



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

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**THE DROP INN CENTER RE(MOVES) TO THE
BUTTERNUT BREAD FACTORY: A Half-Baked Idea**

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“The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed” (Steven Biko).

Though just short of two years old, Alice Skirtz’s book *Econocide: Elimination of the Urban Poor*—a searing account that just about explains it all when it comes to urban policy in Cincinnati—already needs updating. [1] According to Mark Curnutte of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, “The Drop Inn Center, the region’s largest homeless shelter, has agreed to move from Over-the-Rhine to the former Butternut Bread Co. factory in Queensgate” (November 22, 2013). Though not wrong, Mr. Curnutte’s take is not quite right either. Saying the Drop Inn Center “agreed” to its removal from Over-the-Rhine, to a site isolated and residentially inhospitable, is kind of like saying Crazy Horse agreed to be reservationized. Though *reservationize* is not a word, it sure should be, because that is just what happened to the Drop Inn Center—it is to be removed; displaced; put out of sight, where the promise of “new and improved space” will likely be undermined by increased utilities and operating costs.

How did this happen?

In hindsight it’s easy to see. First you apply intense pressure on the Drop Inn Center board to move. Recall that the Center did not start the “conversation” about moving. This was put upon the board back

in March 2010 by then-mayor Mark Mallory, supported by then-vice mayor Roxanne Qualls, with 3CDC thrust into the expediter role to facilitate the DIC's removal. To characterize any of this exchange as a conversation is way too polite. It was, in actuality, a cavalry-like ambush, where the intent of the meeting at city hall was clear from the start: the Drop Inn Center's location was not up for negotiation, it had to go.

Then, not wanting to appear obstructionist, the DIC board capitulates and takes a let's-see-what-develops posture.

Then you colonize the board. This is called professionalizing, where you narrow the focus of the operation by staffing the board with people who mean well, but perhaps do not understand the Drop Inn Center's history in its connections to and networks within the neighborhood. This is like what Peter Buffett, son of Warren, calls "Philanthropic Colonialism," where people who have "very little knowledge of a particular place would think that they could solve a local problem." Buffett's portrayal of the "charitable-industrial complex" is spot-on and points to the growing trend of "business-minded folks" trumpeting business principles as the end-all of non-profit boards. [2] Professionalizing DIC's board in this way leads to comments such as that shared at a meeting at *buddy's place* on March 24, 2010: "We have a whole new organization. I'm the elder statesman on the board now, and I've been on the board for only three years."

Then you institute a new language. Instead of referring to those homeless as people, full of humanity with gifts of their own, you call them clients.

Then you fire Pat Clifford, former executive director of the Drop Inn Center and a very good man, who knew well the Drop Inn Center's history and the role of the neighborhood in its mission. But in a colonized board environment focusing on numbers and business principles, he has to go.

Then, at the same time all this is going on, you turn 3CDC loose, eager to fulfill its helper role, to raise \$34 million in private and public money to remove shelters from Over-the-Rhine. Raising private money is one thing, but perverting public monies just to move shelters around instead of actually producing affordable housing—the lack of which is the primary reason for homelessness to begin with—is another thing altogether. As Chris Wilkey and I wrote in a prior white paper, "On November 7, 2012 City Council voted to pursue a loan from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development for \$37 million, \$7 million of which would be used 'as part of the financing for the City's Homeless to Homes program, to support the construction of improved shelters and homeless prevention facilities within the City' (Ordinance No. 405-2012)...As this loan has no source of repayment, the projected

annual debt service payment of \$532,000 is pledged to come from future Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) entitlement allocation for the next 20 years...All this is at a time when CDBG monies—which are supposed to be used to develop viable communities principally for people on low- and moderate-incomes—have been dwindling.” [3] CDBG monies are not the only monies being diverted. As Mark Curnutte makes clear, “Developer 3CDC is getting \$300,000 this year and next from the Hamilton County Indigent Care [hospital] Levy, and [Stephen] Leeper [executive director of 3CDC] said Friday [November 22] that he hopes the shelter plan can continue to receive money from that source as well as possibly tapping into a pool used for mental health services.”

This raiding of established funds for housing and medical care to support real estate investment just to move shelters is unconscionable; it in no way actually ends homelessness, and worse, it ideologically greases the citizenry to equate mere shifting with actually ending homelessness.

So, where’s the outrage over this misuse of public monies? Where are the voices of those trusted with stewardship of our public funds for housing? How can use of housing funds to move shelters to industrial/manufacturing zones address our affordable housing shortage? Can Strategies to End Homelessness actually live up to its name? Or is this organization merely culpable in facilitating this travesty?

This is how oppression gets internalized. This is how hegemony works. Those in the homeless care community are beaten down, and their internalized oppression reveals itself as despair, apathy, acceptance. It’s hard to get a good deal under those kinds of power relations. I can’t imagine, if all things were equal, the DIC board responding to a multi-million request from the city to end homelessness by saying, "Let's build a new shelter in an isolated location!" It would not do that. DIC knows that homelessness is not solved by shelters and that monies should be used to create affordable housing and good jobs, within established neighborhood networks.

What must be disregarded to make the DIC’s removal palatable?

First, I understand the point that the Drop Inn Center’s new location offers more space. And when you’re bursting at the seams in your existing location, a newly renovated place looks mighty inviting. But why is it advantageous to move those homeless from their friends and neighbors, from the newly renovated Washington Park, from the establishments they frequent such as Our Daily Bread, Venice on Vine, or Tucker’s Restaurant, from the services they need such as the City’s Elm Street Health Center and Dental Clinic, in short, from the neighborhood they call home too? Queensgate seems

to be the new Oklahoma territory and I-75 is the new Mississippi River.

Second is the question of zoning and whether a shelter is even an allowable use on the proposed site. Perhaps the zoning code recognizes that such a desolate setting is not fit for human residence.

Third, it's hard to disregard how 3CDC and the City sweep away the longstanding intent of thousands of donations, large and small, given by a wider community to build and support the Drop Inn Center in its Over-the-Rhine location.

Fourth, violating ordinances and city plans seems not to concern the City or 3CDC. After all, actively organizing to remove the Drop Inn Center since 2010 puts these two entities in violation of the *Over-the-Rhine Comprehensive Plan* of 2002. Espoused goals of that Plan are to displace no one and make housing-related services available for all residents at all levels of income.

Just how many plans, ordinances, funding commitments, and zoning regulations must be side-stepped by the City and 3CDC before citizens of Cincinnati call them to account? It is apparently more important to remove people who are homeless from view than to honor the instruments of civility, public process, and perhaps the rule of law.

What is to be learned?

Mark Curnutte writes that “no formal agreement has been signed yet.” While a fact, it does not give me hope that the decision will be reversed. So, if this goes through, what lessons can Cincinnatians draw from this sordid episode?

Do the oft-trumpeted ideals of “mixed-income development” and “economic mix” have any real meaning here in Cincinnati? Certainly the principles and practices don't match. With the DIC's displacement, such lofty goals smack more as cover, veiling the actual city-corporate game plan to remove and erase “undesirables” from public exposure. And, of course, this has been going on for quite sometime now; consider the demolition of the Milner Hotel in 1995 and its elimination of roughly 120 units, or the Metropole Apartments and the displacement of 223 units, or the straight up assault on the Anna Louise Inn and its removal to another isolated location. The professed sincerity for those homeless and least empowered in Cincinnati is contradicted outright by these naked practices of a powerful city-corporate alliance.

Building the “beloved community” just got harder. Mary Burke Rivers, executive director of Over-the-Rhine Community Housing, recently said this eloquently: “For decades the Drop Inn Center was a community-owned asset. If this was not literally the case, it felt that

way. It was for years the hub of caring and community development in Over-the-Rhine. Not that it was the only place, but out of that place many people were healed and many people gave birth to dreams of a better world. From the Drop Inn Center, the Greater Cincinnati Coalition for the Homeless, ReSTOC and Over-the-Rhine Housing Network were born, and Peaslee Neighborhood Center and the Contact Center were supported. Many activists gathered there to support workers rights, women's rights, voting rights and importantly, social and economic justice.” [4] The colorful garment that is Over-the-Rhine is now fraying, a vital thread of its history unraveling, making it difficult for the rich history of the Drop Inn Center to contribute to the community’s future.

Removing the Drop Inn Center will be the neighborhood’s loss. The ethic my students and I have learned from the community—from the buddy grays, the Bonnie Neumeiers, the Mike Rogers’, the Tom Lees, the Alice Skirtz’, the Mary B. Rivers’, the Andy Hutzels, the Cassandra Barhams, and the so many others over the years who have devoted their lives to Over-the-Rhine—is this: “Seek out those most vulnerable and oppressed so that you may learn how to live.” That is a powerful challenge, reminiscent of Dr. Martin Luther King’s “beloved community,” built around its core principle of “radical empathy.” Empathy, of any kind let alone radical, is in short supply in Cincinnati these days, and its development in Over-the-Rhine will be impossible when those homeless are segregated by geography, removed from our conscience because they are removed from our consciousness (out of sight, out of mind). To paraphrase Dr. King, I doubt if the systemic dimensions and problems of homelessness will have a great chance to be solved until those of greater wealth, through genuine empathy, come to feel the ache and anguish of the daily lives of those homeless. [5]

The Future of Over-the-Rhine?

Imagine a press release five years hence?

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“3CDC today says that it will shut itself down. After having reached all its goals in development the non-profit organization—the spearhead of corporate power in Cincinnati—says there is nothing left to do. Executive director Stephen Leeper said today: ‘With our Gateway 23 project now completed, all the buildings in Over-the-Rhine have been renovated with market-rate condos and upscale restaurants, and there is no real estate nor profit-producing sites left to develop.’ In a related story, the Drop Inn Center, an organization that would like to close because homelessness had actually ended, says that its population has increased ten-fold.”

But with the Drop Inn Center safely ensconced away from the new white, middle class urban playground...who knew?

Econocide.

Mission accomplished.

NOTES

[1] The theoretical heart of *Econocide* is spelled out in the chapter “Like Genocide, So Econocide.” What worries Skirtz, and should worry everyone, is that in a world objectively more and more unequal, “notions that poor people pose ‘perceived or symbolic’ threats to a larger, more privileged community set the stage for their exclusion from the universe of obligation.” Alice Skirtz, *Econocide: Elimination of the Urban Poor* (Washington D.C: NASW Press, 2012). See my review: *Truth-out.org* (<http://www.truthout.org/opinion/item/19683-urban-cleansing-by-class-the-perfect-crime>), posted October 29, 2013.

[2] Peter Buffett, “The Charitable-Industrial Complex,” *The New York Times Opinion Pages* (http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27opinion/the-charitable-industrial-complex.html?_r=3&)

[3] Thomas A. Dutton and Chris Wilkey, “From the Continuum of Care to Strategies to Care Less: From the Anna Louise Inn to the Drop Inn Center?” *StreetVibes* (May 24 – June 6, 2013).

[4] Mary Burke Rivers, “#Giving Tuesday,” (posted November 27, 2013).

[5] Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 107.