AUTONOMOUS PROBLEM-SOLVING AND THE CREATION OF COMMUNITY-CONTROLLED HOUSING ALTERNATIVES IN THE UNITED STATES

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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In this dissertation project, I introduce the concept of autonomous problem-solving and apply it to housing struggles in the United States. Autonomous problem-solving is a mode of collective action in which everyday people experiment with self-organized and self-implemented solutions to pressing problems in their community. I show how this concept highlights a set of empirical cases that contemporary scholarship on public problem-solving has failed to address. I then analyze two cases in which organizers used autonomous problem-solving to grapple with housing precarity in their communities. I examine the creation of the first community land trust by civil rights activists in Georgia in 1969 and the creation of Dignity Village (one of the first autonomous houseless villages) in Portland in 2001. In both cases, participants generated novel forms of community-controlled housing by reconfiguring conventional property relations in creative ways.

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Chapter 1: Introducing Autonomous Problem-Solving

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the United States. The Trump administration's initial response was to downplay the virus. It then shifted responsibility onto individual state and local governments, who struggled to construct adequate testing and contact-tracing systems. The virus quickly overwhelmed what was an already under-resourced healthcare system in the United States. Throughout the crisis, many governors and mayors favored short-term economic interests over safety protocols that would protect vulnerable populations. Although vaccines eventually helped to reduce transmission, the rollout was slowed significantly by a series of logistical failures under both Trump and Biden. Today, Congress has still failed to pass the latest round of emergency COVID-19 funding, without which the government will be unable to provide enough boosters and antibody treatments to those that need them. All of these failures have contributed to a cumulative national death rate in the United States that is significantly higher than any other wealthy country (Mueller and Lutz, 2022). In the past two years, nearly one million Americans have died of the virus.

But COVID-19 is not only a crisis of public health; its cascading effects have set off a wider wave of crises in American society. The pandemic has caused massive spikes in unemployment, loss of income, increased food and housing insecurity, new childcare burdens on families, and significant harm to mental health in the United States. Moreover, many of these impacts have been exacerbated by government failures. Although the federal government offered some forms of relief – including a series of stimulus payments, payroll loans, eviction and mortgage moratoriums, and increased unemployment benefits – these programs were relatively

short-lived. In the long run, these measures have failed to adequately protect vulnerable Americans from the fallout of the pandemic. The most severe impacts have been highly disproportionate, harming communities – including low-income, BIPOC, immigrant, and LGBTQ communities – that were already struggling with structural inequalities before the pandemic.

In short, the pandemic has been devastating for many Americans. However, the people facing these problems did not sit on their hands waiting for salvation. In the shadow of government failures, thousands of everyday people stepped up to tackle these problems through self-organization and direct action. The pandemic prompted an explosion of mutual aid projects across the country, which emerged to help their communities meet a wide range of needs. In Washington D.C., the D.C. Mutual Aid Network helped seniors get safely to medical appointments, delivered essential items to neighbors who were quarantined, and raised money to provide laptops for low-income students learning from home (Jun and Lance, 2020). In Chicago, the Love Fridge project coordinated nineteen community fridges in low-income communities of color, providing thousands of pounds of free food to those who needed it (Lofton, et al., 2021). In Portland, La Colectiva de la Comida brought together teachers, parents, local farms and gardens, and community members to provide food to students who faced food insecurity during school closures (Sitrin and Sembrar, 2020). In New York City, a group of restaurant employees started Service Workers Coalition, which raised and distributed thousands of dollars to laid-off workers when restaurants were suddenly closed (Tolentino, 2020). In Los Angeles, the Auntie Sewing Squad sewed more than 20,000 masks and distributed them to hospital workers, farmworkers, people released from prison, and other vulnerable groups (Solnit, 2020). In Arizona, Kinlani/Flagstaff Mutual Aid built emergency wash stations for people living on the

streets (Sitrin and Sembrar, 2020). In Santa Barbera, Zoomers to Boomers provided free grocery deliveries to the elderly and immunocompromised. And through innovative online tools like the Covid Childcare Coop Calculator, friends and families scheduled cooperative childcare networks when daycare facilities were closed (Glaser, 2020). These are only a few of the countless mutual aid projects that arose to deal with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic in the United States. It is likely you saw similar projects emerge in your own community in the last two years.

In American political culture, we tend to think of the government (the public sector) and the market (the private sector) as the two most fundamental realms of social organization and social problem-solving. However, the participants in these mutual aid projects were not acting through either of these conventional channels. They were not entrepreneurs seeking to make a profit off new products or services meant to alleviate these problems. Nor were they public officials seeking to address the concerns of their constituents. They were not even advocacy groups attempting to convince the government to do better. Rather, they were everyday people – acting primarily through voluntary community groups – that worked to generate self-implemented solutions to the problems affecting themselves, their loved ones, and their fellow community members.

The participants in these projects were engaged in what I will call *autonomous problem-solving.* Autonomous problem-solving is an often-overlooked realm of collective action in which everyday people experiment with self-organized and self-implemented solutions to pressing problems in their community. As I will show, it is distinguished from other forms of public problem-solving by its extra-state, voluntary, and highly participatory nature. It emerges among communities that have lost faith in existing institutions' ability to solve their problems and involves immanent experimentation with self-managed alternatives. Importantly, participants in

these projects act simultaneously as both decision-makers and implementers, which allows them to act flexibly and creatively in their efforts to establish new self-managed solutions to entrenched public problems.

In this chapter, I begin by describing six concrete examples of autonomous problem-solving. Then, I use these examples to highlight certain blind spots in extant theories of public problem-solving – within both policy studies and nonprofit/voluntary studies – that prevent these approaches from capturing the unique type of activity occurring in these cases. Next, I show how the concept of autonomous problem-solving can function to bridge a constellation of compatible (but currently disconnected) studies in radical geography, organizational studies, grassroots innovation, self-help, social movements, and anarchist thought. I then explore some of the broader political implications of this unique form of problem-solving. Finally, I conclude by outlining the content of the following chapters.

What Does Autonomous Problem-Solving Look Like?

The Black Panther Party and Services for the People: As a response to the failures of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty programs to alleviate poverty in the Black community, the Black Panther Party developed a number of 'Services for the People' (also known as Survival Programs). These programs – which raised funds from the community and enlisted local volunteers – emerged from various local Panther groups "to meet the immediate needs of their respective communities" (Abron, p. 178*).* Services for the People included free medical care, free clothing, free ambulance rides, free buses to prison, and even a free pest-control program. Particularly notable was the Free Breakfast program, which in 1969 was serving full-fledged breakfasts to 20,000 children across the country every day. In 1975, the USDA started the School

Breakfast Program, in part inspired by the success of the Panthers earlier model (Collier, 2015; Nelson, 2011; Abron, 2005).

Guerilla Clinics and Community-Generated AIDS Research: During the AIDS crisis in the 1980s, many people with AIDS felt that the FDA's approach to research and treatment was inadequate and immoral. Rather than waiting for the results of double-blind medical studies for new AIDS treatments while people were dying, or risk signing up for such a study only to receive a placebo, people with AIDS began conducting their own community-based research and treatment through 'guerilla clinics.' These clinics smuggled drugs from Mexico or created their own AIDS medication in underground labs. Guerrilla clinics circulated their research and results through programs like AIDS Treatment News, the Community Research Initiative, and ACT UP's Treatment and Data Committee. Their findings, as well as crucial elements of their normative arguments for community-based research, were eventually incorporated by the FDA in the early 1990s (Berk & Galvan, 2013; Epstein, 1998).

Prevention Point: San Francisco was hit hard by the HIV/AIDS crisis in the 1980s. One major vector for transmission was through needles used for intravenous drugs. In response, 8 a small group of San Franciscans formed an all-volunteer needle exchange and safe injection program in 1988 called Prevention Point. The group – whose actions were illegal and operated mostly underground – discreetly distributed clean needles, bleach, and alcohol wipes to users. They also conducted their own research on the relationship between syringe hygiene and the spread of HIV. In 1992, the city of San Francisco was forced to recognize the valuable work that Prevention Point had been undertaking, gave them financial support, and incorporated them into the city's official harm reduction program (San Francisco AIDS Foundation).

CAHOOTS: In the 1960 and 70s, Eugene, Oregon was a countercultural hotspot with a high rates of psychedelic drug use. However, the city did not know how to safely handle bad reactions to these drugs, and those experiencing drug-induced crises were often thrown in jail rather than given proper mental health or medical care. In response, members of a local community clinic started an informal crisis-response team originally dubbed the "bummer squad." They soon found themselves responding to a wide range of crisis calls that would normally be handled by the police. The city, recognizing the value of a specialized mobile crisis-response team, eventually incorporated this grassroots project into their formal emergency response program. The members of the response team, happy to receive support from the city but uneasy about working alongside the police, renamed their organization CAHOOTS – Crisis Assistance Helping Out on the Streets. Since the George Floyd protests in 2020, CAHOOTS has been held up as a national model for shifting crisis-response services from police officers to mental health professionals (Gerety, 2020).

Self-Help Clinic One: In the 1970s, feminist activists responded to widespread constraints on abortion and birth control by creating their own self-help clinics across the country. The first of these clinics, founded in Los Angelo's by Carol Downer and Lorraine Rothman in 1971, was Self-Help Clinic One (later renamed the Feminist Women's Health Center). It discreetly (and illegally) provided abortion operations, birth control, and of other health services to women in the community. Downer explained that the purpose of the clinic was "to take back the power over our own bodies, both everyday types of control which information and self-knowledge gives us, and we also want to acquire special skills and knowledge which will allow us collectively to independently provide our own health care" (Spain, p. 111). Self-Help Clinic One

inspired similar projects in other cities and by 1978 there were over 100 feminist self-help clinics operating in the United States (Nelson, 2016; Spain, 2016).

Take Back the Land and Umoja Village: In the midst of the housing problems faced by the Black community in Miami in the mid-2000s, Max Rameau and other local organizers formed a group called Take Back the Land, which focused on gaining community control over land and housing. In 2006, Take Back the Land worked directly with homeless individuals, community members, and other activists to build a transitional housing village for the homeless called Umoja Village. They built Umoja on an abandoned, city-owned lot with mostly makeshift materials and donations from local community members. The governance of the village was run by the formerly homeless residents themselves (Rameau, 2008). During its six months of existence, Umoja Village helped over 150 otherwise homeless individuals obtain a safe place to sleep, store their things, experience a stable community, and in some cases, transition into more stable housing. In April 2007, the village burned down and the city quickly took the opportunity to disband its residents and place a barbed-wire fence around the once-again empty lot. Afterwards, Take Back the Land went back to helping homeless families move directly into vacant public housing units, as well as organizing community eviction defenses (Rameau, 2008). When asked about the work of Take Back the Land in an interview on MSNBC in 2011, Rameau stated, "We are reimagining our society… and in a real way we're implementing our own public policy."

The participants in these projects did not turn to the conventional mechanisms of the state, the market, or even the nonprofit sector to solve their problems. Rather, through the power of their own voluntary self-organization, they experimented in real-time with new forms of collective action to tackle these problems head-on. Instead of devising new solutions and then convincing those in power to adopt them, they implemented and managed their solutions

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themselves. Some of these examples – like the Umoja Village – faced intense opposition from government officials. However, many of these autonomous projects were so effective in addressing social needs that they eventually became appropriated by government agencies. Interestingly, this even occurred in cases – like Prevention Point or the guerilla clinics – that initially involved illegal tactics.

These six examples suggest that autonomous problem-solving has the capacity to productive innovative, effective, and empowering solutions to difficult public problems. Moreover, this phenomenon is not as rare as some might imagine. The self-managed solutions produced by this form of problem-solving are relatively widespread if you know where to look for them. Across the United States, we can find a hidden landscape of free community clinics, food distribution projects, jail support groups, volunteer street medic teams, self-organized defense networks for marginalized communities, cop-watch groups, eviction defense groups, spontaneous disaster relief efforts, and a wide variety of other self-help and mutual aid projects. These are all examples in which everyday people decide to implement their own self-managed remedies to concrete problems in their community.

Despite its extent and impact, there is surprisingly little attention to this form of collective action in the academic literature on public problem-solving. This is true both in the literature on public policymaking and on third sector (i.e. nonprofit and voluntary sector) problem-solving. In Table 1.1 below, I summarize some of the substantial blind spots in each of these literatures that leaves them unable to fully account for my cases. I explain each blind spot in more detail in the following sections of the chapter.

Table 1.1. Identifying Blind Spots in Public Problem-Solving Literatures

Literature	Definition	Blind spots
Policy Entrepreneurs	Individuals (or groups) "in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations… their defining characteristic, much as in the case of a business entrepreneur, is their willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return" (Kingdon, p. 129)	- Focus on problem-solving that occurs through state channels - Focus on individuals or groups with special access to policymaking processes (rather than everyday people)
Policy Innovation	The adoption of new policies by a government body (Berry & Berry, 2014)	- Focus on problem-solving that occurs through state channels - Little focus on how new solutions are actually created, rather where they are first adopted
Policy Advocacy	"the process by which people, NGOs, other civil society organizations, networks, and coalitions seek to enhance social and economic justice, environmental sustainability, and peace by influencing policies, policy implementation, and policy-making processes of governments, corporations, and other powerful institutions." (Unsicker, p. 4)	- Focus on convincing policymakers to address a problem - Focus on problem-solving that occurs through state channels
Collaborative Governance	"A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (Ansell and Gash, p. 544)	- Focus on state institutions - Misses autonomous efforts by everyday people to solve problems outside of the state
Democratic Experimentalism	"a new form of government… in which power is decentralized to enable citizens and other actors to utilize their local knowledge to fit solutions to their individual circumstances, but in which regional and national coordinating bodies require actors to share their knowledge with others facing similar problems." (Dorf and Sabel, p. 267)	- Focus on state institutions - Misses autonomous efforts by everyday people to solve problems outside of the state
Empowered Participatory Governance	Set of institutional design principles drawn from "real-world experiments in the redesign of democratic institutions, innovations that elicit the energy and influence of ordinary people, often drawn from the lowest strata of society, in the solution of problems that plague them" (Fung and Wright, 2003. p. 4).	- Focus on state institutions - Misses autonomous efforts by everyday people to solve problems outside of the state
Third/Nonprofit/ Voluntary Sector	Encompasses organizations which are nongovernmental, non-profit-distributing, and voluntary in nature (Salamon et al., p. 4)	- Overemphasis on formal, paid-staff, and non-member service delivery organizations - Underemphasis on grassroots associations, affinity groups, self-help groups, and mutual aid groups

Table 1.1. Continued

Literature	Definition	Blind spots
Social Entrepreneurship	a) "a process demonstrated when government or nonprofit organizations operate using business principles" b) "activities of conventional entrepreneurs who practice corporate social responsibility" c) "economically sustainable ventures that generate social value" (Dacin et al., p. 38)	- Focus on individuals and entrepreneurial strategies rather than participatory forms of problem solving
Advocacy Groups	"any organization that seeks to influence government policy, but not to govern" (Young and Everitt, p. 5)	- Focus on groups that seek to influence the state - Ignores groups that solve problems through self-organization and direct action
Nonprofit Service-Provision	The use of formal, paid-staff nonprofit organizations to carry out public services on behalf of government contracts (Brecher and Wise, 2008)	- Narrow focus on groups that carry out services on behalf of state

The two main differences between the type of problem-solving in my cases and existing accounts of public problem-solving are represented in the Table 1.2. The first issue is that many approaches to studying public problem-solving tend to de-emphasize (and thus devalue) more participatory forms of collective action. These approaches are represented by the top two quadrants of Table 1.2. The second issue is that a large portion of the literature on public problem-solving is located in policy studies, which only examines (by definition) problem-solving efforts that are channeled through state institutions. These approaches are represented in the left two quadrants of Table 1.2. One overarching way to describe the uniqueness of my examples, then, is that they are located outside the state (in the third sector) and are highly participatory. This is represented in the bottom right quadrant of Table 1.2, which demarcates the realm of *autonomous problem-solving* in relation to these other problem-solving approaches. I explain each quadrant briefly below before going into more detail in the following sections.

Table 1.2. Differentiating Autonomous Problem-Solving from Other Public Problem-Solving Approaches

	Public (State) Sector	Third (Nonprofit and Voluntary) Sector
Less Participatory	*I. Conventional State Problem-Solving* - Policy Entrepreneurs - Policy Innovation - Policy Advocacy	*III. Conventional Third Sector Problem-Solving* - Nonprofit Service-Provision - Advocacy Groups - Social Entrepreneurship
Highly Participatory	*II. Participatory Policymaking* - Collaborative Governance - Democratic Experimentalism - Empowered Participatory Governance	*IV. Autonomous Problem-Solving*

I. *Conventional State Problem-Solving:* Conventional accounts of state-based problem-solving, located primarily in policy studies, focus on the role of policy entrepreneurs and public officials in generating new solutions to public problems. For example, Voß (2007) traces how policy entrepreneurs, economists, and EPA officials developed the practice of emissions trading as a new environmental regulatory policy in the 1970s. However, as shown in Table 1.2, the perspectives in this quadrant have a blind spot for autonomous problem-solving because they give little attention to extra-state or participatory forms of problem-solving.

II. *Participatory Policymaking:* In response to critiques of top-down models of policymaking, a number of alternative approaches – including collaborative governance, democratic experimentalism, and empowered participatory governance – seek to elicit to participation of everyday people in addressing public problems. For instance, Karkkainen (2003) describes the use of Habitat Conservation Planning as a form local participatory governance that facilitates environmentally responsible land-use under the Endangered Species Act. But while the perspectives in this quadrant emphasize participatory models of policymaking, they give little attention problem-solving that occurs outside of state institutions.

III. *Conventional Third Sector Problem-Solving:* Literature on the problem-solving activities of the third sector – much of which comes from nonprofit and voluntary studies – tends to focus on mainstream paid-staff nonprofit organizations. Much attention is given to their role as service-providers (on behalf of the state) or their advocacy efforts to change public policy. An example is Hall and Taplin's (2010) comparative study of six environmental nonprofit campaigns in Florida that have influenced the state's climate policy. Although the perspectives in this quadrant focus on problem-solving by organizations outside the state, they give little attention to directly participatory modes of self-organization like those found in my initial examples.

IV. *Autonomous Problem-Solving:* Autonomous problem-solving is differentiated from the other three quadrants in Table 1.2 by the fact that it is initiated outside of state institutions and occurs through highly participatory modes of organizing. An ongoing example of autonomous problem-solving in action is the current campaign to defend the South River Forest in Atlanta from deforestation. The city of Atlanta plans to destroy a large section of the forest – which is a crucial urban wildlife corridor and currently offers important ecological protection against floods – in order to build a new police training facility. In response, a coalition of autonomous eco-defense and police abolition groups have engaged in a series of occupations, teach-ins, guided hikes, lock-downs, barricades, and monkey-wrenching actions in order to stop the project from moving forward (The City in the Forest, 2022).

Next, I explore the problem-solving approaches in each of these quadrants in more detail in order to demonstrate the blind spots in each approach and to triangulate precisely what makes autonomous problem-solving unique.

I. Conventional Accounts of State Problem-Solving

From a conventional policy innovation perspective, it may be tempting to label the participants in my six initial examples above as *policy entrepreneurs*. This term was coined by Kingdon (1984) to describe policy advocates who worked diligently and strategically to promote, spread, and implement their preferred policy solutions. According to Kingdon's original definition, these individuals "could be in or out of government, in elected or appointed positions, in interest groups or research organizations. But their defining characteristic, much as in the case of a business entrepreneur, is their willingness to invest their resources—time, energy, reputation, and sometimes money—in the hope of a future return" (p. 129).

Policy entrepreneurs are an important component of Kingdom's broader multiple streams approach (MSA) to studying agenda-setting in public policy. According to this framework, policy entrepreneurs were able to take advantage of 'windows of opportunity' that allow for the adoption of new policy solutions. They do so by combining three different policymaking 'streams' – problems, policies, and politics – that when skillfully put together, allow the entrepreneur to place a previously untapped policy idea on the agenda. Policy entrepreneurs combine these three streams by identifying an unsolved problem and matching it with an innovative solution, all while navigating broader political obstacles and opportunities. The solutions they champion, according to Kingdon, are drawn from a broader set of ideas and debates within a policy community that he calls the "policy primeval soup" (Kingdon, p. 128). The activity of the policy entrepreneur, then, is to pick up an innovative idea out of this primeval soup, refine it, and sell it to policymakers (and sometimes, instrumentally, to the public) as the ideal solution to a given policy problem.

The concept of the policy entrepreneur has become a fundamental part of the literature on policy change. It has been integrated into other major theories outside of the MSA, including the punctuated equilibrium approach (Baumgartner & Jones, 2002; Beyer, Breunig, & Radojevic, 2017) and the advocacy-coalition framework (Sabatier, 1988; Mintrom and Vergari, 1996; Zahariadis, 2008; Ackrill et al., 2013). Outside of its relation to these broader theories of policy change, much of the literature has focused on identifying specific traits and strategies of policy entrepreneurs. These include their ability to engage in networking, mobilization, civic engagement, venue-shopping, storytelling, strategic timing, and team-building (Mintrom & Norman, 2009; Meijerink & Huitema. 2010; Brouwer & Biermann, 2011; Zhu, 2012; Navot & Cohen, 2105; Cairney, 2018; Frisch Aviram et al., 2020).

Despite its wide purchase in the literature, the concept of policy entrepreneurs does not accurately capture the type of innovation described in my examples above. It often focuses on individuals who – if they are not themselves policymakers or political elites – have special connections to or special knowledge of policymaking institutions (Roberts & King, 1996, Baker & Steuernagel, 2009; Mintron and Vergari, 1996; Frisch Aviram et al., 2020). Even in more recent literature that argues for the entrepreneurial capacity of street-level bureaucrats, the entrepreneur in question is still a state actor (Arnold, 2015; Frisch-Aviram et al., 2018; Lavee & Cohen, 2019). This tendency to focus on individuals with special access or knowledge of policymaking institutions draws attention away from the type of extra-state, horizontal problem-solving at play in the examples presented above. The participants in these examples were not wily strategists who knew how to exploit windows of opportunity in the policy realm; they were everyday people struggling head-on with problems in their community. Their "expertise" was

characterized not by their knowledge of policymaking institutions, but by their proximity to the social problem they sought to address.

In many ways, this blind spot is to be expected from using the 'entrepreneur' metaphor borrowed from the private sector. It functions to highlight the exceptional capacity and creativity of certain risk-taking individuals and their ability to "sell" an idea. One can certainly imagine a policy entrepreneur in relation to the examples above. However, this would be someone intent on selling the success of these projects to policymakers, not someone directly involved in the creation and implementation of the project itself.[1] The policy innovation literature's preoccupation with the role of policy entrepreneurs obscures the collective labor of everyday people experimenting with new solutions on the ground. In many ways, this is directly parallel to the way in which the private sector's preoccupation with business entrepreneurs obscures the collective labor of their workers, without whom the entrepreneur has nothing to sell.

Interestingly, some recent literature expands the concept of policy entrepreneurs to include organizations and institutions (Frisch Aviram et al., 2020). For instance, there is a sizeable literature characterizing the European Commission as a policy entrepreneur (Schön-Quinlivan, & Scipioni, 2017; Copeland & James, 2013; Kaunert, 2010; Edler & James, 2015). Other studies look to NGOs like the World Bank (Mundy & Menashy, 2014) and the World Wildlife Fund (Te Boekhorst et al., 2010) as policy entrepreneurs on an international level. More recently, scholars have characterized civil society organizations (Appe & Barragán, 2017) and even social movements (Fiori & Kim, 2011) as policy entrepreneurs. But while these studies

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[1] It is possible, of course, that someone involved in creating the project could subsequently transition into a policy entrepreneur role in order to promote its more widespread adoption. However, notice here that the individual in question would only become a policy entrepreneur by stepping away from more hands-on involvement in the development of the project itself. Therefore, the activity of the participants in these examples is something unique from policy entrepreneurship.

seem to have more in common with my examples, the concept of entrepreneurial organizations still fails to stretch far enough to cover the type of innovation I am concerned with. This is because even entrepreneurial organizations, according to the literature, are designated as such for their important role in *policy advocacy*.

The participants in the examples above are not engaged in policy advocacy.[2] Instead, they are building voluntary and participatory solutions to social problems outside of the state. In fact, many of these examples feature marginalized communities who have given up any hope that their problems will be fixed via public policy and thus turn to their own capacities of self-organization and mutual support. Ultimately, the policy entrepreneurship literature misses this important domain of innovation because it focuses narrowly on the innovative strategies of policy advocates rather than on the actual invention of new solutions (wherever they may emerge).[3]

This blind spot in the policy entrepreneurship literature is indicative of a broader blind spot in the literature on policy innovation. Jordan and Huitema (2014) break down the policy innovation literature into three perspectives: invention (the creation of new policies), diffusion (the adoption and transfer of new policies), and effects (the evaluation of new policies' impacts). Surprisingly, much of the policy innovation literature (including that on policy entrepreneurs) has focused on diffusion and effects at the expense of invention (Nice, 1994; Krause, 2010;

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[2] It may be argued that they are indirectly involved in policy advocacy, since autonomously-generated solutions can provide a model for new policy initiatives. However, the primary goal of these actors is to address the problem themselves rather than asking the state to intervene. Whether the state or policy advocates pick up on this model is secondary to the main goal of these projects.

[3] For the same reason, the literature on advocacy coalitions does not fit these cases well (Sabatier, 1998; Elliott & Schlaepfer, 2001; Sotirov & Melmer, 2012).

Stadelmann & Castro, 2014).[4] In fact, Berry & Berry (2014) argue that the study of policy innovation is itself conceptually distinct from the study of policy invention. They write that "The dominant practice in the policy innovation literature is to define an innovation as a program that is new to the government adopting it… By embracing this definition, students of policy innovation explicitly choose not to study policy *invention*—the process through which original policy ideas are conceived" (p. 307). In other words, the policy innovation literature is primarily focused on how new policies are adopted and evaluated by different government institutions. Little focus is given to how the ideas for new policies emerge in the first place.

Kingdon (1984) himself warned against spending too much time looking into policy invention. When considering the question of policy origins, he concluded that it was pointless, because "ideas can come from anywhere" (p. 75) and due to "the problem of infinite regress, the ultimate origin of an idea, concern, or proposal cannot be specified… So tracing origins turns out to be futile" (p. 77).[5] Kingdon's account of policy invention stops at what he calls the 'policy primeval soup.' This primeval soup is the messy jumble of ideas and debates surrounding a given policy issue, located in what he calls a policy community. His conception of a policy community, however, is limited to various types of policy specialists: "researchers, congressional staffers, people in planning and evaluation offices and in budge offices, academics, interest group

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[4] There is a small literature on the role of pilot projects in policy innovation that has interesting implications for both policy invention and evaluation (Martin & Sanderson, 1999; van Buuren and Loorbach, 2009; Vreugdenhil et al., 2010; Vreugdenhil et al., 2012). However, pilot policy projects are typically state-initiated, whereas the projects in my cases were organized by non-state actors acting on their own volition. Pilot projects also tend to be initiated in order to evaluate the effects of a policy or program before it is implemented it on a wider scale. The projects in my examples, however, were not created simply to test outcomes. Nor do they exhibit an explicit concern for scalability. Instead, these projects were created to address pressing local problems in the absence of other options.

[5] Likewise, Page (2006) writes that "There is no simple answer to where policies come from. The best we can do is indicate the proximate events leading to the authorization or other form of adoption of policies" (p. 222).

analysts" (p. 122). Conspicuously absent in this conception of a policy community are everyday citizens, particularly those who are directly experiencing the social problem in question.

For Kingdon, then, the answer to how new policies emerge – the question of policy invention – is that the competing ideas in the policy primeval soup undergo a process of "natural selection" in which the most durable and timely rise to the top (where they are then championed by policy entrepreneurs). However, because this soup is limited to policy specialists, it misses an entire range of actors, ideas, and practices that can (and do) inform new solutions to social problems. There is no need to limit our soup to specialists. After all, ideas can come from anywhere. And policy ideas do not need to be traced back to a single or ultimate origin for the process of tracing to be insightful or productive. Rather, my examples above show that there is still much to learn about alternative sources of policy invention.

Fortunately, Jordan and Huitema (2014) provide some direction to guide us into the messy realm of policy invention. Drawing on insights from complex adaptive systems (Duit & Galaz, 2008) and polycentric governance (Ostrom, 2009), they argue that "the *invention* perspective is about the ability of all actors to *explore* (experiment, play, discover)."[6] Therefore, they suggest that rather than relying on a unitary approach to solving problems, "many actors should experiment with their own approaches, so that gradually a quasi-experimental system emerges, from which at some point best practices can be selected" (Jordan and Huitema, p. 389). As it turns out, this perspective is very close to that of democratic experimentalism and its close cousin, empowered participatory governance. In the next section, I examine these perspectives

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[6] They are also careful to note that "politicians are definitely not the only actors involved in policy invention. In fact their role comes relatively late in the invention process, whereas earlier stages are dominated by actors from outside the state (businesses, academics, NGOs, international organizations) and by the national bureaucracy (the other key actor within the state)" (Jordan and Huitema, p. 390).

and argue that while their emphasis on experimentation and participatory problem-solving comes much close to describing my examples, they too face a blind spot when it comes to autonomous (i.e. extra-state and self-governed) forms of problem-solving.

II. Participatory Policymaking

Although conventional approaches to studying state problem-solving tend to focus narrowly on policy entrepreneurs and public officials, there are a set of alternative theories of policymaking that emphasize the participation of a wider set of actors in the policy process. These approaches – collaborative governance, democratic experimentalism, and empowered participatory governance – emerge in response to the insights of critical policy studies (Frank et al., 2015; Boullose et al., 2021; Dryzek, 2006). This diverse body of literature – which includes considerations of power and politics in policymaking (Stone, 2002), post-positivist analyses of network governance (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003) discursive treatments of policy (Dryzek, 1990; Torgerson, 2003), argumentative treatments of policy (Fischer and Forester, 1993; Dunn, 1993), interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 1996; Yanow, 2003), and the elaboration of more democratic alternatives (Fung, 2003; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003) – is engaged in a series of overlapping critiques of traditional policymaking, policy science, and policy analysis.[7] These scholars collectively argue that positivist, rationalist, and economic-centered modes of thinking are intimately bound up with hierarchical and technocratic structures of public governance. As Dryzek explains, this is because assumptions of an objectively knowable social world engender trust in a set of policy experts that become alienated from any meaningful democratic

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[7] For instance, Dryzek (2006) defines critical policy analysis as an approach in which "the key task of analysis is enlightenment of those suffering at the hands of power in the interests of action on their part to escape suffering" (pp. 191-192).

accountability (Dryzek, 1990). Critical policy scholars see the failures stemming from traditional structures of public governance to be both failures of efficacy and of democracy. First, these more rigid technocratic institutions produce suboptimal outcomes because of the rigid assumptions of their reductive models and lack of relevant local knowledges (Stone, 2002; Yanow, 2003). Second, they are a normative failure in that they alienate power away from everyday citizens and into the hands of technocratic experts (Dryzek, 1990; Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Torgerson, 2003).

What many critical policy scholars suggest in light of these failures is a re-empowering of everyday citizens by engaging them directly in policymaking processes. Specific recommendations take different forms from different scholars. Some focus more on prescriptive modes of decision making ('deliberative,' 'discursive,' and 'communicative' are some of the common adjectives) but others, namely Hajer and Wagenaar (2003), emphasize a more inductive approach that encourages careful empirical attention to these new practices of policymaking. Ultimately, the critical policy literature sets up the need for new institutions and mechanisms that elicit the policymaking potential of everyday people.[8]

One approach that seeks to include a wider range of actors in the policymaking process is *collaborative governance*. Ansell and Gash (2007) define this approach as a "governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a

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[8] Charles Lindblom also advanced an earlier argument for the importance of everyday people and their capacity for self-organization in tackling public problems. He emphasized the importance of studying 'self-guiding' modes of public problem-solving by everyday people that he called 'lay probing' or 'interactive problem-solving.' He contrasted these more participatory models of problem-solving with more hierarchical, technocratic models that he called 'professional social inquiry' and 'analytical problem-solving' (Lindblom & Cohen, 1979; Lindblom, 1990). However, Lindblom turned to markets or formal political institutions (like voting or trade union bargaining) as examples of interactive problem-solving and in doing so overlooked the public problem-solving capacities of less formal or less institutionalized forms of organizing at the grassroots. As such, he never investigated the type of cases I presented above, in which members of marginalized communities tackle problems through direct action and self-organization, not through markets or formal political institutions.

collective decision-making process that is formal, consensus-oriented, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets" (p. 544). Rather than simply executing policy through top-down decision-making, a collaborative governance approach brings together a team of diverse stakeholders – which may include local organizations, community and business leaders, and representatives of impacted populations – to help develop and implement policy in a given area. However, while collaborative governance is undoubtedly more participatory than many traditional forms of policymaking – in particular, its intentional inclusion of non-state actors – it ultimately must be "initiated by public agencies or institutions" (Ansell and Gash, p. 544). This qualification makes it distinct from the activity occurring in my examples, which were all initiated by non-state actors acting on their own volition.

A second response to democratic critiques of policy studies is the literature on democratic experimentalism (DE). The primary aim of DE is to create new, more participatory state institutions. In fact, democratic experimentalists seek a general restructuring of the state, or as Michael Dorf and Charles Sabel (1998) put it, "to democratize public decision-making from within" (p. 268). Generally, these institutions take the form of networked sets of local participatory experiments, which share information and best practices, often through a central authority ensuring accountability and coordination. This allows everyday citizens to empower themselves through greater participation in their own governance. It also allows for iterative and reflexive types of social learning and policymaking (Sabel, 2012; Dorf and Sabel, 1998; Simon, 2012; Ansell, 2011; Ansell, 2012; Ralston, 2012).[9]

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[9] Much of this focus on reflexive social learning comes from a close engagement with pragmatism and, in particular, the work of John Dewey (Ralston, 2012; Ansell, 2012; Sabel, 2012; Simon, 2012).

Certain aspects of DE resonate with the examples I provided above. Most importantly, DE emphasizes the creation of participatory spaces in which state actors and everyday citizens can innovate new solutions to public problems. This happens through the creation of local subunits, who are given ample flexibility to experiment in real-time with new approaches to problems. These subunits are then incentivized to share their findings with each other in a process of simultaneous learning (Ansell 2012, Dorf and Sabel, 1998). Notably, this perspective is quite distinct from the literature on policy entrepreneurs. First, it pays much closer attention to the actual environments and practices that foster innovation (rather than on the actors who sell innovative practices to policy institutions). Second, it recognizes the capacity of everyday citizens – rather than just state officials and policy experts – to generate innovative solutions to social problems.

This concern for participatory problem-solving places DE much closer to my examples than the policy entrepreneurship perspective. However, its overriding concern with questions of institutional design serves to distance it from the type of autonomous problem-solving at play in my examples. In particular, DE is interested in institutions in which local subunits are linked to a centralized authority that can stimulate experimentation, ensure information-sharing, and disseminate best practices.[10] This central coordination, although it can take many forms, is understood as a crucial design feature. Therefore, participatory forms of problem-solving that lack this connection to a superordinate coordinating body – like my examples – would not be recognized as proper democratic experiments.

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[10] Some of the ways in which these central authorities manage and incentivize local sub-units are through standards-setting, monitoring, benchmarking (Dorf and Sabel, 1998), penalty defaults (Karkkainen, 2006; Simon, 2012) and destabilization rights (Sabel and Simon, 2004).

Relatedly, because DE is focused on democratization of state institutions, it tends to miss participatory forms of problem-solving that emerge outside of the state.[11] It pays little attention to the examples I presented above, in which everyday people build participatory solutions to social problems through voluntary action outside of state institutions. And when it does consider these types of practices, it frames them as something that needs to incorporated back into the state. For example, in Dorf's (2012) article on the potential connection between Occupy Wall Street and DE, he presumes that the central problem facing the Occupy movement was how it could be scaled up and connected to existing representative bodies in the United States:

> Going forward, Occupy faces roughly the same challenge of scale that all democracies face when the body politic grows too large to conduct business by town meeting: How to preserve the perception and reality of participation experienced during direct deliberation when the locus of decision-making power shifts to representative bodies? (Dorf, p. 269)[12]

In response, Dorf proposes a "marriage" between DE and Occupy in which DE could attempt to shift government decision-making down to a more local, participatory level. However, this perspective misses a major feature of Occupy, which was the purposeful invention of deliberative spaces of democracy *outside* the state. Rather than expending energy attempting to

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[11] This is ironic because many of the innovative institutional forms that inspired DE were originally noticed in private firms like Toyota (Dorf and Sabel, 1998). However, despite receiving this inspiration from innovations in the private sector, DE scholarship pays less attention to innovative forms of organization in the 'third' or 'voluntary' sector, particularly at the community level.

[12] It is worth noting that the problem of how to "scale up" direct democracy (without being coopted by a superordinate body like the state) has been the subject of much thought and experimentation by advocates of direct democracy themselves. Most large-scale experiments in direct democracy occur through variations of *confederalism*, which differs substantially from many of the institutional principles of DE (Bookchin and van Outryve, 2019).

restructure representative institutions, Occupy participants (much like the participants in my examples) focused on creating their own self-managed alternatives.

Another theory of participatory problem-solving closely related to democratic experimentalism is empowered participatory governance (EPG). Originally proposed by Fung and Wright (2003), EPG seeks to identify and learn from "real-world experiments in the redesign of democratic institutions, innovations that elicit the energy and influence of ordinary people, often drawn from the lowest strata of society, in the solution of problems that plague them" (p. 4). In their initial elaboration of EPG, Fung and Wright investigate the innovative designs of habitat conservation planning by the EPA, neighborhood governance councils in Chicago, participatory budgeting in Brazil, and decentralized planning in India (Fung and Wright, 2003). More recently, other scholars have used EPG to evaluate food governance in Bangkok (Boossabong, 2019), participatory budgeting in Montreal (Patsias et al., 2012), municipal health councils in Brazil (Cornwall, 2008), and the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform in British Columbia (Lang, 2007).

Much like DE, EPG recognizes the capacity of everyday citizens to participate in collective forms of problem-solving. EPG emerges out of empirical attention to experiments in which "ordinary people can effectively participate and influence policies which directly affect their lives" (Fung and Wright, p. 5). It also emphasizes the incorporation of local knowledge and encourages a practical (rather than technical) orientation to problem-solving. For these reasons, EPG is a much closer fit with my examples than the policy entrepreneurship literature.

However, EPG differentiates itself from my examples along similar lines as DE. Although it recognizes the generative nature of local participatory experiments, it still sees a need for "state institutions to support and guide these decentered problem-solving efforts" (Fung

and Wright, p. 16). In a study of the institutional design of Chicago's participatory experiments in education and policing, Fung argues for the necessity of *accountable autonomy*, in which "centralized powers… ensure that local actors are deliberating effectively by constructing appropriate incentives and monitoring routines" (Fung, 2003, p. 123). This principle – that superordinate organizations are necessary to oversee instances of local experimentation – precludes EPG from recognizing the potential of more independent experiments in participatory problem solving, like those outlined in my examples.[13]

Finally, EPG is committed to studying the transformation of state institutions, which means it specifically excludes what Fung and Wright call "spontaneous activist efforts." They argue that these efforts are less durable because, rather than changing the actual organization of state institutions, they focus more narrowly on "influenc[ing] state outcomes through outside pressure" (p. 22). However, this seems to conflate spontaneous self-help projects (which work outside the state) with policy advocacy efforts (which try to pressure the state to act). When Fung and Wright do refer specifically to "activist self-help," they minimize its impact compared to that of EPG experiments:

> These experiments are thus less 'radical' than most varieties of activist self-help in that their central activity is not 'fighting the power.' But they are more radical in that they have larger reform scopes, are authorized by state or corporate bodies to make substantial decisions, and, most crucially, try to change the central procedures of power rather than

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[13] Just because my examples do not involve superordinate organizations that coordinate information-sharing from above does not mean that these projects become isolated, as Fung and Wright (2003) suggest (p. 22). For example, Take Back the Land learned directly from organizers from the Anti-Eviction Campaign in Cape Town, South Africa. This learning occurred voluntarily and horizontally, without any need for a superordinate body to coordinate the information exchange.

merely attempting occasionally to shift the vector of its exercise. (Fung and Wright, p. 22)

However, it is not clear that activist self-help is always focused on "fighting the power." In fact, as I will later show, self-help projects often occur through a careful navigation or avoidance of the state (rather than a direct confrontation). Moreover, the priority given to projects with "larger reform scopes" or that "try to change the central procedures of power" means excluding projects that are primarily focused on solving local problems through self-organization and direct action. We should not discount these more local projects, especially those occurring in marginalized communities in which people are simply trying to survive and may not have the resources to engage in wider battles over institutional reform.

Overall, the main reason that these theories of participatory policymaking miss the type of problem-solving occurring in my examples is that they are focused narrowly on questions of policy, and therefore on the design and actions of state institutions.[14] Although they highlight the importance of participatory problem-solving, they only do so within the confines of the state. Therefore, to get a better handle on the unique type of participatory problem solving in my examples, we will need to look outside of policy studies altogether.

III. Conventional Third Sector Problem-Solving

In looking outside the state, one's first inclination might be to look to the private sector. However, it would not be accurate to locate my examples in the private sector – conceptualized

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[14] In their overview of competing definitions of public policy, Howlett and Ramesh (2006) point out that, "they all agree on certain key aspects. They agree that public policies result from decisions made by governments… Although the activities of non-governmental actors may and certainly do influence what governments do, and vice versa, the decision or activities of such groups do not in themselves constitute public policy" (p. 5). In other words, despite the fact that non-state actors are undoubtedly important to the policy process, it is widely agreed that the legitimation of the state is necessary to designate an action as public policy.

here as the realm of private enterprise and competitive markets[15] – because the participants involved were not acting through profit-seeking firms. Because these participants felt that the private sector had been unable to solve (or even contributed to) the local problems they were addressing, these participants instead turned to their own voluntary collective action to develop self-implemented solutions.

It would be more accurate to describe my examples as emerging out what is known as the *third sector* – alternatively called the *nonprofit sector* or the *voluntary sector* (Powell and Steinberg, 2006; Kallman et al., 2016; Salamon and Sokolowski, 2016; Smith, 2011).[16] The boundaries of the third sector are somewhat contested, but I draw on Salamon et al.'s (2000) helpful set of characteristics for demarcating the third sector. They argue that third sector groups are nongovernmental, non-profit-distributing,[17] self-governing, and voluntary[18] in nature (Salamon et al., p. 4). Under this formulation, the third sector encompasses a wide diversity of forms, including paid-staff nonprofit organizations, advocacy groups, fraternal societies, religious organizations, charitable foundations, social movements, business associations, and neighborhood groups.

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[15] Drawing on other scholars of the third/nonprofit sector, I define the private sector not as simply the 'non-state' sector, but more specifically as the realm of private business and competitive markets (Smith, 2000).

[16] Another closely related term to the third sector is *civil society*. Although the definition of civil society has been debated, Smith (2011) describes it as "the space of voluntary association and activity that exists in relative separation from the state and the market" (p. 30).

[17] This term is used because, as Salamon (2012) points out, the label non-profit "is a misnomer: these organizations are permitted to earn profits— that is, end up with an excess of income over expenditures in a given year; what is prohibited is the distribution of any such profit to organizational directors or managers. Technically, then, we might more accurately refer to these organizations as *non-profit-distributing* organizations" (Salamon, 2012, pp. 6-7).

[18] An organization does not have to be completely voluntary to fit this characteristic. Salamon et al. (2000) write that it must be voluntary "to some meaningful extent, and therefore likely to engage people on the basis of some shared interest or concern" (p. 4).

However, much of the literature on the third sector, most of which is housed within nonprofit and voluntary studies, has focused on organizations that do not fit my cases. Smith (2000) has pointed out that there is an overemphasis in this literature on: paid-staff nonprofits at the expense of volunteer-based groups,[19] formalized or professionalized organizations at the expense of more informal groups,[20] establishment-friendly organizations at the expense of groups that challenge the status quo, and 'nonmember service organizations'[21] at the expense of self-help and mutual aid groups. The result of this bias, Smith argues, is that a large amount of grassroots activity – what he terms the 'dark matter' of the nonprofit sector – has received little attention in comparison to conventional nonprofit organizations. In fact, none of the solutions generated in my examples came out of established nonprofit organizations.[22] In part, this is because these organizations – which are often structured much like a private firm – may be less likely to engage more participatory or experimental forms of problem-solving in the first place. They also tend to be dependent on the financial support of rich donors or government contracts, which can limit the scope of their activities (Spade, 2020).

We can also differentiate my cases from other elements of the third sector by the type of activity they are engaged in. First, although they may provide free services to other members of

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[19] Smith argues that this lack of attention implies that such groups are less important or impactful: "Such scholars and practitioners tend to assume incorrectly, without adequate empirical data, that paid-staff nonprofits as a category must have a greater cumulative impact on society in all areas than do poorer, 'puny,' more informal, and short-lived GAs [grassroots associations] that, by definition, operative with volunteer time of their members" (Smith, 2000p. 224).

[20] 'Formal' here can refer either to a formal organizational structure or to an organization with 501c3 status.

[21] This term refers to the organizations that provide services to people who are outside the organization (often described as 'clients' or 'the public').

[22] That being said, some of these informal groups ended up creating 501c3 organizations as part of the infrastructure of their new solutions. However, there is an important difference between a solution emerging from an existing nonprofit organization and a solution emerging out of the informal collaboration of community members, which then creates a new nonprofit organization to achieve a specific end.

their community, the participants in my cases are not providing these services on behalf of the state. In other words, they are not service-providers engaged in government contracts for specific purposes (e.g., a nonprofit organization paid by local government to operate a houseless shelter). Rather than carrying out on government-sanctioned goals, these groups set their own agendas for addressing a given social problem.[23] Nor, as I mentioned earlier, is the primary purpose of these organizers one of advocacy. This differentiates them from what scholars call *advocacy groups*, which are defined by Young and Everitt (2004) as "any organization that seeks to influence government policy, but not to govern" (p. 5). Advocacy groups can take a wide range of forms, from large public interest lobbying organizations to grassroots groups gathering petition signatures for a local policy change (Unsicker, 2012; Prakash and Gugerty, 2010). However, the participants in my cases did not appeal to the state, nor focus on building public support for certain candidates or policies. Instead, they tackled local problems directly through self-implemented projects.

Next, my cases differ from scholarly accounts of *social entrepreneurship*, which often takes place in the third sector (Bridge et al., 2009; Anheier et al., 2019). Social entrepreneurship has a notoriously diverse range of definitions, some of which are exceedingly vague (See Dacin et al., 2010). For instance, Austin et al. (2006) define social entrepreneurship as any "innovative, social value creating activity that can occur within or across the nonprofit, business, or government sectors" (p. 2). Under this exceptionally broad definition, my cases could in fact be construed as examples of social entrepreneurship. However, in common practice the term is more often used to refer to either to nonprofits that utilize entrepreneurial, profit-generating

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[23] There is an important distinction here between receiving public funds to carry out specific government-directed projects and independently launched projects that apply for and receive more flexible government grants. The latter does not sacrifice autonomy to the same extent as the former.

strategies (rather than fundraising) to financially support their social work (Lasprogata and

Cotton, 2003; Dart, 2004) or to the activity of individual social entrepreneurs, defined as people

"with new ideas to address major problems. . . who will not give up until they have spread their

ideas as far as they possibly can" (Bornstein, 2004, pp. 1–2). Neither of these descriptions fit my

cases well. In part, this is because the literature on social entrepreneurship tends to come from an

economic or business management perspective, which is then extended to incorporate elements

of the third sector. It also has a tendency – much like the policy entrepreneur literature – to

highlight the exceptional traits and strategies of individual social entrepreneurs, at the expense of

exploring more collective or participatory forms of innovation (Baron and Markman, 2000;

Drayton, 2002; Yitshaki and Kropp, 2016).

Finally, my cases have a complex relationship to social movements, another key element

of the third sector (Anheier and Schere, 2015; Kallman and Clark, 2016). On the one hand, the

projects in my examples are not easily defined as self-contained social movements in and of

themselves. However, most of them *are* embedded in broader social movement communities

(Hassan and Staggenborg, 2015) and could perhaps be described as social movement

organizations (McCarthy and Zald, 1977; Lofland, 1996; Sutherland et al., 2014). For example,

Self-Help Clinic One was embedded within the feminist movement of the 1970s, Take Back the

Land was embedded in a wider international land reform movement, and the Black Panther

Party's free community programs were embedded within the Black Power movement. And while

many accounts of social movements place a heavy emphasis on advocacy or protest (Piven and

Cloward, 1979; Soule and Earle, 2005; McCarthy et al,, 2013), my examples are distinct in that

they are focused primarily on autonomous forms of experimentation and implementation.[24] This puts them much closer to what Eckert (2015) calls 'practice movements,' as well as the social movement literature on prefigurative politics (Epstein, 1991; Graeber, 2014; Raekstad and Gradin, 2020; Yates, 2020), which I will return to in the next section.

Thus far, I have highlighted what is unique about my cases by comparing them to relevant literature on problem-solving in both the public and third sector. I have done so to draw attention to some of the blind spots that exist in mainstream accounts of social problem-solving, which often struggle to account for the type problem-solving at play in these examples. As I have demonstrated, the literature on policy entrepreneurship misses my cases because of its narrow focus on policy innovation and its blind spot for more participatory modes problem-solving. And while collaborative governance, DE, and EPG give more attention to participatory problem-solving, they still place little emphasis on autonomous innovations outside of state institutions. Finally, much of the literature on the third sector misses my cases because of its overemphasis on conventional nonprofits, state-funded service provision, and advocacy. When innovation is considered in the third sector, it is often attributed to social entrepreneurs or entrepreneurial nonprofits, rather than to the self-organization of everyday people in their community.

Fortunately, there is a loose constellation of scholarly work that provides better insight into the cases I introduced at the beginning of the chapter. Unfortunately, this work is scattered across disparate disciplines, with few bridges in between. Therefore, in the next section I use the

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[24] Social movements are, of course, often engaged in much more than protest and advocacy. Della Porta and Diana (2015) note that social movement action "does not always imply the formation of political demands (through confrontational as well as conventional repertoires). It may also take the form of the direct production of collective goods, through a broad range of action that stretch from the communitarian enactment of alternative lifestyles to various forms of mutual help and service delivery" (p. 3).

concept of autonomous problem-solving to weave together this constellation of scholarly work and describe what is unique and compelling about my cases.

IV. Autonomous Problem-Solving

Autonomous problem-solving involves a form of immanent experimentation with self-managed solutions to local problems. It is extra-state, voluntary, and highly participatory in both its decision-making and in its implementation. Autonomous problem-solvers not only generate novel solutions to local problems through participatory deliberation, but they also implement these solutions themselves. In fact, participants in autonomous problem-solving projects often act as both decision-makers and implementers simultaneously. This tight feedback loop between knowledge and action lets participants adapt their projects in real-time to changing conditions. It also makes for uniquely flexible and innovative forms of experimentation.

The term autonomy originally comes from the Greek autos-nomos, which means self-rule or self-governance. Its opposite is heteronomy, which is rule or management by an external entity (Chatterton, 2005). However, I draw more specifically on the concept of autonomy used in radical geography. In this literature, autonomy describes a mode of directly-democratic, collective self-management that offers an alternative form of governance to both state and market institutions (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Chatterton and Ryan, 2008; Chatterton, 2010).[25] Scholars in this tradition have analyzed the emergence of autonomous spaces in variety

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[25] The literature on autonomous geographies often draws its inspiration from the writing of Cornelius Castoriadis (see Chatterton, 2005 and Castoriadis, 1991). However, the concept has also been important "within traditions of autonomous Marxism, social anarchism, anarcho-syndicalism, regional separatism, national socialism, anarcho-primitivism, Zapatismo, ecologism and anti-capitalism" (Pickerill and Chatterton, p. 732).

of settings, including social movements (Chatterton, 2005; de Souza, 2016), food systems (Wilson, 2012) and post-disaster recovery (Jon and Purcell, 2018).

Importantly, autonomy in this sense does not imply an actual separation from other social forms of organization. Rather, it is always "contextual and situated" (Pickerill and Chatterton, p. 731).[26] As Newman (2011) points out, the participants in autonomous spaces "still engage with the 'outside' world, including with the state; people move and live in different social spaces, often simultaneously." It is therefore more helpful think of these "spaces not as fully-formed totalities, but rather as an ongoing form of experimentation" (Newman, p. 356). Thus, the concept of autonomy deployed here is a relational one. It is not a discrete property that groups either have or lack, but rather a relational process of empowerment that emerges from the generative self-organization of a group of people working collaboratively.

Autonomous problem-solvers do not act in a state of complete independence from the state, market, or nonprofit sectors. Instead, they make collective decisions about how to interface strategically with these other domains in ways that preserve (or even expand) their autonomy. For instance, autonomous problem-solvers may occasionally choose to use public grants, raise private donations, or collaborate with a paid-staff nonprofit organizations in order to accomplish certain goals. These choices do not inherently mean that a group has suddenly become coopted, recuperated, or corrupted. It is important to remember that it is (by definition) up to the participants of these projects to decide how they will plug into existing institutions.

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[26] Similarly, Newman (2011) emphasizes that "a particular space can never be said to be fully outside in a self-enclosed, autarchic way. Rather, we should see spaces of autonomy as always contingent and indeterminate" (p. 355).

Autonomous problem-solving often occurs through *grassroots associations*, which are defined as "locally based, significantly autonomous, volunteer-run, formal nonprofit (i.e., voluntary) groups" (Smith, 2000, p. 7). Grassroots associations differ from more established nonprofits not only by their increased reliance on volunteers (as opposed to paid staff), but also in their organizational structure, which due to its size tends to be more participatory and democratic (Kunreuther, 2011). However, autonomous problem-solving does not only occur through grassroots associations, which still assume a formal organizational architecture. It can also occur through what anarchists would call *affinity groups*, which are small, informal, and tightly connected groups of individuals who engage in mutual learning and action. Because they do not have a formal organizational structure, affinity groups are highly participatory and often resort to consensus for making collective decisions (Gordon, 2008).

Although they are engaged in self-organized action, autonomous problem-solvers can (and usually do) still maintain connections to other more formal or established organizations. Individual participants are often involved in (or even employed by) other organizations outside of their autonomous organizing work. In fact, they often act as what organizational theory calls *boundary spanners*, who can marshal knowledge and resources from their connections with these other groups (Levina and Vaast, 2005; Bartel, 2001). It is important to emphasize that autonomous problem-solving typically occurs in the *interstices* of other established organizations. In part, this is what gives participants the flexibility to innovate in ways that more established organization find difficult.

I am certainly not the first to look to the grassroots, rather than to established nonprofits or social entrepreneurs, as a generative space for innovation (Kumar and Bhaduri, 2014; Gupta, 1998; Gupta, 2020). In his work on grassroots associations (GAs), Smith (1997) notes that "GAs

are so flexible and versatile as a societal form of collectivity that they are ideal for social experimentation and innovation" (p. 297). In fact, some of these innovations "are so successful that the business sector or government sector adopts them" (1997, p. 297). Similarly, in a speech to the American Sociological Association in 1981, William F. Whyte argued for more attention to what he calls *social inventions*. These are novel social configurations that are "more or less autonomously created within the organization or community in which they are utilized." He contrasts this with the concept of *social interventions*, which are "brought into an organization or community from the outside" (p.1).

While these scholars rightfully emphasize the broad potential of grassroots innovation, an autonomous problem-solving perspective has a narrower focus. Rather than focusing on any type of innovation that emerges from the grassroots, it specifically draws attention to solutions that are self-managed and self-implemented. Autonomous problem-solving creates solutions that are carried out either by the people experiencing a given problem or allied community members in direct contact with those they are helping. For this reason, it aptly captures the type of problem-solving at work in self-help and mutual aid groups.

Self-help groups are defined as "autonomous, voluntary assemblies of people in similar situations or predicaments, or with the same disease or condition, who join together to cope with and resolve their troublesome issues through sharing knowledge and providing mutual social and emotional support" (Borkman, 2004, p. 428). As evidenced by this description, much of the self-help literature – which is mostly located in nonprofit and voluntary studies – has focused on support groups for individuals struggling with chronic disease or other debilitating conditions

like addiction (Katz, 1993; Archibald, 2007; Borkman, 1999; Riessman and Carrol, 1995).[27] However, the concept of self-help can also be applied more broadly, for instance to the self-determination projects of the Black Power and feminist movements (Borkman, 2007; Riessman and Carroll, 1995). Ultimately, because they involve the direct participation and empowerment of the people affected by a particular problem, self-help groups are a prime example of autonomous problem-solving.

Self-help is also closely related to *mutual aid*.[28] This term originates in the writing of Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin, who conceptualized mutual aid as an inherent tendency towards cooperation and mutual support found not only in human societies, but also in nature (Kropotkin, 1989 [1902]). More recently, anarchists and other community organizers have understood mutual aid as a radical form of community care that occurs in the margins of the state and capitalism. For instance, Dean Spade (2020) describes mutual aid as "collective coordination to meet each other's needs, usually from an awareness that the systems we have in place are not going to meet them" (p. 7). This characterization of mutual aid as the creation of self-organized alternatives to oppressive institutions is mirrored in the Black Panther Party's Services for the People, one of the most well-known and large-scale examples of mutual aid in recent American history. However, as noted in the introduction to this chapter, widespread mutual aid organizing is by no means a purely historical phenomenon. Since the beginning of the COVID pandemic, self-described mutual aid projects have exploded and captured newfound scholarly attention

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[27] This focus on support groups has led to an emphasis on the experiential knowledge shared by participants, which differentiates them from the type of knowledge produced by professional medical services (Borkman, 1997; Borkman, 1999).

[28] Mutual aid is also occasionally discussed in the self-help literature, either as something existing on the same spectrum as self-help (Burns and Taylor, 199), a subcategory of self-help (Riessman and Carroll, 1995), or a distinct type of activity altogether (Borkman, 1999). However, in the broader self-help literature, the concept of mutual aid is often emptied of its more radical political connotations.

(Springer, 2020; Mayo, 2021; Carstensen et al., 2021; Boullosa et al., 2021; Chevée, 2021). Examples include the grassroots tracking of case clusters and hospital wait times in Hong Kong (Spade, 2020) the autonomous production of PPE in the UK (Lachowicz and Donaghey, 2021), an autonomous health and safety network for sex workers in Brazil (Moraes et al., 2020), the Charlottesville Community Resilience Fund (Beutin et al., 2021), the DC Mutual Aid Network (Jun and Lance, 2020), an emerging ecology of free food distribution networks in Chicago (Lofton et al., 2022), and a food and medicine distribution network in Athens (aptly named *Kropotkin-19*) (Travlou, 2021). All of these projects have deployed autonomous problem-solving to grapple with the cascading effects of the pandemic.

As mentioned in the last section, autonomous problem-solving often takes place in connection to larger social movements. In fact, it is closely connected to the social movement concept of *prefigurative politics* (Boggs, 1977; Breines, 1982; Epstein, 1991; Raekstad and Gradin, 2020; Yates, 2020). This concept – which Gordon (2018) describes as "an ethos of unity between means and ends" – helps shed light on the immanent approach taken by autonomous problem-solvers to addressing social issues (p. 522). Rather than advocating for more participation in existing institutions, they create their own self-built spaces of political participation and empowerment. In the words of Antonio Machado: "the road is made by walking" (Machado, 2004).

Conclusion

Taking autonomous problem-solving seriously has a number of political implications. First, it highlights the extraordinary capacity of everyday people to generate innovative solutions to entrenched public problems. While we are often told that complex social problems are best tackled by experts – whether they be academics, policy wonks, or public officials – autonomous

problem-solving democratizes public problem-solving by recognizing the unique knowledge and organizing efforts of everyday people. In many ways, it goes a step beyond literature in critical policy studies and participatory policymaking by considering problem-solving efforts that are intentionally independent from state institutions. This allows us to recognize a much wider diversity of attempts to solve public problems.

By shifting our attention away from the state and more formal elements of civil society, and focusing instead on autonomous practices, we also shift away from a liberal democratic perspective and into a directly democratic one. As Newman writes, attention to autonomous practices "forces us to re-situate the political dimension away from the centricity of the state and towards alternative practices and forms of decision-making" (Newman, p. 359). Rather than locating democracy within representative state institutions, an autonomous problem-solving perspective locates democracy in the more immanent self-governance of autonomous alternatives.

This perspective also resonates with scholarship that seeks to challenge totalizing accounts of society by mapping a more diverse and contested terrain of social organization. Much like Alperovitz (2005, 2013) and Gibson-Graham's (2006) efforts to identify and encourage diverse economic forms, autonomous problem-solving help us recognize a more diverse range of problem-solving forms. Doing so helps challenge the idea that society is thoroughly constituted by state and capitalist domination. Of course, this is not to eclipse the pervasive domination that occurs through these forces, but to remind us of the extensive (and intensive) work that people are doing to create liberatory alternatives in the interstices of oppressive institutions.

It is no coincidence that autonomous problem-solving often occurs within communities that are shut out of mainstream institutions. They often engage in autonomous projects because it is more practical than spending their energy attempting to find a voice in elite spaces. If we are serious about wanting to solve a whole range of public problems, we need to recognize the massive amount of work that marginalized communities have already put into grappling with these problems directly, as well as the self-organized solutions they have already developed. The examples I introduced at the beginning of this section are all the more inspiring in light of the overwhelming opposition that participants faced in their efforts. These projects were forced to organize under extremely difficult conditions and yet were still able to navigate the challenges a world shaped by power. In the following chapters, I investigate how autonomous problem-solving emerges around specific local problems, how it interacts with existing institutions, and how autonomous problem-solvers have built on each other's efforts across space and time.

In Chapter 2, I apply the concept of autonomous problem-solving to the protracted problem of housing in the United States. To help demonstrate the utility of this concept, I provide an overview of historical and contemporary autonomous problem-solving efforts in American housing struggles. I then review the normative arguments for increasing housing autonomy and the difficulties that these type of housing movements face in confronting a landscape already inscribed by property law and its enforcement. Finally, I introduce my two empirical cases and explain the research methodology that informs both studies.

In Chapter 3, I present my first case study of autonomous problem-solving: the creation of the first community land trust by civil rights organizers and land reform activists in 1969. I show how this group of organizers were able to creatively combine aspects of other land reform experiments to create a new model of community-controlled property. In Chapter 4, I present my

second case study: the creation of Dignity Village (a self-managed transitional village) by unhoused Portlanders in 2001. I show how participants in this project were able to create a self-organized alternative to the conventional shelter system on squatted public land. Finally, in Chapter 5 I compare the findings from my two case studies and identify avenues for future research.

Chapter 2: Autonomous Problem-Solving in American Housing Struggles

Introduction

To get a more concrete sense of autonomous problem-solving, this chapter applies it to a specific social problem in the United States: housing. Although studied at length in planning, geography, and urban studies, housing has received relatively little attention in political science. Moreover, the lens through which it is mostly closely examined in political science – the development and implementation of housing policy – reproduces the blind spots laid out in Chapter 1. First, it focuses narrowly on problem-solving efforts that are chanelled through the state. Second, it tends to investigate the design or effects of specific housing policy interventions, rather than how people experiencing housing precarity organize to change their conditions (McClure, 2000; Avery et al., 2005, Freeman, 2003; Acevedo-Garcia et al., 2004; Varady and Walker, 2000; Adkins et al., 2017).

Likewise, most research on the role of the nonprofit/voluntary sector in housing reproduces the blind spots identified in the previous chapter. In particular, this research tends to focus on the problem-solving efforts of established, paid-staff nonprofits rather than grassroots associations and social movement groups (O'Regan and Quigley, 2000; Koebell, 1998; Bratt et al., 1998; Bratt, 2009; Bratt, 2012; Erickson, 2009; Wong, 2018). As expected, the literature on housing movements is much more fruitful for surveying the landscape of autonomous problem-solving in the United States. While some studies are focused primarily on the protest and advocacy elements of American housing movements(Lipsky, 1097; Dreier, 1984), others look more closely at autonomous practices (Vasudevan, 2017; Cahen et al., 2019; Corr, 1999). Most helpful, however, are accounts of autonomous problem-solving that are either produced by

participants themselves or published in news outlets. Below, I draw on these sources to outline some of the ways autonomous problem-solving has shaped American housing struggles.

After demonstrating the prevalence of autonomous housing practices in the United States, I explore normative arguments for encouraging and expanding these practices. In particular, I focus on the writing of Colin Ward and John Turner, both of whom were at the forefront of the self-help housing movement of the late 20th century. Building off their theoretical work, I argue that autonomous approaches to housing are not only useful when there are no alternatives, but also politically valuable in their own right. This is because they enhance the ability of dwellers to exert more control over their environments and everyday lives.

Building and expanding autonomy, however, requires navigating a landscape already constituted by existing property relations. To help conceptualize how autonomous problem-solvers deal with the challenges presented by conventional property regimes, I turn to recent theoretical insights in critical legal geography. This work conceptualizes property as something continually *enacted* rather than settled. It emphasizes the diversity of actually-existing property forms outside of private or state ownership and suggests that property relations can be productively reconfigured through both legal and extra-legal avenues. This distinction directly informs my case selection.

Finally, I introduce the two cases studies that will constitute my third and fourth chapters. The first, New Communities' creation of the first community land trust, is an example of autonomous problem-solving that occurred through primarily *formal/legal* avenues. The second, Dignity Village's creation of the autonomous transitional village model, occurred primarily through *informal/illegal* avenues. I conclude the chapter by explaining the logic of my case selection, my methodological approach, and the methods I used to conduct my research.

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Autonomous Problem-Solving in American Housing Struggles

Autonomous problem-solving has occurred throughout a wide range of American housing movements. The first place we can find it is in tenant-based social movements. Ever since the urbanization of the early 19th century, the primary form of self-organization deployed by struggling tenants has been the creation of tenant unions (or tenant associations). These tenant-run organizations have provided important forms of mutual aid for their members, educated tenants on their legal rights, resisted evictions, held their own press conferences, engaged in rent strikes, and bargained collectively with landlords. Although there are citywide tenant unions, they typically operate through autonomous local chapters organized around specific buildings and owners. Today, there are tenant unions in virtually every major city in the country. The strength and size of these groups has varied over time, but ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, participation in these groups has exploded (Parker, 2022). For instance, the Los Angeles Tenants Union's (LATU) membership doubled – from 4,000 members to 8,000 members – in just the first two months of the pandemic (Black, 2020).

LATU is one of the largest tenant unions in the United States today. It is completely volunteer-run and self-funded by its members, who pay dues of $1-$5 per month (depending on their employment status). They are organized into 14 local chapters, each of which operates autonomously. Although they also advocate for policy change at a local and state level, most of the union's organizing work is focused on directly supporting tenants. They have helped tenants fight evictions and harassment, conducted trainings to educate tenants on their rights (as well as tips on dealing with police and ICE), and recently engaged in the largest rent strike in LA history (Aparicio and Zlutnick, 2018). LATU is also a founding member of the newly-formed Autonomous Tenant Union Network, which describes itself as "a North American collaborative

of tenant unions who have chosen to remain independent of nonprofits, big foundations, and government funding in order to build power that is responsive to and led by tenants" (Who We Are).

It is also worth taking a closer look at eviction defense, an autonomous strategy employed not only by tenant organizations, but also other housing justice groups.[29] Eviction prevention can take a number of forms, from fighting evictions through legal channels to physically blockading eviction courts, as tenant groups successfully did in New Orleans and Richmond in 2020 (Francis, 2020). Typically, however, eviction *defense* refers to a group of people physically surrounding a housing unit to prevent police from carrying out an eviction. This tactic has a long history in the United States. For instance, tenants in the Anti-Rent Movement of the mid-19th century in New York State often came together to "physically prevent[] sheriffs from ousting families" (Madden and Marcuse, p. 152). Moreover, eviction defenses have not only protected renters, they have also been used to protect homeowners from foreclosure-related displacement in the wake of the 2008 housing crisis (Hull, 2018).

Eviction defenses are also closely related to sweep defenses, which protect unhoused encampments from dispersal by the police. In many cities, activists have forms sweep defense networks to respond to immanent threats of displacement. Sometimes, these mutual aid networks function to help those being displaced interface with police and move their belongings safely.[30]

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[29] For example, Portland Emergency Eviction Response (PEER) is a group focused specifically on eviction defense strategies, not wider tenant organizing.

[30] An example of this type of mutual aid network is Stop the Sweeps in Eugene, OR. It operates via a group text that sends out alerts when sweeps are happening, so that volunteers can respond to help those being swept. Often, this involves cop-watching, helping people pack and move their belongings in vehicles, or giving people new tents or other supplies that were lost in the sweep.

In other cases, they mobilize supporters to show up and physically resist sweeps, as was the case in the recent Echo Park sweep defense in LA in 2021 (Martin, 2021).

Public housing tenants have also used innovative forms of self-organization to grapple with their housing problems. Amidst the wider tenants' rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, public housing residents formed autonomous groups to challenge the failures of their housing authorities. In some cities, they even introduced new forms of self-management over their public housing developments. For instance in St. Louis and Newark, tenant associations used rent strikes to pressure public housing officials to turn over significant management roles to the tenants themselves. With the help of other community organizations and consultants, they created tenant management corporations (TMCs) to manage their own public housing buildings. These TMCs set the basic rules for the building, leased the units, provided social services, and oversaw maintenance projects. In both cities, the living conditions in tenant-managed public housing developments drastically improved. These examples were part of a wider wave of experiments in tenant-management, which by 1980 had garnered federal support and included TMCs in nearly a dozen cities (Diaz, 1979; David, 1976; Rabig, 2016; ICF, 1992).

Other innovative housing alternatives have also emerged out of autonomous problem-solving. Limited equity housing cooperatives – which provide a unique form of affordable, collectively-owned, and democratically-controlled housing – were first created by immigrant labor organizations in New York to provide affordable housing to their communities. They also provided their own autonomous spaces and services, including "libraries, cinemas, lecture halls, health clinics, restaurants, cooperative shops, performance spaces, and meeting rooms" (Madden and Marcuse, p. 176). The oldest limited equity cooperative (that still exists today) is the Amalgamated Housing Cooperative, which was started in 1927 in NYC by the Amalgamated

Clothing Workers Union. Today, it encompasses 11 buildings and houses over 1,400 families (Baiocchi, 2018;). As of 2018, there were approximately 425,000 limited (or zero) equity housing cooperatives in the United States (Cooperative Housing International).

Another cooperative housing model creating through autonomous problem-solving is the community land trust (CLT). The first CLT was created by civil rights activists in 1969 to provide collective-owned land for displaced Black farmers in Georgia. The CLT model ensures permanently affordable housing by placing ownership of land in a democratically-managed nonprofit organization, while still allowing private ownership of housing built on that land. I will detail the creation of the first CLT in detail in Chapter 3. Both the CLT and the limited equity housing cooperative models are examples of what has been termed 'third sector housing' or 'social housing' (Baiocchi, 2021). These terms designate "forms of residential ownership that are different from those traditionally employed by either the market or the state; both denote a nongovernmental domain within which the preeminence of social needs over private accumulation is institutionalized—and perpetuated" (Davis, 1994, p. 7). Since their inception, housing activists have used these models to consolidate community-control over housing. For instance, after a long squatting campaign, the Chicago Anti-Eviction Campaign created the Chicagoland Owners Land Trust in order to gain community-control over vacant or neglected properties in the city (Cahen et al., 2019). And in Jackson, Mississippi, Cooperation Jackson has begun converting land into a CLT to keep it under the local control of the Black community and resist gentrification pressures (king, 2016; Akuno and Nangwaya, 2017).

Houseless Americans, in part because they have very little power to influence policymaking through conventional challenges, have often used autonomous action to meet their needs. After Reagan's cuts to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in the

1980s, the National Union of the Homeless (NUH) was created by houseless activists to engage in collective political action. At its height, the NUH had over 15,000 members in 25 local chapters across the United States. Although it engaged in policy advocacy and protest actions – including a march on the capitol – the NUH also engaged in more autonomous forms of action. In 1984 it created its own houseless-run shelter in Philadelphia. And in 1990, it coordinated a simultaneous takeover of dozens of HUD properties across New York, Los Angeles, Oakland, Philadelphia, Chicago, Detroit, and Tucson (McNeil, 2011; Kinoy and Yates, 1990). Although the NUH dispersed in the 1990s, it was revived in 2020 and has been working to rebuild its capacity (National Union of the Homeless).

Unhoused Americans have also engaged in more direct forms of mutual aid to mitigate some of the immediate harms of living on the street. Shantytowns – i.e., informal, self-built structures – and houseless camps have long provided a means of shelter for otherwise unhoused individuals in the United States (Goff, 2016; Parker, 2020). In many cases, these spaces provide a place of refuge, mutual support, and a sense of community for people unable to obtain formal housing (Heben, 2014). In the last three decades, the country has seen an increase in encampments. In the 1990s and 2000s, "dozens of U.S. cities experienced the rise of durable homeless encampments on a scale unseen since the Great Depression" (Herring, p. 285). And a report by the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty suggests there was another major expansion of encampments between 2007-2016 (Tent City USA). Urban studies and geography scholars have argued that these sites have served as important political spaces through which houseless Americans have contested their conditions and reclaimed rights to public space (Sparks, 2017; Sheppard et. al., 2020). While some encampments are mostly geared toward survival and mutual support, others have taken on a more self-conscious political character.

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Many houseless activists have used encampments as visible occupations of public space, particularly in front of city halls.[31]

Other self-organized encampments have served as prefigurative models for new types of transitional housing. Houseless groups like SHARE/WHEEL in Seattle, Dignity Village in Portland, and the Umoja Village in Miami created *autonomous houseless villages*[32] (Mubarak and Rameau, 2020). These villages are spaces in which otherwise homeless individuals live together in informal or minimalist structures, practice mutual aid, govern themselves through democratic processes, and seek to transition residents into more stable housing. They offer an autonomous alternative to the conventional shelter system and have inspired similar projects in cities around the country. Dignity Village, which I will describe in detail in Chapter 4, was an especially influential prototype for an entire wave of self-managed transitional villages – many of which were sanctioned by authorities, some of which were not – across the West Coast (Heben, 2014).

In some instances, squatting can also be considered a form of autonomous problem-solving. Squatting is defined as "living in — or otherwise using — a dwelling without the consent of the owner" (Pruijt, p. 19). [33] There is an important differentiation between "survival squatting" and squatting that takes place in connection with a broader social movement. The former occurs when "illegal occupation is carried out to fulfill urgent needs for shelter" (Herbert,

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[31] For example in 2020, Philadelphia houseless activists set up large mutual aid encampments on city land and refused to move. The city ultimately agreed to give the group 59 vacant public housing units, which would be managed by a new CLT. And in 2021, after a two-month occupation on the land outside city hall, the Kansas City Homeless Union was offered 500 hotel rooms and over 100 affordable housing units by the city

[32] This term was coined by organizers involved in these projects. The emphasize on autonomy is meant to contrast the model with city-managed safe sleep sites.

[33] This differentiates urban squatting from squatting on vacant land, which I will instead refer to as 'occupying' public land.

p. 1). This form of squatting resembles autonomous problem-solving in that it represents a form of direct action in which people facing housing precarity quietly move into vacant properties to meet their immediate housing needs. However, it is often done individually, and therefore does line up with the collective action element of autonomous problem-solving described in Chapter 1.

When squatting takes place through social movements, however, we can find autonomous problem-solving at work.[34] While most contemporary research on squatting movements has focused on Europe, there have also been a number of notable American squatting movements over the past few decades (Lopez, 2013; Cattaneo et al., 2014).[35] One of the most noteworthy, called Operation Move-In, occurred in New York City in the wake of widespread landlord abandonment of deteriorating buildings in the 1960s and early 1970s.[36] This abandonment prompted an initially uncoordinated wave of squatting in the city. However, a more intentional neighborhood movement sprung up in the Upper West Side of Manhattan to resist new plans for urban renewal, which would demolish thousands of housing units and displace low-income tenants. Grassroots resident groups began moving families into vacant buildings to prevent them from being demolished. This intentional squatting movement then expanded to other neighborhoods in the city and forged new connections between the Black

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[34] Often, squatting that is connected to a broader social movement also functions as survival squatting, in that it still helps meet the immediate housing needs of those who are moved into vacant properties. This is what Pruijt (2013) calls "deprivation squatting," which involves activists helping otherwise houseless individuals (or families) into empty homes.

[35] Vasudevan (2017) has argued that most recent wave of squatting movements in Europe and the United States can be understood as an "expression of an *autonomous* understanding of shared city life" (p. 9) and that "these were movements that shared a radical geographical sensibility that operated at a critical distance from the state. Autonomy was linked, in particular, to the occupation and self-management of urban space" (p. 10).

[36] The extent of this abandonment is hard to fully grasp: "By 1970, over 200,000 low-income units had been abandoned by their owners, leaving their occupants without heat or water" (Vasudevan, p. 214).

Panthers, the Young Lords, and I Wor Kuen (a radical organization operating in Chinatown). By the end of 1970 , Operatione Move-In "had successfully placed 150 working-class families in new homes, most of whom were African American or Latino with long experiences of housing security" (Vasudevan, p. 33). Although some of these families were eventually evicted, other were able to stay in place (Dobbz, 2012; Pruijt, 2014; Madden and Marcuse, 2016).

On its own, Operation Move-In represents a prime example of autonomous problem-solving. However, it also – in combination with other spontaneous tenant takeovers occurring at the same time – helped inspire 'urban homesteading' programs in NYC and other cities. Urban homesteading refers to practice of letting tenants move into deteriorating buildings (for a nominal fee), rehabilitate them through 'sweat equity', and gain legal ownership. Cities created urban homesteading programs in direct response to the wave of squatting that occurred during this period. In other words, cities began offering an avenue for formalization for a practice that was already occurring autonomously. This autonomous squatting practice also spawned the creation of organizations like the Urban Homesteading Assistance Board (UHAB) in NYC. This organization sought to help tenants rehabilitate their buildings and convert them into housing cooperatives (Ward, 1974; Turner, 197; Dobbz, 2012). This provides an important example of how autonomously problem-solving can build on itself over time. In this case, the housing cooperative model – created by immigrant labor unions in the early 20th century – could be used as a tool to consolidate collective control over the buildings seized via autonomous squatting campaigns.

Moreover, Operation Move-In is only one of several squatting campaigns in recent US history. In Philadelphia in 1977, activists created their own "Walk-In Urban Homesteading Program" when they placed over 200 people into HUD single-family homes that had been sitting

vacant. About half of these homes were given to their new residents outright, while the rest were offered mortgages or rental agreements (Dobbz, 2012). Then in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now (ACORN) helped coordinate squatting efforts in over a dozen cities.[37] They moved over 200 people into vacant properties (Dobbz, 2012). In some places, squatters created neighborhood recycling programs, community kitchens, and in one instance, even a local credit union. As usual, many squatters were evicted while others were able to remain. For instance, after an initial fight, the city of New York was forced to offer squatters in Brooklyn "access to fifty-eight buildings" as well as technical assistance, a loan, and the opportunity to gain cooperative ownership through a sweat equity program (Vasudevan, p. 219).

In the 1990s, Homes Not Jails – an anarchist group in San Francisco – quietly moved people experiencing houselessness into vacant housing. During this period, they opened up hundreds of vacant housing properties across the city. They also inspired similar groups in other cities to do the same (Parson, 2010). And after the 2008 housing crisis, Take Back the Land in Miami launched a local squatting campaign, moving houseless families into empty homes. They also coordinated a Month of Action in May 2010 in which autonomous 'Local Action Groups' in cities around the country engaged in their own squatting operations (Rameau, 2008; Dobbz, 2012). Although there have not been any major squatting campaigns since, there have been several smaller squatting actions and land occupations. In November 2019, two houseless mothers and their children publicly squatted an investor-owned home in Oakland. Although the families – who were supported by a wider movement called Moms4Housing – were forcibly

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[37] ACORN's squatting campaign was in direct response to its unhappiness with the government urban homesteading programs instituted in the 1970s, which were eventually "shelved" in the 1980s (Vasudevan, p. 218).

evicted, the real estate firm that owned the house later agreed to negotiate with Oakland CLT about buying the property and leasing it to the women. And in March 2020, the Reclaiming Our Homes movement in Los Angeles –directly inspired by Moms4Housing – moved unhoused families into 12 Caltrans-owned homes that been "vacant for decades" (Vantol, 2020; Jaffe, 2020).

Arguments for Housing Autonomy

These examples demonstrate how autonomous problem-solving has been employed by a wide range of American housing movements in their efforts to grapple with housing precarity. In many cases, they have achieved significant results for those involved. Drawing on this rich legacy of autonomous housing practices in the United States, I argue that not only is this mode of problem-solving much more prevalent than common wisdom suggests, but that it can also be an effective method of addressing housing precarity when other avenues have failed. Even further, it offers a politically desirable mode of housing provision that gives people more immediate control over their living conditions.

In many ways, this political potential was recognized in the late 20th century by two intellectual figures: the British anarchist and social historian Colin Ward and the American architect John Turner. Both Ward and Turner were leading advocates of what is now known as 'self-help housing' (Mathéy, 1992; Ward, 1982).[38] In essence, the self-help housing movement argued for "the capacity of poor people to house themselves if helped rather than hindered"

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[38] Self-help housing – much like autonomous problem-solving more generally – usually "involves an incursion into function that would normally be the responsibility of either the public or private sectors who are either unable, or *unwilling*, to provide that service." (Ward, 1982, p. 7)

(Ward, 1985, p. 9).[39] In part, it drew inspiration from a novel understanding of the self-built informal settlements in major cities of the Global South as an autonomous response to rapid urbanization and housing precarity. Turner, had worked for nearly a decade in Peru studying the construction of squatter settlements, where he argued that "far from being the threatening symptoms of social malaise, they were a triumph of self-help which … evolved over time into fully serviced suburbs, giving their occupants a foothold in the urban economy" (Ward, 1977, p. xxxii). After he left Peru, he helped catalyze the study and elaboration of self-help housing practices in the United States (Harms, 1982; Ward 1982; Ward, 1977).

Turner and Ward pointed out that self-building by the poorest members of society is extremely difficult in the United States. This is because of the strength and scope of private property: "Every bit of land belongs to someone, and that someone has the law firmly on his side" (Ward, 1976, p. 80). Even public spaces are routinely cleared of informal settlements. Encampments and shanty towns are seen as ugly and unsafe, instead of as life-protecting shelters for the otherwise houseless individuals.

Although both Turner and Ward were particularly interested in self-built and informal housing, they also analyzed forms of self-help housing in the United States. For instance, Ward was inspired by the public housing TMCs that emerged out of tenant rent strikes and the urban homesteading programs that emerged in response to autonomous squatting campaigns.[40] Drawing on examples like these, as well as on anarchist principles, he argued that housing

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[39] There has been a recent revival of interest in self-help housing in the United States (Durst and Cangelosi, 2021; Bredenoord and Lindert, 2010). In particular, researchers have analyzed the self-help nature of *colonias*, which are informal neighborhoods built primarily by Latino families along the US-Mexico border region (Durst, 2014; Durst, 2016; Durst and Ward, 2014).

[40] In some cases, self-help researchers were also directly involved in these efforts. For instance, Ian Donald Terner – who was published in an edited volume of Turner's called *Freedom to Build* – was one of the founders of UHAB, the organization that helped NYC squatters rehabilitate their buildings and create their own housing cooperatives.

precarity was best addressed "by the direct action of the community" (1976, p. 68). He lamented the fact that "[h]ousing policy assumes that people are helpless and inert consumers and ignores their ability and their yearnings to shape their own environment" (1985, p. 10). Because housing was such a locally contingent phenomenon, residents needed to be granted a large degree of autonomy to forge their own solutions to their unique contexts. However, this was not a popular opinion at the time among public officials. Due to "the scale of the problem" Ward argued that policymakers tended to be drawn to "gigantic solutions rather than a multiplicity of solutions, and rather than help people find their own solutions" (Ward, 1974, p. 112).

Turner also advanced his own arguments for the importance of autonomy in housing. He thought conventional housing practices took power away from 'dwellers' by framing them as passive consumers or objects of policy. Drawing on his research on self-help housing practices, he sought to re-empower residents by increasing their control over all aspects of the housing process:

> When dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contributions in the design, construction, or management of their housing, both this process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being. (Turner, 1977, p. 241)

Turner explicitly used the language of autonomy to describe his participatory approach to housing. He opposed this framework to what he called the "heteronomous" approaches enacted by capitalism and the state. Like Ward, he advocated for a more "pluralist and genuinely democratic system" in which it was recognized that people facing housing precarity know what they need best (Turner, 1972, p. 172). Importantly, Turner also emphasized the need for communication and collaboration between local experiments in housing autonomy. He advocated for the formation of decentralized networks through which local experiments can

share information and resources. Ultimately, he found encouragement in the fact that autonomous housing practices were already so prevalent and sought to support the diverse range of projects that were already underway:

> All over the world there are many people practicing these principles… especially those who have come up against the often disastrous public and private corporate action for ordinary people. They have therefore come to question the principles on which heteronomous (top-down or centrally administered) housing is based. And a rapidly increasing number are preparing or already carrying out radical alternatives. No single activity can be more important than encouraging these pioneers. (Turner, 1977, p. 163)

I take Ward and Turner's arguments about housing autonomy seriously in this project. Although they were limited by the empirical examples available at the time of their writing, they identified a shared political tendency underlying many of these efforts. Today, these arguments about housing autonomy – and more generally, spatial autonomy – have been echoed by scholars of radical geography (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006; Jon and Purcell, 2018; Newman, 2011). For instance, Vasudevan (2017) characterizes contemporary squatting movements as "the expression of an *autonomous* understanding of shared city life" (p. 9). I follow these scholars by looking at squatting actions, as well as other autonomous housing practices, as radical experiments that offer alternative visions of everyday life.

These normative considerations, however, quickly fold back over into practical concerns: Given the desirability of housing autonomy, how can it be established in an environment already carved up into privately-owned or state-managed property? How can autonomous projects find the physical space necessary to take root and expand?

Reappropriating Property

> *The law is for suckers. Rich people don't abide by it and poor people who organize can change it.* – Max Rameau

Groups that use autonomous problem-solving to grapple with housing issues inevitably come up against the challenges of a landscape already shaped and constituted by property. Historically, property has been – and continues to be – a means through which colonialism (Bhandar, 2018), racial oppression (Harris, 1992; Bonds and Inwood, 2017), and economic exclusion (Mitchell, 2001; Feldman, 2004) operate. The ways in which they have done so, however, have varied over time and space. This is because property is not "a fixed entity, or 'thing', but instead as a set of relations that are discursively and materially constituted through everyday power relations" (Bonds, 2019, p. 576). By the same token, because property is a not a fixed or totalized entity, this means it is also pliable to various forms of resistance and reconfiguration from below. The examples provided in the first section of this chapter show that autonomous housing practices have contested and transformed property relations in inventive ways to meet the needs of marginalized groups.

Dominant representations of property (which emerge out of liberal legal discourse) posit it as a relatively stable set of relations that determine how space is parceled up, used, and controlled. We tend to think of property through the simplified representation of the 'ownership model' – through which a property has a clear, singular owner who has near-absolute power over its use. This model assumes that property falls neatly into either private or public categories of ownership. The former typically reduced to individual or corporate ownership, while the latter is reduced to state ownership (Blomley, 2005). However, I draw on Nicholas Blomley's recent work in urban and legal geography to conceptualize property not as a pre-given form, but as a

relational technology that is subject to variation, contestation, and reformulation (Blomley, 2019). He argues that "property is a good deal more labile, multivalent, and complex than dominant mappings suggest" (2004, p. 12). Although he does not shy away from the fact that property relations are conditioned by power, Blomley posits that property relations are continually enacted (rather than settled) and therefore have the capacity to by refashioned through both legal and extra-legal means.

Blomley's framework is inspired in part by Marxist geographers Gibson-Graham and their work on 'diverse economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham, 2013). Gibson-Graham argue that when capitalism is presented and accepted as a self-sufficient totality, alternative economic practices are marginalized and obscured. In other words, conceptualizing capitalism as a totalizing singularity ultimately serves to reify and reinscribe its dominance over everyday life. Therefore, Gibson-Graham argue that the structure of the economy should instead be understood as something continually under construction, or as they put it: "at loose ends with itself" (2006, p. ix). Blomley takes their argument about the economy and transposes it to the realm of property:

> What if we were to similarly depict property "at loose ends," and refuse its circular and settled self-representation? If the city appears settled, perhaps this is more of a 'reality-effect' of the ownership model, than an accurate mapping of property in the world. If we accept property—as defined by the ownership model—as a hegemonized claim, rather than an assured reality, certain possibilities emerge. (2004, p. 14)

Blomley's approach can help us understand some of the ways that autonomous problem-solvers interact with – and even reconfigure – property. In particular, we can differentiate between the ways in which property is challenged or changed through *formal/legal* avenues and

the ways in which property is challenged or changed through *informal/extra-legal* avenues.

Limited equity housing cooperatives, community land trusts, and other forms of third sector

housing are examples of the first avenue. These alternative forms of ownership were created in

order facilitate the democratic management and long-term affordability of land and housing. In

housing cooperatives, for example, residents collectively own their building(s) through a

cooperative corporation that is governed by an elected board of residents. In limited equity

housing cooperatives, there are restrictions placed on how much residents can sell their shares in

the cooperative if they want to leave. These restrictions function to remove the housing from the

speculative market, effectively decommodifying it and preserving long-term affordability for

current and future residents (Baiocchi, 2018). This form of ownership is notable because it

represents a mode of control that subverts conventional notions of private property (in that it is

not owned by an individual or a profit-seeking corporation) and conventional notions of public

property (in that it is not state-controlled). Rather, limit equity housing cooperatives – much like

community land trusts – are a non-market and non-state form of collective ownership that offer a

unique mechanism for establishing community control over land and housing.

Autonomous efforts to grapple with housing issues also interact with property through

informal and extra-legal avenues. Squatting, eviction defenses, and houseless encampments that

make political claims to public space exemplify of this type of action. In all of these cases,

participants transgress conventional enactments of property through alternative (and sometimes

illegal) practices. These types of practices are doubly political in that they challenge existing

property frameworks while simultaneously enacting their own alternative property claims. In

particular, a number of scholars have demonstrated how houseless Americans, far from being

passive subjects of property enforcement, have engaged in efforts to subvert conventional

property schemes (Roy, 2003; Langegger, 2016; Herbert, 2018; Dozier, 2019). For example, squatters who occupy vacant private buildings challenge the failures of the speculative housing market, while also demonstrating how housing distribution can better handled through the direct action of the community in need. Likewise, squatters who occupy vacant HUD or city-owned properties not only challenge the failures of state-managed housing schemes, but also demonstrate the capacity of the houseless to better provide for themselves. Remarkably, in some cases cities have responded to squatting actions by conceding control of squatted units to their new inhabitants. In other words, autonomous housing actions, even when explicitly illegal, have the potential of forcing changes in property relations through direct action.

Case Selection

In the next two chapters, I provide in-depth accounts of two cases in which marginalized communities addressed local housing precarity through autonomous problem-solving. In Chapter 3, I examine how civil rights activists in Georgia responded to the local displacement of Black tenants and farmers by creating the first community land trust – New Communities – in 1969. In Chapter 4, I examine how a group of unhoused Portlanders and their allies responded to local housing precarity and an inadequate shelter system by squatting public land and creating one of the first self-managed transitional villages – Dignity Village – in 2001.

Both groups recognized a need to stake out new places of refuge for those facing housing precarity in their communities. In response, they each obtained land and built their own autonomous housing solutions. I chose these cases, in part, because they demonstrate the capacity for autonomous problem-solving to create durable and lasting solutions to public problems. Both the community land trust model and the self-managed transitional housing model spread and evolved after their initial formulation in these cases. My analysis can help us better

understand how these innovative models were generated in the first place. Moreover, each of these cases involved their own creative reappropriations of property, although through different means. As I will explain in more detail below, New Communities generated the CLT model primarily through a formal/legal approach, whereas Dignity Village generated their village model (at least initially) through an informal/extra-legal approach.

Other important differences exist between these two cases that make for helpful comparisons. New Communities emerged in a rural context to deal with the displacement of Black tenants and farmers in the 1960s, and many of the organizers had significant experience in the civil rights movements to draw on. While they were enabled by these movement connections, they were simultaneously constrained by the racist actions of neighbors and public officials. Dignity Village, on the other hand, emerged in the urban context of Portland in the early 2000s and its participants had much less social movement experience at the outset. They had to create these connections as their campaign developed. However, they were able to establish a few key moments of begrudging support from members of Portland's city council that proved crucial to their project.

In both cases, organizers faced steep challenges in the development of their projects. Each had to employ creative tactics to navigate existing systems of power in their communities. In Georgia, the CLT organizers had to create a novel form of community-controlled land tenure and maintain a financially-viable farm on their land, all while enduring attacks by racist white neighbors and racial discrimination from the USDA. In Portland, the members of Dignity Village had to adapt to frequent police sweeps, deal with NIMBY[41] neighbors, interface with local and

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[41] NIMBY stands for "not in my backyard" and typically refers to residents that oppose new housing developments or social service sites in their neighborhood.

state officials, and find a way to formalize their village while still retaining important elements of its autonomy.

As mentioned above, these cases demonstrate how marginalized communities have engaged with and transformed property relations in creative ways. Organizers in Georgia drew on a rich history of land reform movements in the United States, Britain, India, and Israel to create a novel form of community-controlled land tenure. While the land itself was collectively owned and managed by residents through a non-profit organization, the improvements on the land (including housing) were privately owned by families and individuals. This model removed both the land and housing from speculative markets and the external control of private landlords, ensuring permanent affordability and increased housing security for its residents. This case demonstrates that new forms of property can be (and have been) created that provide a strong element of community- (rather than individual- or state-) control.

In Portland, organizers also challenged and reconfigured conventional property relations. By camping on public land and stubbornly regrouping every time they were swept by police, the members of Dignity Village challenged the city's management of public property by enacting their own claims to it. As one villager said, "We will take public land because we are the public, thank you very much!" The villagers were successful enough in articulating and enacting their claim that the city eventually gave in and offered them a piece of city-owned land to build their transitional village. This case shows how the enactment of public property can be challenged and reconfigured from below through extralegal occupations and experimentation with alternative housing practices.

While these examples may seem insignificant in relation to wider battles over housing policy, they each had their own widespread impacts. Although originally developed in rural

Georgia, the CLT model was picked up in urban areas as a way to provide permanently

affordable housing, resist gentrification and foreclosure, and establish pockets of community-

controlled land and housing. Today there are over 250 CLTs in the United States and dozens

more around the world. Dignity Village has also had far-reaching impacts. The experimental

transitional village worked so well that it inspired similar projects in other cities, both by via

bottom-up organizing and top-down policy implementation by city officials. Today, it is

common practice for large west coast cities to employ a variety of minimalist transitional

housing sites, from sanctioned encampments to tiny house eco-villages. If this form of problem

solving can have such generative impacts on a national (and even international) scale, it is

worthwhile to investigate the concrete practices and processes through which it has occurred.

Methodology and Methods

> *The aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions*
> *under which something new is produced (creativeness).* – Gilles Deleuze

While there exists a sizeable literature on the spread, adaption, and impact of these

alternative housing models, my project focuses instead on the autonomous problem-solving that

generated both alternatives in the first place.[42] Most of the existing literature on Dignity Village

has focused on the impact of the village after it was recognized and sanctioned by the city, not

the organizing process through which it originally formed (Finley, 2003; Mosher, 2010;

Weissman, 2012; Herring 2014).[43] Likewise, most of the attention to community land trusts has

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[42] This reflects the same blindspot I identified in policy studies in Chapter 1. Namely, that there is an overemphasis on policy *diffusion* and *impacts* that inadvertently obscures important questions about policy *invention*.

[43] Ozanne et al. (2018) and Heben (2014) give some attention to process by which Dignity Village was created. The former uses it as a brief example of a larger theory of 'tactical urbanism,' while the latter uses it in a larger comparative study of tent cities.

been focused on their more widespread implementation and impacts rather than on the roots of the model itself (Thompson, 2020; Thaden and Rosenburg, 2010; Miller, 2015; Hackett et al., 2013; Cahen et al., 2019).[44] However, because I am interesting in tracing the real-time, inventive process through which these alternatives were created, I situate my empirical inquiry around the organizing efforts of the original autonomous problems-solvers in Georgia and Portland.

My approach to studying these instances of autonomous problem-solving is heavily influenced by Berk and Galvan's (2013) concept of creative syncretism. This concept comes out of a perspective that understands institutional change as primarily a recombinatory process. In other words, actors relate to their institutional environment "not as a guide, constraint, or script, but as the raw material for improvisation and transformation" (Berk et al.m, p. 3). As such, a creative syncretist approach requires careful empirical attention to what they describe as the "bubbling sound of improvisation and new solutions overflowing the bounds of institutionally defined roles and routines" (Berk and Galvan, p. 52). The selection and description of my cases have come out of an attempt to find and amplify this sound.

Importantly, Berk and Galvan emphasize that creative syncretism is not only practiced by those seeking to transform their conditions from below. It is also employed by those in power who are attempting to prolong the life of existing institutions. As such, my cases will also consider some of the improvisational actions of those who sought to prevent autonomous problem-solvers from subverting the status quo.

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[44] An important exception is the work of John Emmeus Davis, who has chronicled much of the early history of New Communities and the wider community land trust movement (Davis, 2010; Davis, 2016). I draw heavily on Davis' work in Chapter 3.

Ultimately, creative syncretism provides a useful framework for understanding the type of political agency at work in my cases. This is because it draws our attention to actors' relational encounters with, and creative reconfiguration of, the mangle of political forces in which they find themselves embedded. Moreover, focusing this type of agency uncovers "sites of negotiation, alliance, conflict, and compromise that go unexamined in structural analysis" (p. 53).

As I argued in Chapter 1, many existing approaches to studying public problem-solving, especially in policy studies, emphasize questions of structure over questions of agency. Even some of the most generative work on the democratization of policymaking – in the literature on democratic experimentalism – falls into this pattern. The focus of this work is less on studying how people have created new (and reconfigured old) institutions and more on parsing out what sort of institutional design principles that scholars and decision-makers can take away from these seemingly brief moments of agency. What this does, however, is privilege the idea that democratizing public problem-solving simply requires getting the structure or institutional design right, rather than focusing on the emergent, relational practices that people employ to change the environments in which they find themselves. The former implies that public-problem solving is an objective puzzle to be solved by the rational analysis of experts, while the latter recognizes public problem-solving a co-produced (and contested) site of action. I argue that by focusing on the creative practices through which groups of people have reconfigured their conditions through their own self-organization, we can create knowledge that arms and encourages others to undertake similar projects in their own communities.

This perspectival shift of figure and ground – from a focus on policy and institutional design to a focus on autonomous action and the agency of small groups to change their

conditions – raises new questions about social problem solving. How do autonomous problem-solvers navigate a broader ecosystem of powerful institutions and actors? How do these groups creatively engage with, draw from, reappropriate, and reconstitute the institutional landscape in which they emerge? What tactics do they employ? How do they make decisions and resolve internal disagreements? How do they respond to attempts by other powerful actors to halt or coopt their efforts?

In order to conduct the empirical investigation of my cases, I draw on a diverse range of sources. These include oral histories, activist-generated archives, my own and others' interviews with key actors, news articles, secondary historical accounts, and public events in which participants reflect on their experiences. Throughout, I have placed a special emphasis on the firsthand accounts of those directly involved in these events. This gives an inside perspective of the desires, debates, and decisions animating these groups as they confronted unexpected challenges in the course of their campaigns.

For the New Communities case, I draw heavily on the historical research of John Emmeus Davis, who is largely responsible for documenting the birth of the CLT model and movement in the United States. In addition to interviewing Davis, I also interviewed Bobby Broadway, a volunteer who had spent time living and working on New Communities' collective farm. Although I was unable to interview most of the primary organizers themselves, I draw on other interviews they have given in print and in a short documentary on New Communities' origins. I was also fortunate enough to attend the 50th Anniversary Celebration of New Communities in 2019, where I heard from Shirley Sherrod and others who were directly involved in the original project. It was there that I also received access to New Communities'

original 500+ page master planning document, which provided invaluable look at group's history, vision, and planning process

For the Dignity Village case, I am grateful to have access to on an online archive of firsthand accounts, news articles, and press releases compiled by Jack Tafari, one of the original organizers of the village. Many of the documents in this archive were written by Tafari himself during the campaign. I also conducted extensive interviews with Ibrahim Mubarak (another one of the original organizers), Mark Lakemen and Marc Jolin (supporters of the village during its creation), and Erik Sten (a Portland City Commissioner at the time of the village's creation). Additionally, I draw on footage captured by Heather Mosher and Wendy Koppel during key moments of the campaign. Although most of her research has focused on the development of the village after its formalization, Mosher's timeline of events for Dignity Village in the appendix of her dissertation has also been a valuable resource in reconstructing an account of its early history.

Chapter 3: New Communities and the Community Land Trust

This is an effort to establish alternative, and relatively independent institutions to serve the poor within the context of the pervasive larger society. It constitutes an experiment in initiating social change at the grassroots, rather than at the center—the national policy level. Full and legitimate participation, not tokenism, is essential to its success.
– Bob Swann and Simon Gottschalk

Introduction

This chapter will recount the creation of the first community land trust (CLT) as an example of autonomous problem-solving. This case is not easily explained by any of the conventional accounts of public problem-solving I outlined in the first chapter. The CLT was not created by policy entrepreneurs selling an idea to policymakers. Nor was the CLT created through a participatory policymaking institution, a paid-staff nonprofit organization, or an advocacy group. Rather, it was created and implemented by a group of organizers who drew on their diverse connections to build an autonomous solution to the problems facing their community.

The community land trust emerged out of an attempt to grapple with the severe land and housing precarity facing Black residents of southwest Georgia. There was little respite to found through conventional channels. Therefore, a group of organizers came together to create their own self-organized solution to these problems. They drew on their personal connections to the civil rights movement, the southern cooperative movement, and international land reform movements in order to create an alternative form of property that could meet their needs.

As I will show, the organizers involved in this project – eventually known as New Communities – exercised their autonomy by making strategic, collective choices about how they would interact with market and state institutions on their own terms. They also sought to create a housing solution that was itself autonomous, since it placed control of land and housing in the

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hands of residents and community members rather than individual private owners or state authorities. Unlike the case in my next chapter, they did not engage in any illegal or even confrontational activity in the course of their campaign. With the real threat of violence from police and white supremacist groups, they could not risk squatting vacant land like the participants in my next case. Instead, their only option was to purchase a piece of land outright. Unfortunately, they were never able to pay off their land and eventually faced foreclosure. However, they succeeded in the long run by pioneering a new type of community-controlled land ownership that has since been instituted in dozens of cities across the country.

Responding to Displacement

In the 1960s, Black tenants and farmers in the rural south faced racial discrimination, poverty, and severe land and housing precarity. These problems were particularly acute in the rural counties around Albany in southwest Georgia. This area had high levels of hunger, illiteracy, and substandard housing compared to the rest of the state. During this time, thousands of Black residents lost access to their land as the average farm size increased, tenant farms (mostly worked by Black farmers) declined, and farmland became highly consolidated into white hands. Often, this process occurred through racial discrimination in lending, which denied any help to struggling Black farmers while providing generous assistance to white landowners (McClaughry Associates, 1970).

In fact, it is estimated that the number of Black farmers in the United States dropped by 93% between 1940 and 1974 (Daniel, 2015). Many of those who were displaced moved to cities in search of opportunities for work, while others turned to migrant labor. This phenomenon was particularly acute in southwest Georgia. In just the ten years between 1950 and 1960, over

36,000 people left southwest Georgia, the majority of whom were Black (McClaughry Associates, 1970).

The mass land loss and displacement faced by Black residents of southwest Georgia attracted the attention of civil rights organizers involved in the Albany Movement. One of the first to become involved in organizing a response to these rural struggles was Charles Sherrod. Sherrod had moved to Albany in 1961 as a community organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). However, rather than focusing narrowly on the city of Albany, he directed his attention to the rural counties surrounding it. He launched the Southwest Georgia Project, an ambitious voter registration campaign that functioned as the "rural counterpart of the Albany movement" (Swann and Gottschalk, 1970). With a small team, Sherrod travelled through southwest Georgia talking to Black tenants and farmers, organizing mass meetings, and registering people to vote.

At one of these mass meetings, Charles Sherrod met a young woman named Shirley Miller. Miller was a resident of Baker County and was also intent on transforming the conditions of Black Georgians. When she was 17, her father had been shot and killed by a white neighbor, who was never charged. Afterwards, she resolved to stay in southwest Georgia and do something to change it. She and Charles Sherrod were married in 1966 and together they devoted themselves to finding a way to address the imminent needs of Black tenants and farmers (Lim, 2020).

Figure 3.1. Charles Sherrod talking to a family on their porch in Southwest Georgia

By the late 1960s, the disenfranchisement of Black farmers became even more intensified. The wave of voter registration spurred by Charles Sherrod's Southwest Georgia Project prompted retaliation from white residents and landowners (Davis, 2010). Newly registered Black voters were targeted and kicked off their land and out of their housing. This new wave of displacement pushed the Sherrods into immediate action; they had to try something new. Their main goal became finding a way to securely hold onto land for Black residents. Luckily, there were other organizers who not only began to converge on the same problem, but who brought in new ideas around collective land ownership as a means to secure a material base for improving the lives of Black southerners. Soon, an informal affinity group of organizers began to form around this project, each of whom brought their unique resources to the campaign.

Through their civil rights organizing work, the Sherrods were connected to Slater King, one of the main leaders of the Albany Movement. King was a real estate broker who used his business to help secure affordable housing for Black residents in Albany. Slater and his wife

Marion – who had also been at the forefront of the Albany protests – had also became attuned to the land and housing precarity of Black residents of nearby rural counties. Like the Sherrods, they were interested in a way to secure land for those were being displaced.

Through a mutual involvement in Koinonia Farm[45] -- a nearby intentional community that sought to provide a prefigurative model for racial equality in the South – the Kings befriended land reformer and activist Robert Swann. Swann was directly involved in a wider movement for the creation of community-controlled land in the United States and was crucial in helping piece together a novel form of land ownership for the project. He and his collaborator, Ralph Borsodi, were inspired by the recent Gramdan land reform movement in India, in which a village's land was held in trust and then leased to families and individuals. After visiting the rural South and establishing a relationship with Slater King, Swann believed that this type of community-controlled land tenure could help provide secure land and housing for poor Black Georgians. He and Slater King therefore started "talking about the possibility of a 'Gramdan Movement in America' serving black farmers in the South who had been deprived of access to land" (Davis, 2010).

This vision for a new type of community-controlled land tenure in the rural South soon caught the attention of Fay Bennet, the executive secretary of the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF). Since the 1930s, the NSF had worked to improve the lives of poor farmers through advocacy efforts, literacy campaigns, and agricultural cooperatives. In 1966, Fay Bennet attended a land reform conference hosted by Ralph Borsodi and Bob Swann. She took these

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[45] The intentional community at Koinonia was an important precursor to New Communities' farm in Leesburg. As Davis explains, "Koinonia provided Bob Swann and Slater King with a compelling vision of a cooperative agricultural community that had been created, in part, to promote economic self-sufficiency for low-income people, a community supported by a larger network of sympathizers" (Davis, 2010).

ideas back to the NSF, which became an important supporter in the development of a new land trust model. Bennet and the NSF agreed that such a model could help displaced Black farmers secure much-needed agricultural land (Davis, 2010). The initial affinity group therefore acted as boundary-spanners, drawing on wider community resources through the NSF, civil rights connections, and the wider land reform movement to develop a grassroots response to rural housing precarity in Southwest Georgia.

Early Stages

In 1968, the NSF helped send a small team of organizers to Israel to study the land tenure systems of the Jewish National Fund. The delegation to Israel included many of the organizers already mentioned, including Slater and Marion King, Charles Sherrod, Bob Swann, and Fay Bennet. They were also accompanied by Lewis Black of the Southwest Alabama Farmers' Cooperative Association, Albert Turn of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and Leonard Smith of the NSF. The team was interested in the way the Jewish National Fund held land in trust – removing it from market speculation – and leased it directly to farmers. During the visit, they were particularly inspired by the *moshav* model, which featured a balance between individual plots and larger cooperative farming efforts (International Independence Institute, 1972).[46] The team was enthusiastic about applying what they learned to the situation in the South. When they returned, Bennet wrote:

> The underlying principle of the Jewish National Fund, namely, that the land is held in
>
> trust for all the people of Israel in perpetuity and is not to be bought and sold in

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[46] The *moshav* model contrasts with the more communal *kibbutz* model, in that it retains an emphasis on individual families and gives a portion of the profits from cooperative farming back to individual families (International Independence Institute, 1972)

speculation, is paramount. We believe that a structure based upon a similar principle is needed to make possible the acquisition of tracts of contiguous land in the rural South on which to resettle displaced sharecroppers and tenant farmers and to make possible the development of communities with a viable economic base. (Davis, 2016, p. 8)

After their return from Israel in July 1968, the team hosted a meeting in Atlanta to present their ideas. In doing so, they were intentional about creating a participatory process through which the wider Black community could help determine the trajectory of the project. The meeting was attended by a number of major southern civil rights organizations, including the Southern Regional Council, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives, and the Southern Rural Project. At the meeting, the core team proposed the creation of a cooperatively-owned farm in southwest Georgia. This alternative property form, they argued, could be a way for Black residents to hold onto large amounts of land and build economic power through collective agriculture. Synthesizing the influences from Borsodi and Swann, the Grandham movement in India, and the *moshav* communities they had visited in Israel, the proposed farm would have "owner-occupied housing on half-acre homesteads clustered around a village center, surrounded by open fields that were cooperatively farmed. The land underneath this new town would be owned in common—leased out for individual and cooperative use, but never resold" (Davis, 2016, p. 9).

At the meeting, some of the attendees pushed back on the idea of holding the land in trust and leasing it to individuals. There were hesitant at the idea of foregoing individual ownership, which was the conventional strategy for empowering Black farmers. However, Sherrod and the others were able to convince those in attendance that collective ownership was the most promising way to hold onto land. Poor farmers who mortgaged their land often lost it to

creditors. Once owned as a land trust, however, the land could be removed from speculation and leased at a stable, affordable price from the collective (International Independence Institute, 1972). The community ownership model also leveraged the collective economic power of its members in a way that was more than the sum of its parts. It was envisioned "as a way for African Americans to gain a stronger voice in a region where their collective political and economic influence was slight" (Davis, 2016, p. 9).

A follow-up meeting in September discussed some initial principles for the lease-holding agreements and began developing a more robust organizational structure. At this stage, the initial affinity group expanded and concretized into a more formal grassroots association. At first, the preliminary board would be completely open; anyone who attended meetings was considered a member and could vote on decisions. However, after a site had been selected, a smaller board would be selected that included members of the local community. Those that were going to live on the land would have a direct say in the process of its development. At the September meeting, attendees created a series of committees – which included legal, land acquisition, and fundraising teams – to begin the process of establishing a collective farm in Southwest Georgia (International Independence Institute, 1972). The challenge for the group was how they could interface strategically with the market and state while still retaining a significant amount of autonomy.

At the next meeting in October, the attendees made the decision to hold the land under a nonprofit organization rather than a legal trust. This granted the group much more flexibility to borrow money, which was necessary to secure a piece of land. This is because a trust "might require getting court approval on every transaction, while a corporation would be legally empowered to borrow money and pay interest to acquire capital for land purchase" (International Independence Institute, p. 20). Attendees also unanimously decided on the name for their non-

profit organization: New Communities, Inc. Its mission statement was simple: "A nonprofit organization to hold land in perpetual trust for the permanent use of rural communities." (International Independence Institute, p. 20). In March of 1969, New Communities' by-laws were approved and its permanent board was selected, which included Slater King as president and Fay Bennet as secretary (Davis, 2010).[47]

Land Acquisition and Planning

In order to find a piece of land (with a buyer willing to sell to Black buyers), the group once again leveraged the unique resources of its members. With the help of Slater King's real estate connections, New Communities was able to find a 5,735 acre plot for sale near Leesburg, Georgia. However, before the land could be transferred into a community-owned property, it first had to be purchased through conventional market relationships. The NSF was able to provide a $50,000 grant for a one-year hold on the land, but the group still had to raise $1,030,000 to complete the purchase. They faced immense obstacles. In April 1969, in the middle of this process, Slater King was suddenly and tragically killed in a traffic accident. King's death nearly derailed the entire project, but New Communities pressed on with Charles Sherrod as its new president (Davis, 2010).

After negotiating with Prudential Life Insurance, New Communities was allowed to take over the existing mortgage on the land. However, the group still owed over a half a million

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[47] It is important to note that while a formal nonprofit organization was created as a component of the community land trust project, the project itself was not initiated by an existing paid-staff nonprofit organization. Rather, operating in the interstices of existing organizations, a number of individual organizers came together on their own accord to develop an autonomous project. Out of this process emerged New Communities, the more formal organizational body that would serve as a primary mechanism through which individuals could participate in the larger project. Therefore, I use the term New Communities to refer to not only to the legally-designated nonprofit organization created under that name, but also the wider sphere of organizers and volunteers directly involved in the project.

dollars by the one-year deadline. In addition, white farmers in the area put pressure on the white

owners of the land to back out of the deal. Once again, it seemed like the project was doomed.

But after an immense effort, the remaining money was raised – rather miraculously – through an

extensive series of small loan and donations from church groups. Because many of the checks,

which were written in New York, had to be flown into Albany to be validated, New

Communities barely made the deadline for the deal on January 9, 1970.[48]

Figure 3.2. New Communities' farm near Leesburg, GA

Securing the deal for the land was a major victory for the organizers. The property

purchased by New Communities became the largest single piece of land owned by Black

Americans at that time. This finally gave the group a physical space in which to actualize their

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[48] It is hard to overstate how close New Communities came to missing the deadline for the deal: "The checks to close the deal were New York-drawn and had to be certified through the local Albany bank to be satisfactory to the owners and the lawyers. A committee of eight - lawyers and others - worked in New York to process the checks the day before the closing. The only flight that would get them to Albany in time to certify the checks the next morning left at 1 :00 A.M., but when they boarded the plane it was discovered that a defective door might force the flight to be scrubbed. Nevertheless, with some ingenuity the flight took off, the fate of the New Communities experiment virtually hanging on the rope the passengers used to hold the door shut during the flight!" (International Independence Institute, p. 23)

vision of cooperative farming and community development. Shirley Sherrod noted the sense of power that came with this reality:

> I think Black people, even if they were not involved, felt proud. That we could actually get our hands on that much land. You know, land meant power. You know, land established you as somebody. (Cohen and Lipman, 2016)

With the land secured, New Communities began a series of participatory planning meetings on the farm. In the winter of 1970, they also hosted a large charrette[49] in Albany that gathered over on hundred people (including prospective residents) interested in the project (International Independence Institute, 1972). The core team of organizers were "committed to a planning process which assure[d] maximum participation in decision making on the part of the potential and actual residents of the town." (Swann & Gottschalk, 1970).

Figure 3.3. New Communities hosts participatory planning sessions on the farm

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[49] A charrette is "a type of extended encounter session first used in France as a planning tool" (International Independence Institute, p. 24).

A NEW COMMUNITY FOR SOUTHWEST GEORGIA

Submitted by
McClaughry Associates, Inc.
2100 M Street, N. W.
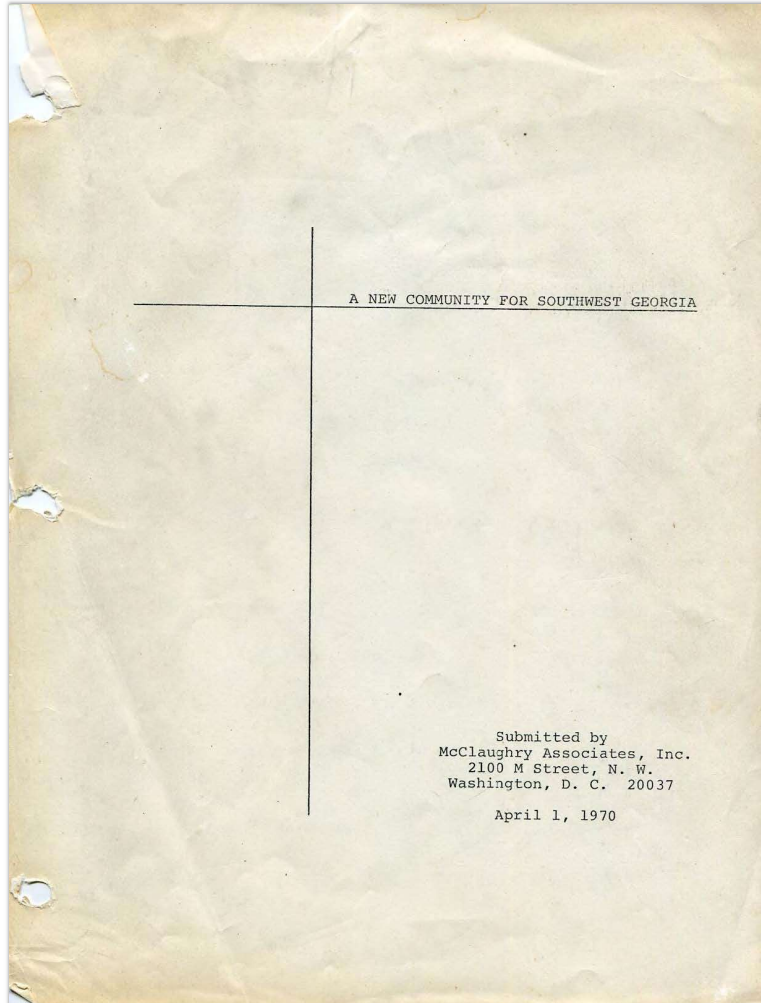Washington, D. C. 20037

April 1, 1970

Figure 3.4. New Communities' comprehensive planning document

The decisions from these meetings were then developed into a 530-page master planning document entitled "A New Community for Southwest Georgia (see Figure 3.4)."[50] This document – only recently rediscovered and digitized in 2019 – presented an incredibly comprehensive plan for the development of the site. In its introduction, the document frames the project as an alternative means of addressing to the plight of poor Black Southerners:

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[50] A $98,000 grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity helped New Communities hire community organizers for the planning process, as well as a professional planning firm – McClaughry Associates, Inc. – to help create the planning document (McClaughry Associates, I-7).

Hundreds of thousands of rural Southern families, lacking both occupation skills and access to adequate social services, face a bleak pair of options: continuing grinding poverty in their present location, or relief rolls in an urban ghetto. The project described here offers a third alternative: a viable new community with a range of occupational and educational choices, services sufficient to the needs of the rural poor, and a framework for democratic participation and control. (McClaughry Associates, I-1)

The planning document laid out an ambitious blueprint for the new community. This included the development of agricultural lands, housing for up to two hundred families, an elementary school, a day care center, and a retail center near the highway on the edge of the site (Davis, 2016). A waiting list of over 500 families was created for those hoping to live on the land. Central to the vision of New Communities was its insistence that "the web of rural poverty must be grasped whole" (McClaughry Associates, I-2). Shirley Sherrod recounts these early (and exciting) days of planning:

[W]e realized we couldn't do just housing – [residents] needed jobs, they needed food to eat, so you need to grow that – you couldn't just deal with one part of a new community, you had to plan everything. (Sherrod, 2019)

Although the planning for these developments had been carried out autonomously by organizers and potential residents, the group sought out public funding to help finance these projects. New Communities planned to fund most of these sweeping developments using a $1 million implementation grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity (EOE). However, they never received the funds. Georgia's governor at the time, Lester Maddox, was a resolute opponent of civil rights. Maddox refused to sign off on the OEO grant – effectively blocking it. He disparagingly referred to New Communities as "Sharecroppers' City" (Davis, 2016).

Without these funds, the community could not afford to build the new housing they had originally envisioned. Therefore, they relied on their own labor and resources to develop the land. Within one year of the purchase, all the existing houses on the land were repaired so that families and volunteers could move in. One house was turned into a day care facility, and another was used for a new education program for young people. During that first year, over one thousand acres of the land were used to grow corn, soybeans, watermelon, peanuts, and hay. In this early stage, New Communities was determined to become a highly productive farm so that it could support its inhabitants, pay off its debt from the original land purchase, and secure the land for long-term community use. In the words of Shirley Sherrod: "We couldn't build homes, we couldn't implement all of the many plans we had put in place. But we could hold onto the land by farming. And that's what we were doing" (Cohen and Lipman, 2016).

"Something for Ourselves"

During the first few years of its existence, New Communities faced harsh opposition. The representative for Georgia's 2nd district labelled the leaders of the community as communists. The farmers also faced sabotage, intimidation, and attacks by white neighbors. Racists diluted the community's fertilizer, shot into buildings, and set fires on the property. They also pressured others to boycott the New Communities' products (Davis, 2016; Cohen and Lippman, 2016). Both Charles and Shirley Sherrod were surprised by the level of resistance they faced, given the fact that New Communities was a self-help project. Charles Sherrod later remarked:

Some of us were naïve enough to believe that, having been called lazy, not up to anything, ignorant, that white people would praise us that we're finally doing something

for ourselves, on our own, with our own money, with our own resources, and sticking

together. (Cohen and Lipman, 2016)

Shirley Sherrod also noted her surprise:

I just didn't think people would fight you when you're trying to simply help yourself.

You're not asking them for anything. So I was really shocked at the opposition. I mean,

they just came at us in every way to try to stop us, to block us, to do anything to get that

land away from us. (Cohen and Lipman, 2016)

Despite all these obstacles, New Communities managed to function remarkably well for

over a decade. About two dozen people – including adults and children – were permanent

residents on the land. Their agricultural revenue enabled them not only to meet their yearly debt

payments on the land, but also to expand their farming operations year-by-year. They produced a

wide diversity of crops and livestock, including sugar cane, squash, okra, strawberries, collard

greens, grapes, cattle, and hogs. They also made their own bacon, sausage, and smoked ham.

Many of these products were sold wholesale, while others were sold in New Communities' Little

Farmer's Market, which was located near the highway on the edge of their land. The group's

farming and retail operations served as a way to plug into (and persist within) a wider

environment of market relationships while still pursuing a collective form of community

development on the land.

New Communities employed about twenty people, some of which lived in the wider

community around Leesburg. When asked about employing people from outside communities in

a 1981 interview, Charles Sherrod stated: "There's no such thing as *outside* to us. We're not an

inside community as such. We are a community, but we are not a *concrete* community" (Reader,

p. 198). In fact, New Communities attracted a large number of volunteers who came to help work the farm, some of whom were involved for years. These included college students from all over the country, graduate students from the seminary Charles Sherrod had attended in New York, and local supporters in Southwest Georgia.

Figure 3.5. New Communities' Farmers Market

I had the chance to talk with one of these volunteers at the 50th Anniversary Celebration of New Communities in 2019. In the 1960s, Bobby Broadway was a resident of nearby Baker County and an active participant in the civil rights movement. It was through local civil rights organizing that he met Charles Sherrod. After New Communities was founded, he volunteered – with support from the AmeriCorps Vista program – on the cooperative farm for three years.

I saw it as definitely being connected to civil rights, for the mere fact that… a large population of African-Americans lived on either plantation owned lands or private

landowners that would control their activities. So New Communities was like the North Star or the promised-land kind of, because if you got kicked off [your land] you knew you had a place you could go. That gave people the ability to express themselves and fight for what they thought was right. (Broadway, 2019)

When I asked him about the atmosphere at New Communities compared to other farms he had worked at, Broadway emphasized the open and deliberative environment on the farm:

The main thing… the big difference was everyone could say what they wanted to say. Now, whether or not what they wanted was instituted or put in place is another story, but at least you had freedom of mind. You didn't feel the pressure of being fired, because someone disliked you or you didn't meet a production quota. So it was, for lack of a better word, more relaxed, less stressful. (Broadway, 2019)

New Communities gave participants a collective project that respected the input and experience of those involved. In fact, Broadway said what struck him the most about New Communities' work was its embodiment of the ideal of self-determination for Black Americans:

Well, I'll say in particular, for African-Americans – the fact that we can come together, we can formulate, we can design our own standards, and become self-determining without outside influence… that was the greatest inspiring and motivational factor about New Communities, was the self-determination factor. (Broadway, 2019)

Despite all its progress, New Communities' entire project was suddenly challenged in 1981, when a severe drought hit the region. Because New Communities' farm lacked an irrigation system, this drastically affected the productivity and profitability of farming operations. Other imperiled farmers in the area were able to secure federal loans to get through

the crisis. New Communities attempted to do the same, but they were once again met with resistance. Shirley Sherrod recounts the discrimination the group faced when attempting to get a loan from the Farmer's Home Administration (FHA):

> We were doing quite well after a while. We could make enough money to buy the land notes and expand the farm operation. But then we had a drought. And followed by a second year of drought. And so we decided, just like all farmers were doing, to go to Farmer's Home Administration to borrow money. The farm manager, my husband, went over to the office in Dawson, Georgia, and the guy said, 'You'll get a loan here over my dead body.' And he meant it. (Cohen and Lipman, 2016)

Needless to say, New Communities did not get the FHA loan. This meant they could not afford to install an irrigation system to save their crops. These agricultural and financial problems snowballed through the early 1980s. After a failed effort to secure more funding, the community faced foreclosure and were kicked off the land in September 1985. Although they were unable to pay off the land and secure it for future community development, their autonomous problem-solving efforts were not in vain. Other organizers would later transform the CLT model initiated by New Communities into a far-reaching movement for community control over land and housing in the United States.

Figure 3.6. A collage of images from New Communities

CLT Model and Legacy

How can social innovation be nurtured, yet excessive isolationism be avoided?
– Swann and Gottschalk, 1970

The major innovation of New Communities' experiment – what set it apart from previous

land trust models – was its incorporation of input from the wider community in which it was

immersed. In other words, it was intentional about not becoming a sealed-off enclave. In fact, it

could not have survived as long as it did without support from members of the wider community:

These activists understood that such a radical experiment in racial advancement could

only survive in the hostile environment of southwest Georgia through the continuing

participation of sympathetic outsiders who might never live at New Communities

themselves. When Swann and his colleagues got around to suggesting an organizational

structure for their new model, therefore, they saw the merit of involving a larger,

supportive community in guiding and governing the CLT. (Davis, 2010)

This element is what ultimately distinguishes a land trust from a *community* land trust.

New Communities' had implemented this ethos in their everyday practices, but it became

formalized by later CLTs into a three-part board structure[51] that set aside a portion of seats for residents of the wider community. This community ethos – which some CLT veterans worried is minimized in contemporary CLTs – is what makes these projects more than just a policy tool for stable and affordable housing.

This offers important insights for how we should conceptualize autonomy. For New Communities, autonomy was not about a separation from all aspects of the surrounding community. Rather their autonomous problem-solving process necessitated a set of strategic connections with the surrounding community that enabled them to sustain themselves. While it is easy to picture autonomy solely in terms of a group's ability to confront oppressive institutions on their own terms, it is just as important to understand how autonomous problem-solvers carefully cultivate positive relationships with supportive elements outside of their immediate circle.

Moreover, the autonomous problem-solving efforts of New Communities had widespread impacts that were impossible to imagine at the time. The evolution of the CLT model provides an incredible example of how autonomous problem-solving efforts can build on themselves over time. Although the residents of New Communities' farm were ultimately kicked off their land, their collective experiment inspired an expansive CLT movement in the United States and beyond. Even before New Communities' lost their land, two other rural CLTs had been started in the late 1970s – one on the coast of Maine and the other in the Appalachian Mountains of east Tennessee. In 1980, the first urban CLT – the Community Land Cooperative of Cincinnati

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[51] In this common board configuration for later CLTs, roughly one third of board seats would be held by leaseholders (residents of the CLT), one third by non-leaseholder residents of the surrounding community, and one third by local "experts" or representatives of the public interest.

(CLCC) – was created to curb gentrification in the West End neighborhood. By 1990, CLTs had been established in at least six more cities.

Today, there are over 291 CLTs in the United States and dozens more abroad. CLTs have been shown to resist gentrification, they have significantly lower rates of foreclosure than conventional forms of ownership, and they have served as a medium through which communities have democratized land and housing (albeit on a small scale) (Thaden & Rosenburg, 2011). Some city governments – like Chicago, Burlington, and Irvine – have started CLTs as a way to provide permanently affordable housing to their residents. Moreover, many housing justice movements look to CLTs to transfer housing away from both private and city ownership and into the hands of the community itself. In short, the original cooperative farm in Southwest Georgia has generated a set of effects that considerably outlive its foreclosure.

In fact, the foreclosure of the original farm in Southwest Georgia is not actually the end of New Communities' story. In 1999, New Communities joined a class action lawsuit against the Farmer's Home Administration for its racial discrimination against Black farmers, who had been systematically denied loans in the 1980s and 1990s. Ten years later, in 2009, New Communities learned that it won $12 million from the lawsuit. With the money, the group purchased 1,683 acres of land in Southwest Georgia that had once belonged to the largest slaveholders in the state. They changed the name of the land from Cypress Pond Plantation to Resora. They have since transformed the site into a multi-crop farm and educational hub for the wider southwest Georgia community.

In 2019, the 50th Anniversary of New Communities was hosted at Resora. Civil rights organizers, land reform advocates, and CLT practitioners from all around the country attended. It was an incredible moment for the remaining members of New Communities to reflect on the

legacy of their work. During one panel presentation, a woman stood up and thanked Shirley Sherrod for all of New Communities' work. She had recently started a CLT in Jamaica to preserve affordable land and housing in her community.

Everyone involved in the original New Communities' farm was amazed at how far the CLT movement had come. When I asked Bobby Broadway about the CLT model, he said that no one working on the original farm had expected its widespread implementation:

> Our vision was immediate – for the needs of those involved: affordable housing, adequate housing, affordable health care, maintaining a good ecological base… But as far as becoming what it has as a model for the nation and internationally, we didn't even think about it like that. (Broadway, 2019)

At a panel discussing a short documentary on New Communities, Shirley Sherrod shared a similar sentiment. She stated that she was learning just as much from the attendees as they were from the original New Communities' cohort: "The young have this. I don't even know how they just took all of this and made it all happen. I'm learning right along with you" (Sherrod, 2019).

Conclusion

The process of New Communities' formation demonstrates how autonomous problem-solvers, although relying primarily on the collective power of their own self-organization, still have to navigate a broader environment of powerful institutions and actors in order to achieve their goals. The organizers had no choice but to buy land off the private market before they could legally convert it into community-owned property. The financial burden from this purchase, which was exacerbated by discriminatory lending practices and the outright denial of public grants, significantly restricted their ability to build new housing on the land. Despite these

challenges, the group was able to live on the land for fifteen years. During that time, the space provided a refuge for displaced community members, a place for participants to engage in collective farming practices, and a site for Black self-determination in the rural South.

Although New Communities' original community land trust experiment was cut short, the group succeeded in creating a new model for the community-control of land and housing. Their creative recombination of other land reform experiments produced a novel form of property that has far outlived New Communities' foreclosure in 1985. Today, community land trusts – because they remove land from the private market and put it into community hands – are an invaluable tool in the contemporary housing justice movement. This evolution suggests that the solutions produced by autonomous problem-solving do not always remain a purely local or isolated phenomenon. Rather, other autonomous movements can build off one another by deploying previously used models and practices in new local contexts.

In describing the community land trust movement, John Emmeus Davis deploys a series of agricultural and ecological metaphors to emphasize the nonlinear ways in which the movement has evolved over time. These metaphors include the *cultivation* of resources about CLTs, the *cross-pollination* of CLT ideas and practices, and the *hybridization* of the CLT model as it adapts to new conditions. Dynamic metaphors like these could also be valuable in studying the interconnection of autonomous problem-solving projects more broadly. While outside the scope of this project, future research could investigate more closely how autonomous problem-solvers build off each other's efforts. While this project is focused primarily on the *invention* of autonomous solutions, future research could take a closer look at the *diffusion* of autonomous solutions.

Chapter 4: Dignity Village and Autonomous Houseless Villages

A group of people said we're going to organize ourselves who was thought of as a waste, and we stood up and showed our ingenuity, we showed our compassion for one another, we showed how we can get along and make due for one another. And the thing of it is, we were right.
– Ibrahim Mubarak, Co-founder of Dignity Village

Introduction

This chapter will describe the creation of Dignity Village – one of the first autonomous houseless villages – in Portland, Oregon. Much like the previous case, the story of Dignity Village does not map well onto conventional accounts of public problem-solving. The participants involved in this project were not acting primarily as policy entrepreneurs or policy advocates. Although at certain stages the group did pressure the city to help support their project – by halting police sweeps and letting them occupy an unused piece of public land – the project itself was autonomously created and implemented. Moreover, Dignity Village was not created by a participatory policy institution or a paid-staff nonprofit organization. Rather, a small group of unhoused Portlanders and their community allies forged their own autonomous solution to the harmful conditions they faced on the street.

Dignity Village emerged out of unhoused Portlanders' need for a safe, dignified alternative to the conventional shelter system. In the early 2000s, there were only a small fraction of shelter beds in relation to the number of people sleeping on the streets every night. Moreover, many houseless Portlanders decided that being on the street was preferable to shelters. The latter often involved severe restrictions on freedom, including waiting in line for hours to secure a spot, limits on belongings, separation from pets and partners, crowded conditions, and the inability to come and go at will. These inadequacies in Portland's public- and nonprofit-hosted shelters prompted a group of houseless organizers to envision a radical alternative, in which houseless individuals would build and manage their own transitional housing space.

Unlike New Communities, the organizers in Portland were not able to buy land through the private market. At first this was due to financial constraints. But even after the group had raised sufficient funds, they faced intense opposition from NIMBY neighbors. Therefore, their primary tactic for securing a physical location for the village was by squatting on vacant public land. This prompted a nomadic cat-and-mouse game as the city tried (and failed) to disperse the camp. However, after eliciting significant support from segments of the wider Portland community, the organizers were able to negotiate with city officials over a piece of public land to site their village. Incredibly, their insurgent claim to public space was recognized by the city when it offered the group a site for their village.

Much like New Communities, Dignity Village organizers had to make collective decisions about how to navigate the diverse landscape of obstacles (and opportunities) placed in front of them by existing institutions. They had to interface strategically with the powerful state, market, and nonprofit institutions in their environment while still maintaining their autonomy. Sometimes, this caused internal disagreements, and even temporary splits, within the group. However, it also prompted the use of innovative tactics through which the villagers leveraged support from powerful actors (like city officials and private donors) to strengthen their autonomy. Their efforts not only resulted in the establishment of a novel form of transitional housing, but also helped inspire a larger movement for the creation of collective, self-managed housing spaces for people facing houselessness in the United States.

Out of the Doorways

In August 2000, Jack Tafari attended the National Homeless Convention in Los Angeles as a delegate for Portland's homeless newspaper, *Street Roots*. The convention was hosted at Dome Village, a newly formed transitional housing village. Tafari was so inspired that when he

returned to Oregon, he wrote an editorial calling for the creation of a similar space in Portland (Tafari, 2009). Tafari's editorial, entitled "We Need a Tent City," was not, as one might expect, addressed to city officials. Rather, its primary audience was the unhoused community itself. Tafari argued that a self-governed tent city could provide a dignified model for transitioning people from the streets to permanent housing:

> A sanctioned campsite would provide a place where we could store our things, it would give us a break from the constant hassle and harassment we get living on the streets. We could regulate our campsite ourselves. Once we had that break we could go about our business, deal with whatever we have to deal with. It is not easy getting and holding a job when you live on the streets. The respite a campsite would give us would allow us all to improve our livity and condition, it would allow some of us to get the steady jobs that would get us up out of homelessness. (Tafari, 2000)

Tafari's article ended by calling for unhoused Portlanders and their allies to join an organizing campaign aimed at seizing a piece of unused public land for the new encampment. Importantly, they did not plan to ask the city for permission first. They hoped that by squatting a public site, they could make an insurgent claim to public property that would be eventually recognized by the city. This call to action marked the beginning of what would be known as the Out of the Doorways campaign. Other unhoused activists, grassroots organizations, and community members soon joined the call.

One of the first to do so was Ibrahim Mubarak. Mubarak was living on the streets of Portland and was fed up with the conditions that he and other unhoused people faced in the city. As a Black man and a Muslim, he was repeatedly harassed by the police and other passersby. On some occasions he was even violently attacked. But there did not seem to be much the unhoused

– because they had to focus on personal survival – could do to change their collective situation. That is, until he ran into Jack Tafari:

> I started meeting people who was tired of being kicked around. So one day I was walking around and met Jack Tafari… He was a *Street Roots* vendor and he told me "We're trying to organize the houseless community to have a safe place to sleep because people are being criminalized." (Mubarak interview, 2019)

Tafari and Mubarak soon launched the Out of the Doorways campaign. The first official meeting was held at the *Street Roots* office on October 12, 2000. The format was open and collaborative. Attendees worked to set up media, fundraising, and legal teams, studied reports of other tent cities from the National Coalition for the Homeless, and began the search for a suitable piece of land to host their tent city. They were encouraged by the fact that, only about two weeks prior, Multnomah County Judge Steven Gallagher had ruled Portland's public camping ban unconstitutional. The campaign continued to meet throughout November and December, hoping to site their initial encampment by Christmas (Tafari, 2000).

Unfortunately, the Multnomah County ruling did not actually end Portland's anti-camping ordinance. Portland Mayor Vera Katz had instructed the Public Defender's Office to appeal the ruling on behalf of the state, which would not be resolved for months. In the meantime, the ban remained in effect. And while Gallagher's decision set important precedence for other individuals who chose to fight similar tickets in court, it did not guarantee that other judges would rule in their favor (Cowles, 2000). Despite this setback, the campaign continued.

By December, the campaign had a diverse and dedicated team of organizers. In addition to its unhoused members, a number of other community members lent their skills to the project.

These included John Hubbird, an experienced community organizer, and Mark Lakeman, a local architect. Together, the group selected a site and planned the occupation.

Camp Dignity

Figure 4.1. Alex Lilly, JP Cupp, Tim Brown, and Jack Tafari

On December 16, 2000, eight unhoused activists from the Out of the Doorways campaign set up a small encampment on a patch of unused city land near the Broadway Bridge. They knew their occupation was likely illegal, but hoped to contest the city's current (dis)use of the property by enacting their own alternative use for the space. They named their new tent city Camp Dignity. As the name suggested, the encampment was about much more than mere shelter; it provided a tight-knit community and sense of purpose for those who participated. The original campers, who referred to themselves as the Homeless Front, included Jack Tafari, Ibrahim Mubarak, JP Cupp, Lee, Debbie, Jada Mae, John Reese, and Tim Brown. Tafari writes that "We were old and young; black, white, and red; Rasta, Muslim, Christian, and Atheist. We were also freezing cold and fed up with the way things were. It was the first year of a new millennium and we wanted to begin a new beginning" (Tafari, 2000).

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What they thought had been public land, however, had been recently purchased by a private owner. It only took a few days for the police to notice and sweep the site. The campers were forced to pack up and move along. In fact, Camp Dignity was displaced three times in its first ten days. However, they quickly adapted to these displacements to preserve their project. Instead of dispersing as the police hoped, the Homeless Front would pack up all their belongings into shopping carts and move together to a new location (Bayer, 2003).[52] During their second displacement campers made the mistake of telling police where they planned to go next. When they arrived, they found fences had been put up around the site. From then on, Mubarak said, they knew to give fake locations to the police (Mubarak interview, 2019). During this early phase of the village, the autonomy of the group could only be preserved by a flexible nomadism that emerged to avoid state repression.

The village's third site was under the Morrison Bridge. Here, the camp grew to about forty tents and began to receive media attention (Mosher, 2010). When reporters arrived at the camp one morning, and other campers did not want to talk, they woke up Mubarak in his tent. In his own words:

> Some reporters came… and they woke me up and I start crawling out my tent. And the
>
> reporters stuck a microphone in my face and asked me, how will I stop drugs from
>
> coming into this camp? And so, the only logical answer when you're getting just woken

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[52] It was also nominated for Best Choreography of a Protest in March 2001 in the Portland Mercury's First Annual Anarchist Awards: "In 1981, the city devised an anti-camping ban that encouraged police to keep the homeless endlessly moving along. Since then, the police (encouraged by our own Mayor Katz) have played a tired game of Tom and Jerry with the homeless, chasing them from one bad situation to another. Last fall, after being chased from underneath the Broadway Bridge, a group of 30 or so homeless men organized a shopping cart parade. Their carts rattling through Old Town gave a figurative middle finger to Mayor Katz, and a symbolic "Up yours!" to the Chief of Police. The men have since re-settled on the fringe of the coveted Pearl District, underneath the concrete off-ramp for I-405. Christening their new home Dignity Village, these men and women easily earn the nomination for Best Choreography of a Protest!" (Academy of Anarchy, 2001).

up is, "If America can't keep drugs out this country, how am I going to keep drugs out this camp?" (Mubarak interview, 2019)

Mubarak's half-awake quip received a boost of positive attention in the media, and the other campers appointed him as the unofficial spokesperson for the camp. Now when reporters came to the camp, they'd be referred to Mubarak.

Despite its frequent displacement, robust systems of self-organization emerged in Camp Dignity. The campers intuitively clustered their tents into small pods that Lakeman called "circles of affinity." A larger tent served as the common meeting place for the campers. There were also common spaces with tables where people could eat together. This design facilitated the development of what Lakeman called the "social nucleus" of the camp (Lakeman interview, 2020).

Figure 4.2. Camp Dignity under the Fremont Bridge

Camp Dignity's first experiment in self-governance involved each affinity circle sending a representative to the common area for meetings. But because the community was so small and people were eager to participate, nearly everyone ended up at the meetings anyway. Mubarak tells me that they were careful to include everyone's input and operate as much as possible through direct democracy, rather than organizing around a single leader:

> That's the way it's always been and always will be with me. There's no one leader, because then if they come take me to jail – which they did *several fucking times* – then the movement [continues]. No one person is the movement, we all the movement. (Mubarak interview, 2019)

The camp's directly democratic governance model produced effective systems of self-management. Everyday tasks – including recycling, trash, collecting materials, building, and collecting donations – were all handled by the residents themselves. Four basic rules were established: 1) no drugs or alcohol in the camp, 2) no stealing, 3) no violence, and 4) everyone must make a fair contribution to maintaining the site. The simplicity of these rules was important, Mubarak says, in contrast to the "catalogue of rules" in place at traditional shelters: "People don't want to read a catalogue of rules and shit, they just want to go to fucking sleep" (Mubarak interview, 2019).

Around this time, the campaign shifted away from terms like *tent city* and *camp* and began referring to their community as a *village*. This shift in terminology helped clarify that the campaign did not want to remain a tent city forever. Its final goal was to build a transitional housing community with minimalist (but permanent) architecture, much like Dome Village in Los Angeles. The term village could also help in translating their vision into something more legible to city officials and the wider community. Lakeman remarks that,

To go from camp to village is to go from something that is not permanent and is kind of amorphous, and undefined, to something which is actually clearly admirable and relates to tons of goals related to walkability and design. And after all you're proposing something in a design conscious culture, so I was basically saying use the standing benchmarks of the region and claim them. (Lakeman interview, 2020)

This decision marked a broader shift in the orientation of the village. Although they had already begun building robust systems of internal self-organization, they still desperately needed a sanctioned space to permanently site their village. Without any funds to purchase private land at the time, the villagers decided to put pressure on the city in hopes of obtaining a piece of public land. They decided they would do so not through lobbying or pleading with the city, but by occupying a more publicly visible site to force the city's hand.

Getting the City's Attention

After about three weeks under the Morrison Bridge, Camp Dignity was forced to move yet again. This time, the campers wanted to make their move a media spectacle. With help from Sisters of the Road and Reverend Ron Williams, the campers planned a massive shopping cart parade on MLK Jr. Day. The parade started from their site at Morrison and ended at a new site downtown near the river. John Reese, a disabled veteran, and two other participants in wheelchairs led the long, single-file parade. Although it started small, approximately 200 people were marching with the parade by the time it got to the Sister of the Roads café. After stopping to eat, the villagers went on to their new, very public location.

Figure 4.3. The shopping card parade passes a group of children

The march proved to be a turning point for the campaign. It drew significant attention from the media and finally caught the full attention city officials, who could no longer ignore the issue. Mayor Vera Katz and city commissioner Erik Sten heard about the MLK Jr. Day parade while at an annual prayer breakfast hosted by *The Skanner*, a local newspaper in Portland. Sten – who was serving as Portland's housing commissioner – recalls how that initial conversation went with the mayor:

> I remember that I told the mayor - and not in an oppositional way but more in a pragmatic way - just look, they're looking for a fight. And so don't move them along, just let them be. Nobody's using the park, it's cold as hell, and this is only going to last until the rain starts. (Sten interview, 2019)

Although the mayor also acted as police commissioner, and could therefore order a sweep of the village at any point, she listened to Sten. However, she also handed him responsibility for dealing with the village. The day after the parade, Sten met with representatives of the village and promised conditional support in working towards their goals (Mosher, 2010). Although he said he was "in total agreement" with the villagers, he could not get anything done immediately. When I talked to Sten about his reasons for working with the village, he said they were twofold:

> I had two different things that I was trying to accomplish. I wanted to as much as possible use their efforts to help support their goal of getting more housing and better rules up. And then at the same time, I didn't support their goal of creating a big spectacle to do that. I didn't want to be on the wrong end of the basic optics of, you know, getting after them and moving them along. That whole scene doesn't really accomplish much of anything that I can see.

Sten also expressed some frustration at being the target of this kind of demonstration:

> I always took it with a grain of salt, but there's also kind of this feeling like, you know, [Portland was] pretty good on these issues on the scale of things, especially back then, compared to most places. Even the mayor they had their gripes with wasn't bad. And your tactic is to make us look bad by forcing us to move you out of the park? C'mon! Come up with something better than that. I think Bush was in office at the time, really? I'm the target of this? Forget it, just stay down there. (Sten interview 2019)

Creating a public spectacle that directly challenged Portland's progressive planning image turned out to be an effective strategy for the villagers. By January 23, the village made a deal to move back to a lower profile site where it could continue organizing, negotiate with the city, and seek out a permanent site. The villagers moved back under the Fremont Bridge at 18th

and NW Savier, where the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) – thanks to Sten – allowed them to stay until April 30. Relocating back under the bridge also allowed the villagers much-needed shelter from the spring rain (Mosher, 2010). These conditional alliances with city officials, although they may superficially appear as a process of cooptation or capture, actually enabled the village to retain its autonomous activities at the site and continue its campaign.

While at the Fremont site – which lasted about eight months – the village's internal organization, long-term vision, and support base all strengthened significantly. By April, the population of the village grew to approximately 75-80 residents. Mubarak notes that this included a significant number of LGBTQ individuals who had been thrown out of their family homes. Because of the stability and security provided by the village, some villagers were able to leverage this newfound stability to obtain jobs. Others were even able to transition to more stable housing. In fact, John Reese, who had led the campaign's shopping cart parade, was able to move into formal transitional housing soon after the move to Fremont. In a response to a critical story about the village in the *Portland Tribune*, Tafari wrote that, "No one really reached out to John Reese when he lived in a parking lot for most of last August or when he lived under the Broadway Bridge. John's connection with the Out of the Doorways campaign, his role as a Dignity soldier and the attendant publicity that this has generated has helped him find housing" (Tafari, 2001).

Figure 4.4. John Hubbird, Ibrahim Mubarak, and Mama at Fremont

During this period, the village also launched its website, held a large fundraising event (in which they secured $5,000 towards a future land purchase), and continued publicizing its vision. In order to counter criticism from opponents of the village – including the editorial board of the *The Oregonian* – villagers and supporters wrote their own arguments in order to explain their efforts to the public. In the February edition of *Street Roots*, Hubbird wrote a piece entitled, "Camp Dignity is No Indignity; It's an Answer." In it, Hubbird asks a series of pointed questions:

> Whose interest does it serve to criminalize these people? For that matter, why not let anyone organize into drug and alcohol-free, self-help communities to live off the recycled cast-offs of everyone else? Isn't this what our planet needs? Is the rest of society so threatened by poor people that we are willing to sit by and watch them be stripped of their constitutional rights and criminalized into prisons at a cost to taxpayers of $35,000 a year per head? (Hubbird, 2001a)

In the April addition of *Street Roots*, Jerry Martin praised the democratic self-governance of the village and its ability to solve problems as they arise:

> Once a week, the villagers of Dignity gather around a lantern and hash out issues of their community and of the surrounding community as they strive to bring the two together. In keeping with a Native American model of democratic procedure, they pass a "talking stick," which signifies the speaker on the floor. Working from a written agenda, they passionately discuss issues, make motions, and vote. They adopt and amend village policies, and delegate responsibilities and work details. They're solving problems and resolving conflicts, and in doing so, the villagers of Dignity are dispelling myths about homeless people. (Martin, 2001)

By this time, the village had amassed a significant amount of community support. The Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church, City Repair Project, Outside In, Martial Art Gallery, JOIN, Transition Projects Inc., Sisters of the Road Café, and the Oregon Law Center, and the local anarchist community all provided aid to the village. Dozens of individual community members also volunteered their time and skills in various ways. For instance, attorney Marc Jolin provided pro bono legal aid, Heather Mosher and Wendy Kohn filmed important moments of the campaign through their documentary project, and Lee Larson, president of the Larson Legacy Foundation, provided significant financial donations at crucial moments of the campaign. These sources of community support were vital for the perseverance of the village during this period of drawn-out negotiations with public officials.

Negotiating with the City and State

While at the Fremont site, villagers began meeting with city and state officials in the hope of finding a permanent site for the Dignity Village. After some successful fundraising efforts, they were interested in buying private land. But the village faced stark NIMBY opposition everywhere they looked. Therefore, they continued to pressure city and state officials for help in obtaining a sanctioned site on public land. To do so, they did not ask for help. Rather they exerted pressure on public officials through a set of confrontational tactics. Mubarak recounts how fellow villager Jada Mae taught him tricks for dealing with avoidant public officials:

> Jada Mae was… that's the most interesting woman, besides my mother, that I met in my life. She didn't give a fuck… She used to tell me, young Ibrahim, you don't *ask* for a meeting, you just go in and *get* a meeting. So she would take me around with her, and we would bogart the mayor's office, the commissioner's office, and say we want this and we wouldn't leave until they heard us out. (Mubarak interview, 2019)

Jada Mae Longloss was described by Israel Bayer of *Street Roots* as, "a real life rabble-rouser and diplomat, a proud mother and a royal pain in the ass" (Bayer, 2009). She had been around city hall for some time and had even run for mayor in the past.[53] She passed on her organizing knowledge to Mubarak by bringing him along to city hall. They would show up to an office and demand a meeting. If told that the official they wanted to see was busy, they would sit and wait. If they were kept waiting unreasonably long, they would then resort to "raising hell." It worked. Jada Mae's tenacity, paired with her genuine compassion for helping the worst-off,

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[53] From an obituary for Langloss by the *Williamette Week* editorial staff (2014): "For two decades, she was a fixture on local ballots, mounting dozens of quixotic campaigns for governor, mayor, and Multnomah County chair on the Preservative Party ticket. Her specific platform evolved over the years--she once championed the rights of extraterrestrials--but she never wavered from her conviction that Portland should do more for the downtrodden."

made her well-known around city hall. Although Jada Mae passed away in 2014, Mubarak tells me he still uses her strategy and teaches it to others.

The village was able to secure a meeting with Mayor Katz on March 23 and ODOT on April 6. ODOT considered leasing land to the village at market rate, but the details of the potential arrangement remained unresolved. For his part, Sten had agreed to do what he could to help overcome permit and zoning hurdles when the village finally secured a site. Amidst the ongoing talks between the city, state, and the village, ODOT extended Dignity Village's tenure at Fremont by another 60 days, giving the village a new eviction deadline of July 1, 2001. Ultimately, the village's ability to pressure public officials into granting them exceptions and extensions proved crucial for the continuation of their autonomous project.

On May 16, the village met with the Portland Bureau of Housing and Community Development. The villagers were asked to formulate a formal proposal for the development of the village. Rather than merely telling the city what they wanted to hear, the village decided to use this opportunity to envision the future they wanted for their project. Over the next two weeks, the villagers put together a comprehensive 40-page document outlining their achievements thus far, their existing resources and partnerships, and their detailed vision for the future. The proposal – entitled *Dignity Village: 2001 and Beyond*[54] – presented the self-managed village model as an alternative to both conventional shelters and sleeping on the street. It provided a long list of unique benefits that this model could provide, including its minimal cost to taxpayers compared to criminalization or conventional shelters, the provision of a supportive community of peers, and the ability for residents to gain leadership skills by participating in the

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[54] At one point, the villagers considered calling the document *2001: A Public Space Odyssey*.

self-governance of the village. The proposal also proudly notes that twenty people had already used Dignity Village as a springboard into transitional housing services. This demonstrated that even with zero city funding, the village had been successful in getting people off the streets.

The document also outlined the structures of self-governance through which the village would operate. These include the creation of a Village Roll to keep basic information about residents and turnover, a set of intake and exit procedures, security shifts, the election of Field Coordinators who manage specific day-to-day tasks like sanitation or recycling, and the creation of Village Council made up of coordinators and delegates for each 'pod' of residents. It also maintained the four original rules that the village developed in its early stages: 1) no drugs or alcohol on site, 2) no violence towards yourself or others, 3) no stealing, and 4) everyone contributes to keep the village clean and sanitary. Crucially, the villagers' vision of self-governance did not include any form of city management.

The proposal also listed the villagers' requirements for a future site. First, they were careful to think about scale. The proposal stated that, "The optimal size for Dignity Village would be a minimum of 50 and a maximum of 80 residents on 2-1/2 to 4 acres of land. This scale of operation is small enough to maintain a strong system of self-governance without becoming organizationally unwieldy." The proposal also required that the site would be in a sanitary and environmentally safe location and that it be situated "close enough to the downtown core to be accessible and visible to the homeless population being served" (Dignity Village, 2001).

Perhaps the most important part of the proposal was a set of architectural plans illustrating the development of the village. To facilitate the creation of these plans, Lakeman led an intensive charrette over the course of a weekend. The hypothetical site villagers chose for their plans was an open field in the south waterfront area of the city near the International School

and the Riverplace Marina. Dubbed "Field of Dreams," the site was in a prime downtown

location amidst businesses, condos, and apartments. Lakeman admits that, "We chose that site

partially to polarize. Like, look what we could do here, in a place where you would catch hell for

saying yes" (Lakeman interview, 2020). Again, while the villagers wanted the city to recognize

the value of their vision, they also pulled no punches when it came to designing their ideal

development plan.
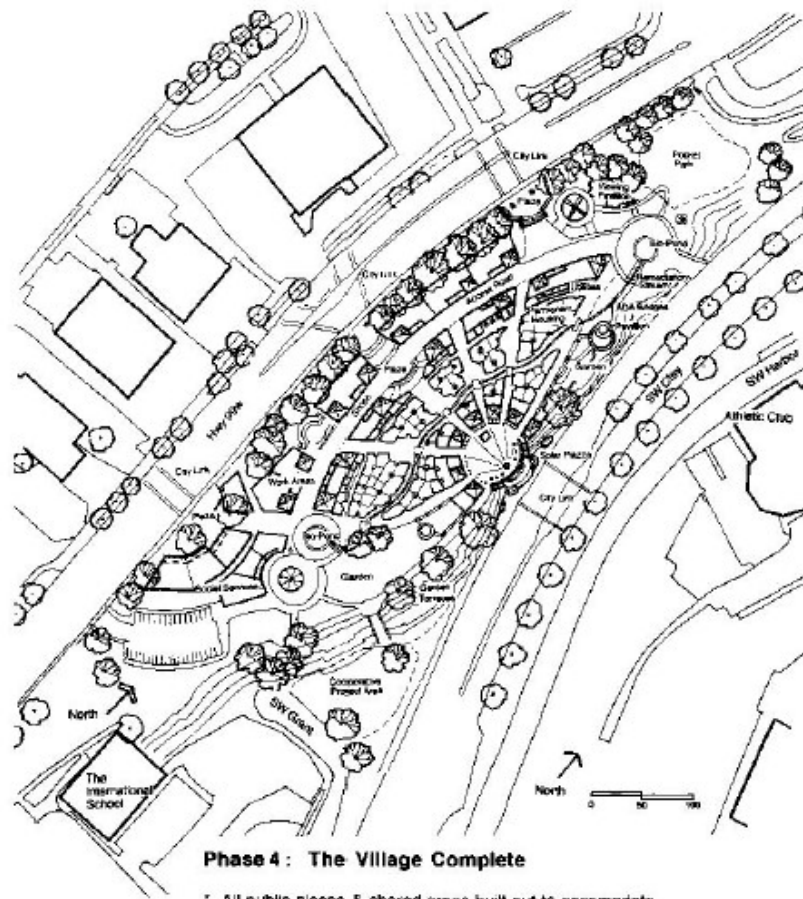
Phase 4 : The Village Complete

* All public places & shared areas built out to accomodate
  various dynamic village functions.
* Tent Pods with umbrella roofs become self-built, permanent, shared units.
* City edge plazas & shops complete.
* All pathway & access road surfaces installed with permeable surfaces.
* Remediation waterways & ponds complete.
* Garden terraces finished.

Figure 4.5. The proposal for the final stage of the village's development

The main point of the architectural plans, were not to claim a specific site but to illustrate how the village would develop from its current nomadic form into a robust transitional housing village. This involved four developmental phases, each of which were visually depicted in the proposal. The first phase, entitled *Nomadic Beginnings*, described the village in its current form and included a photo of the tent city. The second phase, *Settlement*, featured an illustration of the tent city positioned at the "Field of Dreams" location. Common amenities – included a kitchen, meeting room, and sanitation facilities – would be built, as well as simple pathways within the village. The third phase, *Development,* would constitute a transitionary phase in which new improvements would be built around the tents. Umbrella roofs and screen walls would be put up around common areas and tent areas, parking space would be added, and permanent utilities would be installed. In the final phase, *The Village Complete*, the tents will be upgraded into "self-built, permanent buildings with shared units." Porches, gardens, and ponds will be added to public spaces. Rather than remaining an isolated enclave, the village would be purposefully embedded into its surroundings. The proposal stated that the village would "serve as a little 'sibling' community that assists other communities by demonstrating how people with very few resources can work together to provide mutual and community-wide benefits" (Dignity Village, 2001). This reveals how the group's understanding of autonomy did involve a *separation* from the wider community. Instead, the villagers wanted to establish a set mutually-beneficial relationships with the community at large.

To strengthen the feasibility of their long-term development plan, the village's proposal also included a detailed budget, a list of its current residents' relevant skill base, and plans for meeting existing codes and regulations. Ultimately, however, Lakeman thinks that the illustrations themselves were the most crucial element for city officials:

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I had already been doing enough design activism to see how frequently bureaucrats wouldn't understand what you're talking about even if you were holding up their own objectives. They couldn't relate to your proposal because they had never seen it before. So we clearly needed pictures that would engage their imagination. And I think the 2001 proposal, report, and those images were really key to engage the council to move the project ahead. (Lakeman interview, 2020).

On June 3, the village unveiled their proposal at a public teach-in at First Unitarian Church. They also sent a letter to Mayor Katz asking for reversal of her decision to evict them from the Fremont site on July 1. The proposal and the letter worked. On June 28, the city announced that it would not evict the village on July 1 and instead continue meeting with the villagers about transitioning to a more permanent site. The city convinced ODOT to allow the village to stay at the Fremont site for another two months, until September 1. There were now serious talks about the city supporting the village as a one-year pilot project on public land (Mosher, 2010). The challenge now was finding the right piece of land.

Sunderland Yard

On August 28 (just a few days before the village was scheduled to be evicted), the city offered the village a site next to the Sunderland leaf-composting facility in north Portland. However, there were serious problems with the site. Most importantly, it was completely outside of the city core, about seven miles from downtown. This would make it difficult for residents to get to jobs and social services. It was also dangerously far from emergency services. Villagers were also resentful that their neighbor would be a prison, the Columbia River Correctional Institute. Finally, the site was near enough to the Portland Airport to experience loud flyovers.

All of these reasons left the villagers feeling frustrated and angry. Tensions emerged between those who wanted to reject the site and those who thought they had no choice.

When I talked to Sten about the section of the Sunderland site, he admitted it had problems but insisted that it was the only feasible option. He told me, "We looked at every site we could find. And the only one that didn't have a fatal flaw was Sunderland…. It was the only thing that would work." He argued that it needed to be somewhat isolated, to protect it from hostile neighbors who could sue the village:

> And there's lots of things that don't work well with other neighbors in the city. It's just that they have a *right* to be there. And you see… there was nowhere that we could put it that it's not going to violate substantial amounts of the city code. And we don't, even on the council level…. at least the way we ran the government, we don't have authority to just ignore the code. Ignore the code and you lose the lawsuit… And so putting it someplace where it obviously was going to lose the lawsuit, quickly, didn't make a lot of sense. And also it's just kind of bad governance. I mean we waived some of the building codes for the structures. But the basic land use can't just be waived. (Sten interview, 2019)

Despite their unhappiness with the site, the villagers publicly accepted it at an August 30, 2001 city council meeting. This would give them time to find a more permanent site to move to after their 60-day stay at Sunderland. At the meeting, Mubarak reiterating the village's problems with the site, but ultimately accepted the city's offer on behalf of the village:

> But since we're not just a bunch of lazy scumbags as people perceive homeless people to be, we're going to accept your offer and move out there and we're going to show, not

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prove to *you all*, but prove *to ourselves*, no matter where we can, we can be successful and we are going to be successful. (City of Portland, 2001)

Mubarak's statement received an eruption of applause from those in attendance. Other villagers and supporters also voiced their concerns about the site and highlighted the success of Dignity Village's model. John Hubbird presented the city with an agreement between the village and the Portland police, which established a protocol for communication between village security and police officers. The villagers then presented a video profiling the success of the village and its residents to the council. Community members outside of the Out of the Doorways campaign also voiced their concerns. One woman criticized the city for, "their role in creation of a lawless community where transient campers are allowed to exist and crime has exponentially increased." She went on to criticize the city for granting, in her view, unfair exceptions for the village in relation to the city's code. Aside from these comments, however, most of the attendees seemed to support the village.

For their part, the city council voted 4-1 in support of a resolution that officially committed to supporting Dignity Village. The single no vote came from City Commissioner Jim Francesconi, who argued that the expansion of conventional shelters and church sponsorship, not an encampment, was what the city should be supporting. He was also not confident that the villagers could meet the city's conditions. However, knowing the position of the rest of the council, he closed his statement by saying: "Listen, if there's ever been one vote, and I hope I am wrong, I hope this is it." The other council members, including Sten and Mayor Katz, voiced their support. Sten stated that:

I really don't know whether this can work or not. What I do know is that the shelter system is full. And the streets are overflowing with people. I also know that in January I

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did not think you could pull this off, but I gave it an effort and you have pulled it off.

(City of Portland, 2001)

Mayor Katz then closed the meetings with her support:

There are those who think that we are absolutely crazy for passing this resolution. There are those who think that we are absolutely crazy for identifying a site for 60 days and moving a camp dignity there. And I commit to the city that all of us will work very, very hard to make this work, to provide a sense of place that we always talk about, and a sense of community to residents in our community that never experienced it before. So, with that, I vote aye. (City of Portland, 2001)

In the next few days after the city council meeting, more of the villagers were able to visit the site for themselves. What they found angered them. There were serious problems with water drainage at the site, which meant that large pools of rainwater formed on the asphalt lot. They also learned of potential environmental hazards from the next-door leaf-composting facility. Finally, fencing had been put up in some places around the site, making it all-too reminiscent of the nearby prison architecture. This pushed many of the villagers, already deeply resentful of the site, over the edge (Goetze and Austin, 2001).

Because the village operated through a flexible form of direct democracy, its members were not trapped by its initial decision to accept the site. In light of their new knowledge about Sunderland, they revisited their decision. When put to a new vote, the majority of villages chose to refuse the site. The village announced this reversal at a September 3 press conference and rallied their supporters to help them make a stand against the move. Seeking to stay put at the Fremont site, J.P. Cupp argued that the villagers had an inherent right to occupy public space:

We're going to run with this and we're going to call this damn thing Dignity Village our

home, cause this is all we have in the whole world and we will make this work because

we have nothing else. We will take public land because *we are the public* thank you very

much! (Kwamba Productions, 2009)

On September 4, they were warned by police that the village would be swept in 24 hours

and those who remained would be arrested (Mosher, 2010). The village had hoped that with

enough villagers and supporters willing to face arrest, they could resist the sweep. However,

their hope that hundreds of supporters would stand with them did not materialize. At most, thirty

or forty supporters stood with the villagers. Once it was clear that the eviction would be

successful and police would in fact arrest and charge those who stayed, most villagers realized

they would have to leave. The reality was that most villagers – who had struggled diligently for

months to improve their situation – simply could not afford to be dragged into the carceral

system. Moreover, the village as whole could not afford the incarceration of its inhabitants if it

wanted to survive (Mubarak interview, 2019).

Facing immanent arrest, the village split into three groups. Because the village was a

voluntary project, there was no mechanism (or need) to force villagers into a unitary response to

the sweep. Therefore, each of these three groups autonomously responded in the way they

thought was best. Many of the villagers, included the elderly and disabled, retreated to a

supporter's farm outside of the city. This group dubbed their temporary home Rancho Dignity.

The second faction of villagers did not fear arrest and wanted to provoke a visible confrontation

with the city over the continuation of its camping ban. Calling themselves the Homeless

Liberation Front, they established a peaceful protest camp in the south waterfront area of the

city.[55] On September 11, the protest camp was swept and several inhabitants were arrested and charged with camping on public property.

Figure 4.6. Villagers and supporters protest the Sunderland site

The third faction, consisting of only one villager and one supporter, accepted the city's offer on behalf of the village. The supporter, Lee Larson, had recently worked with Mayor Katz to bring the Dalia Lama to Portland two months prior. This personal relationship allowed Larson to call Katz and work out a last-minute deal. Larson told the mayor that the village would move

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[55] Notably, this was the same hypothetical site that villagers had selected for their 2001 proposal to the city.

to Sunderland and that he would personally pay the city $20,000 a year to fund it. The morning of September 5, Larson and one villager pitched a small camp at Sunderland Yard. Mayor Katz drove out to meet and thank them. When the other villagers found out that their democratic decision-making had been undercut, they were angry with the collaborators. By September 7, however, with nowhere else to go, the villagers slowed started regrouping at the city-sanctioned site (Lakeman interview, 2020).

This is an interesting moment in relation to the village's autonomy. It does not appear that the villagers asked Larson to front this money. Rather, it was an ad hoc move that Larson engaged in on his own volition (to the chagrin of some villagers). Although this caused tension within the group, most villagers decided to make the best of it and capitalize on the deal Larson had made with the mayor.

Although the series of events between the city's initial offer of Sunderland and the village's eventual relocation may seem somewhat chaotic, it was ultimately advantageous for the village. Hubbird reflected on the disjointed move to Sunderland in an article on Portland Indymedia. His account is worth quoting at length:

> With one week's hindsight, I feel that the Village's controversial and agonizing "flip-flop" decisions (go, stay and "make a stand", go) -- although a bit messy and confusing to people more accustomed to tidy linear modes of decision making -- certainly produced a number of positive results. Bringing the situation "to the brink" of a police showdown, and then reluctantly relocate to Sunderland "under protest" was brilliant strategy in that it accomplished several very important short-term objectives: 1) gained much broader community support that has continued to pour in since the move, including financial support and suggestions about possible sites, 2) succeeded in keeping the unrelenting

pressure on the city to assist with finding a much better and closer-in site soon, and 3) forced the city to act in much better faith in the future when dealing with the village, especially related to its next relocation. 4) sent a forceful message to City Hall and the broader community about it's siting requirements, 5) avoided needlessly re-criminalizing most vulnerable villagers, 6) kept most of the village together at Sunderland to continue working steadily towards short and longer term goals, including incorporation, fund raising and finding a permanent site. (Hubbird, 2001b)

Hubbird also praised the Homeless Liberation Front for their act of civil disobedience against the criminalization of the unhoused in public space. Interestingly, he states that the HLF had "no official connection with Dignity Village," despite being composed of a handful of former villagers. This separation between the two groups was extremely beneficial, because it enabled the more radical contingent of activists to engage in riskier forms of direct action without endangering the village as a whole (Hubbird, 2001b).

Once they were reconvened at Sunderland, the villagers continued to organize and search for a more permanent site. The village had to be out of Sunderland by November, when the city would need the space for their leaf composting process. By the end of October, the villagers had reviewed dozens of private sites, but faced overwhelming resistance from potential neighbors. One site that seemed promising – in the Creston-Keniworth neighborhood – ended in what Lakeman describes as a "spectacular debacle" (Lakeman, 2020). Neighbors who opposed the village distributed flyers suggested that the village would bring crime, drugs, and needles. At a meeting between villagers and the neighborhood association, hostile neighbors interrupted and shouted down the villagers as they tried to explain their plans. There were even threats to burn

down the village. Needless to say, even though they had the money to purchase the site, the village did not move to Creston-Kenilworth (Bayer, 2003).

Since they were unable to acquire a private piece of land, the villagers, the Larson Legacy Foundation, and the city worked out a deal for Dignity Village to remain at Sunderland for 8 more months, until July 1, 2002. To offset the city's costs for its delayed leaf-composting process, the Larson Foundation would pay the city $20,000. The villagers held a vote and narrowly decided to stay at the site. However, a few villagers left the group over the decision.

By December, the village had filed for incorporation and nonprofit status. This would grant them more opportunities to raise funds to support the village. On December 16, 2001 – one year since the establishment of Camp Dignity – the village held its first formal elections. Village Council positions included Chairmen, Vice-Chairman, Treasurer, Secretary, and Security Coordinator. Over the next few years, the city granted a series of short extensions on their stay at Sunderland (Mosher, 2010). It wasn't until 2004 that the city officially incorporated Dignity Village into its continuum of care for the homeless.[56] From then on, the village engaged in three-year contracts with the city. In return for allowing the village a large degree of autonomy at Sunderland, Dignity agreed to collect basic data on resident turnover, set residency limits on non-council residents at two years, and work more closely with local social service providers (Jolin interview, 2020).

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[56] During their push for continued city support in 2004, Dignity Village found an ally in author (and Portland resident) Ursula K. Le Guin. In a letter to city council, Le Guin wrote: "The Village gives homeless people shelter without pauperizing or punishing them; it provides true, meaningful community, and offers those ready to accept it a real chance at transition back to working life; and it does this at less cost than the shelters. How can we, as a city, not back such a project?" (Le Guin, 2004; Wold and Lore, 2004).

Over the years, Dignity Village and its supporters have turned the empty lot at Sunderland into a full-fledged transitional village. With the help of volunteers, they built dozens of eco-friendly tiny houses, installed restrooms and showers, constructed a large dome building as a community meeting space, and built a series of gardens around the village (Bayer, 2003). The village still sits at Sunderland today and has a long waiting list for new residents. It continues to serve as a place of refuge and an avenue for otherwise houseless individuals to transition into more permanent housing.

Figure 4.7. Villagers at Sunderland Yard

Dignity Village's legacy, however, spans far beyond Sunderland. It has inspired an entire wave of new transitional housing villages in the last twenty years. Some of these have formed autonomously, while others are city-initiated projects. For instance, the organizers for the Umoja Village in Miami (mentioned in Chapter 1) learned directly from the experiences of Dignity Village. In fact, Max Rameau and Ibrahim Mubarak recently hosted a collaborative workshop on the formation of autonomous houseless villages. And Andrew Heben, an Oregon-based urban

planner, drew on Dignity Village's evolution to draft a set of replicable planning models for self-managed transitional villages. His organization, SquareOne Villages, has helped build new villages in cities throughout the state. Some of these villages are even run as limited-equity cooperatives. SquareOne Villages has also helped other groups start villages in Wisconsin, Colorado, California, and Washington. Much like New Communities, Dignity Village's impacts have ranged far beyond what the original organizers even imagined.

Conclusion

The primary organizers of the Out of the Doorways campaign – who were themselves experiencing houselessness – could not count on local government to come to their aid. Instead, they devised and implemented their own self-organized solution to their housing precarity. Without any prior permission from city officials, they occupied public land and created a prefigurative alternative to the conventional shelter model. This self-governed village was remarkably successful as a way for otherwise houseless individuals to provide for one another, experience a tight-knit community, and transition into more permanent housing.

However, in the course of its development, Dignity Village had to navigate the constraints placed on them by powerful actors in Portland. To do so, they deployed a number of creative practices that allowed them to continue the development of their autonomous houseless village even in the face of recurring challenges. When besieged by persistent police sweeps at the beginning of their campaign, they adapted by stubbornly regrouping to new locations. Next, they realized the need to engage with the city in order to avoid these sweeps and secure a more permanent site. But rather than negotiating with the city on its terms, they employed their own collective power to stage a spectacular shopping cart parade, establish a very visible presence

downtown, and storm into the offices of public officials. These tactics gave them new leverage in negotiations with city (and state) officials.

To counter critical narratives from *The Oregonian* and other opponents, the village also published their own accounts of their actions in local media outlets. This helped grow their community support and make it harder for the city to shut them down without tarnishing its progressive image. Then, when the city requested a formal proposal from the village, the organizers produce a comprehensive vision of their goals for a permanent site. When a site was finally offered that the villagers found unacceptable, the village responded by fragmenting intro three groups. The village's open and voluntary character allowed each of these three groups to act according to their own interests. One group protested the offer from the city, a second group accepted the offer, a third group opted out of both confrontation and acceptance. As Hubbird pointed out, this nonlinear move (although spontaneous) allowed the villagers to simultaneously protest the deal, secure the sanctuary offered by the deal, and protect its vulnerable members from arrest. Ultimately, the village ended up establishing permanent roots at Sunderland Yard, where it still sits today.

Like the participants in New Communities, Dignity Village organizers contested and refashioned conventional property relations in order to meet their needs. However, unlike New Communities they did so primarily through an informal (and initially illegal) enactment of property. While New Communities created a new legal model for collective land tenure, Dignity Village prefigured a new *practical use* for public land. Previous conceptions of public property had never rendered it open to intentional appropriation and self-governance by unhoused groups. Although mutual aid encampments certainly existed before Dignity Village, they were consistently construed as misuse of the land and dispersed by police. However, by autonomously

enacting (and publicizing) their own transitional housing space on public land, Dignity Village not only forced the city to recognize the value of this form of land use, but actively support it. The extent of their impact can be seen in the proliferation of alternative shelter and transitional housing models in American cities. Today, it is not unusual to see autonomous houseless shelters, sanctioned tent cities, Safe Sleep sites, or tiny-house housing villages as part of local responses to houselessness. Arguably, these alternative forms of land use could not have existed without the efforts of the original Dignity Village organizers.

Chapter 5: Case Comparisons and Conclusion

Introduction

This chapter will compare the findings from my case studies in Chapters 3 and 4. Below, I compare my cases across seven topics: 1) the contexts in which they emerged, 2) the early stages of their development 3) the way they acquired land, 4) their production of formal planning documents, 5) their internal governance, 6) their strategic interaction with the state, market, and nonprofit sectors, and 7) the wider impacts of these projects. As I will show, these comparisons evoke new implications for our understanding of autonomous problem-solving and suggest promising avenues for future research.

Local Contexts

The autonomous problem-solving efforts of New Communities and Dignity Village each emerged out of unique local contexts. Needless to say, the rural counties of southwest Georgia in the late 1960s presented a much different landscape than the urban conditions of Portland in the early 2000s. First, each context produced unique forms of housing precarity. The organizers of New Communities were responding to an explicitly racialized form of rural displacement that was exercised through a combination of targeted government neglect, discrimination by white lenders and landowners, and violence from local white supremacist groups. The displacement and precarity faced by unhoused Portlanders, on the other hand, was a result of Portland's lack of affordable housing, the police enforcement of private property rights and public camping bans, the inadequacy of the conventional shelter system, and the city's initial reluctance to make any significant changes to these conditions.

These landscapes also provided unique opportunities for each group. Dignity Village benefited from Portland's relatively progressive city government, which the villagers were able to pressure into offering limited support to their project. New Communities, on the other hand, found little support from local or state governments, which were mostly controlled by staunch opponents of civil rights. Instead, they were able to marshal support from their connections to a broader ecology of civil rights organizations and cooperative networks in the region. This suggests that while autonomous problem-solving can benefit from eliciting local government support, this support is not necessary in all contexts. For New Communities, it appears that the support of established social movement organizations was able to sustain their organizing efforts despite recurring opposition from public officials. Future research could more thoroughly map the advantages of and disadvantages of different external sources of support for autonomous projects.

Early Stages

There were a number of notable similarities in the early stages of New Communities and Dignity Village. First, both groups were inspired by alternative dwelling models in other locations. In fact, members of both groups travelled to visit and learn from these alternative models in person. New Communities sent a small to team Israel to study moshav communities and Jack Tafari travelled to Los Angeles to visit Dome Village. This suggests that firsthand experience of other alternatives is an important catalyst for autonomous problem-solvers.

Another similarity in the early stages of these projects was the use of open and participatory organizing meetings. Both projects were started by small affinity groups of committed organizers working in the interstices of existing organizations. However, these affinity groups then hosted larger meetings that elicited input from wider audiences. In Portland,

organizers held a series of open meetings at the *Street Roots* offices in which participants (both housed and unhoused) developed the plan for their occupation campaign. And in Georgia, the core organizing team hosted a series of large meetings in Atlanta. At these meetings, participants helped outline the formal structure of the land trust and the new nonprofit organization through which it would be operated. Rather than establishing tight boundaries around their decision-making procedures, both groups recognized the necessity of eliciting wider circles of input in order to make better decisions. Future research could confirm whether this practice is common across other autonomous problem-solving projects or if some groups rely on more insulated forms of decision-making.

Acquiring Land

New Communities and Dignity Village used very different approaches to secure land for their projects. Dignity Village could not purchase land from private sellers, at first because of financial constraints. However, even after raising the funds, they could not find anyone willing to sell to a group of unhoused people looking to build a transitional housing site. Therefore, they resorted to the occupation of public land. Their occupation campaign eventually forced the city to provide them with a public site. Because they were using city land, they had to meet certain external conditions imposed on them by the city. But the group decided that these compromises were acceptable in return for the long-term opportunities that a sanctioned site provided.

With ongoing threats of violence from police and white supremacist groups, it was not feasible for New Communities to illegally occupy public property. Therefore, they had to purchase a piece of land from a private seller. Although this came with a heavy financial burden, the group managed to gain access to a large plot of land (the largest owned by Black Americans at that time) for nearly 15 years. Because New Communities bought private land, it did not have

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to conform to special conditions imposed by local government like Dignity Village. However, its debt burden ultimately led to its foreclosure in 1985 when a drought interrupted their farming operations, and therefore their ability to pay off the land.

These findings point to certain tradeoffs between private and public land use for autonomous projects. Use of public land might come with more stipulations about its use. But because it does not have to be purchased outright, it may also impose less of a long-term financial burden on autonomous projects. However, purchasing private land may give autonomous projects more immediate control of their space (if they are able to afford it). Future research can further investigate these tradeoffs, as well as the tradeoffs that come with squatting strategies vs. legal means of acquiring land.

Planning Documents

The creation of formal planning documents was a key moment in both group's organizing campaigns. New Communities received a grant from the Office of Economic Opportunity that allowed them to hire a professional planning firm to help them conduct a large-scale deliberative planning process and produce a formal planning document. Dignity Village, on the other hand, created their formal planning document in response to a request from the city. Rather than hiring a planning firm, they received free technical assistance from a small group of volunteer architects and planners.

The creation of these documents could be misread as a moment of unilateral incorporation into state logics. They were created, after all, to justify support from public officials or agencies. However, both groups also used these documents – and the planning processes that preceded them – as a chance to boldly envision the future of their projects. The

planning sessions for both groups were conducted as charrettes, which are a form of participatory brainstorming and decision-making often used in community design projects. Through this deliberative process, both groups created detailed plans for the development of their alternative housing solutions. The final documents – *A New Community for Southwest Georgia* and *Dignity Village 2001 & Beyond* – are incredibly rich accounts of the alternative housing models proposed by each group. Even though neither plan was implemented exactly as proposed, the production of both documents served as a pivotal moment for both New Communities and Dignity Village. Moreover, these documents live on today as resources for future organizers seeking to build similar projects.

This prompts a series of questions for future research: Do other autonomous problem-solvers generate formal plans or proposals for their projects? Do these plans or proposals function primarily to garner external support? Or do they also function as moments of collective visioning? What other documents or resources to autonomous problem-solvers create in the course of their projects? Through what mediums do other groups attempt to make their projects legible to outsiders?

Internal Governance

The internal governance practices of New Communities and Dignity Village changed over time as their projects developed. New Communities' initial team began as an affinity group without a formal decision-making structure. It extended this flexibility to its open meetings in Atlanta, where anyone who attended was considered a voting member. When the group created its nonprofit organization (through the open Atlanta meetings), it introduced a more formal governance structure. A mix of organizers, potential residents, and community members were elected to its leadership. This was important because the nonprofit organization would become

the legal owner of the land. However, the nonprofit board did not make decisions unilaterally. For example, after the land was purchased, the group still elicited the input and participation of other community members during its charrettes. Likewise, volunteers on the land emphasized the open and deliberative atmosphere of the farm. So while New Communities adopted a formal governance structure through its nonprofit organization, this did not preclude it from garnering the input of the broader community when making decisions.

Dignity Village also began as an affinity group with an informal decision-making structure. At their initial meetings, participants used open deliberations to make decisions. They also formed smaller groups for specialized tasks, like researching other village models or raising funds. Once their occupation campaign began, the villagers themselves experimented with different governance models but generally operated through direct democratic practices. They seemed to use a mix of consensus and majority voting to make key decisions. And although some villagers (like Jack Tafari and Ibrahim Mubarak) were prominent voices for the camp, the group was wary about granting formal authority to any individual person. Much like New Communities, however, a more formal governance structure emerged with the creation of their nonprofit organization. Once settled at Sunderland, the group elected a Village Council – with one-year terms – to run the day-to-day operations of the village.

From these findings, it appears that autonomous problem-solving benefits from open, flexible, and direct forms of governance (especially during the initial stages of a project). This flexibility allows groups to work outside of conventional institutional structures, adapt to new tasks, and to easily incorporate wider circles of feedback. It also appears that groups are likely to transition into more formal, representative forms of democracy once their autonomous solutions are concretized. However, this phenomenon may be unique to these cases. Both groups'

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transition to representative models coincided with the creation of nonprofit organizations (with conventional board structures) that allowed them to plug into public and private sources of support more effectively. Many autonomous problem-solving groups decide not to pursue nonprofit incorporation, which may allow them to preserve a more directly democratic governance structure. Future research could investigate the full range of governance structures across autonomous problem-solving projects, as well as patterns in their changes over time.

Interactions with State, Market, and Nonprofit Sectors

The autonomy exhibited by New Communities and Dignity Village did not involve a simple separation from state, market, or nonprofit institutions. Rather, their autonomy was sustained by a series of tactical relationships with these sectors. For example, Dignity Village received funds from the Larson Foundation that allowed them to extend their stay at Sunderland Yard. They also agreed to abide by certain conditions that the city imposed on them at Sunderland in exchange for the land. In Georgia, New Communities used a public grant from the Office Economic Opportunity to fund its community planning process. They also used commercial agriculture to pay off the debt from their land purchase. Although these relationships involved collaboration with non-autonomous institutions and actors, New Communities and Dignity Village leveraged these relationships to serve their autonomous projects. In fact, participants exercised their autonomy through the very act of making collective, democratic decisions about how to approach these relationships.

Future research could further explore how autonomous problem-solving projects engage in these tactical relationships with state, market, and nonprofit institutions. A new set of dynamic, relational concepts are needed to capture the (somewhat paradoxical) way that autonomous groups leverage their strategic connections to other institutions in ways that sustain

their own autonomy. A number of questions about the nature of these relationships are also worth exploring further: At what point do connections to other groups constitute a loss of autonomy? Is that solely up to the participants to decide? What sort of tactical relationships seem to offer the most benefits to autonomous problem-solvers? Are nonprofit relationships more beneficial than making deals with the state? Do any groups forego all ties to existing institutions?

Wider Impacts

As mentioned in the previous chapters, both of these projects had impacts that travelled far beyond their local communities. New Communities produced a community housing model that has since been implemented by hundreds of groups across the country. And Dignity Village's successful village model has inspired its own wave of new self-managed housing alternatives. The afterlives of these projects demonstrate that autonomous problem-solving, rather than remaining an isolated phenomenon, have the ability to generate significant long-term effects (even without "scaling up" into national programs).

In fact, the long-term impacts of my cases have intersected. In March 2019, Max Rameau visited Portland to give a talk about the community control over land, housing, and policing. The event was hosted by Right2Survive, a houseless advocacy group founded by Ibrahim Mubarak a few years after the formalization of Dignity Village. That weekend, Rameau and Mubarak hosted a series of strategy meetings for housing justice groups. Notably, one meeting was focused entirely on the use of community land trusts to secure community-controlled, affordable housing. At the meeting, I realize that what I had conceptualized as discrete moments of autonomous problem-solving had since intersected within contemporary social movement circles. This demonstrates the capacity for autonomous problem-solving efforts to build on each other over time.

Although this project has focused narrowly on the *invention* of autonomous solutions, there are ample opportunities for future researchers to study the *diffusion* of autonomous solutions. How do the ideas, practices, and models created by autonomous problem-solvers circulate to other groups? How does this circulation compare with conventional accounts of policy diffusion? And happens when certain aspects of autonomous projects are picked up by public officials and implemented by government agencies?

Conclusion

In this project, I have introduced the concept of autonomous problem-solving to shed light on an overlooked realm of collective action in which everyday people develop self-organized and self-implemented solutions to pressing problems in their community. As I demonstrated in Chapter 1, this stratum of problem-solving has been widely ignored or undervalued by mainstream scholarship. However, my hope for this project is not only to bring increased scholarly attention to this mode of collective action. I also hope to provide useful knowledge to people who are engaged in autonomous projects themselves.

In our current era of overlapping crises, I find hope in autonomous problem-solvers. Around the world, everyday people are stepping up to grapple with the difficult problems facing their communities. The explosion of mutual aid during the COVID-19 pandemic is only one example of recent autonomous problem-solving efforts. We also saw a wave of autonomous strategies employed in the George Floyd protests of 2020. Today, there is an emerging patchwork of grassroots responses to climate disaster as extreme weather events become more prevalent. As mainstream institutions continue to fail us, we must turn to one another and our collective capacity to solve problems through alternative means.

In the vein of Gibson-Graham's work on diverse economies, I hope that my work extends our scope of what is possible. By drawing attention to the way that everyday people have created self-organized solutions to the problems that plague them, I hope it is easier to imagine that we can do the same. Because in the end, collective action is the only thing that can save us.

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