center attracts? The new school shouldn't be next to a homeless shelter."

On the surface this point appears to have weight. Children's safety should be of high concern. But the point reveals its racism and classism when one understands that Washington Park Elementary School, which sits directly in front of Music Hall, and Taft High School, which sits one block directly behind it, have been serving neighborhood kids for as long as the Drop Inn Center has operated. Neighborhood children and the homeless have occupied the same territory for 21 years. So, whose children matter? Are pupils of public magnet schools more important than those in neighborhood schools? The concern for children *now* should at least strike citizens of Cincinnati as two-faced, but is not the racism and classism obvious?



Apparently not. And now that we are near the final act of this urban drama, it's instructive to see how the powers of corporate liberalism veil their racism and classism and continue to hold the public's imagination even while they put forth no argument to explain their position; there have been only assertions. Dominant powers do not have to construct an argument because, well, they don't have to. Evoking terms like economic mix, public good, and integration, without definition, apparently works in their interest. Tapping into the liberalness and goodness that such terms imply somehow overcomes what should rationally be seen as glaring contradictions. But to call for the removal of the Drop Inn Center *after* asserting that "Over-the-Rhine should be everyone's neighborhood," or that "There's plenty of room in Over-the-Rhine for a healthy mix of low-income housing, market-rate housing, cultural attractions, social service programs and businesses," or that "the Arts Campus and the Drop Inn Center must become good neighbors" are indeed irrational contradictions that should give one pause.

To proclaim the displacement of the Drop Inn Center, *by default*, makes a mockery of economic mix, public good, and integration. As used by the Kunzel forces these terms are code words to disguise their specific class and race interests with a specific agenda, which of course, neuters the terms of their full political value. Couple this with the lack of any argument and the naked truth becomes crystal clear--a desire to erase a group of homeless folks and by extension an entire class of low income persons and people of color. Out of sight, out of mind. It's shameful. But there it is. Again, the *Cincinnati Enquirer*: "City Hall officials should not let the tail wag the dog. A homeless shelter should not be allowed to block the greater good of this extraordinary multi-purpose project." A letter writer to the *Cincinnati Enquirer* had this to say: "Predictably, the debate has evolved into a debate of the rich vs. the poor. The relocation of the Drop Inn Center is at the heart of the debate. They do not want to be uprooted, claiming that the center's [GCAEC] advocates want to brush their clientele under the rug. 'Out of sight, out of mind,' so to speak. Well, this is exactly what I am advocating...I advocate moving the center into the post office on Dalton..." I guess we can say that at least this person is honest.

If concepts like economic mix, integration, and public good have any chance of becoming reality, groups like the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement will need support. True economic mix, integration, and the public good are not on the agenda of those individuals and



institutions that navigate the chilly sectors of corporate, city, and cultural power, at least not in Cincinnati. They have shown themselves to want homogeneity, exclusivity, and displacement, but cleverly couched in liberal language that veils their true interests.

The Drop Inn Center and the People's Movement see strength in reaching out to national groups. It is very difficult today for any social movement that focuses on issues of community development to persist and thrive, especially when isolated. Most political and ideological models configuring community development today are not politically progressive. Actually, the discourse of community development is pathetic, dominated by a language of cooperation that is little more than a dressed-up corporatism.

Hardly any version of community development today is theorized outside of this ideology of corporatism. With its lingo of public/private partnerships, enterprise and empowerment zones, tax abatements, tax incentives, and deregulatory legislation, the strategy is to advance privatization, to reduce environmental standards, and generally to subordinate social movements to the interests of profits and the market system. Community development has been reduced to a kind of plea-bargaining with the powers that be, such that demands of full employment, housing as a right, or healthcare cannot even make it to the table, and thus what ends up being constructed as hope within the community is the desire to have a little more money funneled in its direction.

Think of the role of the state here, just to refine the point. Through a transforming global economy and the rise of neoconservatism to political power, the state divests itself of meeting social need (rollbacks on affirmative action, welfare and AFDC, cutbacks in housing) while it becomes more punitive (increases in police forces, the building of prisons, continuation of a militarized economy) all at a time when social need worsens greatly. As the state divests itself of social services, the meeting of need is taken over by local groups--non-profits operating on marginal budgets, coalitions for the homeless, churches, even if they don't want to. The various member organizations of the People's Movement have consistently raised the funds necessary to serve a population abandoned by Reaganomics. They have to or people die.

And in this process a most regrettable shift occurs whereby social movements--whose role has been to make demands against the state through the building and organizing of constituencies--are transformed into splintered fragments of social service agencies--in



essence, a service ensemble, whose job is to hustle money to meet social need within a systemic distribution of resources that is badly skewed and maladjusted. Trying to meet desperate need within trying circumstances *becomes* the game.

The People's Movement is aware of these trends but this does not make it any easier to educate enough hearts and minds to effect a veritable public good based upon integration and economic mix. One lesson of the fight to save the Drop Inn Center and to advance the People's Movement is the need to develop reciprocal relations with other progressive groups--a new party (?)--in order to develop a power base to reassert the political project to redistribute wealth, regulate corporate behavior, and to advance conceptions of community development that are inclusive. In the meantime, the Drop Inn Center and the Over-the-Rhine People's Movement continue to oppose the community cleansing of corporate liberalism. Support and advice are welcome.

