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## ***District 9: Over-the-Rhine***

A Working Paper

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“They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it” (Oglala Chief Red Cloud).

*District 9*, nominated for Best Picture at March’s Academy Awards, is now widely available at a movie gallery near you. Rent it, watch it, and learn about Over-the-Rhine. More specifically, watch it in light of the most recent city-corporate effort to displace the Drop Inn Center (DIC) from its home in that neighborhood. *District 9* is not your normal alien movie. The typical question these movies pose is, what are they going to do to us? In *District 9* the roles are reversed. The aliens in *District 9* are metaphors—stand-ins for homeless people, people of color, immigrants, marginalized groups generally, what some have referred to as “surplus humanity”—and the question *District 9* poses is, what are we going to do with them? Denigrated and vilified as “prawns,” the movie charts the brutal removal of the aliens from one part of Johannesburg to a new and “improved” facility out of sight of humanity, and thus its moral sensibilities. Evidently, the “prawns” in Over-the-Rhine have to move for the good of the whole; a revealing statement, actually—apparently homeless people are not considered part of the whole.

On Tuesday, March 30, at a city hall meeting called by Mayor Mallory, three board members of the DIC were given their marching orders to make plans to relocate the DIC because it “has got to go.” Accompanying the mayor were vice mayor Roxanne Qualls, some city staff, members representing the Continuum of Care, and CEO Steve Leeper, Adam Gelter, and Joe Pichler representing 3CDC.

Though no agenda was provided, the intent of this meeting became all too clear. While cordial on the surface, just below it was anything but. Some accounts characterize the meeting as abrupt and disrespectful, both in tone and body language. It doesn’t take much to surmise why, because the question of *why* the DIC “must” move never was negotiated, nor was it going to be. The whole thrust was procedural, a matter of simply figuring out the logistical steps, with 3CDC offering its “help” in searching for new sites for a new facility.

The DIC needs to make no argument as to its home, at least not until the city-corporate types make theirs. And that should be something to behold. I wonder if they will be able to say what's really on their minds. Many years ago I was approached by an unnamed city council member, whose 40-foot likeness now adorns a prominent entry point to Over-the-Rhine, urging me to convince the leaders of the DIC to relocate.

"Why does the DIC have to move," I asked.

"Well, you know..."

"Hmmm. No, I don't. Can you explain?"

"Well, it's just not right."

"Not right?" What do you mean," I inquired.

"Well, it's just not a good fit."

"How is it not a good fit?"

"Well, the Drop Inn Center just needs to move."

"Why," I asked.

I am still waiting for an answer. And it's doubtful that an inquiring public will get one.

The powers-that-be don't want to have such a conversation, of course, and will do everything in their power to avoid one. This is precisely why the "conversation" that took place in city hall was structured the way it was—as method and logistics.

Some of this can be explained by recent trends in our national discourse. We Americans seem to deal with our most intractable problems by either turning a blind eye toward them or by shifting the terms of understanding so they magically disappear. "Global warming" downgrades to "climate change," racism is solved through references to a supposed colorblindness or to a "post-racial" society, and massive inequality will be overcome by "free markets" and access to "equal opportunity."

Bogus.

Let's call this out for what it truly is. The discourse of the city-corporate alliance that is developing around the removal of the Drop Inn Center has a long, sordid history in the U.S. It comes in many names: manifest destiny, social cleansing, ethnic cleansing, negro removal, gentrification, colonialism, and let's add another, "econocide" (which I will explain shortly). Cincinnati is witnessing in Over-the-Rhine today a variant of colonialism in line with the history of this country as a settler state to marginalize, exterminate, or remove the "undesirables" whose very presence hinders the (colonialist) project.

In this sense gentrification (predicated on removing the DIC) as a modern-day form of colonialism is nothing new, although characteristics may be different. It is certainly racist ("white middle class saviors") in that it targets communities of color for removal, or transfer, or displacement. It is also classist in that economic policies are spun around spurring "homeownership" and market-rate development, all the while suggesting that the needs of lower income residents can be met by such economically exclusive approaches. And insofar as the state appropriates gentrification and sanctions it as urban policy, racism and classism now become official state policy.

This is the game plan for places like Over-the-Rhine today. As the city favors a business climate based upon privatization and public/private partnerships, the flipside is that all benefits and awards accrue to new gentrifiers by expelling all traces of the poor and homeless. This is not a situation where the byproduct of urban policy just happens to negatively impact the poor. No, this is urban policy where the active defense of privilege and class depends upon the denial and removal of the poor.

This is urban policy with a vengeance. The tactics are clear, where the city promotes an agenda to sanitize urban neighborhoods, and links crime and militaristic measures such as more jails, more police, and more punitive legislation into a seamless marriage. In this view, the root causes of crime are rarely addressed and where the prison of today is just the latest incarnation of the same line of thinking that produced the racial enclosures of slavery, Jim Crow, the ghetto, and the Indian reservation.

This is "econocide," a term developed by theorist Arjun Appadurai in his poignant *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Appadurai's concern is that violence is taking new forms in the new era of "intense globalization," of which ethnic cleansing and culturally motivated violence perpetrated on a large scale are two of the most pressing examples. For Appadurai, the extent and rapidity of globalization have produced fearful conditions of anxiety and uncertainty, with one response being the mobilization of violence against minorities, immigrants, the poor, the homeless, and the outcast as kind of exorcism to produce certainty and

stability. Violence becomes a kind of purification rite on the part of “majoritarian identities” to purge their fear of marginalized populations that are being written off and targeted for removal: “Econocide is a worldwide tendency to arrange the disappearance of the losers in the great drama of globalization.”

Imagine being the target of econocide, where the following is a daily experience in Over-the-Rhine:

-You are told that your very presence in your own community is disorderly, unwanted, unattractive, displeasing, and that you are not a “good neighbor;”

-Your own history is retold in ways that edits you out;

-You are told that the use of force, backed by the police, prisons, surveillance, and punitive social policy and added to with a dash of free-market fundamentalism, will solve all social problems;

-You’re told that deregulation for the mobility of corporate capital, coupled with the regulation of urban public space by punitive social policy and police sweeps (what some refer to as the annihilation of space by law), are precisely needed to serve your interests;

-You are told of the need for outside, corporate forces—with the city’s blessing and support—to lead the charge in redeveloping your neighborhood because there is just too much fragmentation and the successful organizations you have built over the decades are deemed incapable.

And with regard to the specifics of the Drop Inn Center’s removal, again, imagine being of the receiving end of a domestic neocolonialism steeped in econocide:

- You are not approached in the spirit of mutual respect and reciprocity. There is no attempt to understand the complexities of the DIC, nor its successes. No, the approach is militaristic; the city barks orders and 3CDC maps logistics for how the Drop Inn Center *is* to move. How would moving the DIC serve the DIC’s mission to end homelessness? Not only does the DIC own its land and has a right to be there, moving it makes no sense in solving the circumstances producing homelessness in Cincinnati. The *Homeless to Homes* report makes no mention of a move. What a waste of dollars to create a new facility when said money could be directed to permanent supportive affordable housing, for example, which is precisely what *Homeless to Homes* advocates.

- You are presented with a faux humanitarianism. I and others have already called this out to the public before in our “When Humanitarianism Goes Bad” (see either

[http://www.cincinnati-beacon.com/index.php?/contents/comments/when\\_humanitarianism\\_goes\\_bad/](http://www.cincinnati-beacon.com/index.php?/contents/comments/when_humanitarianism_goes_bad/) or <http://arts.muohio.edu/cce/papers/When%20Humanitarianism%20Goes%20Bad.pdf>). And what concerned us then is raining down on us now—a new, high-bred rhetoric of concern and compassion for the homeless that masks true intentions, which is not to end homelessness, just move it elsewhere. I suspect the Drop Inn Center board is not fooled by this urban colonialism dressed up in a false generosity.

- You are essentially lied to because the practices and the principles of 3CDC, or the city, are not in sync. Operating as individual entities or as a city-corporate alliance as is happening now, the track record in following through in safeguarding the interests of our most vulnerable citizens is inadequate. Actually, “safeguarding the interests of our most vulnerable citizens” is being way too nice. It feels more like a war. Through policy and willful action, the poor of the Queen city have been targeted time and again. Consider:

- After a promise to replace all 100 or so units of housing units after the demolition of the Milner Hotel—torn down in 1994 to make room for upscale housing at a time the city was arguing for economically mixed communities—only twenty units were replaced at the time and those no longer exist.
- The city’s effort to kill ReSTOC’s Vine Street Community Project back in 2000. After officially backing the project, Mayor Charlie Luken pulled his support, encouraging city council to block the release of city-administered funds and requiring ReSTOC to sell one of its primary buildings in the development to a private developer. This was not the end of it, however, as the city forced ReSTOC to sell off more of its property and convert some rental units into owner-occupied units.
- The Housing Impaction Ordinance of 2001, which forbids the “City of Cincinnati from spending, approving or in any way condoning more subsidized low-income development in those areas deemed impacted,” mistakes symptoms for causes by popularizing the misguided view that the concentration of low-income housing is the root problem in Over-the-Rhine. Not seen in this view are the larger, structural causes that include the disappearance of decent paying, lower skilled jobs, suburbanization, declining wages, welfare reform and other rollbacks of state-sponsored services, poor education, and lack of affordable health and childcare, all of which disproportionately and severely impacted poorer populations.
- The city’s decision to abolish its Planning Department in 2003, which signaled to all those many people and organizations who worked on the *Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan* (2002) that the Plan itself was essentially shelf material, effectively walking away

from responsibilities outlined in the Plan to safeguard economic mix.

- The city didn't just pass one anti-panhandling ordinance, but two. Now a person cannot lie or use profanity or ask for change more than once, even though governments shall make no law...abridging freedom of speech.
- The emptying of 1316 Race of 33 tenants who were displaced by the owner as a condition of sale to 3CDC. These residents were pressured with thirty day's notice to vacate the premises. As this happened in November 2006 many residents had to find refuge from the approaching winter cold.
- The city's attempt through the Zoning Text Amendments to restrict and remove social services from Over-the-Rhine in the name of de-concentrating social services.
- 3CDC's word to keep basketball courts in a redesigned Washington Park has no value as the courts have been dropped from the program. It appears this was a unilateral decision made by 3CDC, and the message this sends to African American teenagers is loud and clear: you are not wanted.
- 3CDC's statement about the importance of having "a deep-water pool south of Liberty in Over-the-Rhine" (because the existing one in Washington Park will be eliminated) seems to hold no water. It appears there are no plans to renovate Ziegler Park's shallow pool into a deep-water one anytime soon.
- 3CDC's claim that, as a rule, they don't displace people from their homes is contradicted by their action with the residents of the Metropole downtown. 3CDC can't even relocate them in their own downtown neighborhood.

The contradictions in these examples, and there are many more, are striking on their face. The professed sincerity for the homeless and our least empowered citizens is contradicted outright by city-corporate practices.

The 37-year history of the Drop Inn Center deserves respect, gratitude, and acknowledgement for the experience and wisdom its gained in operating with strong ties to community organizations, both in and outside homeless care provision. The Drop Inn Center is much, much more than a "shelter." It is a community-based organization woven into the fabric of Over-the-Rhine with strong ties with many neighborhood organizations of all stripes. Its graduates have gone on to establish new neighborhood institutions and even national reputations (think of Jimmy Heath, Donald Whitehead, Jimmy Render, Joe Beene, and Mike Rogers, for starters). Over its long history, it has not only raised awareness in the City about the circumstances and need for shelter, but it continues to argue for a different societal future where homelessness is eradicated and not just moved to a new District 9, out

of sight and out of mind.

I suspect this piece will not be well-received by the likes of 3CDC and the city. And I fully expect that these entities will act in the retaliatory fashion typical of bullies, which is precisely how they are operating now. I would not be surprised if they try to restrict rightful monies from reaching the Drop Inn Center. I would like to be wrong here.

No one appreciates arrogance and paternalism. Patronizing the Drop Inn Center, I fear, is the first step is ignoring it altogether. The challenge is to construct a society full of real humanitarianism, building upon what the Drop Inn Center enacts everyday. It is a place of compassion, of empathy, of healing. It is a place that can restore Cincinnati's humanity. Apparently the city and its agents can learn something from the Drop Inn Center.