

OCCUPIED ZUCCOTTI



AND PLANNED SHRINKAGE

INTRODUCTION

October, 2012 - It's been a year since the September 17th emergence of the Occupy struggles in the States. So many of us were taken aback by Occupy – surprised, captivated and uplifted by the emergence of a new moment of collective rebellion. Admittedly, I was apprehensive. I distinctly remember marching on September 17th and feeling underwhelmed by the experience. But then, seemingly out of nowhere, the general assemblies multiplied at Zuccotti. Like thousands of others, I spent dozens of nights around occupied Zuccotti – “Liberty Square.” While participating in marches around the financial district, I felt a spirit of confrontation, antagonism and hope I've only felt a handful of times in my life.

Unfortunately, there were other, less appealing sides to the unrest that developed in ensuing weeks. There was a growing frustration and disregard by some relatively privileged organizers about the “homeless” people who were “taking over,” “sidetracking” and “dividing” the occupy movement. And as it turned out, similar attitudes were showing up across the country.

In New York City some of these organizers, including people who had committed hundreds of hours to the growth of the struggle, acted on their frustrations by actively marginalizing those they perceived as present at Zuccotti for the “wrong” reasons. Some began to think through how to cut services as a way to evacuate poor people from the park.

In the 1970s administrators in New York City thought about ways to cut service provision to evacuate poor people from neighborhoods like the South Bronx, Brownsville, and elsewhere. The theory underlying the approach was called “planned shrinkage.” It is part of a longer history of forced movement of poor people – particularly people of color – that has also been known as “urban renewal,” “spatial deconcentration” and other euphemisms that translate into a violent process of population displacement.

During the occupation of Zuccotti Park a sort of planned shrinkage thinking developed that's worth discussing.

This pamphlet is – emphatically – not intended to make a false equivalence between protesters who focused disproportionate blame on poor and homeless folks and sought to withdraw services during the occupation of Zuccotti on the one hand, and the City administrators who have overseen the destruction of poor neighborhoods on the other. Such an argument would be absurd at best. The destruction that occurred in the South Bronx, parts of Brooklyn and elsewhere – largely as a result of the decisions of City policy makers – was of a magnitude matched in war-zones, with similar societal impacts. Occupied Zuccotti was a small space of political struggle, and while the unfortunate logic of population-disper-

sal and service-reduction developed, there is no comparison to be made of the reality of planned shrinkage as it destroyed parts of New York City and some activists who had problematic ideas within a political mobilization. I also do not believe activists thought through the implications of their ideas.

With that, this pamphlet is partially intended to point toward the dangerous lineage behind arguments for the withdrawal of services as a way to impact who does, and does not, populate a given movement space. I do believe that there was a sort of planned shrinkage thinking that developed for some active folks in Occupy. My hope is that the implications of this kind of thinking will be carefully thought through in the future by those engaged in movement building work. And, to be clear, many involved in Occupy were thinking deeply about these issues and all the ways they intersect with structural and interpersonal oppression throughout the occupation of Zuccotti, and they made a fundamental and decisive difference in how things played out.

In terms of building and expanding social struggles, planned shrinkage thinking, as well as other forms of oppression, inevitably leads to weak movements that do not seriously reflect the needs of many people. Such movements will be reflective of privileged Activists and will inevitably be failures from any reasonable standard of “social justice.”

There are two pieces in this pamphlet. The first piece is an essay I wrote in November 2011 at the height of the Occupy struggle. I have left it largely unchanged, so there’s a lot of incompleteness and a bit of a rushed tone. The piece points to the frightening reality of social (dis)services and the decimated and punitive “safety net” programs in New York City, in context of service withdrawal discourse during the occupation of Zuccotti Park.

The second piece is an interview with Deborah Wallace, which we conducted in December 2011. Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace have painstakingly researched and published on the development and impacts of planned shrinkage. To be clear, the interview is included in here to draw out the historic process and meaning of planned shrinkage – its presence by no means implies that Mrs. Wallace agrees with my perspective or my article in here. She kindly agreed to do an interview on her work on planned shrinkage, not to discuss other matters.

Thanks to Jack, Johannah, Kevin, Laura, Conor, Stevie, Lantz, Al, Wells, and Ben for their support, encouragement and critical engagement, even if I chose not to take their advice.

Contact – panic@warmachines.info.
-C. Hughes, 10/2012.



Panic! I See Poor People *Some Thoughts on Gentrification Efforts in Zuccotti Park*

November, 2011 - In recent weeks of the protests at Zuccotti Park there has been a gentrification effort. I use “gentrification” here intentionally to refer to the process through which some middle class segments of the Zuccotti Park organizing population are seeking to remove poorer populations from the park in order to bring in wealthier and more “stable” segments of “the 99%” – those seen as there for the “right reasons.”

The corporate press has also launched an offensive aimed at dividing protesters through racism and classism. And, undoubtedly, papers like the *New York Post* and *The Daily News*, amongst others in print and on screen, have sought to exploit and exacerbate movement divisions to quell the struggle currently centered in Zuccotti. But the presses offensive hasn’t been without its kernel of truth about the opinions held by some Occupy organizers.

Stories abound from and about homeless youth at the park about be-

ing policed and marginalized by some working group participants and protest gatekeepers who presume the intentions of others present. Some vocal activists have argued that dealing with issues of poverty in the park have sidetracked all other work. Some have made unfortunate comments about poor and homeless people – arguments conflating homelessness with “substance abuse,” and “substance abuse” and homelessness with morally reprehensible behaviors; arguments conflating “mental health issues” with disruption and violence; arguments implying that formerly incarcerated people and the homeless are problems to be dealt with instead of comrades and allies, or potential comrades and allies. Some organizers have strategized ways to cut service provision in the park in order to disperse poor people.

Arguments with similarities to the unfortunate perspectives put forward in the corporate press have also shown up in the Left press. For example, *The Independent* ran a full page story in its November issue written by Nicholas Powers that noted, “Every utopia has extreme behavior that is a symptom of its values...Into Liberty Park have come homeless street youth, drug addicts and alcoholics.”¹ Here, Powers conflates homelessness with “extreme behavior” for unclear reasons. He negatively discusses “drug addicts” and “alcoholics” as if there is no need for explanation – we just know those people are problems, after all. It’s as if the connections are all common sense. They’re not.

Some organizers have argued that if we could just connect those presumed to be “chronically homeless,” have “mental health” issues or “abuse drugs,” or those in need of hot meals, to the appropriate social services – outside of the park – then energy could be re-devoted to the “movement” work and the park would become a generally safer space that served those there for the “right,” reasons (the supposedly “political” ones). Some Occupy organizers eagerly jumped after a representative of a local social service agency made the argument that Occupy had created a “perfect storm” to channel homeless people to the park by providing a space for congregation with free meals and minimal rules. The representative told organizers to stop serving food as a way to clear out the homeless and get them back into shelter. That is, get them back into the City’s chosen form of institutionalized population management for homeless people.²

In late Fall some Occupy working group members organized a meeting with social service providers. The aim of some of the Occupy organizers present amounted to figuring out how homeless people could be

1 Nicholas Powers, “How Liberty Park’s Ragged Utopia is Changing the World,” *The Independent* #171, p. 4

2 It’s worth mentioning that this is an agency buried in the pockets of the Bloomberg administration who funds them in vast quantities. The agency is also headed by the former homeless services commissioner under the gentrification-giddy Giuliani administration. Interestingly, in Portland, Oregon a major provider of services to homeless youth also played a similar role in relation to Occupy Portland.

connected to services *intentionally* outside of the park. Their goal was to figure out a way to decrease the presence of homeless people through connecting them to services elsewhere. This occurred simultaneous to increased commentary outside of the meeting that homeless people were the cause of the problems in the park (some of that commentary was also present in the meeting). Other activists and service providers present in the meeting were shocked that movement people were trying to figure out plans like this, that movement people were so uncritical of their attitudes toward others involved in the occupation of Zuccotti.

While Occupy organizers initially made calls for more homeless people to come eat at Zuccotti Park as part of the struggle, there's now been an overwhelming sense of renege from some working groups members. Once the poor arrived and it increasingly became a "homeless encampment" in addition to an ideological space, "Liberty Square" somehow became less of a "movement" or "protest" space in the eyes of some vocal activists.

Mirroring the mainstream, blame for the problems at the park has been overwhelmingly placed on "the homeless," "gang members," "drug abusers," "the mentally ill" and youth. In short, those with the least access to society's resources. This attitude has become increasingly popular amongst protesters – not just because of the corporate press, but also because of real, prevalent attitudes of some Occupy activists. In thinking about the political composition of the movement, including its strengths and its real and potential fault-lines, the divisions developing are a serious danger and, undoubtedly, one of the most pressing issues at hand.

Rumors that the movement is being "divided" by the police via "dropping off vans" of former prisoners from Riker's Island has become associated by some as a government-repression strategy in the tradition of the FBI's Counter-Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) of the 1950s-1970s.³ In short, those who have faced the brunt of the sharpest attacks on the social safety net are being blamed for diverting the movements' energy toward ostensibly more important and relevant work, and delaying the growth of the struggle. The right wing *New York Post* printed an article speculating that this was occurring – to be clear, the supposed explosion of the presence of formerly incarcerated people is based on anecdotal evidence and a lot of assumptions – and it seemed to catch on in wildfire fashion in the corporate press (conservative and liberal), and amongst many activists.

Indeed, while it's entirely possible that the NYPD could be directing people from Riker's or elsewhere to the park, it's also possible that Zuccotti makes sense for those leaving lock-up for many reasons. What has been so frustrating, and so problematic, is that those making the argument about the – unproven – NYPD's actions here rely on the assumption that people

3 See, for example, Rebecca Rosenberg, Jamie Schram, and Bob Frederick, "Rikers cons flood Zuccotti for free eats," *New York Post*, October 26, 2011

coming from lock-up are automatically outside of an accepted and legitimate protest body. The argument starts with a belief that people leaving jail are already a problem, and relies on an imaginary of formerly incarcerated people that is more based on stigmas and oppressive discourses than real experiences. Here, the rhetoric around formerly incarcerated folks and lacking resources in the park are explicated, instead of systematic analyses of governing bodies, bureaucracies, class dynamics, racism, privilege and different levels of access. The problems become some of the people using resources and coming to the park, not the systems of power controlled by the “1%” – and administered and implemented, often violently, by many in the “99%.”⁴

That most of those being blamed are people of color and many of those doing the blaming are white is an obvious fact that points to just a couple of the numerous ways that racism and white privilege are evincing themselves. Further, the fact that housed people, some involved in working groups, have committed violent and disruptive acts has received comparatively little attention – which is unsurprising given the tendency to blame homeless and poor folks for all things problematic.

Importantly, there are major efforts by working group participants on the ground, as well as actions by those who may not identify as part of working groups, to challenge the prevalent attitude of dispersing poor folks from the park and blaming poor people for everything bad that happens. Those efforts are and will continue to be decisive. They are creative and involve many voices and people who are working day and night to make Zuccotti Park a true “Liberty Square” – more safe and supportive for everyone present. They are some of the most exciting and inspiring parts of the movement’s development.

To be explicit, I by no means mean to imply that there aren’t very serious and real safety issues at the park – there certainly are. These issues include sexual violence, assault and other attacks, theft of personal property, verbal aggression, quickly triggered tempers, tensions and other difficult things. As many have pointed out, female-identified people have faced numerous assaults and face ongoing threats to safety. Male-identified people have also faced assault, including sexual assault. As many of those on the ground involved in working to build a safer culture have stated, these are urgent issues of absolutely central importance. I absolutely agree and I hope I am able to present this commentary without giving the false impression that problems at the park are somehow anything less than very real. Indeed, they are both very real and very complicated.

Rather, the point in this short piece is that focusing blame overwhelmingly on people who face structural marginalization does nothing to solve

⁴ At various points in this piece I reinforce the role of some of the 99% in administrative violence. My intent in doing this is to point out the difficulties of the 99%/1% split in context of social service delivery. Such complications could be made easily elsewhere (i.e. middle management roles and so on)..

the problems at hand. By doing so issues cannot be dealt with appropriately: blame will consistently be misplaced, white and middle class organizers will continually project racist and classist feelings and thoughts, and potentially strong relationships that could allow a much safer, anti-racist, anti-oppressive space to develop will be lost. The movement will consistently be weakened and its divisions easily exploited by its enemies.

Perhaps some of the problems of classism and racism develop from a larger problem within Occupy. As I address below, I find a commonality between some of the discourse surrounding Occupy and that which has fueled the Tea Party. In short, participants in both expound a distinct rhetoric that is more about fear of losing relative class privilege and becoming poor than building a movement that incorporates different sectors of the working class -- including those without access to wages or salaries, and those without access to apartments or other homes.

The purpose of this piece, admittedly incomplete, is multifaceted. It is primarily intended to challenge those who, to a lesser or greater extent, think that evacuating the poor is a positive step for the development of the struggle in Zuccotti Park and other encampments. It is also aimed at the organizers and others who believe that “just” sleeping at the park isn’t a valid enough a contribution to the struggle. Further, it is aimed at folks who believe those in need of services should and can simply be routed to appropriate services outside of the park, and accordingly aim to simply devise ways to “connect” people to them appropriately. As I hope to make clear, service connection is often a very problematic goal and an unrealistic possibility. And, as I also hope to make clear, there is a serious need within the Occupy struggles for ongoing critical analysis and discussion on the role of social services – not just the absence of funding for social services, but the role direct services play in movements and in everyday life. The latter includes the overarching ideology of discipline, blame and violence through which “services” are administered.

This piece takes the following course. I begin by providing a very brief discussion of “planned shrinkage” and some connections to Liberty Square. From there I move on to address layout and functions of social services supposedly intended to help poor and homeless people in New York City. After describing and briefly analyzing these services I move on to an attempt to complicate the problematic discussion of “gangs” and “drugs” at Zuccotti. From there I discuss movement composition.

To begin then, I want to talk about another time service withdrawal was the agenda for evacuating poor people.

PLANNED SHRINKAGE AND LIBERTY SQUARE

Gentrification has led to massive numbers of working class and poor people, primarily people of color, being pushed out of their communities, and has been the context for the “quality of life” policing efforts that the

NYPD has used to target, incarcerate and in some ways terrorize poor people and people of color. One of the functions of the prison system has been to hide away from public sight many people who have been displaced through gentrification. As Picture the Homeless have pointed out, gentrification has pushed many into homelessness and “there is not a homeless crisis, but there is a housing crisis, with homelessness being one result.”

Gentrification in New York City is often characterized by neighborhoods like Williamsburg, Brooklyn, which has become the cliché example of hipsterdom in Gotham. While some of Williamsburg has stayed a space for working class people, there’s no denying its rapid shift from a working class area to one of the most bourgeois – perhaps the most bourgeois – neighborhoods in the States. The process of how that happened is less known. Describing that whole process is inappropriate here, but it seems worthwhile to point to one significant element of Williamsburg’s gentrification – the City’s practice of “planned shrinkage.”

“Planned shrinkage” was a term used by Roger Starr, the head of NYC’s main housing department in the mid-1970s, during the major fiscal crisis of that period. Although never officially adopted – due to protest – it was clearly implemented in Manhattan, Brooklyn and the Bronx.⁵ Planned shrinkage was an approach to the City’s fiscal crisis that sought to breakup political organizing, balance the budget crises on the backs of the poor, and clear “blighted” areas through denial of City and social services. Starr argued to let poor areas “lie fallow until a chance in economic and demographic assumptions make the land useful once again.”⁶ In areas where there were high percentages of poor people, the City simply stopped picking up garbage, decreased firefighting services and resources, ceased housing investment and development, and helped the infrastructure fall apart – for example, facilitating the utter destruction of the South Bronx to rubble. As Miriam Greenberg described it,

“First, the logic went, the poorest residents needed to be driven out of their neighborhoods, thus “shrinking” the population demanding services, and making their abandoned properties available for more profitable purposes...As for those who would not or could not leave, Starr called for the city government to aid in “population transfers” of entire neighborhoods, particularly of poor blacks and Latinos out of New York City.”⁷

5 The two most important volumes on planned shrinkage are: Deborah Wallace and Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned Down and Public Health Crumbled* (New York: Verso, 2001) and Mel Rosenthal, *In the South Bronx of America* (New York: Curbstone, 2001). On Williamsburg, see Curran’s article in the “Further Reading” section.

6 Quoted in Joshua B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), p. 277.

7 Miriam Greenberg, *Branding New York: How a City in Crisis was Sold to the World* (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 141.

Service withdrawal was at the heart of planned shrinkage – and the argument of moving services out of Zuccotti Park has a frightening similarity to such thinking.

THE SERVICES IN NYC AND PRIVILEGED ASSUMPTIONS

Some activists have seriously misunderstood how NYC services function and have deprioritized building a movement that takes the needs of the poor at its heart. Below is a brief breakdown of the available services in NYC, presented in hopes of clarifying what not out there for people. What is “available” however, functions within a larger neoliberal framework that aims to push people away when they try to access, and services whose intention is often disciplinary and punitive. My point here is that people cannot just be “connected” to appropriate services, and often such connections, even if they’re possible, are for very good reasons not desired. I will briefly address shelters, affordable housing, cash and food assistance, and mental health and addiction services.

Shelters

There are more than 46,000 homeless people within the adult and family shelters in NYC.⁸ Most shelter residents are families. There are also thousands more “unaccompanied” homeless youth in the City. There are thousands of unsheltered homeless people who live on the streets, on trains or in other public places. There are thousands of others who rely on hospitals for crisis housing, and thousands of others who are locked-up without a place to go when they get out. There are also well over a hundred-thousand people doubled-up in public housing units in the City whose presence puts the leased-tenant at risk of eviction, and who, without access to that public housing couch/floor/etc., would be in the shelters or on the street.

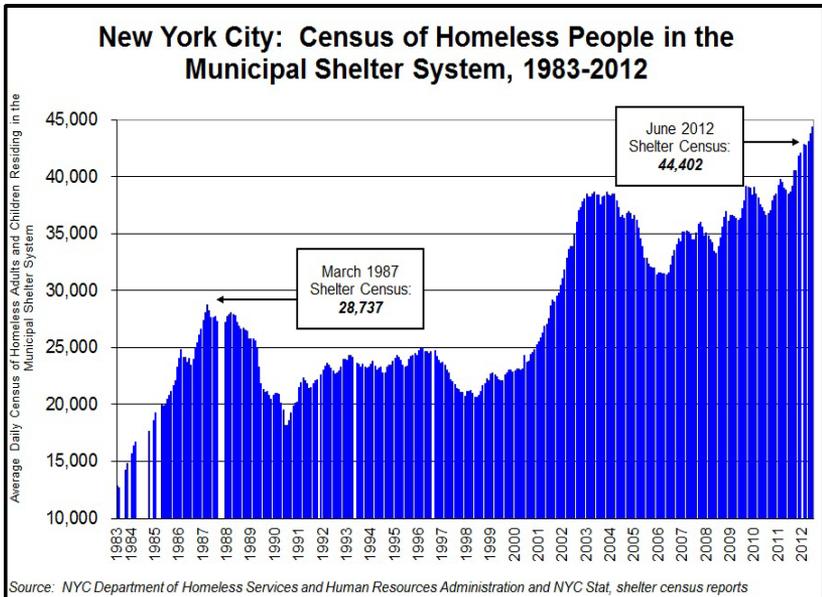
The City is legally mandated under the Callahan Consent Decree of 1981, and follow-up lawsuits, to provide shelter to adults. However, this is vastly expensive and City officials – implementing a neoliberal framework of service denial – make the experience of accessing shelter a miserable one. At the entry point, the City has increasingly pushed a “diversion” line to make it harder and harder for people to access the shelter system (similar to their approach to welfare provision, discussed below). Once

8 Number updated to reflect 9/2012 population. In a connection worth drawing out, current DHS Commissioner, Seth Diamond, was also the head of the “work first” department of the NYC Human Resources Administration (the City’s Department of Social Services) during the tenure of influential neoliberal welfare reformer, Jason Turner. Diamond played a decisive role in the City’s implementation of a welfare system that functions to exploit people in low/unwaged jobs, and pushes people out of accessing assistance entirely. For more on this see, Kemba Johnson and Kathleen McGowan, “Axe Man Turner Overdrive: HRA Chief Merges and Purges,” *City Limits*, April, 1998; Neil deMause, “Welfare Reformer Becomes City Homeless Commissioner,” *City Limits* April, 2010. On the development of the shelter system, it’s worth reading Theresa Funicello’s, *Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1994), particularly the chapter “The Creation and Marketing of Homeless People.”

inside, the City does all it can to push people out.

The majority of shelters in NYC, of which there are hundreds, are run by non-profits contracted by the Department of Homeless services (DHS) the City's main homeless agency.⁹ The City holds tight strings on its contracting agencies and effectively runs each shelter through the non-profit. There are also so shelters that are directly run by DHS and some for-profit providers. There are a minuscule handful of shelters for homeless youth – usually defined as under 21 – that are administered by the Department of Youth and Community Development (DYCD). Some churches and domestic violence agencies provide a small number of beds as well. DHS and DYCD have sought to cut services in recent years, including successfully shutting down drop-in centers and cutting shelter beds for youth. Still, each year NYC pours more than a billion dollars into the “Shelter Industrial Complex:” the massive industry that warehouses in shelters people without houses/apartments, instead of investing in truly affordable housing.

DHS shelters are notoriously – and intentionally – dirty, frightening and dangerous places that many avoid. Investment in shelter infrastructure is often intentionally paltry, with the intent and effect of pushing people out of shelter (and, to be clear, it is often not the 1% who actually enforces the violence of shelter push-out – it's folks who are part of the 99%). Conditions are pervasively bad and even worse in so-called “Next Step” shelters – shelters intended for DHS clients deemed “difficult” or those in



source: coalitionforthehomeless.org

⁹ “Non-profit” is a bit of a misnomer though, given the vast sums of money that the City pays each shelter-provider per resident.

shelters longer than DHS thinks acceptable (so called “long term stayers”). Shelter residents are on constant crisis alert – violence, including sexual assault, is a serious concern. Homophobia and transphobia are rampant. Youth are often at serious risk of harassment or physical violence. Staff – people within the 99% - often treat residents like shit, to put it mildly.¹⁰

Youth shelters have a better reputation than adult shelters. But there are only around 250 emergency youth shelter beds for the thousands of homeless youth seeking shelter each night in NYC. DYCD-funded beds accept youth only through age 20. Instead of increasing the available youth beds the City has aimed to significantly decrease them as homelessness has skyrocketed. DYCD has budgeted for fewer beds in each of the last few years. And between City funded and privately funded beds, there have been serious reductions: in 2009 there were more than 350 youth shelter beds, at least a hundred more than there are today.¹¹

Queer youth, who make up at least 40% of youth homeless in NYC, have access to just a few shelters that focus on serving them. LGBTQ youth face intensified danger in the shelters. Waitlists in the very limited queer programs are hundreds-long. LGBTQ-positive but not queer-specific shelter providers are often full and maintain constant waitlists. One shelter for queer youth is known for filling every corner of their building with a mat for a young person to sleep on – it’s not pretty but there’s also no other option in many cases. Thousands of youth can’t access these beds, so they figure out alternatives: banding together and sleeping in groups in public places (facing heavy harassment by the police), sleeping individually in the streets, couch surfing, staying awake all night in public places, staying in dangerous housing situations and so on.

There are a smaller number of other assorted beds. For example, getting a bed at domestic violence (DV) shelters is often impossible due to high-need and slim availability. DV beds for individuals without children can be particularly difficult to locate. Churches provide some beds but sometimes set difficult requirements that create barriers for access.

Rather than invest in actually affordable permanent housing, NYC

10 There is a funny logic at play where City officials both act to reduce the shelter population to some degree, through diversion – as a disciplinary measure toward poor people in a neoliberal economy – and then, after leaving office, tend to go into leading agencies/ companies that receive DHS contracts. See for example former DHS Commissioner Robert Hess who now heads up a non-profit shelter provider (Housing Solutions USA) making gross sums on DHS contracts, or Muzzy Rosenblatt who was DHS Commissioner under Giuliani and heads up Bowery Residents Committee (BRC). In the end they make lots and lots of money off poverty.

11 On resources (not available) for homeless youth, see: www.empirestatecoalition.org. City-funded homeless outreach teams are overwhelmingly geared toward street-homeless adults. They are run by major homeless service non-profits who obtain lucrative contracts and most often do not engage youth. Since homeless youth often don’t “look” like homeless folks these teams are seeking out, they are ignored or missed. Further, youth (like many adults) also often evade the police-like tactics of some City homeless outreach teams. DYCD City funds only one nighttime youth homeless outreach team for the entire city. Accordingly, many homeless youth do not engage with youth homeless service providers at all, or not until years into their homelessness.

has continually invested in failed stopgap measures like shelters, which can never meet the needs of many of “the 99%” but do keep poor people more closely regulated by the state. Millions are in situations of housing precarity or homelessness, which can have a rapid domino effect on someone’s life. To compound the failed approach of shelter/ jailing/warehousing the poor – or successful approach, depending on the meanness of the perspective – the Bloomberg administration has actively taken steps to exacerbate the housing/homelessness problem. NYC is now at its all-time height of homelessness.

The Unavailability of Housing Assistance

It’s no secret that NYC’s rental housing market is the most expensive in the U.S. The Section 8 list is closed, there’s well over 150,000 on the NYCHA waitlist, and so-called “affordable housing” is an Orwellian trick – “affordable housing” usually has a “minimum income” that is far-above anything welfare, SSI or minimum wage pays. Most poor people cannot access “affordable housing,” even if they make it to the top of a waitlist. Accordingly, poor folks deal more often with predatory landlords than anyone else and many are forced to rely on the massive sheltering industry to survive.

Until 2005 those who went into shelters received priority access to federally funded Section 8 Vouchers and public housing (called ‘NYCHA’ New York City Housing Authority) – meaning that, due to an emergency situation of homelessness, they would jump ahead of those who were not homeless on the ever-growing waitlists. Section 8 vouchers (now called “Housing Choice Vouchers”) and NYCHA units require residents to pay 30% of their income to rent. This is called “subsidized housing” and allows many who have been denied access to living wages able to afford an apartment. Historically, many in NYC and across the country have relied on subsidized housing to avoid or exit homelessness. As mentioned above, there are hundreds of thousands of subsidized units in NYC and they are packed. In the case of some public housing units, the City simply refuses to allow them to be occupied. There are also thousands of public or privately owned units that are kept off the market.

Mayor Bloomberg has decided that giving priority access for federally-funded subsidized housing (NYCHA and Section 8) to homeless people was “incentivizing homelessness” – meaning people were more likely to go in to shelters voluntarily to get access to housing assistance – and his administration cut homeless priority for NYCHA units and Section 8 subsidies.¹² The Bloomberg administration had almost no evidence that people were actually dropping into the shelters to get access before taking away homeless priority to federal resources, and studies since have shown

¹² For what its worth, given the reality of the low-wage job market and high-rent housing market, it seems extremely difficult to find any fault in a person or family who did decide to make it through the shelters for a period to gain access to subsidized housing.

that this was overwhelmingly not the case. Since Bloomberg cut this priority access homelessness has soared to historic levels. The Bloomberg administration has utterly refused to reverse its position. The numbers of homeless continue to increase.¹³

After cutting priority status, DHS instituted two failed subsidization schemes. The first was called “Housing Stability Plus,” which was a complete wreck.¹⁴ HSP was followed by another disastrous effort called “Advantage.” Advantage was a failure for a number of reasons including, first and foremost, that it paid a portion of rent but only for a maximum of two years –if after two years you couldn’t afford rent in NYC’s gentrified and spectacularly expensive housing market, you would be pushed back into homelessness. For many, that’s just what happened.

In March, DHS cut Advantage and decided there would be no replacement program instituted. We are now facing the first time since “modern homelessness” began in the late 1970s where New York City has no way of getting most people out of the shelters and into housing. DHS’s commissioner, Seth Diamond, has announced that there will be no replacement.¹⁵

The most cynical part of this? It costs the government thousands of dollars per month to shelter each homeless family. That’s enough to pay for a nice apartment on the Upper East Side. But the City believes that the poor are at fault for being poor, that they simply shouldn’t be given permanent housing assistance, and that they should be punished for their situation. In practice this belief functions to keep many people in constant crisis and worry, to stay housed in dangerous and violent situations, and to push poor people onto the street and into emergency rooms, into jails, or out of the City entirely. It also serves to continually funnel money to the massive shelter and homeless services systems (with their highly compensated CEO’s and Executive Directors), and predatory slumlords who cash-in on lucrative government payouts for pathetic and dangerous sheltering conditions.

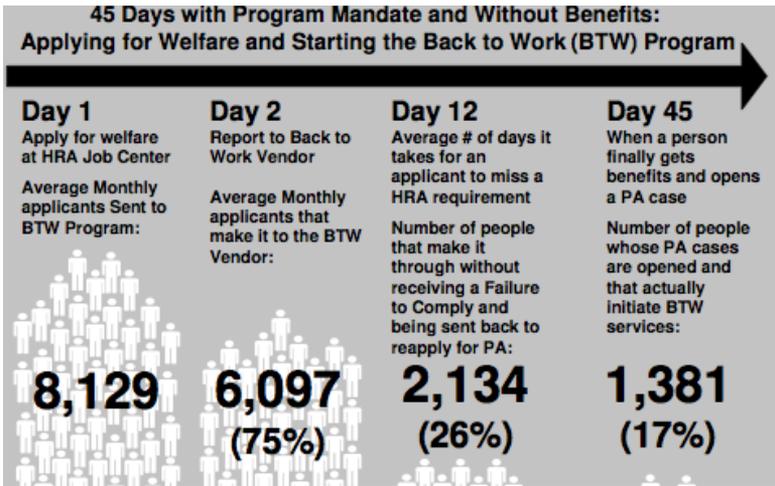
(Lacking) Cash and Food Assistance

Part of the response by corporations and the City to working class power in the second-half of the twentieth century power was the decimation of manufacturing. Companies moved operations to anti-union areas and off shore. Another part of the response to working class power in the 1960s and 1970s, particularly the success of the welfare rights movements, has been the ongoing assaults on entitlement programs and

13 NYC’s Coalition for the Homeless have done ongoing analysis of the impacts of Bloomberg’s policy: www.coalitionforthehomeless.org

14 On the absurdity of Housing Stability Plus see Picture the Homeless’s report, “Time’s Up: Homeless New Yorkers Demand Alternatives to Bloomberg’s Failed Five-Year Plan,” 2009.

15 According to Information for Families, Inc. when they asked Seth Diamond about it his response was “There is not going to be another housing subsidy.” See *How...When...Where: Information for Homeless and Relocated Families in New York City* (June 2011 issue, cover page).



the social “safety net.”¹⁶ Accordingly, from Reagan through Bush, through Clinton and Bush Jr., and through Obama, the welfare system has been continually decimated and reformulated in increasingly paternalistic and punitive ways. Clinton sought to “end welfare as we know it” in 1996 when he passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), which ended the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program (commonly known as “welfare”) and instituted the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families program (TANF). For decades presidents and administrators have sought to replace “welfare” with “workfare,” and Clinton codified this on a federal level. In New York City workfare mandates had already been in play, having grossly expanded under Mayor Giuliani. After PRWORA’s passage the “work first” mentality dominating the City’s welfare programs intensified.

In New York City, like other places, the welfare system has been re-crafted to deter people from using it, partially by creating tremendous barriers to completing an application (known as “tightening the front door”), and also by paying barely any money, and instituting mandatory and extremely lowly-paid work requirements. These are parts of a “churning” process – systematic ways of keeping people from accessing public resources that are implemented by social workers, case managers, eligibility workers and other parts of the “99%.” In the neoliberal framework the point is to emphasize that there is no public service there to help, that the state is not responsible for social welfare, and that society owes you only very limited aid, or no aid at all. The state functions as a paternalistic and

16 Useful here are Harry Cleaver, *Reading Capital Politically* (Oakland: AK Press, 2000); Jefferson Cowie, *Capital Moves: RCA’s 70-Year Quest for Cheap Labor* (New York: Cornell University Press). Also worth looking at: Phil Mattera & Donna Demac, “Developing and Underdeveloping New York: The “Fiscal Crisis” and the Imposition of Austerity,” *Zerowork: Political Materials* #2 1977.

punitive apparatus, first and foremost. If you can't access a job then you will be pushed to work without a wage and coerced to take any low-wage job that may open up. Otherwise, there's the street-economy or prison (or both).

Cash Assistance recipients are forced to make daily appointments at service and employment programs through the Back to Work and Work Experience Program's (WEP). In the summation of one highly-paid and conservative NYC non-profit bureaucrat, "WEP places participants in internships within city agencies where workers receive below minimum wage rates for jobs that once paid a union salary."¹⁷ That's not an ambiguous summation of the role of workfare in the economy.

Even getting to the point of acceptance after applying for any cash benefits via a "Job Center" – what welfare centers were renamed in the late 1990s as a way to discourage participation – is incredibly difficult and frustrating. Applicants spend 45 days mandated to participate in what are ostensibly job preparatory activities administered by government-contracted providers (i.e. the Back to Work program). However, participants rarely get anything tangible from Back to Work. But if applicants miss a day they will face a sanction and will lose benefits for months at a time. A 2008 study by organizing group Community Voices Heard found that only about 17% of applicants made it through the initial 45-day process.¹⁸ Those approved for Cash Assistance are pushed to accept any job offered and, until that happens, spend their time at placements in exchange for cash assistance paying below minimum wage. Applicants desiring to engage educational programs to gain a degree or increase their skills are often not allowed to access education over work requirements, even if policy is ostensibly otherwise. Education, which could potentially help increase someone's access to resources, is systematically deprioritized and actively discouraged. Poor people are intentionally and systematically kept in poverty.

Cash Assistance pays around \$150 per month for a single person, and not all that much higher for a family. NYC will pay a bit over \$200 per month in rent for a recipient if they maintain Cash Assistance compliance. Most jobs people have been pushed into pay minimum wage, have no space for advancement, and don't invest in skill-development to allow someone to access to higher wages. Again, public assistance does not assist almost anyone in exiting poverty, as a rule.

To the excitement of local bureaucrats, since being instituted the workfare system has had one major success: keeping people in need off

¹⁷ Ralph da Costa Nunez, *A Shelter is Not a Home ... Or is It? Family Homelessness in New York City*, p. 90. On the wealth that this guy accesses through the poverty industry, see, Steven Thrasher, "The Non-Profit 1%," *The Village Voice* March 12, 2012.

¹⁸ Alexa Kasdan with Sondra Youdelman, "Missing the Mark. An Examination of NYC's Back to Work Program and Its Effectiveness in Meeting Employment Goals for Welfare Recipients." Community Voices Heard report, 2008.

the welfare rolls – less than half of those eligible for public assistance are enrolled. This was a success by the measurement of those who conceived of and implemented this system. But lacking money or access to resources leads to more survival-oriented behaviors, which lead to more people being locked-up in the mass incarceration system. There is a direct tie between the decimation of the welfare system and the explosion of the incarceration and sheltering systems. And there is a direct connection between the policing approach of the welfare system and the incarceration systems.

For those who struggle with a physical or mental disability and try to get access to Supplemental Security Income (SSI), they face an uphill battle. Accessing SSI is a very high-threshold eligibility process. The SSI denial rate is around 70% nationally. Approval is based on whether or not the government feels you can work “gainfully” (as determined by doctors and social workers, who are part of the 99%). Most applications are denied – the government does not want SSI to function as a defacto welfare program – leading to an extremely lengthy appeals process for some, and giving up for many others (which functions as churning process as well). Sometimes an applicants’ very ability to survive is held against them in the eligibility process. Accessing competent doctors who will advocate for their patients is extremely difficult. Getting social service workers to assist in obtaining past records to prove your case is also very hard. Many service providers feel that SSI is inaccessible, which leads to fewer applications and less serious advocacy since providers feel the person won’t be approved no matter how clear it is that the person needs the benefit. Service providers also often feel that people applying for SSI are exaggerating their disability, which also creates significant barriers for people who need the benefit being able to access it. Accordingly, many people who cannot work due to disability are never granted access to SSI and may not be able to gain access to any other income. In the slim chance they are granted SSI, recipients receive under \$800 per month – which is far below an income someone needs to obtain housing and economic stability in NYC or anywhere else in the U.S.

Mayor Bloomberg has recently mandated that food stamp recipients must also be employed – never mind the unemployment crisis – or go to workfare services. Thousands of people who miss a single appointment are now losing food stamps for months at a time. This has, and will continue to push and keep people off the rolls – which is, in fact, its purpose. Since food stamp funds are almost entirely federal – only administration funding comes from State/City – this policy change is about meanness and implementing a neoliberal “work first” framework for what is usually considered an income-based entitlement. In short, this food stamp policy, like the City’s approach to welfare provision and homeless services, is about disciplining poor people and pushing them away from assistance.

Along with the oppressive realities of the food stamps system in

NYC – the sanctioning logic, the rules against purchasing hot food with stamps and so on – is the fact that for those with access to a kitchen, food pantries are continually being shuttered, are developing waitlists and usually provide low quality food. Soup kitchens are scattered across the City, but often times difficult for homeless people to access due to location or serving times. Soup kitchens are also often overburdened, often serve less-than-nutritious food and many avoid them for various reasons.

Mental Health and Addiction Services

For those who do deal with acute mental health difficulties services are overburdened, limited and often alienating or disciplinary. As common sense would dictate, homelessness also often triggers depression or anxiety and can cause or exacerbate mental illness.¹⁹

Going to mental health providers is often a difficult process due in large part to costs, waitlists, and traumatic experiences dealing with overburdened, burnt out, callous, uncaring, and/or transgressive service providers in the “helping professions” (members of the 99%). Traumatizing, alienating or oppressive experiences with service providers – doctors, social workers, foster care providers, case managers, eligibility determiners, and so on – are major factors in pushing people from accessing the limited help that is available in NYC. So are shaming and stigma.

Supportive housing programs, which provide subsidized housing for homeless people with what are called “serious and persistent mental illnesses,” like schizophrenia, Bipolar Disorder, and others, are very difficult to access and in very short supply. They usually require income that many do not have access to. Gatekeepers (members of the “99%”) deciding who will be welcomed often refuse people with histories they disapprove of. While supportive housing was modeled off successful “Housing First” approaches -- which meant individuals on the street were given access to an apartment without going through all the barriers of other housing programs, and then provided supportive services in a very sensitive way -- the supportive housing industry has overwhelmingly become the reverse of the Housing First model. Someone who smokes weed to cope with anxiety, depression or trauma may be denied access because some providers – members of “the 99%” – deem this “substance abuse” and require abstinence and successful completion of a drug-counseling program before granting access. People who aren’t open to medication may be told they have to be medicated to gain access, even if they have other successful coping mechanisms. Further, much of the available supportive housing requires either extensive documentation of homelessness. Someone who has spent significant time on the street may have a hard time documenting their homelessness and may not be able to access a program. There are

¹⁹ With this, it seems worth mentioning that most of us have some mental health difficulties, and our experiences with privilege – racial, class or gender privilege, or our experiences as youth with the abusiveness of mental health services -- directly impact our access to care, the quality of care we receive, and the exacerbation of the difficulties we experience.

extensive waitlists. For those who identify substance abuse as a primary barrier to their housing or are in need of a detox bed, resources are slim. There is very little housing for homeless people with substance abuse disorders. Detox beds usually require Medicaid and even with Medicaid there are usually waitlists.

At Zuccotti Park, people who are triggered are sometimes treated as “the mentally ill” with all the negative stigma that implies – thus, interacting with folks perceived as falling apart has often been made the task of the social workers and medics, and calls have been made for the support of non-profits. That is to say, dealing with other human beings having breakdowns or difficult experiences has become an issue for *some*, in contrast to a general understanding that at the core of “movement building” is being able to interact with other human beings of diverse experiences and diverse needs.

In conclusion, those who have argued people should just be connected to services so others can do the “real work” are ignorant of the systems in place. Their arguments misunderstand that policies and practices are systematically racked against the poor, and services are simply not available to many people – particularly, in the case of Zuccotti Park, the many people who sleep in the area at the West side of the park that some have named “The Projects.” Such privilege is rampant in arguments that ultimately intend to disperse poor people. They ultimately shift the movement to a middle class orientation. In practicality, these arguments are an Activist version of Quality of Life policing – just get them out of here.

DRUGS AND GANGS

A major issue facing the Zuccotti Park occupation right now is challenging the middle class and other voices that seek to marginalize poor people, blame them for everything, and conflate issues like substance abuse, “gang affiliation,” “mental health” difficulties and homelessness with fucked up, violent behaviors.

Substance use is different than “abuse” – that is to say, smoking weed doesn’t mean “abusing” weed, much like using coke doesn’t necessarily mean its “abuse.” And being high does not mean someone is particularly likely to act like an asshole. Often times drugs help people cope with past traumas, stress and emotional and mental health difficulties. Abstinence rhetoric has overwhelmingly framed substance use discourse, and social service providers have relied on it to punish and lockout people in need – but there are alternatives.

The effort at Zuccotti Park found itself in a difficult position when organizers, from the beginning, made the park a “drug free” space – essentially criminalizing use of illegal substances or alcohol within an attempt at creating an autonomous zone. As harm reductionists have pointed out for decades, criminalizing substance use means that it goes underground,

which then leads to higher-risk behaviors to hide a given substance and to access it. While it was undoubtedly difficult to have developed an alternative to the drug-free-zone policy, it seems worth mentioning that much of the discourse on “substance abuse” at the park has sought more to marginalize and hide the actions of those using substances than it has to engage users in safer ways of ways of using, or alternatives to using when at the park. If the assumption is that “substance use” is “substance abuse” and that either automatically leads to fucked up behaviors, or that those using should be pushed away, then there’s little difference from the disciplinary ways that most social service agencies in NYC interact with substance use. Further, this kind of thinking contributes to the stigmatization of some addictions over others – even though, in an objective sense, most of us deal with some sort of addiction and most of use some sort of substance each day, and most fucked up behaviors have nothing to do with any sort of high or intoxication.

Notions of “gang affiliation” and “gang members” have also gotten play within discourse of the difficulties faced at the park. Notions of “gang involvement” have been used to illustrate how “dangerous” the park can be, and functioned as coded language for problematic implications about young men of color. Gang affiliation means little on its own. Thousands may affiliate with gangs, and many of those people may also affiliate themselves with other identities and communities –what gang affiliation may mean to someone who identifies with a gang is entirely subjective, and alarmist notions of what gang membership means do nothing but fuel racist, classist fears. Gang affiliation or involvement by no means implies someone is any more given to violent behavior than those who don’t identify as a “gang member.” By emphasizing the presence of gang members as a problem, those sounding the alarms reinforce oppressive discourses that aim to marginalize young people, particularly youth of color, who may or may not identify with a gang.

For both users of drugs and “gang members” – many of whom are also homeless – NYC, like much of the nation, has sought blame, criminalization and punishment. Accordingly, high percentages of both populations experience disproportionate involvement in the “criminal justice” system, most often for minor offenses like jumping a subway turnstile, sometimes for police setups, and often for survival activities. But neither “gang involvement” or “substance abuse” is a fair reason to make assumptions about the behavior of anyone. Some at Zuccotti Park have argued this, and many others have missed this point and instead chosen to rely on fears and assumptions that mirror oppressive, mainstream, perceptions.

THE LIBERAL TEA PARTY

Not too long ago, when the corporate media began to discuss the recent tidal wave of protests as the “liberal Tea Party,” most in the move-

ment scoffed at the argument. I did too, until recently. But there actually is a real, tangible connection in my experience.

Two years ago a few friends and I attended a major Tea Party rally in Washington, DC and interviewed participants. We, along with lots of other folks examining the Tea Party, concluded that the Tea Party was a quintessentially white and middle class movement. The grassroots activists at its core who we spoke with were overwhelmingly white people who had middle incomes or ran small/medium sized businesses, had banked on the '90s neoliberal boom, and were petrified at the possibility of sliding below "middle class" status – they were terrified of becoming poor. In turn they focused their blame not only on the Obama administration but also on those with the least economic access – the racist rhetoric of the "welfare queen" came back in various guises, and social service programs and advocacy and organizing groups that help millions survive (as well as many that simultaneously punish and police poor people), became, again, major targets.

The similarity between many involved in the current protests, and the Tea Party, is the aim to build largely middle class movements. Much of the struggle at Zuccotti Park and similar protests elsewhere is about not becoming "the poor" and decisively not about ending poverty. Like the Tea Party, much of this movement is about not losing the relative privilege that some have and not about ending that privilege all together. There's nothing wrong with not wanting to experience poverty – but there is something wrong with building a movement that aims not to equalize access to wealth and justice for everyone, but rather to maintain the relative privileges of some, even if implicitly.

WHOSE PROTEST?

It's hard not to acknowledge how bizarre it is that some who have never had to lived on the street have decided that they should have the right to delegate how a public encampment should function. It's possible that they did not understand that a public encampment was almost inevitably going to be a better alternative to what's available for some of those without homes. And it's very frustrating to see how people's perceptions about what is valid "activism" and "political activity" can actively harm movement building. It's angering to see those with access to apartments and homes feel they have more right to a public space than those who have little choice but to spend their nights in the streets when there is no declared protest going on – something many of the people sleeping at Zuccotti Park night after night have done year after year.

In feeling that involvement in work groups gives authority, some have made the argument that ones presence in the park needs to be of the "right" intent and that simply accessing services or a place to sleep is not enough. Along with this have been assumptions made by some that "the

homeless,” “the mentally ill” and so on are not there for “the movement” – even though many folks who are homeless and/or experience mental illness have been very involved in organizing and engaged in political activity – but rather “just” to get services.

Some organizers/participants prioritize certain kinds of activity/labor over others – for example labor in a working group may be seen as more important than spending nights at the park and forming mutual aid groups with others doing the same – and, from this stance, argue that the park is attracting people who aren’t “contributing.” From there, these folks begin to think of ways of limiting the presence of those they perceive as there for the wrong reasons. This kind of hierarchical thinking is unfortunate – the likely reality is that without the many homeless people sleeping at the park there may not be enough people at night to have an encampment. Without the presence of those with the least access to society’s resources, the Zuccotti protest would not be involving many of those hit hardest by the current crises, which would be a major impediment to developing a serious economic and social justice movement of any real potential.

Indeed, some organizers think that those sleeping at the park and not actively involved in their working groups have a “responsibility” to be involved in the larger effort and are insufficiently contributing for what they’re getting – a sometimes safe place to sleep with food and basic medical care, the things that many of those who hold this condescending opinion have secured. This kind of opinion leads to unfortunate classifications that amount to “deserving” versus “undeserving” protester – remarkably similar to the “worthy” and “unworthy poor” dynamics that underlie much of the “poverty-assistance” programming in the States. Such thinking also leads to an “otherization” process on the part of some more privileged organizers. This process gives less importance to “relationship building” between those with different life experiences, different opinions, and different priorities and thus less importance to valuing all the labor that contributes to the “movement” – including the contribution of staying overnight. This line of thinking seems to insist that the “right” reasons for being present in the park and accessing services there are strictly ideological, as opposed to needs-based, experiential *as well as* explicitly political.

It seems worthwhile to point out that resistance happens everywhere in the crisis, and for many it happens regardless of a clear capitalist crisis or not. As one person who has experienced homelessness and has been involved at Zuccotti stated, “there’s more protest in the welfare office than there is here.” In NYC, survival requires resistance by those with the least access to resources, breaking laws that folks with access don’t have any difficulties with. Being poor often means having to challenge gatekeepers and bureaucrats (from Program Directors to Social Workers and so on) at every turn. Resistance and struggle are often most present in everyday forms, and much lesser so in periodic collective public protest. It doesn’t

take being in a working group to be involved in “the movement,” if the movement actually incorporates the reality of all of “the 99%.” As importantly, those putting their time and energy into staying in the park overnight, putting their bodies on the line and blocking the police from easily reclaiming the space, are undoubtedly playing a crucial role and their labor and contribution should be acknowledged and valued.

DISPERAL, CONNECTION, AND BUILDING 99% AS A CALL FOR ITSELF

Whether it be housing, cash benefits, food stamps or other forms of survival assistance, the social service system is – intentionally – designed to keep people from accessing the “safety net.” The barrier-ridden and disciplinary safety net functions within a context of spreading unemployment, low-wages, and a generalized precarity across the working class (including people without wages). Capital and the state rely on a wage-hierarchy and hierarchies of access to divide the working class and to pit the class against itself.

When activists with more access to the economy and society’s resources place disproportionate blame on folks without resources for problems in the park, some began to think of withdrawing service assistance to get rid of the people perceived as the source of the problem. Such thinking conceives of social movements in an extremely classed, raced and conservative way.

Indeed, it’s not just that connecting people to services that work for them is impossible because there is a scarcity of services – it’s also that the existing services do not work for the purposes people often need them for, and intentionally so. But many “social services” do play important functionary roles – punitive, disciplinary, hope-depleting – in the neoliberal economy.

Marx used to talk about the “working class” as either a movement “in itself” or a movement “for itself.” The former was the simple statistics of the class – the number of people who worked for what wages and so on. The latter meant the class in struggle. Picking up on these themes many radicals would come to argue that the class in-itself inevitably had to struggle against the racist, patriarchal and other divisions that appeared when the class began to struggle “for itself.”

The 99% is a messy form of the class developing its capacity – what is the 99% in itself versus the 99% for itself? To the extent that there is revolutionary potential one of the core issues is the participation of the poor in determining the direction the struggle. The 99% includes those who are low-income, “gang members,” “substance users,” “substance abusers,” the “homeless” and those with “mental health issues.” Without these people “the 99%” is a much narrower, more privileged, and significantly less important, powerful or diverse configuration. And in that case, “the 99%” is not only destined to fail – it should fail.



(Picture from Mel Rosenthal's *In the South Bronx of America*)

“The Civilian Version of Firebombing:” **Planned Shrinkage and its** **Consequences in New York City** *an interview with Deborah Wallace*

How did you first become involved in studying fire services in New York City?¹

My husband [Rodrick Wallace] and I were part of a group called Scientists and Engineers for Social and Political Action and we were picketing a weapons lab, the Riverside Research Institute. Riverside was headed by a man named John Dunning, who was also Mayor [John] Lindsay's unpaid scientific advisor. Because he was unpaid he could see that money was funneled to Riverside by advising that this was a good place for it to go. Lindsay had a theory that if he could give civilian work to defense firms that they would make the transition, ignoring all the research that these firms had a particular culture – they had the culture of killing. We found out from Riverside Research employees who talked to us – we had picketed them for years and gotten to know them – that they were being given a contract to evaluate a new version of the street fireboxes. We went to the Uniformed Firefighters Association (UFA) to talk with them about what these fireboxes would mean to their workload, because when we got down

1 Interview conducted December 9th, 2011 in Harlem, NYC. Deborah Wallace is co-author, with Rodrick Wallace, of *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York City was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled* (New York: Verso, 1998). The picture above is from Mel Rosenthal's breathtaking collection, *In the South Bronx of America* (New York: Curbstone, 2001).

into what the fireboxes were and how they would operate it was a mess.² They were like telephones and sometimes you could get a busy-signal on there, and because they were like telephones and you had to speak with the fire dispatcher, street noise could make it impossible for you to hear what the dispatcher was saying. If you didn't speak either English or Spanish, forget about it. That is what they had to offer: English or Spanish. When my husband got down to the UFA, at that time the president was Dick Vizzini, Vizzini started to tell him about the Rand Corporation and gave him an arm-load of reports from the New York City Rand Institute. So this is how we got into it, through anti-war activity. The handing over of vital city functions to defense firms was just a disaster.

Can you explain what planned shrinkage was?

Planned shrinkage, as designed by Roger Starr (Housing Commissioner under Mayor Beame), performed triage on neighborhoods. Neighborhoods were classified as healthy or unhealthy. The unhealthy ones got their services cut to provide more service to the healthy ones: such phenomena as crimes, substandard housing, overcrowding, and other markers of low income neighborhoods decided the classification.

Can you discuss the meaning of 'benign neglect' and its relation to planned shrinkage. Around what time can we see planned shrinkage implemented?

Planned shrinkage actually preceded benign neglect. It appeared in a book by Roger Starr who thought it up, the book's title was *Urban Choices: The City and its Critics*.³ He espoused a model where a community had a lifecycle: it was born, it went through a prime, and then it died. This was pure fabrication, there was no data underpinning the model. He said, 'well, you know, in an era of limited city money what you want to do is, you want to do triage on the dying communities.' Of course, he had a vision of what a dying community was. This was his ideological basis to allow the city to save money on the backs of the poor communities, and also to disperse the poor communities so that they would not have much in the way of political power anymore. At that time, these communities were starting to get highly organized. For example, you had the school board rebellion in Ocean Hill-Brownsville that led to community control of schools, which Bloomberg took away recently. The Model Cities program was getting a lot of organizing done in these communities, along with community advocacy. So you started to get people voting more. Herman Badillo made a very creditable run for Mayor in 1969.⁴ This was scary for the powers that

2 The Uniformed Firefighters Association is the New York City firefighters union.

3 Roger Starr, *Urban Choices: The City and its Critics* (New York: Pelican, 1966)

4 Herman Badillo was the first Puerto Rican to hold numerous political offices, including Commissioner of Housing and Relocation in New York City, Borough President of the Bronx and Representative in the U.S. House of Representatives.

be. When we presented our material about the spatial pattern of the closing of fire companies and the changes in response policy to alarms to the FBI, the agents said “that looks like dispersion of voting blocks.”

Benign neglect appeared in the 1970 memo, from Daniel Moynihan to President Nixon. Moynihan was Nixon’s urban advisor. Like Roger Starr, he looked on poor black communities as being pathological. He wanted to separate the poor from the middle class blacks. He decided that poor blacks were anti-white, they were violent, they were criminal and he decided that fires were a social index of how pathological they were. He got his fire data from the New York City Rand Institute. We found in the [New York City] Fire Department files an extensive exchange between Moynihan and the New York City Rand fire staff. They mislabeled fire alarms in poor neighborhoods as arson and then they sent those figures to Moynihan. Then he, in his benign neglect memo, goes through the fire statistics in New York City, but he labels it arson and says that [these statistics] prove how pathological these neighborhoods are. But these were the neighborhoods of very high density, housing overcrowding, aging housing – this level of fire activity is something you would expect under those conditions. We didn’t get a whole lot of arson until after the fire company closings. The benign neglect memo preceded the fire company closings – the memo was in 1970, and the closings began in ’72. It was ’74 when it became very evident that the fires weren’t being controlled and that if you set one it would do a lot of damage. That’s when you start to get some arson kicking in. So, benign neglect – the phrase was meant to say you don’t listen to the outcry of poor black communities anymore, just neglect them, don’t listen to them, he called them “boodlers,” as if their outcry wasn’t legitimate.

Can you discuss the components of the major changes in fire services?

There were four major changes. The alarm boxes were changed from a simple mechanical box that was very reliable, to this electronic thing. It’s like a telephone, you talk with a dispatcher. The darn things are wired in series on a circuit, not in parallel. If one box on the circuit is activated the other boxes cannot be activated. So you’re not allowed to have two fires on the same circuit. Now, when you consider that fires peak in time and season and day of the week, in a densely populated neighborhood, there is a raised possibility you’re gonna have two fires. You can’t report them both on these fireboxes. Now, this was put in at a time way before cell phones, in fact at a time when a large number of people didn’t even have home telephones. So, they were needed, and a high proportion of fires at that time were reported on fireboxes.

The second thing was that they changed response policies. First, they tried something called “adaptive response” where at certain times of day certain boxes that had a pattern of a large number of false alarms, they

might send only one unit to see what was going on before they'd send the rest. When things got very busy and, this is after fire companies were cut, they would sometimes not send even one unit to those fireboxes. [But] those fireboxes also reported real fires, it wasn't just false alarms and they were, of course, concentrated in the poor neighborhoods where there were lots and lots of children who pulled the false alarms. So, that was another thing. After the cuts in fire companies began, they chopped one engine company in the standard response. It used to be, if an alarm was registered, you'd get three fire engines, two ladder companies and a fire chief. Now we have two [fire engines] and two [ladder companies], plus the fire chief. In large buildings, that might not be enough. To fight a fire in a multiple dwelling, you have an engine and a ladder company going in on the fire floor, another going in on the floor above because fire rises. The ones going in on the floor above are making sure the fire hasn't reached in there. In the old response you had a third engine, what you called Standing Fast, in case the fire was bigger than they're used to, or in case that one of the engines or the other was struggling hard and needed relief. So, you don't have that now. They had to special call it in. So that was changed.

By the end of 1975, ten-percent of all the fire companies in New York City had been closed or removed from a poor neighborhood to a rich neighborhood. This meant that during busy times there was a raised possibility that you would get companies coming from very far away to service a fire because the local companies would already be out at the fire. Of course, fires grow. The fire department liked to reassure communities that these cuts in fire companies weren't going to impair services. They would flash the Rand Corporation calculations of response-time for the first arriving engine. But, really, what you ought to be considering is how long it took to get the last arriving ladder company – the last arriving unit and that's something else. So those were the major changes. By April of 1975 the fire load had gotten so great and the number of companies had been reduced so badly that there was an instant where all the fire companies in Brooklyn were out working, every single one of them. And Brooklyn had to draw on lots of companies in other boroughs. That was the first time it happened, but after that it happened in each of the three densely populated boroughs.

What were the outcomes of fire service withdrawal in these areas?

Approximately two- to three-hundred thousand housing units were lost. There were neighborhoods in Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Manhattan that actually lost over fifty percent of their housing units. When I say neighborhoods – the Health Department has a thing called the Health Area, [each of] which has about 20,000 people in them. So there were health areas of the Bronx that lost between fifty- and eighty-percent of their housing units, and they lost that percent of their populations of course, because there was no housing left. The loss of housing units led to massive migration

City's Housing Administrator Proposes 'Planned Shrinkage' of Some Slums

By JOSEPH P. FRIED

A top Beame administration official is urging that, as a possible alternative to citywide cuts in services because of the fiscal crisis, the city should consider adopting a policy of "planned shrinkage."

Under this, the population losses occurring in certain slum areas, including Brownsville in Brooklyn and the South Bronx, would be "accelerated" by public policy.

The aim of such a policy, in the opinion of Roger Starr, the Housing and Development Administrator, would be to hasten the population decline already begun in these neighborhoods so that, ultimately, further cutbacks in city services could be concentrated in a limited number of areas.

This approach would be more efficient in the long run than continuing to "thin out services" — including police, fire-fighting and subway services — in many areas across the city, according to Mr. Starr, who is urging consideration of the planned shrinkage approach.

Mr. Starr emphasized in an interview that he was speaking for himself and not for the Beame administration as a whole in urging that the concept be "studied and discussed and debated" as a possible city strategy.

Zuccotti Opposed

That Mr. Starr was not speaking for the administration was further made clear by John E. Zuccotti, the First Deputy Mayor, who called the planned shrinkage proposal as outlined by Mr. Starr "impractical" and one "we are not pursuing."

Nonetheless, the fact that the city's top housing official sees such an approach as a possible alternative for a city in deep trouble is a vivid sign that "thinking the unthinkable" about the city's future options, as some might consider it, is no longer limited to academic planning circles.

Mr. Starr added that he himself was not necessarily committed to the planned shrinkage idea, but was simply "pointing out, as someone who is a long-time resident and loves the city, dearly, that this approach should be discussed" along with other possible alternatives.

The others, he said, include seeking to rebuild a severely shrinking employment base, to make up for the loss of half a million jobs in the city since 1969, and pressing for more Federal aid through national welfare-policy reform and greater subsidies for the poor.

"But we seem to have great difficulty in attracting industry here," the official added. "We're



The New York Times
Roger Starr

trying to get more from the Federal Government but it's still not enough."

In essence, Mr. Starr held that "if we don't have sufficient jobs, people will leave the city."

"But we have an infrastructure based on a population of 7.8 million, and this infrastructure will have to be reduced," he asserted.

Such a "shrinkage," he argued, is already taking place, but it is "not planned" and not coordinated, and "a limit has been reached in the extent to which you can thin out services across the city."

If a strategy of planned shrinkage were adopted as he defined it, Mr. Starr said, it would say that we have some areas that are already shrinking in population, and our policy should accelerate that shrinkage.

A planned shrinkage approach would not involve "pushing people around," Mr. Starr explained, but might include such steps as no longer spending housing-rehabilitation funds—already severely limited in amount — in those slum areas, like the South Bronx and Brownsville, that are already characterized by large stretches of abandoned and razed buildings and a "very marked" decline in population.

A planned shrinkage approach, Mr. Starr said, would also include "inducements" for people still living in the areas involved to move to other neighborhoods where there is a "continued willingness to live," despite problems.

Mr. Starr said that such relatively viable neighborhoods include the Lower East Side and

the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn.

Meanwhile, the depopulated areas involved would remain vacant "until new land uses present themselves," Mr. Starr said at one point. At another, he said that the future of these areas was among the specifics to be "addressed" before any planned shrinkage course might be adopted.

Another matter to be considered, he acknowledged, was the fact that in areas like the South Bronx and Brownsville, a number of housing construction and rehabilitation projects have been completed in recent years at significant public cost.

"I'm not trying to discuss something inhumane. I'm not trying to discuss forced migration," he said. "Don't make me sound like an ogre—I'm not pushing people around."

Rather, he said, the strategy would involve phasing out services after the city had induced people to move elsewhere.

Mr. Starr denied a report, in a real-estate trade paper, that in explaining his proposal to a reality group recently, he had suggested that the South Bronx "become a national park."

Before becoming the Beame administration's top housing official, Mr. Starr was widely regarded for years as a leading expert on housing and urban affairs.

In commenting on the planned shrinkage concept, Deputy Mayor Zuccotti said that "it doesn't strike me as practical that it is possible to close off a large section of the city."

In an area like the South Bronx, added Mr. Zuccotti, the former head of the City Planning Commission, "there are sites for housing, and buildings that can be rehabilitated."

"There is an active, vibrant community that lives there and its continuation is critical to our city," he said.

Representative Herman Badillo, whose district includes much of the South Bronx, contended that there was not enough housing in other neighborhoods simply "to keep up with current relocation needs."

"You can hold down the depopulation of the South Bronx by making the area more attractive," he continued. "If there is no money for rebuilding, you certainly can demolish the abandoned buildings and give money to community people to plant crops and flowers."

Others argued that the large empty stretches in the South Bronx and Brownsville offered excellent opportunities for the development of "new towns."

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source: New York Times, February 3, 1976

within the City. So the central South Bronx moved into the West Bronx. Parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Bushwick and Brownsville moved to Flatbush [Brooklyn]. You had parts of Harlem moving up into the East Bronx. This destabilized those communities, too. So, between 1970 and 1980, 1.3 million white people left the City because the conditions had deteriorated badly. Suddenly, they had all these doubled-up families living in their neighborhood and because of the social disruption; there was no ability to socialize the young. So, you were getting a conflict between the white middle class and the new migrants.

Can you explain how planned shrinkage is situated in context of other displacement efforts targeted at low-income and communities of color?

One of the first documented displacements in New York City was Seneca Village, an African American post-Civil War community that was displaced to build Central Park. This was setting the pattern. Lots of people have gone through this, including Malcolm X. He said that “the names change but the game’s the same” – it’s a policy of continually removing these communities so that they can’t amass capital, they can’t amass social capital, and they can’t get political power. In the post-World War Two world it was called ‘slum clearance.’ This was “urban renewal,” which the federal government put in place. The economics were very favorable to the landlords to sell the buildings to the program – they got money far above the actual value of their property. So they sold, it made sense. Since these were absentee landlords they didn’t have a social tie with the property.

The architect of what happened in New York was Robert Moses. Moses got backing from both the conservatives and the liberals. He brought around even some of the black politicians, like Hulan Jack. Hulan Jack would agree to the building of Lincoln Center, even though that just devastated a black neighborhood – a poor black neighborhood. He wanted to limit some of the other takings, and so Manhattan wasn’t quite as extreme as it could’ve been. But it was high.

Urban renewal also meant the building of the public housing, [which] was highly segregated housing. They didn’t build as many units in public units as what they destroyed in the old tenements. So you ended with a housing shortage that deeply impacted poor people. They did it very quickly, the bulldozing and the displacement. At first they did not have any mechanisms for relocating people. During the first few years of the 1950s, when the program really started up, people were just evicted and told go find a home, go away, you’re out. After that didn’t work so well, they started to have a little more of relocation. This is when Herman Badillo got into politics – he was the Commissioner of Housing and Relocation in New York City. And he channeled, he steered, Puerto Ricans into the South Bronx. He built his power base and he became several different grades of

elected official from the Bronx. He ended up as the Borough President at a time when borough president's had some power, but for a while he was the Congressman. This period of urban renewal was very formative. Anyway, they slapped people into this high-density public housing, they mixed them up, whatever unit was available, the person was sent to.

Even if it was a distance from where their previous housing and communities had been?

Public housing wasn't an organically grown community. It was an artificial mixture of families and individuals who didn't know each other and were traumatized by what they had just gone through. They had lost all their friends and neighbors and they were at a loss. People turned to alcohol and drugs, there was a lot of risk behavior going on, and the violence flared up and the crime flared up, centered around the public housing projects – because there was no community to do social control, there was no community to do social support. So it was un-buffered pain that fed on itself. Eventually, that particular scenario was what caused the end of urban renewal, because the churches, especially the Episcopal Church, moved into the issue and said this has got to stop. They said it was taking families and individuals along a trek that will – they'll be lost. [They said] our congregation's are suffering. So, politically, by the mid-late '60s, you couldn't do anymore urban renewal in New York City. Something else had to come up.

source: *New York Times*, February 11, 1976

Starr's 'Shrinkage' Plan for City Slums Is Denounced

By GLENN FOWLER

A suggestion by Roger Starr, the city's Housing and Development Administrator, that badly run-down areas of the South Bronx and Brooklyn be subjected to "planned shrinkage" of city services was strongly denounced at a public hearing before the Board of Estimate yesterday.

"It is clear that the administration lacks the leadership, sensitivity and administrative capability to address the city's housing problems," said Ronald Shiffman, director of the Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development.

"Until Administrator Starr, proponent of the genocidal program of shrinkage, is removed from office," he continued, "the city will be unable to make any progress with these problems."

The view of Mr. Shiffman, whose center describes itself as a public-interest group that undertakes architectural and

planning assistance to neighborhood organizations, was echoed by several other speakers at the day-long hearing on the city's proposal for spending \$102 million in expected Federal community-development funds beginning this spring.

Mr. Starr advanced his thesis that the city should begin planning for a contraction of population and for abandonment of entire neighborhoods three weeks ago in a talk to a real-estate industry gathering and expanded on it in a series of published interviews.

In the most recent, which appeared in *Real Estate Weekly*, a trade publication, on Monday Mr. Starr took issue with the growing emphasis on neighborhood development that has been fostered by the City Planning Commission during the last three or four years.

Mr. Starr was quoted as denouncing the plans for neighborhood progress issued by the Planning Commission, which he termed "studies that serve the

local patriotism of neighborhoods in the city instead of centralized planning."

In urging cutbacks of such services as schools, housing, hospitals and fire stations in places of extreme decay such as the South Bronx and the Brownsville section of Brooklyn, Mr. Starr touched a raw nerve in the Planning Commission itself.

In a report on the Community Development proposal drawn up by a steering committee headed by the Planning Commission's former chairman, John E. Zuccotti, now First Deputy Mayor, the commission went out of its way to dissociate itself from the Starr thesis.

"We are not prepared to give up, nor to say directly or

implication that any of our neighborhoods are expendable," the commission's unanimous report said. "Even our poorest communities, devastated as they may be, contain areas, institutions and people around which they may be rebuilt."

The commission, like many of the witnesses at yesterday's hearing, deplored the Federal "pittance" being offered to the city and for which the details of application plan is being drawn up under the Housing and Community Development Act of 1974, a broad range of Federal aid categories was lumped together, including funds for urban renewal, Model Cities, water and sewer facilities, rehabilitation loans and other programs.

There were several studies, one from Fordham University's urban program, some from the Planning Commission, that were trying to say that we need to clear land for industry. So, the 1969 Master Plan had clearing of large sections of the South Bronx, Brownsville, East New York, and parts of Harlem, for industry.⁵

Now, what's interesting is that the early, early master plans had said, well we don't want industry in Manhattan. [They said that in] Manhattan, we're going to have the financial district and we're going to have all white-collar stuff in Manhattan, because that'll make it nice. This was a strange development – suddenly we need industry. In point of fact, American industry was just starting to decline. Globalization was just taking hold – this was early globalization – and our ability to compete with Japan and Germany was not good. So, this, this image that what's needed for industry is space – that is something that had no data basis at all. They were edging toward an ideological basis for clearing the land and that was part of the motivation that they expressed for doing this. The 1969 Master Plan for the Bronx specifically identifies the black and Latino families of the South Bronx, [and] said 'oh, these people move all the time. We gotta take the opportunity, when they move out of an apartment, leave it vacant. We're going to amass houses and bulldoze them.' That's they wanted to do.

So, when Roger Starr's book came out, the first edition was 1966, the second was 1969, he gave another basis for withdrawing services and he said that the American community reality doesn't exist – you can disassemble the community down into its individual family parts and ship them off to a place of similar socioeconomic profile and they'll just reassemble again. He used the metaphor like railroad cars, that was his metaphor. Even then we knew this was not true, because there were lots of studies by then on the aftermath of urban renewal. So that was the history behind how urban renewal turned into planned shrinkage.

Starr discussed planned shrinkage in his 1969 book. But wasn't until '76 until it was announced as potential policy and papers like the New York Times attended to it. How was planned shrinkage implemented prior to 1976?

Starr was the intellectual of policy. He was the head of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council. He was also on the editorial board of the New York Times. And in those two positions he could do a lot of work behind the scenes. [Mayor] Lindsay's planning commissioner [head of New York City Planning Commission] was John Zuccotti. John Zuccotti is a big wheel in real estate. So these little quiet meetings, the Lindsay administration had a lot of behind the scenes stuff going, like John Dunning, Lindsay's unpaid scientific advisor that I mentioned earlier. So, that's how it became intellectual currency, way before Mayor Beam appointed Starr

5 New York City Department of Planning, *Master Plan for New York City*, 1969.

as Housing Commissioner.⁶

In *A Plague on Your Houses* you discussed the rise of community organization. You argued that Lindsay gave a lot of power to the Rand Institute because “something had to be done to develop poor neighborhoods and disorganize the poor.” Can planned shrinkage accurately be understood as a response to the increasing struggles in New York City in the ‘60s?7

We don’t have a lot of written information about that. But considering the way Roger Starr and Daniel Moynihan looked on these communities, it’s not a stretch to infer that that’s what it was. Across the river you had suddenly had a black mayor of Newark, in Detroit you suddenly had a black mayor. Black politicians were being elected because black people were voting. And when you had a pretty good run for New York City mayor by a Puerto Rican [Herman Badillo], then the people in power start to think – they see the handwriting on the wall. So, why would anyone do this thing except to uproot these communities?

How did the communities that were most impacted by this, who had been building political power in the ‘60s and early ‘70s respond given this mass migration and these assaults via withdrawal of services?

What happened in those communities during the ‘80s and early-‘90s, because of this disruption and the inability to socialize the young and to exert social control and support, you had the rise of that interwoven monster of drugs, violence, hyper-sexuality, which was part of the AIDS epidemic. People withdrew. It was dangerous. The drive-by shootings were real, the knifings were real, people stayed home. Institutions like the political clubs, the community boards, the different social clubs, the block associations – these things weakened a great deal. It would be a fascinating study to look at the fall and then the rise after this cascade of events occurred of permits to have block parties. Because after the fire epidemic went away, it took fifteen years, until about 1993, for the crimes, the drug use, and all of this, to start going down again. Once it started going down it plummeted. And people started coming out again.

How did the politicians respond in the neighborhoods most impacted?

That differed from neighborhood to neighborhood. In Greenpoint, the politicians helped occupy Engine 212’s firehouse. Greenpoint was a Polish neighborhood and this was under [Mayor] Beam. Beam didn’t have them arrested; he sort of left the Engine there. They eventually leveraged

⁶ Starr was Commissioner of the New York City Department of Housing and Development, now the New York City Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD)

⁷ Deborah Wallace & Rodrick Wallace, *A Plague on Your Houses: How New York City was Burned Down and Public Health Crumbled* (New York: Verso, 2001).

a re-opening, although Bloomberg closed it. But it was reopened for about twenty years, maybe thirty years. In Crown Heights, they tried again, but that was a black community – this is Crown Height's North, not the Hasidic part. They were going to move Engine 234. [Mayor] Koch's Fire Department was going to move Engine 234 from the center of Crown Heights North to the edge, to service Crown Heights South better. The politicians also helped occupy the firehouse. The politicians and the local clergymen, everybody got arrested on that one. [In other parts of Brooklyn the] politicians weren't terribly active. As a group they're very uneducated about fire service – they seemed to think you could turn it on and off like water and it would come. But sometimes you turn your faucet on and nothing comes, they didn't think about that. The communities, though, were very active. So when word got around that one of the companies in Bushwick was going to close, the Latino community in Bushwick came and they did some civil disobedience. That closing was negated – it never happened. At that time the president of the UFA was Michael May and he was just utterly taken with that action. He ran around to the different communities, he and his delegates from the Boroughs ran around to the different community's and tried very hard to educate people about fire service. And since then the union has not been really great about. Vizzini and May and a couple of their successors were very ethical people and very concerned, it wasn't just a matter of keeping fire fighter jobs.

source: New York Times, March 5, 1976

MINORITY CAUCUS BIDS STARR QUIT

**Calls Housing Chief's Plan
for Poor Areas 'Racist'**

The City Council's six-member black and Puerto Rican Legislative Caucus called yesterday for the resignation of Roger Starr, the Housing and Development Administrator, for advocating the "planned shrinkage" of low-income and minority-group communities.

Mr. Starr, who advanced the concept as his own idea, had urged the acceleration of population losses in slum areas as an alternative to citywide cuts in services dictated by the fiscal crisis.

Neither Mayor Beame, who last Tuesday disassociated himself from the plan, nor Mr. Starr would comment on the caucus's demand. On Tuesday, Mr. Beame said he had no plan to dismiss Mr. Starr, adding:

"I don't gag my commissioners."

All Are Democrats

The four black members of the caucus, all Democrats, are Frederick E. Samuel of Manhattan, Archie Spigner of Queens and Samuel D. Wright and Mary Pinkett of Brooklyn. The two Puerto Rican members, also Democrats, are Ramon S. Velez of the Bronx and Luis A. Olmedo of Brooklyn.

Mr. Samuel, chairman of the caucus, said the proposed program was "genocidal, racist, inhuman and irresponsible." He further described Mr. Starr's plan as "ugly" and "vicious" and said that instead of "promoting, rehabilitating and saving these neighborhoods from decline he would leave them to die in their own prime and accelerate their death."

He said that as a result of the publication of Mr. Starr's plan "there has been a great outpouring of disgust and outrage in the communities."

Although Mr. Starr had spoken of the planned shrinkage in the South Bronx and Brownsville, the caucus contended that the concept was not confined by geography and that "an assault on one is an assault on all."

We've had a change since then.

[Politician's] response depended on the neighborhood. In Harlem, it was nothing. There was very little response really. In the Bronx there was no response. There's a sense that I got from meeting with these people [politicians] that they were betting who was going to leave the City. If the white people left the City, that meant that the percentage of the population that wasn't white was going to get higher. So I could see some of these people possibly thinking about, 'oh we're gonna take over, it's gonna be like Newark or Detroit, we'll take over.' So they didn't contest it.

I visited Charlie Rangel, I visited him under the sponsorship of Jim Houghton, the organizer of the movement to integrate the construction sites, so that black construction workers would get hired as easily as white construction workers. He was very powerful. And Jim was very much behind the idea of keeping firehouses. It was interesting what Charlie did: he called the Fire Commissioner and he asked, 'if I were to sponsor a bill that would give you money to re-open fire houses and to keep the firehouses,' and the Fire Commissioner said 'No.' Isn't that amazing? Then Charlie said, 'well you know I can't do it without his support.' It happened right in front of me. I was right there and I saw this thing.

Was landlord abandonment rampant before planned shrinkage and the withdrawal of services, or was it something that followed the withdrawal of services? What about landlords setting fire to their buildings?

That's a different creature. The Women's City Club of New York documented the abandonment problem in the South Bronx in 1977.⁸ It seemed to be all at the same time. It was becoming evident in the early '70s, at the same time that they started withdrawing the fire service. So it was happening.

The arson, whether it was by landlords or by tenants, that really didn't pickup heavily until around 1974, when it flared in the Bronx. But the Bronx was the most heavily impacted borough, especially the South Bronx, by all the [changed policies of the] fire department. By '74 it was very evident that if you set a fire in the South Bronx it could do a lot of damage.

We did a study of every fire in Bushwick, which was another heavily impacted neighborhood. And we looked at the records by cause of the fire there, this was, between 1976 and the end of '78, three years of fire records. Nineteen seventy six was the height of the fire situation in Bushwick. There was never a single month where arson was more than half the fires, so for most of the time these were accidental fires – they had a cause, you know, smoking in bed, cooking fire, electrical fire, boiler explosion,

⁸ Women's City Club of New York, *With Love and Affection: A Study of Building Abandonment* (New York, 1977).

all of this kind of stuff, someone flicked a cigarette into the garbage, this kind of thing. The subtitle of the book was *How New York was Burned Down and National Public Health Crumbled*. Can you briefly discuss how planned shrinkage caused the decline of public health in the City? There are two factors: one is the physical housing; the other is the unraveling of the social networks. Tuberculosis (TB) is highly dependent on a mix of housing overcrowding and community population density. If you have a high percentage of extremely overcrowded housing – more than 1.51 persons per room – introduction of an active case of TB under those circumstances means a highly elevated probability that someone else in that household is going to pick it up. That’s within the household transmission. When you have very high population densities – so your neighborhood centers, the grocery stores, the restaurants, the barbershops, the subway platforms are very crowded – that elevates your probability of transmission between households. And we know a lot of transmissions occurred within households when the overcrowding increased.

The people at Montefiore [Medical Center] in the Bronx did a study of the rates of TB among children under five, so these were children that were not picking it up in school.⁹ They looked at the families where the children had TB and then they had a set of families where the children did not. And the children that caught TB had persons per-room in their household twice what was the case in the children that didn’t have TB – the control children. So we know that that’s a factor, and the doubling-up of the families that was caused by the housing famine resulting from the loss of the housing, this was one of the groups of the problem. TB is also very dependent on the immune system response, so you get a lot of alcohol use, drug use, these are people are going to be a lot more susceptible to TB.

In fact, before the housing loss the City was looking to eradicate TB because they found it was only in little pockets of alcoholics, especially old guys that had immigrated into the City from high-TB regions of the country. They had a plan to eradicate it before the epidemic. They were in these little controllable clusters and it was mostly people who were doing alcohol and drugs. So there’s that.

The feeling of being made utterly powerless and of being driven out of your home, plus the loss of your social support and community controls over your behavior is a prescription for risk behaviors. Like the drugs, the alcohol, the multi-partner sex, the violence. We’re not the only research team that found that – there’s a team in Baltimore and similar things happened in Baltimore.¹⁰ They were studying low-weight births. And their

9 Bosworth W, Sckell B. 1994. “Childhood tuberculosis in the Bronx, New York.” *The Lancet*, 343: 1482-1485.

10 Schempf A, Strobino D, O’Campo P. 2008. “Neighborhood effects on birthweight: an exploration of psychosocial and behavioral pathways in Baltimore, 1995-1996.” *Social Science and Medicine* 100-110; O’Campo P, Xue X, Wang MC, Caughy M. 1997. “Neighborhood risk factors for low birthweight in Baltimore: a multilevel analysis.” *American Journal of Public Health*, 87: 1113-1118.

Starr, New York City's Housing Chieftain, Will Leave Post by Fall, Officials Say

By JOSEPH F. FRIED
Roger Starr, the city's controversial Housing and Development Administrator, is planning to leave his post by the fall, according to city officials. "I refuse to confirm it but I'm not denying it," Mr. Starr said of the reports of his departure.

At another point, he said that "the Mayor and I had a discussion about my future generally, which I originated." The reason for the discussion, Mr. Starr said, was his own concern for his career and for "earning a living" in the future.

Controversies Not Involved

The discussion did not originate because of any of the controversies surrounding his activities as the Beame administration's top housing official, Mr. Starr said.

Other sources in the administration said that they did not believe Mr. Starr was being eased out, despite the embarrassment he reportedly caused the Mayor recently by suggest-



The New York Times
Roger Starr

ing a policy of "planned shrinkage" of certain slum areas.

At the time, Mayor Beame immediately disavowed the suggestion, but also added that "I don't blame Mr. Starr's resignation for the city's financial crisis, but I do blame his resignation for the city's financial crisis." Mr. Starr's resignation has been asked for from Mr. Starr, and "none has been received."

Some persons familiar with New York's housing scene suggested that the 55-year-old Mr. Starr was leaving largely because of professional frustrations combined with various personal reasons.

A longtime housing expert with a major interest in developing housing for the poor and middle classes, Mr. Starr focused himself presiding over a housing bureaucracy that, because of the city's fiscal crisis, had no money for major new construction.

No Pressure Found

Although Housing and Development Administration also included such matters as the city's Rent Control Office, Starr appeared to be involved with the details of these units than he did with the offices involved in developing new housing.

Some members of the Housing and Development Administration have been increasingly critical of Mr. Starr's abilities as an administrator. Community and anti-poverty groups have accused him of being unresponsive to apartment tenants and the poor. Mr. Starr has rejected these charges. "I've never said that it was 'absolutely false' that I was 'absolutely false,'" he had "said anything to me to suggest I've not done a job they're satisfied with."

One of his critics within the Beame administration agreed that Mr. Starr was apparently not being pressured by the Mayor to quit.

It was also considered unlikely that Mr. Starr planned to leave his \$45,000-a-year post because of the Beame administration's long-stalled plan to dismantle the Housing and Development Administration, one of the "superagencies" created during Mayor John V. Lindsay's administration.

The dismantling plan had been a Beame proposal from the time Mr. Beame ran for office, and under it Mr. Starr was to have become Commissioner of Development.

A man of conspicuous wit and personal charm, Mr. Starr remained an outspoken critic of the Beame administration in its many years as executive director of the Citizens Housing and Planning Council, a local civic group. Over the years he has written books and numerous articles on housing and urban affairs. A recent report is that Mr. Starr plans to undertake a book project under a foundation grant when he leaves city government. He declined to disclose what he intended to do after leaving city service and would not say when he did plan to leave, although he said it would not be before the start of summer.

source: New York Times, May 22nd, 1976

first paper came out in '97, they found that the patterns of violent crime were highly associated with low-weight births. Then they came out with a second paper just a few years ago, where they analyzed data from their surveys of the mothers. And they found that the mothers were coping with the danger of the neighborhood, they were coping with tobacco, alcohol and drugs, and those were the mediating factors toward the low birth-weights. So this is how it works. It's a universal template, it's not just New York City.

New York is special because it's the top of the urban hierarchy – it's the major travel center of the country. Other metropolitan regions that have contact with New York through the travel pattern are going to catch whatever New York has. It could be a germ-related disease, like HIV, TB. They found drug resistant TB strains that originated in New York they were found in the Midwest, on the West Coast, in Paris, London. New York is a very sharing city. But it's also behavior patterns. Contagion isn't just the germs – they found special neurons, they call them the 'mirror neurons' and when you get close to someone else and start to identify with that other person, you take up that other person's habits.

Can you explain how planned shrinkage impacted in the spread of HIV?

Well, I've already alluded to the fact that between the extreme pain that people were in from the loss of everything that was familiar and that they loved, to the loss of ability to socialize the young through social controls and social support, the risk behaviors came out. The other thing that happened with the social fragmentation was that you got fragmentation along the lines of what are called 'disjunctive factors' such as age, race, religion, those things. So, young people created their own little type of social networks. And those, unfortunately, a lot of the times, featured identity establishment by risk behavior. So that, if you wanted to establish yourself you ended up being the most violent person around who did the drugs, and the multi-partner sex, and all of these things. And that's a prescription for the spread of HIV.

By 1984, even the health department was documenting the fact that the rate of growth of AIDS incidents in the minority communities was much higher than in the communities of white gay males. By that time, you know it was only three years after the virus had been found and identified, by that time the white, gay community was starting to take a lot more responsibility about using condoms and this kind of thing. So that that's how it got out there. If you're doing drugs or you're drunk, the probability of you using safe sex is low. Some people have argued that planned shrinkage was important in the gentrification of neighborhoods in New York City.

What do you see as the relation between planned shrinkage and gentrification?

Once the political and social organization of the low-income neighborhoods of color was broken then you can get things like large evictions without a big push back. Certainly Columbia University benefited from it, for example, in Harlem. The supply of housing dictates the economics of housing. That's another way. If there's only a limited amount of housing the landlord can charge whatever he or she feels the traffic will bear unless it's a rent controlled building. And in the rent-control situation there is a lot of illegal activity and harassment and eviction where then the apartment can be gotten out from under rent control, it can either go into rent stabilization or just out from under regulations completely, depending on how the papers are filed. So once the strength of the community was broken and there's no pushback for these things, that's how all of this is enabled.

What do you see as the legacy of planned shrinkage. Did it end?

Well, the City services are still in the same configuration. So, in that sense, there's been no end to it. The fires went away because, like in any epidemic, where the density of the susceptibles drops below the epidemic threshold, the epidemic goes away. So the at-risk housing in these areas actually dropped below what could sustain an ongoing fire epidemic. That's the reason why we don't have the epidemic now.

The legacy is you have an increasing Capetown-ization of a white city core and suburbs. The inner-ring of suburbs, like Mt. Vernon in Westchester and Roosevelt on Long Island, and of course Newark in some of the near counties of New Jersey, where instead of the reverse migration of low-income black people out to the suburbs to do the housework for the white people, you have low-income black people commuting into the City, like suburban commuters, and doing work in the City. But they're not living in the City, and this is one of the legacies. Now, those suburbs don't have the resources to cope with some of the needs. [Rodrick Wallace] and I went and visited some of the health commissioners of some of the suburban county's around New York around 1990. They were saying "these people are showing up in our counties and they're isolated, they have no resources, I don't know what to do." The process now has gone much further, so now you're getting inner-city problems in this inner-ring of suburbs and the resources to address them just aren't there. Because they're suburbs, they're little towns. That's part of the legacy.

As Malcolm X said, 'the names change but the game's the same.' And there been other incarnations. One of them was called HOPE VI, and that's the destroying of public housing. So [residents] finally build community in public housing and even though, you know, they have the crime rates elevated above the rest of the City, it is community. And now [officials] say, we can't have this anymore, it's no good, we're going to evict you all and bulldoze the buildings. So it's just another round of this stuff.

It's similar as well in that HOPE VI wasn't a one-for-one housing unit replacement...¹¹

Exactly. Under Bloomberg we have particularly punitive policies against the homeless. And yet homelessness is being manufactured by City policy. So, it's like, if a kid comes down with Chickenpox you're going to punish the kid for coming down with Chickenpox.

Do you see the use of austerity as part of that legacy?

Yes. Well, the fire companies that Bloomberg closed were mostly in working class and poor neighborhoods. Like here on 125th street, Engine 36 was closed. Closing a Company in Harlem is a very stupid thing to do. It's malicious. They closed Engine 212, which was in working class part of Greenpoint. The other companies that were closed were also – I think there was one in Cobble Hill in Brooklyn that was middle class, Engine 204. So, of the six or eight companies that he closed, only one was in a middle class neighborhood. That's a continuing pattern. We have been told, although I don't have documentation, we have been told that they are continuing to use the Rand models to close companies.

11 HOPE VI is a program of the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) that targets public housing developments.

FURTHER READING

On planned shrinkage Deborah and Rodrick Wallace's, **A Plague on Your Houses: How New York was Burned and Public Health Crumbled** (New York: Verso, 2001), Mel Rosenthal, **In the South Bronx of America** (Curbstone Press, 2001), Winifred Curran, "City Policy and Urban Renewal: A Case Study of in Fort Greene, Brooklyn," *Middle States Geographer* 1998, 31:73-82 and "Gentrification and the Nature of Work Exploring the Links in Williamsburg, Brooklyn," *Environmental Planning A* 36(7), p. 1243-1258 are good starting points. Yulanda Ward Memorial Fund, "Spatial Deconcentration in D.C.," re-published in an issue of *Midnight Notes* is also really helpful. Important context for NYC class relations and crisis is found in Eric Lichten's **Class, Power and Austerity: The New York City Fiscal Crisis** (Bergin and Garvey, 1986). Context of the development of the sheltering industry in New York in the 80s and the growth of the lucrative services system can be found in Theresa Funicello, **Tyranny of Kindness: Dismantling the Welfare System to End Poverty** (Atlantic Monthly). On everyday resistance and social services a useful starting point is John Gilliom's **Overseers of the Poor: Surveillance, Resistance and the Limits of Poverty** (University of Chicago Press, 2001). On the intersections of discipline and welfare provision, see Loic Wacquant, **Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity** (Duke University Press, 2009) and Joe Soss, Richard Fording and Sanford Schram's **Disciplining the Poor: Neoliberal Paternalism and the Persistent Power of Race** (University of Chicago Press, 2011). On the power of individual service providers a useful starting point is Michael Lipsky's **Street-Level Bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the Individual in Public Service** (Russel Sage Foundation). For some useful discussion of the intersections of radical organizing and social services, see: Ann Whithorn, **Serving the People: Social Services and Social Change** (Columbia University Press, 1984). INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence's (ed.) volume, **The Revolution Will Not be Funded** (South End, 2009) also has lots of brilliant commentary that's relevant here. On the co-optation, functionary and disciplinary roles of services, some useful starting points are: Kristen Bumiller's **In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence** (Duke University Press, 2008), essays by Emi Koyama at eminism.org, and Young Women's Empowerment Project, "Bad Encounter Line: 2012" report at ywepchicago.wordpress.com. The following organizing groups have completed reports documenting the ins and outs of services in New York City, and all are worth visiting: cvhaction.org / picturethehomeless.org / empirestatecoalition.org / coalitionforthehomeless.org



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