

Breaking the Eviction Cycle: Rethinking Design in an Urban Homeless Campsite

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DEDICATION

For Knoxville's urban campers, whose resourcefulness and insight but ultimately, most significantly, kindness, has forever altered how I see the world.

For Avigail, who brought me back into academia and rescued me from Starbucks.

For my dear husband, for enduring my absences and loving me even in my dire panic.

For Ambrose, for surprising me daily.

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ABSTRACT

In Knoxville, TN, in an area of decaying rail-based industry close to a cluster of homeless services, people experiencing homelessness, who cannot or will not use the shelter system, generate outdoor campsites. Every 6 or 8 months, local authorities evict the campers due to complaints of trash accumulation or disturbances. The homeless campers then move to new locations, and the cycle begins anew. Homeless service providers and policy makers discuss what to do about the perceived problem, but they do not condone the urban campsites or ask the campers what they need to improve their situations.

This is a “wicked problem” as described by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber – a problem that involves multiple stakeholders with competing agendas and thus has no single or easily-identifiable solution. I elected to investigate the role of the designer in this problem by exploring community-based design as a pathway to mutually satisfying solutions.

My research, through ethnographic study and community-based design, revealed that the transitional spaces homeless urban campers generate are important for their expression of agency and autonomy. They desire to feel that they have the freedom to make their own decisions. Therefore, offering decision-making power by allowing urban campsites as transitional spaces for members of the homeless community is an important part of addressing homelessness.

This work is an argument for looking at homelessness in a new way and a description of my experience exploring community-based design with members of the homeless community. I intend to generate thoughtfulness among design professionals in situations where they may encounter homelessness in its various manifestations. My analysis may serve as guidance for those who would undertake similar processes.

PREFACE

I remember being ten years old and participating in a fifth grade field trip to Washington, D.C. We boarded busses and left our parents' protection, taking with us our preferences and assumptions, our moral grounding and experiences, our underdeveloped selves. On the way to the Museum of Natural History, we passed a man in worn clothes and a trucker's hat. He held out a coffee mug that jingled with change. Knowing I wouldn't need all the money my parents gave me to spend, I did what I had been taught in church both through the practice of the offertory and the ideas of aid for the poor: I pulled out a dollar and stuffed it in his jar. My best friend immediately pulled my arm, drawing me away, and told me that I shouldn't give money to people like that because they don't really need it and they will just spend it on cigarettes and alcohol. She had already visited other cities and experienced panhandlers and people asleep on benches; her parents had already handed a set of assumptions down to her. Mine hadn't (yet). I felt conflicted, betrayed both by the man asking for change and by my friend. This was the initiation of a series of arguments I would have with myself and with others, arguments I am still having - the truth of which this thesis is evidence.

We do not approach the homeless with a clean slate. We come with our set of assumptions. Would our assumptions and perceptions change if we didn't have words like "homeless" or "panhandler" or if we hadn't heard the political and moral discourse? How would (and do) our assumptions change when we talk to someone experiencing homeless and learn a little about her, or him? How might the engagement of a whole community - the housed, the homeless, the business owners, the employed and unemployed, the police, the designers, the children, the abused, the elderly - shift our assumptions about homelessness from the realm of the lazy, the dirty, the criminal to the realm of the citizen and the human? How could such a shift change the lives not just of the homeless and underprivileged but of the housed, the designers, the business owners, the police, the young and old and abused?

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“Does the tree say to the sparrow ‘Get out, you don’t belong here?’ Does the tree say to the hungry man ‘This fruit is not for you?’ Does the tree test the loyalty of the beasts before it allows them into the shade?”

The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ, *Philip Pullman*

“What matters is an affirmation of a social world accepting of tension and conflict. What matters is an affirmation of energy and the passion of reflection in a renewed hope of common action, of face-to-face encounters among friends and strangers, striving for meaning, striving to understand. What matters is a quest for new ways of living together, of generating more and more incisive and inclusive dialogues.”

“Chapter 10: Epistemology and Educational Research,” Maxine Greene

CHAPTER I

Urban Collisions

Mariane and Mark¹ had been living rough in Knoxville, Tennessee, in a tent by the railroad tracks for three months when an official from Norfolk Southern Railway found them and told them they had 72 hours to move from that spot or be arrested and relieved of their few belongings. They found a new campsite under Interstate 40 out in the open, where a city ordinance disallows them from even having a tent – but it was the only place where their presence was then condoned.² I had visited their campsite to interview them, and while we spoke, the sun dipped below the horizon and evening deepened; it was getting colder and they sat in side-by-side nests of blankets, huddled in coats and hats and gloves, passing a bottle of whiskey. I was planning to head home after the interview, and I was increasingly aware of how nice it would be to get back to a warm house and have a shower. I realized that Mark and Mariane were going to be out there in their blankets all night, and that night wasn't going to be the coldest they would experience that winter. In a situation of extremely limited choices in which a tent in the woods near available showers at Knoxville Area Rescue Ministry (KARM) would be the best they could do, their choices had been limited even further by powers outside their realm of influence. They were at the mercy of everything around them: the weather, the less savory and drug-addicted people on the streets who would steal their few personal belongings, and the changing civic winds. They couldn't argue with the police or the Norfolk Southern officials, because jail would be worse than sleeping rough. Their agency, and thus a large part of their humanity, had been pared down to the bone. The only choice they could make would be to sleep apart in the shelter or sleep together

1 In the cases where I refer to people by name, they are the real names people gave me. Initially, I told participants that I wouldn't use their names or any identifying features, but all of them gave their names freely and seemed eager to be known rather than anonymous. I realized that, for people experiencing homelessness, being known is somewhat rare, and they seek that kind of recognition. I thus returned to several participants, the ones I could find, and asked if they wanted their names used and had them sign an amended participation form agreeing to this use. If I did not obtain permission from someone, I do not use a name at all but refer to them only as a "participant."

2 Since then, the Knoxville Police Department has issued them another eviction notice; an officer monitoring the site told me that he had advised them to move north of the next street, but I haven't to date found their new camp. I don't know if they are still camping. The problem of the invisibility of unhoused people will be discussed in the Conclusions.



Figure 1. Mark and Mariane.

out in the open, where the Bernoulli effect intensified the wind under the bridge and where they couldn't even put up a tent without getting grief from the authorities. They can't leave their campsite together for longer than a couple of hours because they know something of theirs will be missing when they return. They are tied to this campsite by a specific physical, spatial, and social history.

As I neared the end of my research in February, Mariane and Mark as well as the other 30 or more people living under I-40 were again issued eviction notices. According to a district police sergeant, someone had complained about disturbances on the site, and the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT), which owns the viaduct and therefore the ground underneath it, had ordered the eviction. While none of the actors in the scenario had wholly malevolent intentions, it remained that as a thick snow began to fall, more than two dozen people had to move out from under the mean protection of the viaduct and pitch tents and start new fires in new locations where they hoped they wouldn't be arrested or deprived of their personal items. The cycle continued.

The way for a designer to approach this situation is not to hypothesize about what causes people like Mark and Mariane to end up where they are; the literature is full of such research and discussions. The

place of a designer is not to discover typical behaviors. It is not even to investigate the kinds of lighting and arrangements of bushes that might decrease the likelihood of theft at their campsite. These things are very important to people in other areas of study and practice, and elements of these things might play into the design of a project that the unhoused³ could use.

What is important to me, and what I think should be important to designers, is the physical, spatial history specific to this site that is embedded in the narrative of Mark and Mariane and others in their position; what designers need to understand is the potential for those physical and spatial issues to contribute to a design process. As individuals, Mark and Mariane react in a particular way to the forces at work around them, and their narrative and their reactions are part of a patchwork of people in the same situation who all interrelate with one another and with people outside their situation. I wouldn't have known the details of this situation without asking this couple about their daily lives. People who don't have a home become more than invisible; they become socially leprous. We often avoid their gaze and give them a wide physical berth. We don't want to be asked for money, so we don't ask them anything at all. But in asking them questions, we can learn about the spaces of the city in ways we've never encountered.

Through my research, I uncovered a complicated story of a part of the community that most people do not take time to observe. I learned about the forces they perceived to be working in opposition to their progress toward jobs or housing. I discovered what dangers they perceived and how and where they found safety. They told me about their understanding that the public does not cast a positive light on their lives and their moral character, and many admitted that they interacted with the mainstream public only infrequently and often with negative consequences (arrest, unkind words, rejection). They described stories of evictions of different kinds: being banned from a public place, being banned from a homeless service location, losing access to a campsite, losing their housing, being removed from a place of employment, and being cast away from family connections and activities. I understood that most of their

3 The terms "homeless" or "the homeless" or "homeless people/person" today carry a stigma and an unsavory mental image. The terms are used like "gay" or "retarded" in many cases – as a joke or a generic way of being derogatory. Thus, I try to avoid this term. I often use "people experiencing homelessness" or "members of the homeless community," but the term I favor is "unhoused." I picked up this term from a great book by Mitchell Duneier with Hakim Hasan and Ovie Carter called *Sidewalk*.

stories were stories of separations and losses. Most importantly, I came to understand why living outside was important to them, having experienced these different kinds of evictions and separations. They were all in extremely difficult life situations, and for them, being able to make a choice about where they slept that night gave them some small encouragement: the fact that they could make do for themselves when it was necessary. Having lost, as they thought of it, *everything*, they could still have freedoms enjoyed by people who had made better choices or had experienced less hardship. “That’s why people camp out, because there’s rules [at the shelters],” commented one participant. “Living on the street, there are no rules.” Outside, they are not told not to drink alcohol, to go to bed at 8 pm, to pray at meals, or to sleep in a room according to their gender rather than their relationships.

Without understanding the things I learned by being on this site with the unhoused campers I met, we may continue to assume they *are* less because they *have* less. We may continue to edge them out of society, at worst, and meet their needs improperly or with condescendence, at best. As a designer soon to enter the profession, I am questioning what our role is in changing the outcomes of situations like this. I have learned that many designers create things *for* unhoused people, like “Quixote Village” in Olympia, Washington, for which MSGS Architects contributed pro bono design work, or the domes of Ted Hayes’s Justiceville, USA in Los Angeles. The latter project received a large grant in 1985, and the resulting Dome Village became a transitional space for unhoused people to better their lives and move toward housing. However, designing a project like this didn’t satisfy my particular thirst: to discover what ideas the unhoused had for improving their own situations, without a design as the final result.⁴ I needed to step away from proceeding to a finished design so that I could make the time I needed to form relationships with the people on the site and learn about their struggles firsthand. Thus, I began to frame the question: can designers position ourselves to channel the knowledge and skills of the unhoused into areas of empowerment? Can we invite them into existing community processes? Can we bring their voices into the realm of professional practice and the decision-making activities of civic leadership? What would a designer do first, in a situation of confronting homelessness in a space where other stakeholders

4 One of the decisions that came up in the design workshops, which I will discuss later, was that participants didn’t want permanent structures. They preferred an open space for their own tent, primarily because they didn’t like the idea of using a structure and a bed that had been used by a previous unhoused occupant. They had all the same concerns about hygiene and health that everyone else does.

would seek their removal? What would the steps in the process be, and how would the process evolve as I discovered new information?

In a scenario like this informal urban campsite, which, I have found, repeats in many cities across the U.S.,⁵ the solutions or outcomes rarely favor the unhoused population living outdoors. The assumption is that they are the “others” and they do not belong; their use of land is considered an invasion. But their use of land is also necessary, because they have no other place to carry out the activities of living. They have chosen outdoor camping as their own solution for a current set of problems, and because they have chosen and created and structured their own space, they can feel a sense of ownership there. I do not mean a sense of ownership of property but rather ownership of one’s own life, which, I contend, is what we all want from our homes. That kind of self-controlling of an environment is an expression of agency, and it is crucial that we, outside of the experience of homelessness, recognize that people inside that experience have agency. Once we start doing that, as I have discovered and will explain, significant changes can take place in the attitudes of unhoused people.

We therefore need to look at new methods of addressing the conflicts that many associate with these campers. Because their constant removal breaks down the tenuous networks of support and structure that members of the homeless population build for themselves, evictions may be one of the factors perpetuating their difficult situations. If they perceive that they have no choices and might be uprooted and tossed aside yet again at any moment, how can they perceive any way out of their situation? If we never ask them what it is they really need but instead do things *for* them, how can they perceive that they have any agency? If we do not engage their stories and experiences and seek to understand the underlying forces and how best to address them, we will keep making them invisible and inconsequential. Again and again, they will have to pick up the few things they own and find a new place to make their temporary life as they wonder, will anyone ever care about me? About us?

5 Many cities have experimented with or removed informal tent cities and campsites while some cities have approved their existence for periods of time. *Tent City, USA* is a documentary that covers the growth and subsequent removal of a tent city under an overpass owned by TDOT, very much like this one. Dignity Village is a tent city in Portland, Oregon; Justiceville, USA was the aforementioned experiment in Los Angeles that ended in 2006 when the value of the land it was on increased and the nonprofit could no longer afford rent (<http://domevillage.tedhayes.us/>); Tent City in Lakewood, New Jersey, is still active today; Camp Take Notice in Ann Arbor, Michigan, was established in 2010 and disbanded in 2012 because of requests by the Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT); and I have had conversations with individuals in Indianapolis, Indiana, and Chattanooga, Tennessee who lived in urban campsites in hidden areas (they also had stories about repeated evictions).

Thus, what I wanted from Mark and Mariane’s story and the stories of the other campers on the site is a greater understanding of their lives and needs, because that understanding might help a designer take steps with them toward a more equitable solution to the problem of urban campsite eviction. I want to engage in what Nigel Cross calls a “designerly” way of researching – a way that is reflective and responds to changing situations – that allows critical interpretation of the forces that influence people like Mark and Mariane. I want to see what unhoused people have to say about it but also and more significantly, I want to see what they have to *do* about it. I want to offer an outlet for design thinking and see how they would approach participation in a design problem. I have asked what the place of a designer can be in changing the eviction cycle to give the unhoused the agency they need to move forward into something they themselves define as “better.” I have tried to insert myself into that potential role, constantly re-asking the questions, “What can designers do here?” and “How might designers do that?” What follows is a description of my activities in that role and the conclusions I have drawn that answer those questions in a new way.



Figure 2. Things left behind.

RE-URBANIZATION AND INGREDIENTS FOR CONFLICT

As I mentioned, illegal and informal campsites are not uncommon in urban areas across the country, though some have achieved temporary or lasting recognition while some, like the ones in Knoxville, continue to move from place to place in response to repeated evictions. But homelessness in its many manifestations is ubiquitous. The population of the United States continues to drift away from rural areas and concentrate, in urban centers. In 1950, about 64% of the population of the United States lived in urban areas; today, about 82% live in urban centers, and the number is expected to reach almost 90% by 2040 – about 385 million people nationwide (UNDOESA website. http://esa.un.org/unup/Country-Profiles/country-profiles_1.htm). In combination with this trend, Barrett Lee, Townsend Price-Spratlen, and James Kanan suggest that characteristics of urban areas, such as the concentration of services for homeless individuals and, for those looking for work, the perception that cities offer more job opportunities, cause them to draw more of the homeless population than rural areas and small towns (Lee, Price-Spratlen, and Kanan, 336). As a result of this phenomenon and a series of economic and cultural shifts, policy in urban areas has become increasingly unfriendly toward the homeless community. Don Mitchell writes that in the late 1970s and into the 80s when economic downslide pushed large numbers of people, including whole families, into homelessness, the public attitude toward the homeless turned toward activism: many people were troubled and outraged by the swelling ranks of the desperately poor and engaged in protests, championing for policy changes (“Homelessness, American Style” 934). The most significant change that came from this period of unrest was the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, which provided federal financial assistance to homeless shelters. This was the first and, still, the only legislation to acknowledge homelessness, or the lack of provision of basic shelter, as a serious problem and a symptom of the nation’s inability to address it (National Coalition for the Homeless website. <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/publications/facts/McKinney.pdf>). Around the 1990s, however, the country began to experience what Mitchell calls large-scale “compassion fatigue” as increasing numbers of shelters failed to decrease the visible homeless population (“American Style” 943). The U.S. was entering into another time of economic plenty, and this seemed to further decrease interest in caring for the homeless. Sympathy seems to come easier when everyone is perceived to be struggling together, and, Don Mitchell argues, we are forced to acknowledge

the structural issues that contribute to poverty and homelessness rather than blaming individual faults or bad choices for a person's state of want ("American Style" 940).

Don Mitchell also cites "the deepening of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s" as a large part of the shift in attitude toward the homeless ("American Style" 934). He argues that cities were trying to be more "'competitive' in the markets for footloose capital, tourism, and gentrifiers," and thus the visible homeless population in these cities was increasingly perceived as a liability. In many cities, the argument convenient to civic leadership that the presence of the homeless was a safety concern or a matter of civility and order became common rhetoric; Mitchell asserts that policy makers use this argument but are instead concerned with maintaining a city's aesthetic so as not to damage their competitiveness in drawing capital (*Right to the City*, 169). In fact, a Knoxville police officer I spoke to admitted without hesitation that city beautification was the primary reason for the February 2014 camp eviction; he told me the city doesn't want the trash in the camps to be seen from the interstate overhead. Cities don't want visitors to get the wrong impression; they want their urban areas to appear safe, clean, and orderly.

In the wake of this shift in investors' and officials' goals for urban centers, homelessness was criminalized in one city after another. Ordinances and laws still in place today made "dumpster diving," sitting or sleeping on the sidewalk, panhandling, camping, and other activities illegal in the name of cleaning up the neighborhood or assuring the safety and comfort of the general public. The 2008 economic crisis again swelled the numbers of the unhoused and made these populations more diverse, increasing the percentage of women, children, and working individuals in the homeless population.⁶ When jobs are scarce and foreclosures are on the rise, homelessness swallows even the demographic groups that tend to have more safety nets in place. Between April 2008 and April 2009, foreclosure rates increased by a third while the unemployment rate climbed, and, according to a study by the National Association for the Education of Homeless Children, the numbers of homeless students increased in 95% of school districts across the nation (National Coalition for the Homeless website. Foreclosure to Homelessness 2009 report. <http://www.nationalhomeless.org/advocacy/ForeclosuretoHomelessness0609.pdf>). As the 2008 economic crisis

⁶ A report prepared by the Urban Institute said that 44% of respondents reported doing paid work in the 30 days prior to the survey. Twenty percent reported working "in a job lasting or expected to last at least three months."

set in, many cities began to focus on housing instead of homeless shelters as the central means of addressing homelessness, but “underinvestment, gentrification, and outright destruction” have continued to make these efforts largely unsuccessful (“Homelessness, American Style, 934).

As structural issues like the shortage of low-cost housing⁷ and persistent unemployment make an end to homelessness seem impossible, the daily struggles of homeless people continue to cripple their willpower and drain any resources they have left. Even if housing assistance is offered, it may take months to process an application. The applicant may be issued a caseworker they don’t really want. The housing may be in bad shape or in a bad neighborhood or disconnected from resources. There may not be enough of this housing for the number of homeless persons in a city. Thus, we continue to see the homeless among us, finding places to sleep where they can, being sent to jail when their activities of living intersect with difficult laws, and struggling to make a way through social rejection, illness, substance dependence or abuse, bad weather, and a number of other challenges. Camping offers a little respite; if they can get a tent and sleeping bag, they know they can be relatively dry and warm at night and can provide at least a thin protecting barrier for their possessions. Sleeping outdoors is likely their last resort after staying with friends or relatives or in a shelter. Urban camping, therefore, is crucial because it represents the end of the line, the last bastion before jail or even death.⁸ It can give those with no other options a place to control and care for and a way to take care of themselves.

KNOXVILLE: A LOCAL EXAMPLE

Starting around 2002 and picking up over the next few years, downtown redevelopment and revitalization in Knoxville, Tennessee fanned the flames of public interest in helping many people experiencing homelessness, joblessness, poverty, and hunger. However, it also instigated some of the conflicts

7 Lee et al. describe the problem: “Price inflation throughout the market has made the transition to home ownership more difficult and thus has increased competition for rental units, pushing such units beyond the means of poor households. Other units have been lost via conversion, abandonment, demolition, and arson. Urban renewal and gentrification have taken a heavy toll on the stock of single-room occupancy (SRO) housing that was once plentiful in the urban core” (“Determinants of Homelessness” 337).

8 People in the vulnerable position of homelessness can easily become victims of violence, exposure, substance overdose, and health problems. There have been at least four deaths of people camping outside in Knoxville in the last two years. 9

I previously discussed that were becoming ubiquitous in growing cities across the country. In Knoxville and the surrounding county, shelters and housing services for the homeless reported about 1,400-1,500 people using beds on a particular night when the count was undertaken (point-in-time count).⁹ According to the 2013-2014 Biennial study conducted by the Knoxville Homeless Management Information System, about 1,960 chronically homeless individuals (those who have been homeless for over a year or who have been homeless 4 or more times in 3 years) used services in Knoxville and Knox County in 2011; a total of over 9,800 people accessed homeless services that year. Though this does not mean that 9,800 people were homeless in Knoxville and Knox County at any one time, the discrepancy between number of homeless persons and number of beds in use at the time of the HUD point-in-time count is still quite staggering. This suggests that more people are outside the shelters than are in them (though some do stay with friends or relatives). In the area I studied alone, participants estimated 30 to 40 people camping out on a given night, but even people using the site may be blind to all the hidden and changing people around them. There are many other campsites scattered across the city.

Following the trend of many American cities over the last couple of decades, Knoxville has been pumping resources into the urban core, restoring activity to and encouraging commercial growth in a previously empty downtown. Now Market Square thunders with life in all seasons of the year: crowds throng the farmers market, the skating rink, and dozens of street festivals of different scales. Gay Street floods and flows with people seeing movies and shows, spending money at restaurants and bars and shops, and intentionally or accidentally *encountering* each other. There's the Old City, Happy Holler, Cumberland Avenue (or The Strip), the Riverfront (Figure 3). Knoxville has "First Friday" to encourage participation in the arts and make visible new artists. It has news media outlets with thriving public forums, like the *Metro Pulse* and *The Knoxville News Sentinel*. Local public radio, venues large and small, and the "Blue Plate Special" at the Visitor's Center encourage local musicians. There are more places and opportunities for children to play and grow all the time. There is the Knoxville Museum of Art, the East Tennessee Historical

⁹ Data from 2012 point-in-time count study by HUD. I accessed spreadsheets on their website. http://usich.gov/media_center/news/hud_releases_2012_point_in_time_count_estimates_of_homelessness

Society, and McClung Museum. As all of these attractive places and activities started to draw suburban residents and out-of-town visitors, discussions about the homeless became more common and laced with frustration and prejudice.

Rifling through the archives of a local publication, the *Metro Pulse*, I saw this process in journalistic time-lapse. People visiting from or moving from suburban areas who were unused to urban interactions felt intimidated by panhandlers (*Metro Pulse* 28 Sept 2006). Residents in a gentrifying historic neighborhood blamed the homeless for a rash of break-ins and car robberies (13 Oct 2005). One of the homeless services, the Volunteer Ministry Center, relocated from North Gay Street to North Broadway, near the other homeless services; North Gay Street was now a place of high-priced lofts, art galleries, and restaurants. In 2005, just as many old buildings were being converted into lofts and galleries and Fourth and Gill, one of the historic neighborhoods, was gentrifying, Knoxville implemented The 10-Year Plan to End Chronic Homelessness.¹⁰

Over the next few years, mostly between 2005 and 2007 but continuing to the present, articles, editorials, and letters to the editor increasingly were aimed squarely at the homeless “problem”; suddenly everyone had an opinion and cared about it. Whereas before the homeless were mentioned only occasionally and semi-affectionately – one writer reminiscing about the Fort Sanders neighborhood said that inviting the homeless in the neighborhood to house parties was common practice (*Metro Pulse* 24 Jan 2002) – now “the homeless” became nearly a code phrase for “people we don’t want.” People who don’t have a home were not part of the community. Even pity was distanced and qualified with “but” statements. They became “invaders.” In October of 2005, an article appeared that said Fourth and Gill residents were blaming the neighborhood’s proximity to some of the city’s homeless services – Knoxville Area Rescue Mission (KARM) and the Salvation Army, primarily (Figure 4) – for a rash of break-ins and car burglaries, despite Knoxville Police Department officials insisting that there was no indication any of the crimes were committed by member of the homeless community.¹¹

10 At the time of this writing, this plan has recently been updated and is in the last stages of review prior to implementation.

11 In the first workshop, I mentioned that we could have trouble with residents of Fourth and Gill in trying to approve a tent city. One participant, Country, snapped to attention and declared, “Fourth and Gill definitely do *not* want the homeless. I had a shotgun pointed at me two years ago. I wouldn’t even tell them [about a tent city].”

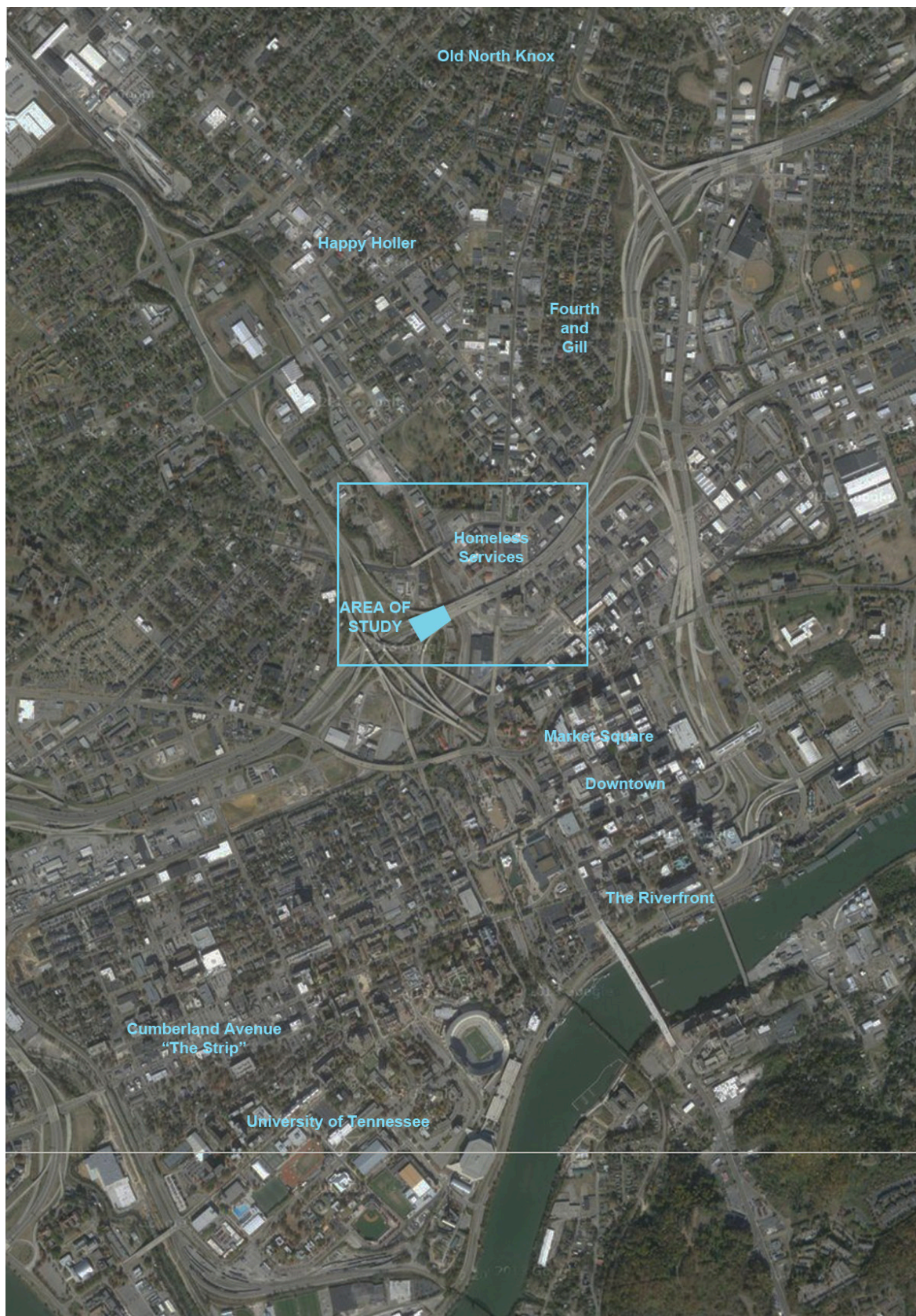


Figure 3. Map of Knoxville.

Not everyone held the homeless in a negative light – one reader wrote a response letter to that October article saying she didn’t believe the crimes were the work of homeless individuals but rather a serial thief (27 Oct 2005). But then, early in 2006, an article and a commentary piece highlighted the controversial plan to locate Minvilla Manor, permanent housing for the homeless, at N Broadway and W 5th Avenue where the other existing services were clustered. This ignited an explosion of controversy, as many people were already convinced there were problems with keeping all the services close together. In a May 11, 2006, letter to the editor, a reader claims that the concentration of these services was bringing more homeless into Knoxville – an instance of the circulating but unfounded opinion that Knoxville was becoming a “homeless mecca” – and was encouraging the perpetuation of bad habits people associated with homelessness, like substance abuse.

Getting rid of the homeless was often masqueraded as acting according to “tough love” – ensuring that the city was not “enabling and encouraging” activities such as public urination and drunkenness, bathing in the creek in Krutch Park, or other “aberrant behavior” (*Metro Pulse* 14 Sep 2006).

A September 28, 2006 editorial describes the attitude toward panhandlers:

Despite the availability of services to the homeless or jobless or stranded in Knoxville, the incidence of panhandling downtown and the aggressiveness of some of its practitioners has been on the rise in this mild-weather season.

It’s along those sidewalks, [City Councilman Chris Woodhull] says, where “We want a safe, comfortable environment.” We couldn’t agree more. So it’s a very encouraging sign that the city is looking into an ordinance that may effectively reduce the element of panhandling that has become so threatening to downtown Knoxville’s ambience.

We hope that the city fathers come up with something that is both constitutional and palatable to those people who are committed to ameliorating the plight of the poor and homeless. And we hope they do it soon.

Concern for the “plight of the poor” is nonexistent in this editorial; the call to “ameliorate” their struggles is almost a fist held high: “or else” implies the writer. Words like “threatening” and “aggressiveness” put the taste of violence and thus fear in the mouths of readers. In March of 2007, a section called “Ear to the Ground” briefly commented on the loss of the café in the downtown library: “Others remark that the place sometimes resembled a sitting lounge for vagrants, further evidence of Knoxville’s uneasy relations with the homeless nation” (*Metro Pulse*). In a regular piece called “Frank Talk” in late 2006, Frank Cagle wrote about “dealing with panhandlers, drunks and petty criminals” as crucial to creating connections between existing segments of the city, labeling the homeless with derogatory terms and lumping them

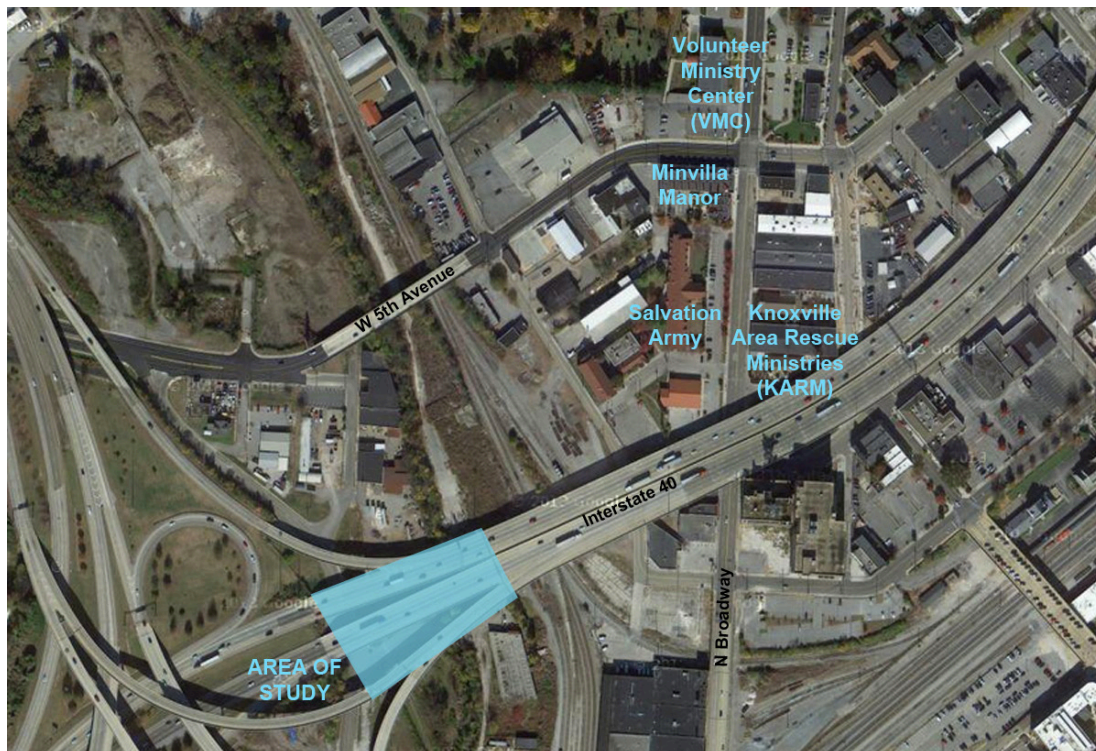


Figure 4. Homeless Services.

together as a group of law violators (14 Sept 2006). These examples reveal the extent to which a problem like homelessness is spread, demonized, and even *created* by public opinion. The storm and fury in this one Knoxville publication – which pales in comparison to the arguments people have made through the online versions of such media outlets – reveals the range and intensity of emotions associated with homelessness and how and when it became a “problem.”

Around 2007, the discussion was still ongoing, though fewer people were being so unabashedly unkind about it. Still, a feature story on May 24 of 2007 describes the debate over yet another homeless service at N Broadway near W 5th Avenue (Figure 4):

And [City Councilman Chris] Woodhull saw plenty of clashing personalities while sitting on the Broadway-Fifth Task Force. Formed in the summer of 2006, the committee’s mission was to address concerns raised by Volunteer Ministry Center’s planned renovation of the former Fifth Avenue Hotel into apartments for the homeless. Several residents of nearby neighborhoods, namely Fourth and Gill and Old North Knoxville, as well as area business owners, were strongly opposed to the renovation on the grounds that VMC was effectively creating a “homeless district” in their backyards.

From the get-go, Woodhull says, the battle lines were clearly drawn. “Most of the people who came to the first meeting, the second meeting, they couldn’t stand each other,” he says. “They were very upset.”

I still see evidence of the faction who believes that Knoxville created a “draw” for homeless people from all over the country, that the homeless were essentially criminals who needed someone to whip them into shape, and that these individuals were a blight on the city and should be pushed somewhere else so the public doesn’t have to deal with them. I still hear versions of these opinions when I talk to people about homelessness now, including police officers, news reporters, and friends. This perspective remains the ubiquitous one.

In contrast to this trend, however, in 2009, *The Amplifier*, Knoxville’s homeless street newspaper, was established. As a way for unhoused people to make extra money in a socially and legally legitimized way, I perceive that it has helped the city make some strides toward accepting homeless individuals as part of the urban community. The content of the paper seeks to “amplify” the voices of the homeless; the perspective that the articles and interviews help publicize guides Knoxvillians to new frames of mind. Though the tide is still against them, at least there are instances of individuals from both “sides” meeting and even interacting daily, because of this publication. The editor, Eddie Young, is a passionate but measured advocate for Knoxville’s homeless community, especially members who have the hardest time accessing housing or coping with the restraints of utilizing shelter facilities and other services. Working with him was extremely important to the design process I coordinated because his posture on individual empowerment rather than service provision was perhaps the social work equivalent of my own position from a design standpoint.

Knoxville Chief of Police David Rausch explained in a February 2014 meeting with the Knoxville Homeless Collective – a group of homeless and formerly homeless persons who are acting as the voice of the larger homeless community – that the Knoxville Police Department frequently feels pressure from communities and neighborhoods to act on some of the “symptoms” – real or perceived – of the presence of unhoused persons. He pointed out the perception that people have of the homeless, confirming from at least one perspective that these negative connotations of the “problem” are still in effect. The opinions of the law enforcement officers themselves, however, seem to frequently lean far more in the direction of sympathy. They seem completely on board with compassionately approaching each individual incident without making broader judgments. I hypothesize that this could be because KPD officers form relationships with unhoused members of the community in ways the general public doesn’t. These officers and sergeants see many of the same people day after day, and they assume that their job as

law enforcement is to protect the safety of every person, whether or not they have a house or apartment to live in. In the same meeting, West District Commander Don Jones stated this explicitly, assuring the KHC members that “nothing in the Constitution says you have to have property to have rights” (Knoxville Homeless Collective meeting, 5 Feb 2014).

These attitudes contribute significantly to the way Knoxville approaches homelessness today. Many of these KPD officials, even Chief Rausch, are willing to speak up in defense of the unhoused in public discussions. Knowing the attitude of local law enforcement became important for me in determining some of the steps I took and might take in the future. It showed me that the KPD could be allies in the discussion rather than a force to contend with, and it made me aware that I could ask officers questions about campsite locations, property ownership, and city plans for the area I studied, without incurring negative consequences.

Knoxville has, at the time of this writing (May 2014), recently revised its Plan to End Homelessness, but in the meantime unhoused people without shelter access – or who find shelters unacceptable conditions – continue to appropriate spaces for urban campsites. When people discuss homeless campers, even in the new plan to end homelessness, they always talk about homelessness being an “unacceptable condition.” This sounds like a compassionate approach, but what it means is that they don’t accept homelessness, or sleeping outside as a result of homelessness, to be a deliberate choice – an expression of agency. “I don’t believe that anyone truly chooses to be homeless,” said Chief David Rausch in the 5 Feb KHC meeting. What he is saying is exactly that: he doesn’t believe it. Though he is full of compassion, he cannot fathom as part of his worldview that anyone could desire to live in a campsite without a permanent address or a real plan to improve their situation. A few of them do. Some of them just desperately need a case worker who can see their specific issues and assign them doable tasks, guiding their steps up the ladder. But some would rather sleep outside and have full control of their own life than be part of a program to get into an apartment with cockroaches and drug dealers, far away from all the other support networks they have so that they have to get a bus pass just to see their friends or have lunch at the Mission.

But, as the archives of the *Metro Pulse* reveal, many people believe that anyone can (and just needs to) be reformed instantaneously, made to realize the error of their ways, and set on the straight and narrow in order to get out of homelessness. Then they can have the house and family and job, the

American dream that many think everyone should want. The events and opinions I found in the *Metro Pulse* and through casual conversations with police officers and acquaintances reflected what Don Mitchell describes as our way of distinguishing between the “deserving” and the “undeserving” poor and blaming homelessness on individual flaws, not structural problems (lack of housing, lack of jobs). If the homeless don’t want the assistance we’re providing for them or are too (lazy, addicted, troubled, stubborn) to use it, goes the thinking, then they don’t deserve help at all. We gave them their chance, this attitude proclaims. They refused to take it, so it’s their own fault and we can wash our hands of it. One officer said, “They could stay in one of the shelters. They just want to be able to *drink*, is what it is.” When I countered that I wouldn’t want to be told that I wasn’t allowed to drink either, he just argued, “You’re alternative isn’t the streets.” As if because they are in a difficult situation, they aren’t allowed to want what the rest of us want: the freedom to conduct our lives as we wish. But this thinking that the unhoused in Knoxville, especially those who are single and have been homeless for some time, are the “undeserving poor” seems at least as ubiquitous as the thinking that all they really need is a hand up. And the problem is, that thinking is often louder than the voices of understanding that call for equality.

Because of this, Knoxville’s urban homeless have, in practice, no voice in public decisions. Even the mayor’s round table, a group that exists to provide counsel to the mayor on issues this group faces, has only recently included representatives from the homeless population; previously (and still largely), it was composed of representatives from homeless *service organizations*. Until mid-February of 2014, which was the first time a formerly homeless person attended one of these meetings, the homeless were still discussed as objects, not subjects; others, outside, without agency. In most cases outside the Knoxville Homeless Collective and the Mayor’s Round Table, they still are.¹² Most of those who lack permanent housing and spend each night in a tent or a homeless shelter – or jail – without guaranteed access to meals, showers, communication technology, and transportation, find that being part of a public conversation is impossible because of these barriers. The foundation of the problem is that they quickly learn, even after a short time on the streets, that nobody cares to listen to what they have to say. In fact,

12 As another example, a group of business owners called the Cumberland Avenue Merchants Association holds monthly meetings, and panhandling is frequently a topic of discussion. They have issued anti-panhandling brochures, encouraging people not to give panhandlers money, generalizing that all panhandlers use the money for drugs and alcohol. In the meetings, the homeless are discussed as a problem and a nuisance. Recently, a member of the homeless population sat in on one of these meetings. The merchant representatives continued to talk about the criminal and undesirable presence of the homeless on their sidewalks, as if the unhoused individual were not in the room, listening to the confirmation that he was not welcome in public.



Figure 5. Belongings.



Figure 6. Fire pit.

most of the individuals I engaged with during this process who were camping out and spending their days on the street would cut me off as I began to explain why I wanted to talk to them: “They don’t care what we think. Nobody cares what we think.” Knoxville may have numerous caring people who very much want to help, but conversations still focus on what to do about the perceived problem of homelessness rather than what the homeless want. Don Mitchell refers to this attitude as “*distanced compassion*” (“Homelessness, American Style” 942). Since it is lack of agency that can be one of the toughest barriers to action, planners, service providers, and policymakers in Knoxville may be perpetuating the problem simply by not acknowledging that human beings need to be able to make choices in order to move forward. A trapped human is a stalled human. People learn helplessness quickly.

LOCATING AN AREA OF COLLISION

The site that brought me to the study of this problem, where I spent most of my research hours, is just north and west of downtown; still in the “center” of the city but in a marginal space that includes abandoned or reused structures in varying states of post-industrial decay. At least one property is what is called a “brownfield,” its soil containing heavy metals that leach into Second Creek. One site is Buddy’s British Restorers & Others Inc, where a few rusting cars grow weeds and grasses from their open hoods. A spaghetti tangle of viaducts flies overhead, pouring spouts of water in heavy rains but offering shade and

shelter below. The Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) owns the viaducts and the land directly below them. The site is also near an old depot, and one spur of active rail line intersects with a primary path taken by the unhoused campers living there. The track and a 100-foot zone to either side belong to the Norfolk Southern Corporation. Second Creek slogs through, channeled and headed toward the culvert under World's Fair Park. It is one of four primary waterways that flow through Knoxville on the way to the Tennessee River, and remediation of all of these creeks has been discussed for years. All are under a bacteriological advisory because they exceed Total Maximum Daily Limits (TMDL) of fecal coliform. In 2006, the Third Creek restoration project began, and Second Creek was submitted to the EPA in 2010 to obtain assessment funding under the Brownfields Grant Program. Stormwater pipes open to it, gushing shed rainwater laced with petroleum derivatives and heavy metals into its already-contaminated flow. The contamination is significant enough at the time of this writing in 2014 that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has jurisdiction over the investigation of the waterway, according to a representative from the Metropolitan Planning Commission; there is a pending EPA consent order for the corporation that has been one of the biggest contaminant sources along the creek to fund its remediation. Trees shade the creek in a narrow buffer for much of its length, but directly under I-40 the earth is bare dirt, and sagging concrete retaining walls lean crazily over the water. The place is on a margin of seen and unseen; I have come to consider it "backstage" for the sidewalks along North Broadway between 5th Avenue and Cooper Street,



Figure 7. Knoxville Homeless Collective Meeting.
19

where people seeking homeless services walk or sit for much of the day (Fig. 3). Drug dealers have been a recent plague on both North Broadway and its “backstage” where I held my interviews; they use the unhoused people who wait around there as a sort of cover for their own brand of waiting, and they prey on members of the homeless community who receive monthly checks.¹³

Because the site is hidden in a relatively undesirable area for development and includes the shelter of the bridges and trees as well as proximity to many of Knoxville’s homeless services, it is a prime location for unhoused people to make camp. However, because it is still partially activated by commercial and small-scale industrial processes and is largely owned by the state, Norfolk Southern, and a few small businesses, it is also ripe for these cycles of tension, eviction, relocation, and so on. The homeless really need to be there; TDOT, Norfolk Southern Railway, Buddy’s, and the other small businesses really don’t want them to be there. There is the added complexity of remediation of Second Creek becoming more urgent (in fact, it is now under the jurisdiction of the EPA because the state could not fund adequate remediation) and, of course, the ever-present policy issue: ordinances against tent camping in urban areas and against activities related to camping.

13 I talk about this more in Chapter V in the section “Describing a micro-culture.”



Figure 8. Rainwater falls from the viaduct above.



Figure 9. Buddy’s Restorers & Others Inc.



Figure 10. Stormwater enters Second Creek.



Figure 11. Second Creek under I-40.



Figure 12. Aerial view.

Knoxville contains plenty of places that might provide an opportunity for someone to approach a difficult situation where the unhoused interface with the public and arguments ensue. However, this chosen site provides both a wealth of participants to learn from for the purposes of research and an intensity and frequency of conflict that may not exist to this degree anywhere else in the city. By trying to grasp the situation in its most complex and emotionally-laden form with the greatest physical extents and most frequently-repeating patterns, I hope to explore the greatest range and richness possible to pass along the most information to others who might repeat the process in other situations.



Figure 13. Paths To and From the Site.

This map shows how the site is a central location for many of the areas that members of the homeless community access daily.



Figure 14. View at Oak Avenue.

This was the boundary of my area of observation to the south. The photo was taken from a gravel lot where one participant frequently parked his car. In the rain, scuppers sent a row of waterfalls cascading to the road and the lot below.



Figure 15. View under Interstate 40 looking east.

This was the primary area of study where most of my participants spent time. They ate, socialized, and slept here. Most of them had beds made of piles of blankets and sometimes a mattress or sleeping bag underneath.



Figure 16. View under West 5th Avenue.

This was the boundary of my observations to the north. There were remnants of camps under this viaduct, but I did not observe active campers beyond this point. After the February 12, 2014 eviction, a Knoxville Police Department Sergeant reported that many campers had moved north of this boundary.

INVESTIGATION TIMELINE

I began my investigation after discovering the problem in November of 2012. During the rest of the fall and that winter after the campers had moved (at this point, I did not seek to uncover their new location), I read a great deal and learned about homelessness, from practical planning approaches to theoretical arguments for including the homeless more equitably in public life. In the spring, people began to once again collect on the site and situate new visible campsites. During this time, I was enrolled in a design studio that focused on the health of local watersheds. I chose the Second Creek watershed because it included the site I was interested in. At that time, I intended to design a theoretical project that would bring to light the issue of homelessness and the issue of water quality by illuminating the democratic use of a public space. I would design something *for* the unhoused campers: a bathhouse where they could have access to clean water. Plan East Tennessee (PlanET) and the Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC) had been discussing the feasibility of locating a bicycle connector path along Second Creek through the site, so part of the bathhouse design intention was that it would also be available for use by the mainstream public who would pass by the project on the proposed greenway.

In preparation for the project, I conducted site observations and analysis that included taking photographs and written notes of physical conditions, researching local climate conditions, and producing a series of diagrams of those conditions. I looked at the water cycle and how stormwater reached Second Creek and in what quantities. I studied sun angles and shadows from the overpasses, vegetative cover and percentage of impermeable surfaces, paths of movement and places of rest used by the unhoused people there (as I observed them), boundaries like railroad tracks and fences, and traffic flows.

But during my review at the end of that semester, my jury brought up questions that I didn't know how to answer because I hadn't asked the unhoused people themselves who were already using the site. These were questions like, how do you ensure that all parties using the bathhouse would feel safe? What areas of the site present hazards and how will you mediate them? Would the proposed users *actually use* this? How could you encourage use or alter the program and design to encourage use? I also presented the project to my thesis committee, explaining that I intended to consult the people on the site about whether or not they thought such a project was feasible. During that review, my thesis committee encouraged me to think about cognitive mapping as described by Kevin Lynch in *The Image of the City*. This would involve interviewing individuals and having them draw the site they were using as they observed it. I

November		
	recognition of site - first time aware of an eviction	
March		method: design <i>for</i>
	site observations and analysis collected for a design studio; resulted in theoretical bathhouse project time on-site: 3 visits, about 5 hours total	
September		method: collect design feedback and site analysis
13	first site visit for interviews; introductions, explanations time on-site: about 2.5 hours first interview	
27	time on-site: about 1 hour interview: Michael	
October		
13	time on-site: about 1 hour interview	
18	time on-site: about 1 hour interview	
20	time on-site: about 1.5 hour interview	
28	time on-site: about 2 hour interview: Tumble Weed	
November		method: use ethnographic study to enter into community-based design
2	time on-site: about 2 hour interview	
3	time on-site: about 2 hour interview: Mark and Mariane	method: design workshops for theoretical program/design
December-January		
	time on-site: 15 minutes on average per visit visited site four times as the weather grew cold; I brought a tarp during a snowstorm and brought firewood a couple of times	
February		
5-19	eviction and site cleanup by City of Knoxville attended Knoxville Homeless Collective meeting time on-site: 4 hours	method: design workshops for locating and programming/designing
19	Workshop I time on-site: about 7 hours	
26	Workshop II time on-site: about 7 hours	

Figure 17. Research Timeline.

intended to introduce Lynch's five mapping elements (landmark, district, node, path, edge) and then discover how the homeless urban campers perceived the site I had already mapped in the design studio; I would compare the results from their position as users to the results from my position as a designer, to see how it changed the way I saw the site. I planned to then use these maps and create a new map of the site based on combined knowledge. In this way, the participants would contribute to pre-design site analysis and offer insight into the bathhouse project I had already produced. I would propose a new version of the bathhouse project at the end of the research.

When I started conducting interviews in the fall of 2013, however, I discovered limitations to this process that proved prohibitive. It also became clear that in order to honestly gain the input of the unhoused participants, I would have to erase my initial design from the equation and step through the process of site analysis, programming, and preliminary design *with* them. This would more accurately capture the spirit and intent of participatory design.

Therefore, as I ended the interview process, I decided to hold design workshops. These would take a sociologically-oriented project and redirect it toward design and the role of design professionals, not just design researchers. In January of 2014, I planned two workshops: one to program a place like a tent city where participants could stay as they waited for housing or a job and the other to produce a preliminary design for the program.

In the last portion of the timeline, starting on February 5, 2014, the plan for the workshops changed when the campers were issued eviction notices in a large-scale and total cleanup of the site. At this point, it became necessary to discuss a secure and permanent tent city in answer to pressing and emotional course of events than the unhoused campers were experiencing. The first workshop, thus, was to locate a real tent city and discuss program elements such a project would require. In the second workshop, we would solidify the program and start space planning.

Most of my interviews took place in September and October, with two taking place in early November. I spent one to two hours on the site for each interview, and this time included chatting and sharing snacks with others who were not being interviewed that day. I usually conducted one interview per visit, and each interview lasted between twenty and forty-five minutes. I frequently conducted these interviews on weekends; Sunday afternoons were relaxed among the participants, and there were usually plenty of people around at that time. I learned this in September as I visited the site several times outside

of conducting interviews and also as I biked by at different times on different days, taking note of who was sitting around, who was walking, and who was absent.

The workshops each lasted over two hours; the second one lasted almost three hours. Preparing for the first workshop, holding the workshop, and cleaning up and transporting participants afterward took about seven hours. The second workshop took about the same amount of time.

Beyond the original intent of the thesis and outside the bounds of this document, I intend to hold two more workshops to congeal the participants' plans for a tent city so that we can draft a proposal to present to Mayor Madeline Rogero. We intend to request meetings to determine several possible locations for a tent city and move forward with plans to engage the community in the planning and involve the future tent city residents in design development, construction documents, and construction administration phases of the project.

CHAPTER II

A View of Society in Conflict

People like those I observed and interviewed in Knoxville who have lost access to stable housing are caught in an impossible bind: private housing is out of reach and “in public” is the only place for them to be. Don Mitchell declares poignantly that it is in this inescapably public lifestyle that mainstream society least considers them citizens, part of the public (*Right to the City*, 135). As discussed in Chapter I, in an economic climate of neoliberalism/globalized capitalism, we most commonly understand public space to be for commercial use to ultimately benefit individual landowners and business owners, the only “class” of person some would consider to be citizens. However, public space is created by and for the active practice of democracy, formed by “spatial contests” in which people physically occupy space in order to enforce their rights (Deutsche, 276). Through an exploration of a necessary activity – finding shelter – that individuals experiencing homelessness conduct in public space and a study of some of the basic tenets of Henri Lefebvre’s theory on the “production of space” (and arguments of others who have followed his lead), I have come to see that the right to inhabit is part of what public space is for. When private space is no longer an option, public space becomes the only place in which the homeless can exercise their production of space as part of the polity.

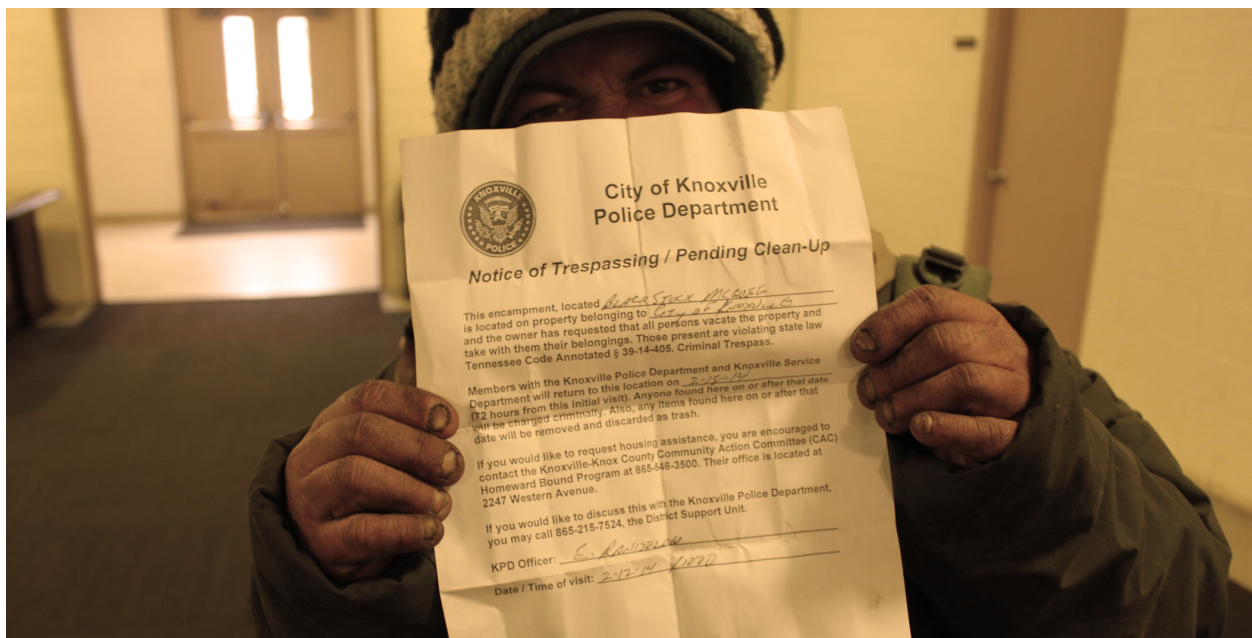


Figure 18. A Knoxville camper displays her eviction notice.

I investigated authors who wrote about homelessness and public space, and I identified several whose ideas inspired my thinking about how designers fit into this social problem. I discovered a discourse committed to arguing for the fundamental right of all citizens to use public spaces. In different ways, each author discusses what kind of person is usually considered “the public,” and points out the tendency for the homeless (or others in poverty or otherwise marginalized) to be excluded from that. Since rhetoric about the “public good” rarely refers to members of minorities or the marginalized (in fact, the rhetoric is sometimes intended to further disenfranchise them), these authors seek to discover who we *should* consider to be “the public” and how actions carried out in space can change society’s perception of the actors. Each assumes that public space should be for political action rather than (only) for commercial profit, as many public spaces have come to serve. Each criticizes capitalist modes of spatial production as largely dehumanizing, oppressing laborers, women, minorities, the homeless, and so on, in order to achieve a wider profit margin. Each asks, What is public space for? and How can/should public space be used? and What does it mean to inhabit the city? Each outlines parallel but not identical answers and contributes to how I understand the position of those living outdoors without property of their own.

DON MITCHELL AND THE RIGHT TO INHABIT

Among these thoughtful answers and proposals was *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space* by Don Mitchell. I introduced his ideas about economic development in cities contributing to the perceived problem of homelessness in Chapter I. He rejects the argument that dislocating these visible homeless people from urban public spaces creates healthier cities and goes on to champion the “right to inhabit” public space, contending that chasing the homeless out of public spaces is denying them the very right to exist. This rings true for me in the situation I found on the site and in surrounding areas in Knoxville where the unhoused campers break a number of city ordinances to survive. These ordinances include no open alcohol containers in public, no tent camping in urban areas, no public urination (based on this ordinance, those arrested on this charge are recorded on the list of registered sex offenders), no access to privately-owned dumpsters, and no sitting or laying on the sidewalk between 7 a.m. and 9 p.m. in the downtown core and along Broadway and N Central. They have no choice but to go about these daily activities in public or little-used privately-owned spaces (for the latter type of space, they can also be arrested for criminal trespassing). While those in the mainstream public engage in the same activities, they are not subject to arrest; they have a socially validated *space*

in which to engage in those activities. Unhoused people often cannot access these validated spaces. The members of the homeless community are discouraged in these ways because the city wants citizens (meaning non-homeless persons) to feel comfortable. As Mitchell, points out, this kind of rhetoric places “the need to maintain ‘order’ and ‘civility’ in public space” over the rights of the marginalized (*Right to the City*, 15). Mitchell criticizes proponents of “order,” claiming (with Lefebvre and Guy Debord as precedents) that “The city is the place where difference *lives*,” and that public space is crucial to the struggle for rights (18). Public space is where citizens make themselves visible and can physically represent their interests and their rights. Seeing the man with the tin cup when I was a fifth grader gave me my first exposure to the actual existence of people who have so little money that they have to ask others for theirs. This exposure is not necessarily pleasant, and because of this, public space is viewed as a “retreat” where members of mainstream society can enjoy the “spectacle” of one another and of the urban landscape (128). But Mitchell argues that resistance (experienced in diverse urban areas) is necessary to life; “coping with difficulty” rouses us to action (189). If we never encounter people who have different challenges and lifestyles than ours, we may never reach outside ourselves to accept and help others. Following Lefebvre’s discussions, Mitchell believes that only through the representation of all members of the community in physical confrontation and resistance can the community fairly determine where certain behaviors (speaking, sleeping, urinating, drinking alcohol, expressing sexuality, sitting) are “tolerated” or disallowed (218).

When civic leaders use facts like the percentage of the homeless suffering from alcoholism, drug addiction, or mental illness, they make the issue of homelessness about behavior, not about life circumstances or broader economic conditions. When statistics are used to define a group in this way, it allows people to feel excused for considering that group’s members to be less than citizens. They are citizens, however, Mitchell maintains, and they too have the right to democratic public space.

LEFEBVRE AND THE PRODUCTION OF SPACE

Mitchell’s writings led me to Henri Lefebvre, who talks about the “production of space” as the action of people physically occupying and using public spaces for their own purposes. I became interested in why many of the homeless choose not to occupy shelters but rather live in these precarious urban campsites. Lefebvre might argue that it is a question of agency; they don’t want space produced for them but rather want to take control of their space in the small ways they can.



Figure 19. Living space is produced under Interstate 40.

Henri Lefebvre's name and writings cropped up in almost every other text I read. As a philosopher following Marx and a sociologist, he strove to bring Marxism into the realm of daily activity. He saw the products of both capitalism and socialism and criticized both as insufficient to meet the human need to create one's own space for living. Introducing vastly influential concepts such as the "production of space," "use value," "exchange value," and the "right to the city," he upheld habitation, the physical act of daily living, as central to the formation of an individual and thus a just society. For him, the working class was the only part of the population that could revolutionize working conditions and stratified social structure. The city was an *oeuvre*, a "work" as in a work of art or a monument, and each person contributed by producing social space day to day. In *Writings On Cities* he postulates that before industrialization, the wealthy justified their positions in society by creating public works, claiming that "very oppressive societies were very creative and rich in producing *oeuvres*" (66). Now, the wealthy spend wealth making products instead of *oeuvres*, creating a society of exploitation as distinct from a society of oppression. Creation has thus become a process of mere replication. The marginalized must take up the reins and create their own social space to break free from compartmentalization, institutionalization, commercialization - - all the powers that dictate daily life and crush creation.

This idea especially resonated with what I found in the interviews and activities I observed. People were choosing to make their own spaces outdoors instead of using the shelters. By camping out, they had a realm they could control rather than having their daily activities and thus their very lives dictated to them, constrained, and segmented.

Lefebvre also addressed the economic and political components, as Mitchell did after him; he says that the centralization of power in cities is a “spatial strategy” that will “force worrisome groups, the workers among others, out towards the periphery”; the powerful center increases exchange value (monetary value as distinct from use value – the value of something to further social needs, not monetary gain) to exclude the poor and thus homogenizes the urban center, creating a fiction of harmony and “spatial coherence” threatened by outside infringement (*Production of Space*, 321). This homogenization destroys what he calls differentiated space.

For Lefebvre, “[f]ully developed individuality came about through differentiated practice, not through drudge or routine, and differentiated practice was only possible through a differential space, through one’s ‘right to the city,’ through an ‘urban revolution’” (Merrifield, 72). Differentiated practice was brought together in the city, making urban public space crucial for creating opportunity for interaction and confrontation with otherness. The recognition of otherness was central to the formation of the “total man” with access to “universal consciousness” (Merrifield, 76). Consciousness then becomes (and stems from) practice – “social practice, an analysis of pressing social problems, invariably economic problems, which called for practical solutions – invariably, *political* solutions” (77). The solutions resulting from daily practice by people with universal consciousness, Lefebvre believes, will meet social needs not addressed by commerce and industry. “The double process of industrialization and urbanization loses all meaning if one does not conceive urban society as aim and finality of industrialization, and if urban life is subordinated to industrial growth,” Lefebvre writes (*Writings on Cities*, 177). We must apply rights (“right to work, to training and education, to health, to housing, leisure, to life”) to social practice: “[a]mong these rights in the making features the *right to the city* (not to the ancient city, but to urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete *usage* of these moments and places, etc.)” (179). Having no house or apartment to sleep in at night should not exclude a person from these activities of “encounter and exchange” and of “life rhythms and time uses.” Including the unhoused in the process of design might be one way to allow them to exercise these rights, even if policy remains in place to prohibit certain other activities.

ROSALYN DEUTSCHE AND DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Rosalyn Deutsche's ideas about democratic public space and public spaces as being formed by and for the active practice of democracy, helped me solidify my developing theoretical basis for arguing that the homeless should be allowed to inhabit marginal public space and create networks of necessary mutual support. Embracing this habitation, designers can unfold an entirely new realm of design participation and placemaking. How thrilling, I think, to be part of such a process.

Along with Mitchell, Rosalyn Deutsche also argues the case for public space as produced by and inextricable from democracy. Quoting Claude Lefort, Deutsche calls democracy "the disappearance of certainty about the foundations of social life" (272). Since in a democracy authority does not come from God or an individual or "the state" but rather from the social order – and since there is no inherent determinable social order – authority must come from conflict and contest in public space. Public space is thus implicit in and critical to democracy (273). Deutsche writes, "Public space implies an institutionalization of conflict as, through an unending declaration of rights, the exercise of power is questioned, becoming, in Lefort's words, 'the outcome of a controlled contest with permanent rules'" (274). She agrees with Mitchell: that we have an image of "a homeless person" creates a narrative that there must be some homogenous urban harmony if the homeless person exists to disrupt it. However, she maintains: "Conflict is not something that befalls an originally, or potentially, harmonious urban space. Urban space is the product of conflict" (278). Confrontation, uncertainty, and conflict are not threats to "the democratic public sphere"; the threat is rather forces that would "supersede conflict, for the public sphere remains democratic only insofar as its exclusions are taken into account and open to contestation" (289). The designation of space as public or private, used for this or used for that, is up to us and is a product of the meeting and sorting out of different opinions and practices; the designation is not inherent or static. She criticizes the looking to "origins" to give public spaces meaning and references Nietzsche to fuel her case; he says the origin of something "does not reveal the essential, unchanging meaning of a concept; it shows, on the contrary, that meanings are conditional, formed out of struggles" (290). In fact, "stories about the beginning of public space are not really about the past; they tell us about the concerns and anxieties inhabiting our present social arrangements" because it was those arrangements that began public space (290). She cites Lefebvres argument that "spatial coherence" is a fiction created by "late-capitalist space," and looks to site-specific public art to "become part of their sites precisely

by restructuring them, fostering – we might even say, restoring – the viewer’s ability to apprehend the conflicts and indeterminacy repressed in the creation of supposedly coherent spatial totalities” (260). Deutsche, like Mitchell, references the term “authoritarian populism” to describe the “mobilization of democratic discourses to sanction, indeed to pioneer, shifts toward state authoritarianism”; the “state apparatus” is not the same thing as public space, and the state cannot speak for the whole public to determine what happens in public space (266). No individual or group can claim to be the true voice of the people. The people have many voices, and public space is where they can be heard. The unhoused people I learned about under the bridge were engaging in space-making and space-taking, actions that could be considered democratic and crucial to claiming and practicing their rights. They are showing us that there is another half and that our perception of a peaceful and celebratory social atmosphere represents an incomplete picture of society.

“LOOSE SPACE”: APPROPRIATED, PRODUCED

Loose Space: Possibility and Diversity in Urban Life was an interesting book that explored four possible responses to urban spaces that are public but not programmed, left over, abandoned, or otherwise open to alternative activity. Karen A. Franck is a professor at the New Jersey Institute of Technology College of Architecture and Design, and she has a PhD in environmental psychology, and she has written about diverse topics like designing for human needs, alternative housing, and relationships between food and architecture in the city. Quentin Stevens has a PhD in Urban Design and has written journal articles as well as authoring, editing, and co-authoring/editing several other volumes on urban public spaces, urban waterfronts, memorials, and myriad other topics. Together they edited and wrote the opening essay for *Loose Space*, exploring what it is that they are calling “loose space” and how it is made. They say looseness is determined by the architectural type that forms the space, the activity and choices of people within the space, and the regulations on those activities and choices. Loose space gives “opportunities for exploration and discovery, for the unexpected, the unregulated, the spontaneous and the risky” (Franck and Stevens, 3). Rather than arguing for the rights of people to inhabit loose space, they lovingly unwrap its qualities and possibilities. They do, however, reference Lefebvre in some ways such as describing the activities taking place in loose spaces in terms of use value, writing they are “outside the daily routine and the world of fixed functions and fixed schedules” and are “neither productive (like traveling to work) nor reproductive (like buying necessities)” but have other purposes (3). They argue that we move differently



Figure 20. A mostly-hidden tent by Second Creek.

in loose space, feeling freer and more aware of the various uses of our bodies. We are more civil and tolerant in public loose space because we encounter strangers who “avoid us and [at the same time] accept us,” engendering “more relaxed and inclusive behavioral rules and standards” (5). These engagements with strangers can even be pleasurable and exciting, as can be the experience of risk and discovery. This risk and freedom was something several campers described in different ways during my interviews with them. Perhaps there is even an attractive quality about the experience of camping out for them. Certainly it seems more pleasurable and exciting than staying packed in with others in shelter conditions, for many members of the homeless population. There is the potential for excitement for members of the public as well in the opportunity that loose spaces like urban campsites offer for us to encounter difference and find that these perfect strangers accept us immediately, without question.

Tightness and looseness of space are always evolving in relation to one another in a dialectical process. Franck and Stevens also introduce the sections into which the book is divided, and the introduction for Part III, “Resistance,” was of particular interest. They call out that there are “dominant forces” of cities – economical, social, architectural, laborious, recreational – and there are marginal forms of living that resist the dominant forces, adding that “submission to these forces would mean the loss of place, practices and identity” (Franck and Stevens, 171). They agree with the other authors I have read: the group people mean when they talk about “public good” rarely includes the marginalized. Stigmatized people create stigmatized places in and around the spaces they inhabit, though of course the stigmatization comes from association by members of mainstream society and has nothing to do with the choices of the stigmatized.

Several of the essays in *Loose Space* elaborated on themes I had read earlier in the semester. Stavros Stavrides writes about “heterotopias” (after Foucault) and “porous space,” calling architecture “the art of creating passages” and emphasizing that thresholds and “in-between spaces of encounter” create boundary-crossing social as well as spatial experiences, moving us “towards a culture of mutual involvement and negotiation” (Stavrides, 177). Heterotopias have “osmotic boundaries” that allow the overlap of “situated identities” that can “destroy those strict taxonomies that ensure social reproduction” (178). Gil M. Doron writes about “urban nomads” and how they reveal the boundaries by inhabiting and using them; this destroys the illusion and makes those thus disillusioned uncomfortable (224). He cites Richard Rogers who says “The physical and intellectual accessibility of the public domain is a litmus test

of society's values: inclusive and thriving public spaces foster tolerance and radical thought," a sentiment which repeats Deutsche's refrain (224).

Understanding the problem of homelessness from the perspective of rights to public space and the democratic production of space, what, then, is a concerned designer's course of action? Where should we draw the line between action and activism (that may be a matter of personal consideration)? What actions could we take that might influence the way the homeless are perceived and treated in public spaces? If we understand society to be engaged in conflict, as these scholars suggest, where does the designer fit in mitigating the conflicts that arise? If I see the evictions of the campers under the bridges to be effects of larger social, economic, and political frameworks, how can I insert myself to change the place of helplessness the unhoused currently hold in those frameworks? If I do not see this situation having a straightforward solution but rather having too many complicated issues to solve with Knoxville's Plan to End Homelessness, then where do I step into the issues? What can designers address in an urban campsite, and how should we go about it?

CHAPTER III

Reconsidering the Design Process

Involving myself with the people I met under the bridges changed the way I approached design on this particular site. The process became distinct from design methods I had previously understood in both academic and professional settings; the underlying assumption had always been that the designer ultimately had the answer. However, when I tried designing what I thought was the best answer for the site I studied, I ended the design process with more questions than I started with. I didn't know how the campers perceived the site or whether they would want to use the bathhouse I designed. I didn't know any details about their daily activities other than what I had observed from a handful of site visits. I conducted site analysis, defined a program, and designed a bathhouse and public plaza on a greenway without asking one person if a bathhouse would help them, if they would use it, what would make such a place feel safe, and so on.

For much of modern architectural history, the judgment of the designers has been trusted and even revered; they are the professionals, and they know best. In the 1960s, however, a new perspective on the role of the designer reshaped the way many architects perceived and conducted the design process. Community-based design research became part of the curriculum at North Carolina State University when Henry Sanoff helped initiate the Community Development Group. He called the program “a new paradigm for professional practice” and called out the two ways community-based design research (CBDR) is different from “traditional academic approaches to design” (*Design and Community*, 3). The two primary differences he described were that CBDR “is done with rather than on the community” and that “an explicit goal is to contribute in some way to improving the lives of those living in the community” (3). Participatory design, according to Sanoff, is inspired by the concept of a participatory democracy (also developed in the 1960s), in which everyone helps make decisions and learns the participation skills they need to involve themselves in future decisions that affect them (“Multiple Views” 59). Participatory design, then, is a source of empowerment for the participants. It is an opportunity for designers to recognize that the power imbedded in their skill and expertise is not absolute or proprietary. It is also an opportunity for participants (clients, users) to access that power.

Based on these definitions, I find three things about CBDR and participatory design crucial: that designers engage with a community and learn something about them, that designers work with

that community to make things better for them, and that the community members take away from the process valuable skills of engagement so they can apply those skills in the future when they are needed. These three elements of participatory design are what I intended to bring to the design process I offered to the members of Knoxville's homeless community. Some designers may already use community-based design in projects that will benefit the homeless community. For example, the Metro Atlanta Task Force for the Homeless has placed heavy emphasis on participatory design charrettes to improve the spaces in their Peachtree-Pine shelter facility (Metro Atlanta Homeless Task Force website. <http://www.homelesstaskforce.org/vision.html>). However, the process I imagined and executed was different from this kind of participatory design in important ways. As community-based design pushed the traditional design process to become less designer-focused and more user-focused, the design process I undertook with unhoused campers pushes and transforms the community-based participatory design process.

PARTICIPATORY DESIGN, ALTERED

First, community-based design does often engage marginalized groups, but in the past, these have often been groups that already have the benefit of carrying perceived value in society. We want to take care of strong neighborhoods, our senior citizens, our sick children having to spend an unfortunate amount of time in a hospital, our employees, and so on. But the homeless, especially people who cannot or will not use the shelter systems and services we offer, have little perceived social value. In the cases where designers have engaged members of the homeless community in participatory design, the process is usually within the bounds of a structured shelter system or facility. The participants I invited into the process were outside even these hegemonies. They did not have the benefit of being part of an established and thus more "deserving" group of clients. As discussed in Chapter I, they exist outside the safety of public approval. They have refused the services offered to them, and thus they have become lost causes. Therefore, one way this work pushes the design process is to challenge the designers involved to perceive the human value of the participants differently. I began to see the unhoused campers as people who made choices for particular reasons, not as outcasts or degenerates, as the public might describe them. Conducting interviews and holding design workshops required me to alter my own understanding of how to interact with these individuals. I had to learn to trust them as much as they had to learn to trust me. The very ways I used body language and words needed to change.

Next, fewer physical barriers exist to stall the use of community-based design in more conventional situations. Designers can use a community center, a school gymnasium, an existing hospital, or an assisted living facility to stage design discussions or conduct surveys. These are likely spaces the participants already use and are comfortable in. They will have access to restroom facilities, tables and chairs, and maybe dry erase boards. The participants may be likely to trust the designer immediately because someone else has probably introduced you and paved the way; there is a chain of trust. But in the case of the unhoused, their spaces are often handmade out of found materials. They may not be able to keep dry in the rain. There are no tables. Unless a designer connects with a service provider, a church, or another entity willing to bring in a group to use their facilities, she or he may have trouble finding the physical tools needed to make the products of design happen. In short, the structures that help facilitate “traditional” community-based design may be absent, so designers seeking to include the unhoused in the same way will need to create and procure these structures. For example, I brought participants to the chapel at Redeemer Church because the tools we needed were not on the site, and bringing them into a different space encouraged them to focus on one another and on the tasks I offered. Other kinds of surroundings can be distracting for everyone. Additionally, unhoused participants are not guaranteed to be in a place the designer expects them to be, as with groups in most community-based design activities. The designer may not be able to simply walk into a room where another party has helped gather the participants, introduced the designer, and explained the overall process. The designer must be shepherd, leader, counselor, introduction, and main event.

Additionally, community-based design is usually yoked to the cultural perception that it is a positive, uplifting experience and produces results that can change people’s lives for the better. No such assumptions existed in regards to the methods I used with the homeless community. I didn’t perceive that many people expected it to go well, and I had my own doubts about the outcomes. Even the fact that I am implicitly encouraging their continued existence on this site or a similar site as a legitimate alternative to homeless shelters is not always well-received. Working with the unhoused to design something of their choosing raises eyebrows rather than instilling hope in the heart of the observer.

Though the ways of approaching design here deviate from traditional design practice and even most community-based design in important ways, there is an enduring quality to a design approach to

problem-solving that lends itself well to difficult and complex problems. I want to focus for a moment on the kind of problem I perceive this urban campsite to be an example of and why designers already know how to think about such problems.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND DESIGN

One thing that is consistent with all design methods is the effectiveness of design as an effective way of addressing “wicked problems.” Wicked problems as described by Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber have no clear goal or single and easily-identifiable solution. They are distinct from problems in science or engineering where “the mission is clear” and one can easily discern whether or not it has been solved (“Dilemmas” 160). Because of the nature of design-based problem solving, designers generally approach a problem without one specific solution and propose a one-off answer based on the available criteria. Designers are trained to look at problems this way. They quickly run through a number of iterations, coming to one solution out of a limitless pool of possibilities. Examining some of the characteristics of wicked problems, we can start to see that this campsite in Knoxville is an example of one and that design research can be beneficial in a contentious situation like this.

Urban campsites constitute a difficult and tenuous and *fuzzy* problem. The emotions attached to the issue on both sides of the narrative are complex and can be intense. A change in attitude doesn’t come through rational and objective experimentation, because people don’t work that way. We change our attitudes based on individuals we come to know and care about. The positivist notion of coming to a conclusion because people behave in similar and generalizable ways cannot apply here. The unhoused may think about space differently than anyone else, or they may have design criteria that nobody else would consider, such as not feeling comfortable in a permanent place of shelter if other members of the homeless community had stayed there before them. Furthermore, every person experiencing homelessness has a different set of problems to confront. These things cannot be easily converted to data and reduced to categories and predictable phenomena that can apply to large-scale design decisions. Legibility and predictability are not effective in defining the problem of homelessness or some solution or set of solutions. This is a different kind of problem. It is a wicked problem.

In his article, “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” Horst Rittel outlines the

characteristics that define a wicked problem – all of which apply to the urban collision in Knoxville.

One overarching characteristic is that wicked problems are not easily defined. You cannot describe them sufficiently, because you would have to “develop an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable *solutions* ahead of time” (“Dilemmas” 161). There are too many facets of the problem to understand it all at once, so there is no way to formulate it. The problem of the unhoused eviction cycle in this urban site is spatial as well as social as well as political as well as environmental as well as economic. Some member of the homeless population think they need to be allowed to keep a campsite without being moved around.

Some members struggle with substance abuse and might need something more than just a campsite. Some members of the mainstream public would like to have more opportunity to interact with people who don’t have a home. Others in the mainstream public do not wish to help them or interact with them at all. Wicked problems have a “no stopping rule” because you can never arrive at a final solution, like with a mathematical equation. You can continue looking for a *better* solution, but you will never get to *best*. As you find a solution to one part of the problem, another issue will arise because of changing forces. This is because each wicked problem is “a symptom of another problem” (“Dilemmas” 165). As I understand it through my observations and the scholarly approaches discussed in the previous chapter, conflicts with urban campers and resulting evictions are symptoms of systematic social inequality as well as harsh prejudices against unhoused people. They may be a symptom of more specific problems in one location, like the collapsed ecology of Second Creek on this site. The evictions might be a symptom of inadequate availability of low-cost housing or of recession-induced unemployment. And you could point to many of *those* problems as symptoms of others, because they too are wicked problems. For example, even in cities that have condoned formalized urban camps, new issues arise as the camps age. Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon, now has new issues to address as some people begin to accuse campers of becoming complacent and the Village residents’ “contract” with the city of Portland runs out; the problem is not solved.

The solutions to wicked problems “are not true-or-false, but good-or-bad” (“Dilemmas” 163). You can’t immediately test the solutions to see if they have worked. Who would you ask? You would have to consult the unhoused, TDOT, the local business owners, their customers, and so on. The solution will likely have “waves of consequences.” You may even discover that it would have been better not to have

acted at all. This can inform future decisions, but because each wicked problem is unique, you can't apply one solution exactly to another wicked problem.

Importantly, Rittel calls out that “the existence of a discrepancy representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem’s resolution” (“Dilemmas” 166). Whatever causes you attribute to a wicked problem – and there will always be many – your solution will change depending on which cause you choose to address. I’ve looked at homelessness in a number of ways, and I’m choosing to approach the ones who sleep outside in this one location. The causes of their individual problems are unique to each of the campers. I point to broader causes like rejection from the shelters, inadequacy of the shelters, policy decisions, urban development, the mainstream rhetoric that demonizes them, and so on. But not all the homeless camp out. Not all campsites intersect with urban development. There are other causes that I am setting aside and choosing not to address. The ways I have come to explain this style of homelessness have directly determined my choice for ethnography and participatory design. But there are other ways to try to solve this problem, and many other people are employing them and coming to their own solutions.

By acknowledging wicked problems, designers can examine how each sub-problem – social defeat, spatial marginalization, lack of resources, lack of social safety net, and so on – affects and is a symptom of other problems. We can examine the ways that the social issues are inseparable from spatial issues. We can begin to see how social marginalization creates spatial site forces. We can then take our existing methods of finding spatial solutions and incorporate the participation of the site users and their knowledge of these spatial issues. This can help us generate new ways of changing social dynamics with our spatial solutions. Acknowledging the wicked problem of homelessness in its manifestation of the urban camper can offer agency and empowerment to the marginalized people, change the physical way they are seen in public, generate new spatial overlaps between unfamiliar groups, and produce spatial resources to enable necessary quality-of-life activities. It can illuminate the social conflict present, which is the first step toward resolution of the conflict.

This requires designers to remove themselves to some extent from the design and allow unfamiliar people into the design space. Designers are empowered by their knowledge and ability to produce spatial solutions; sharing that knowledge empowers others. The process as well as the resulting space becomes more democratic.

THE POSITION OF THE DESIGNER

Designers can change culture, change behavior, and advance a system of values, and social entrepreneurship provides the economic vehicle in which designers can tackle wicked problems . . . getting people to do the right thing often proves difficult for a host of reasons, including established cultural norms, poor education, peer pressure, lack of financial and geographic access, lack of time or will power, and more. A designerly approach looks for factors that contribute to negative behavior and tries to shift them through some form of designed intervention. The constraints for the designed intervention include the cultural norms, access to education, the physical and financial access of the users, and all of the other qualities that acted as barriers to the more objective or scientific approach (Kolko, 36).

Because design thinking can provide one-off solutions that may be as necessary in circumstances where scientific thinking has defined but failed to help solve a complex problem, designers already have many of the tools needed to move toward new solutions. Design thinking is reflective, problem-centered, and site-specific; a good design process might produce a solution that top-down, solution-oriented, or generalized problem-solving could not. One thing I have discovered through this process is that so many people have written about homelessness to diagnose causes and suggest generalized solutions. These are important resources. In *Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving*, Jon Kolko asserts that wicked problems “demand *both* a scientific approach and a designerly approach” (36). Thus, a design response to the problem of homelessness is, according to Nigel Cross, constructivist rather than positivist; that is, design is an experiential form of learning where events influence knowledge, rather than a scientific way of knowing where experience should be as far removed from the equation as possible (4). Design is based on finding a solution rather than defining a problem. To design is to figure out *how* rather than just to know *that*.¹⁴ A design goal is to solve a specific problem rather than to disseminate the causes of phenomena, but the results of positing a solution and analyzing the possible or actual results can illuminate some of those causes. Science searches for the causes top-down while design looks for causes bottom-up. The instance points to new “rules” rather than determining rules and then using instances as proofs. Cross quotes Christopher Alexander, who put it more simply: “Scientists try to identify the components of existing structures. Designers try to shape the components of new structures” (2).

Designers work in the space between vision and practicality.¹⁵ If I have a vision for the homeless

14 This elegant phrasing came from my advisor and professor, Dr. Avigail Sachs.

15 Again, credit to Dr. Sachs.

to be part of communities in a much more involved way but get bogged down with the practical problems of conflict avoidance and stereotyping, a good way to navigate between the two seemed to be to call upon academics and professionals in the building sciences to be that personal link to bring the unhoused into greater community involvement. I've been encouraged by other situations in which this has happened, and I've drawn on experiences of those who have made the situations happen.

Architects do not merely choose materials and create structures to meet budgets. Architects interface with clients and illuminate site issues beyond traffic, sunlight, climate control, and soil. They understand social dynamics and have a sense of what has worked in the past and what is not working well now. Architects diagnose an array of conditions and prescribe what they think is the best solution to the given situation. In a situation where homeless campers are an existing condition, an architect's training and experience may allow her or him to see the problem and potential solutions in ways others can't. They are also trained to interpret user needs and create maps, diagrams, and, ultimately, a design that reveals and meets needs.

Taking these design tools and applying them to empathic and participatory methods can meet wicked problems where they need to be met: on the ground, case by case, with people whose voices may not always be heard. Jon Kolko posits that community-based and participatory design processes provide a better approach than traditional design thinking for solving difficult or "wicked" problems in communities. He writes, "This [community design] approach empathizes and reflects; it has an intimate view of people's aspirations and emotions" (Kolko, 36).

Additionally, many designers are already familiar with participatory design methods. For any project, the architect will generally consult at the very least the building owner. Likely the list of people participating in design decisions will also include a representative panel of users – other members of a family, a group of high-level employees in a company, a church committee – and sometimes will include a wider range of users – students, residents, nurses, athletes, administrators. To assume that a group of people living on a site proposed for development should be on the list of consulted users is not so great a leap. We know from education and experience a great deal of what we should ask and how we should ask it. So what is stopping us?

BARRIERS

Policy, of course, is at the top of the list of things keeping designers from addressing homelessness, especially in the form of tent cities. If a group of people is not technically legally living in an area, few people will act as if their presence warrants legitimate consideration. Stepping across such a boundary can be extremely prohibitive. Separate from coping with feelings of discomfort associated with approaching (let alone arguing in favor of) anything illegal is overcoming the views of those in favor of upholding the law. Designers work according to rules like building codes and structural capacities; activism seems out of the range of professional practice.

Stigma and prejudice are just as prohibitive. Most people don't know much about people in such a life condition. Are they potentially violent? Do they smell bad or have a disease or mental illness? Will they answer a simple question if asked? Will they ask us for money? Our social code stalls us; even our very sense of self-preservation will direct our steps and our gaze elsewhere. Do we want to be seen as friendly toward them? Many of us might have friends, family, or professional acquaintances who would frown upon anyone suggesting that the unhoused living in tents under bridges have any justified reason for being there or any rights to that kind of existence.

Participatory design can, of course, take longer than traditional design because the designer has to take the time to establish empathy and trust with the unhoused community participants. Investing time and resources into this project has been joyful and rewarding for me, but I recognize that I am working outside the constraints of project schedules and budgets. However, I am also working in a much more time-intensive way on a site with a significant concentration of members of the homeless population. A likelier situation outside my academic reality might be one where professionals are already involved in a project, discover a campsite on or near the project site, and simply to take a few extra steps to include the unhoused in the existing process. I will discuss this barrier in greater detail in the conclusion.

Perhaps, though, the greatest barrier is that nobody has done precisely this before. Some designers have designed large buildings for shelters or other homeless services. Some designers may have worked on low-cost housing projects to offer an alternative to people living on the streets. But walking up to a campsite and making friends with someone experiencing homelessness is not something design professionals typically do. It is not only that we don't know how to start; it is that venturing into unfamiliar territory is inherently frightening. We have nobody to ask, "What should I say? How should

I act? How do I get them to cooperate? What if they get angry with me and tell me to go away?” What I hope may result from presenting my experience and research is to set a very small precedent to counteract this part of the barrier. In my thesis, I needed to try these things and answer some of the questions I had so that I could pass those answers along to others who would approach similar situations.

CONSIDERING ALTERNATIVE PROCESSES

Given the continuing conflict between the homeless and the public, designers need to reassess their own process to make it legible and workable for individuals with no design training. The products of the process may be unexpected and cause the designer to try alternative solutions. The inclusion of an unfamiliar group may bring a new perspective to other players like city officials and contractors, revealing the need for cooperative planning and compromises of space use; thus, they might be included in other parts of the process like construction and permitting.

One way this might change the design process is by encouraging greater inclusion of intermediaries – people who work with the study group already. One of the benefits of participatory design, as mentioned, is that of bringing together myriad perspectives to form a more equitable and whole knowledge base. My research was constantly (intentionally and unintentionally) influenced in a positive way by working with Eddie Young, publisher and editor in chief of the local street paper and Board of Directors member of Redeeming Hope Ministries, one of Knoxville’s nonprofits to benefit people experiencing homelessness. Because this particular organization has the focus of empowering rather than just serving the unhoused, working through this channel helped connect me with members of the homeless community who were interested in helping. My relationship with Young also helped me more quickly gain the trust of the people I interviewed, which allowed them to open up to me and be willing to give real opinions.

If designers began working closely with people like this who are already passionate about changing the lives of marginalized groups, they could gain a great deal of knowledge all at once instead of having to go looking for it themselves. They can also access easier avenues of connection with members of the marginalized group and more quickly form trusting relationships. A relationship with such an interested and passionate individual can shift the attitude of the designer in important ways so that they may be more open to considering the difficulties of people living in situations that are totally outside the designer’s experience.

What was most significant about this connection with Eddie Young, however, was that we both understood the problem of homelessness from the posture of a society in conflict. Seeing the struggles of the unhoused as produced by structural forces of economics and politics rather than resulting from some moral failing causes Young to seek to change the structures while still offering the empathy that marginalized individuals need to feel like part of something positive that they can influence. He sees *The Amplifier* as an extremely effective way of bringing unhoused people into a position of greater participation in and acceptance by society, and I agree; furthermore, I see my research as a similar approach but in the discipline of design/build rather than that of media. Young is always careful to avoid sensationalizing the lives of the unhoused or assuming he understands their needs. Instead, he seeks to give them access to measures of power usually denied to them that will allow them to produce their own ways to meet needs. This is what I wanted to explore through design and what I saw as missing from other design processes: how to offer the unhoused the keys to the mode of power that designers have. Existing design processes reproduce the hegemonies of a society in conflict, pushing the unhoused to the margins and away from public view. What I wanted to achieve was a design process free of the hierarchical relationship of designer and user. I wanted to find out what tools they already had so that I would know what tools to offer. The tools they had, as it turns out, were valuable. They already think about a number of things designers think about as important to good design, especially in thinking about urban planning or community planning. Rather than taking elements of their input and applying them to my existing planning process, I sought to have them determine the planning process itself and then insert their own elements. I sought not to bring design and planning down to them from a higher social and political stratum; this would leave them in the same position after the design process as before. My ultimate goal, then, was to explore the implications and products of a process that could bring them up to that stratum and into a position of social power.

CHAPTER IV

Approaching the Collision

INSCRIBING THE DIMENSIONS

Though the problem of homelessness is vast and complex, I have outlined the part of the problem I intended to understand through the lens of the designer. Based on what I learned about homeless camping from observing this site, what the unhoused on this site in Knoxville need most from someone in professional design work is a translator to help describe and implement a series of site-specific spatial solutions that offer security, self-governance, access to a toilet and shower, and freedom from ordinances such as criminal trespassing and public intoxication that may lead to incarceration and eviction. They need a place to feel they can stay and be safe and get on their feet – a sort of “waiting room” for housing, a job, or some other way out of homelessness. They need to be able to break through the barriers of professional, “expert,” validated civic involvement and by their own voices and presence encourage others to consider their needs, too. They need to enforce their right to inhabit, and they need access to power structures that will help them take the actions necessary to do so. There are certainly important elements of the problem that we as a whole society need to talk about and fix, like expensive housing, an inadequate safety net, inadequate support for drug and alcohol abusers, and the problems associated with privately-funded homeless services.¹⁶

The most important problem, however, which I have come to understand and seek to ameliorate is that of people who cannot or will not be part of the privately-funded services, have barriers to permanent housing, and need a safe and comfortable place to sleep, get clean, and keep their belongings *tonight*. Some of the campers I’ve met have been in and out of shelters chronically for *decades*. Some have been camping out for a few weeks or a few months following a disaster or a move. Some of those I spoke with in November were no longer present on the site in February. Some find others in the same area distasteful but are willing to tolerate and support them anyway. To take such a fluctuating group and find a way to facilitate the actions they take to remain as safe and warm and clean as possible is a difficult task; it is enough.

The unhoused may have the most to gain by addressing the issue the site poses to them. Still, everyone who lives in Knoxville has a stake in this conflict. Allocating space for the empowerment

16 These problems will be discussed in Chapter V in the section titled Describing a Micro-Culture.

of the homeless cannot infringe on others' rights, security, health, and so on. Examining some of the primary stakeholders (those with the most influence, those with the most contact, those who might be harmed) helped congeal the edges of the problem for me and refine my course of action. Outlining these stakeholders here will help the reader understand some of the forces that influenced the outcomes of my interviews and design workshops.

PRIMARY STAKEHOLDERS IN THE SITE CONFLICT

The Knoxville Police Department has a stake in the problem. As law enforcers, they are often first on the scene in the event of a disturbance, and they have more contact with the homeless community than most of the general public. They are liable for the safety of an individual they come across who is intoxicated or otherwise in a position of potential harm, to themselves or to others. KPD officers, district chiefs, sergeants, and even the Chief of Police, David Rausch, have no say in the ordinances they enforce. They do, however have protocol that determines how to handle various enforcement situations so that they do not harm unless it becomes necessary. Communication between the unhoused and the KPD can help smooth out misunderstandings and prevent inappropriate action by either party. During evictions, it is often the officers serving the eviction notices who give the campers suggestions for alternate locations with minimal disruption. The KPD also works to reduce other problems in which the unhoused can become ensnared; most recently, drug dealers had been using the groups of homeless standing on Broadway near the cluster of services as a cover for dealing. According to one interview participant, the dealers would frequently prey on the homeless (those using the shelters as well as the campers) who received monthly benefit checks. This participant told me that “out of 100% of people who receive checks in this population, 95% of them receive checks on the first [of the month] . . . if you want to see something interesting – the drug dealers you don’t see the other weeks will cluster to get these people’s money” (Personal Interview, 13 Oct 2013). KPD officials can see and act on these problems in a way specific to law enforcement, so understanding their place is key to proposing a solution.

Private land owners also have a stake in the repeated evictions on this site. The most common reason for evictions is a business owner responding to complaints about disruptions on the campsite located on their property. After the most recent eviction in February of 2014, a police sergeant with whom I spoke briefly told me that some of the business owners had claimed that the presence of the unhoused population had been scaring customers away. Though these businesses do not draw customers to their

locations but generally provide services elsewhere, perceptions of this group must be considered when looking to an equitable solution. The owners and employees of these businesses do not want trash on their lots or groups of people sitting near their doorways all day, and they, too, have a right to safety and comfort. Additionally, including them in subsequent conversations about space use may offer a different environment for interaction with the unhoused population than they have previously experienced. Discussions could alleviate some of the tensions between the two groups and help them understand one another's frustrations more clearly.

Since the Tennessee Department of Transportation (TDOT) owns not only the roadways but also most of the land directly underneath overpasses and viaducts, they are also frequently involved in these evictions. Complaints by others might go to TDOT officials first and may include alcohol use, trash and belongings on the site, and instances of violence. Unfortunately, these complaints also result in eviction (enforced by the Knoxville Police Department) rather than conversation or compromise.

Land ownership could become a central issue in alleviating the problem of cyclical evictions, involving the City of Knoxville as a stakeholder. This is the case where arguments for an egalitarian use of public space come into play. If the spaces they use are owned by the city and are in this unused margin, then the campers could argue that they have the right to public land use just as others do. Existing arguments for city beautification will surely be a force to contend with in taking this stance, as many believe that the tent camps present Knoxville with an unattractive face to passers-by. The city ordinance against camping in urban spaces was established for reasons related to this argument and other points of view drawing on safety concerns, cleanliness, and order. If the space the campers use is public land, assuming that they could obtain permission to establish more permanent residence, the design would have to account for adjacency to other possible public uses. I believe this is where the conversation could become most interesting and productive. Deliberate production of space for engagement between the unhoused and the mainstream public might encourage a new way of seeing the homeless. Even visual access to a well-planned and well-maintained tent city could affect the way some people think about homelessness. It might also give a different spatial opportunity for the unhoused and the public to meet, where everyone arrives on the same terms. In charitable encounters, the unhoused person may be subjugated; public access to a portion of the tent city might reveal the agency that homeless people can have and should have.

Concurrent with public space and the City as a stakeholder, the public themselves are the most ubiquitous stakeholders in this collision of needs. The way people perceive their own safety heavily influences their choices of activities and spaces. Public postures toward the homeless affect policy and policy enforcement. In many cases, it is a complaint by a member of the public that leads to discovery and eviction of a campsite. Though the homeless are no more likely to commit violent crimes¹⁷ (though some of them remain jobless due to the stain of a previous conviction on their records), there are situations where criminal activity is drawn to places they inhabit; these cases of actual public safety concerns are crucial to address and subvert. In other cases, mediating between the unhoused and the public with design elements that encourage connection between groups may alleviate public fears and make a camping area that is mutually beneficial.

A FEW PRECEDENTS

There are examples of tent cities being established and condoned in other cities. One of the most recently highly publicized examples is Dignity Village in Portland, OR. While beset by the expected controversies, it has remained for ten years a self-governed place for people to access a safe environment and resources like internet and phone use – and, if they choose, work toward a permanent housing situation. According to an *Oregon Live* article, sixty residents now find a place to step up from the streets back into a job and housing, and more are still on the waiting list. This has subsequently inspired a “sister” camp called Right 2 Dream Too. “There are membership meetings everybody has to attend,” said Ptery Lieght, outreach coordinator, in a July 10, 2012, video interview for *The Oregonian*. He said there are also required hours of sweat equity to maintain the camp and pay for being there as well as required contribution to security. “It’s a big opportunity to have space and safety and stability . . . to help [people] remember who they were before they hit the streets,” he said. He called Dignity Village a “concept” the same way the Constitution is a concept, with “a practice” as the other side of the coin; he said, significantly, that people have to learn about democracy there. When people come together to produce a new social space, they are practicing democracy in the purest way.

17 A 2008 study published in the *American Journal of Community Psychology* suggested that unsheltered homeless individuals were more at risk of committing nonviolent crimes (such as breaking the anti-homeless ordinances previously discussed) related to street survival, they were not more at risk than the general population to commit violent crimes. Homeless individuals frequently moving from shelter to shelter, however, were more at risk to commit violent crimes, perhaps due to existing stresses compounded by living in close quarters with others (“Homelessness, Mental Illness, and Criminal Activity” 251-252).



Figure 21. Dignity Village. Reproduced with permission from Portland Ground: Pictures of Portland, OR portlandground.com



Figure 22. A home in Dignity Village.

Intermittent inspections ensure that the structures there meet fire codes, and communication with Portland City Council. According to an October, 2013, article in *The Oregonian*, Dignity Village has amenable relationships with police officials and with Portland Fire & Rescue. This open interaction with policy makers creates the opportunity for a different set of policy solutions to issues posed by people in a different set of circumstances than the mainstream public. When people find themselves in these exceptional circumstances, perhaps it is beneficial to consider for them exceptional regulations.

The existence of tent camps is omnipresent at a smaller scale in myriad locations all over the city; in fact, tent camps exist all over the country on a variety of scales. In Nashville, there used to be a camp under an interstate that received significant publicity with the release of the documentary *Tent City, U.S.A.* Indianapolis has several rotating campsites, according to a young man with whom I spent a happy hour in the cold. The key to all these places is that *this problem is not insurmountable*. All we have to do is ask people what they think and what they need, engage in a process of empathy and then conciliatory design, and then use those considerations as development moves from schematic design toward construction documents and approval from the code offices. Taking action on a small scale like this site in Knoxville is a manageable thing but can lead to larger-scale changes. We can potentially influence the way the public



Figure 23. Tent City, U.S.A.

perceives homelessness, offer agency and creative control to people who don't usually have much of it and might benefit from such things, and help to meet physical needs for people who are out of options.

Conciliatory design necessarily involves policy. Just as in some cases a designer seeks exceptions to or even revisions of the building codes to make a particular vision become reality, in cases such as this, a designer may seek exceptions to or revisions of ordinances or standard procedures to move forward with a design. The exceptions or revisions to be sought should align with what the unhoused participants determine to be necessary. This may involve a great deal of input and analysis. It may also involve professional interpretation and ensuing compromise. The important aspect is that the designer continually consults the real people who are on the ground fighting to keep themselves and their belongings safe – in addition to other stakeholders who are usually the decision-makers.

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: CONSEQUENCES AND CONSIDERATIONS

Previously I discussed some of the possible reasons designers do not currently address this problem in professional practice. It is also necessary to look at some of the barriers external to the individual limitations of the designer. While a certain healthy dose of optimism will go far in encouraging others to get involved and accept some out-of-the-box solutions, an equally generous spoonful of realism can help a designer catch some issues before they become prohibitive.

The primary consideration is that implementing the design solutions a designer reaches together with members of the homeless community may require approval from city officials, since some cities have in place some or all of the ordinances mentioned earlier to discourage and criminalize homeless activities. In other cases, it may require approval from private owners or the securing of a land grant. There is always the possibility that key drivers of public discourse will not approve of the solution and will push to adjust the results. Even careful consideration and design cannot alleviate some deep-seated fears about public safety.

Thus, it is entirely possible that a designer undertaking a project like this will make people angry. I have danced around several arguments, in person and via email, over the course of my inquiry; in some cases as soon as you mention a homeless campsite, someone bristles because they've been stewing over a situation for a long time without knowing the whole story. As described in Chapter I, many people are firm in their convictions about the homeless. I have seen the products of the common discourse of the "deserving" vs. "undeserving" poor, and those conversations are most often about alcohol use among the

homeless. This is an issue that many people become emotional about, in one way or another, so even a logical approach is not always effective.

Attending the Homeless Collective meetings in February made me realize that because this is such an emotionally volatile issue, advocates of the homeless as well as (in particular?) the homeless themselves have to be careful how hard they press for answers and action, which issues to talk about with which stakeholders, and how to get just the right person to understand their difficulties and help make life easier. When one member, who is usually known as Country, came to one meeting in a state of extreme emotional instability because an officer with the Knoxville Police Department had issued him yet another eviction notice only two hours before, he had the opportunity to look face to face with a KPD sergeant. But instead of breaking down in tears (though that was a near thing), he calmly asked the legitimate question: “Where am I supposed to go? I’m about to lose everything.”

I was angry while I sat in this meeting, but because Country was calm, I too reigned in my reactions. Because he knew that making this sergeant angry would be counter-productive, he approached the issue respectfully but honestly. The discussion that followed brought many things to light because we all understood where to stop and what not to ask. Serving eviction notices is, after all, part of an officer’s job; criticizing them for doing it is not a good place to start. Similarly, criticizing a public official for ordinances she did not herself approve is counter-productive. Blaming a business owner for responding to complaints of violence or disruptive behavior will probably only make a business owner defensive and emotional.

Another possible consequence of a city taking action and condoning a tent city is that the site may become the things that cities fear: full of trash or a source of disturbances – in short, a representation of the city that clashes with the image that public officials desire. Thus, thorough planning at the outset is crucial. It is necessary to pick apart the causes of contentious issues. The site I studied, for example, accumulated trash because the campers had no access to city trash services. I also speculate that most of the trash was generated by people visiting and “partying” on the site rather than those living on it. Campers tended to care about order and cleanliness in their private campsites, but people who used the site by day, such as people staying overnight at KARM or in nearby public housing, did not have the same sensibilities of keeping a living space tidy. They could trash the place and then return to their own living places. Understanding who is using the site in its existing condition and then negotiating who will

be using the site in the future can subvert the potential for disturbances and illicit activities as well as encourage the people who do want to make it a safe, clean, attractive space.

Acknowledging such potential consequences is key to moving forward. I believe it is possible for designers - - that they are in fact extremely qualified - - to place themselves in a situation like this and enact change. Even if a designer convinces law enforcement officials, policy makers, and private business owners, not everyone will be amenable to allowing or encouraging alternative uses of public space. This is the logical consequence of offering solutions to wicked problems. But if the solution seems to provide the most positive changes for the greatest number without endangering the rest, might such consequences be worth the effort?

TALKING AND DESIGNING WITH THE HOMELESS

My main goal was to explore a process that could achieve validation for a group of people who rarely have any. Political action by definition validates or rejects a predefined group of people. In an urban context, criminal trespassing and anti-urban camping laws frequently invalidate individuals who have nowhere else to be. Open container and public intoxication laws invalidate individuals who have nowhere else to drink. So, ending the cycle of eviction for the un-housed has much to do with validating these individuals through empowerment and a place in such political discussions as it has to do with securing physical spaces for them.

There are camps in other places in Knoxville that are slated for development, like the South Waterfront. In one of the Homeless Collective meetings, it was brought up that members of the Collective should try to seek and inform people living in camps in that area, because they will surely be evicted as the project gets underway. What is an alternative and validating step here? How can these campers become part of the conversation so that instead of eviction, there is another option?

The steps I took in my research are one way I developed/discovered over the course of my investigation to answer these questions. First, I got to know some of the people who would need to take part in such a policy and design discussion. As I learned more about the participants and what motivated them and what barriers they faced, I gradually changed my process to meet new needs. I learned that getting people to participate can hinge on their understanding of your level of investment. If they don't know what you're doing or why or whether or not you're really interested in their interests, they might not want to put forth the effort. Unhoused people have so many things to think about every day to ensure they

meet their own physical needs, so they may be reluctant to make themselves vulnerable if they perceive that you are operating more in concert with your own interests than in theirs.

What I found, though, is that many are interested in helping others in their community. They are also interested in the empowerment of decision-making because they spend so much time under the jurisdiction of others' decisions. Sometimes they do seek some kind of compensation, and if you can't offer that, they may not see the point. It is helpful to provide snacks or a small meal or coffee or sodas; it's what any of us would expect out of this kind of activity. Finally, I found them very interested in learning when the topic was producing their own spaces. It seemed they already had in their minds what such a place would be like if they could have one; they simply needed to be asked what already existed in their imaginations.

Approaching the unhoused should mean empowering a group instead of bringing one's own position of authority into play. Including them in a design process means finding out where to apply my knowledge and skills and where to withhold or withdraw. Ultimately, engaging in design with the unhoused in this research means finding and revealing – to the participants themselves, to the KPD and the Mayor and other stakeholders, and to anyone who may read or learn about this work – the social and political forces that might be limiting their rights and decision-making capabilities. According to the University of Central Florida web page in a section about critical qualitative design, research methods should challenge the “current power distributions and the status quo” instead of perpetuating them or accepting them as given. A researcher or designer should treat participants with respect and honesty and genuine investment.

CHAPTER V

Ethnography and Community-Based Design

I began my research on the site, asking people questions and gauging responses to maximize my outcomes and minimize any disturbance of their routines. I continued to get to know them and understand the limits of the site and their willingness to participate in some capacities but not others. I completed the interview phase and planned the design phase, and finally, I held the design workshops to shift my method of inquiry from question-and-answer to direct action. The following chapter will offer my narrative of these processes. I preface each narrative with explanations of my approaches and decisions and close each with an analysis of the outcomes.

I initiated the approach with repeated site visits, trying to interview one person each time I was there. My process gradually changed as I learned more about the people there and what they responded well to and what seemed to shut them down. I adjusted my mannerisms, deliberately and without realizing it, as I became more comfortable walking up and saying hello. On the whole, they always seemed to welcome my presence as a positive happening rather than an intrusion, though one woman consistently rejected me with her body language and a couple of times by addressing me.¹⁸ I continued to attempt to glean their way of analyzing the site throughout the interviews, but I found that the format of one-on-one interviews on the site and presentation of maps on which to draw paths and landmarks was not conducive to this kind of design research. As my “cognitive mapping” method fell flat, I held on to the richness of understanding I gained in the interview process and applied that knowledge to the design workshops.

The workshops showed me that all of the struggles I met in engaging participants in the site analysis/cognitive mapping phase of design were situational and had nothing to do with particular characteristics of unhoused people; once they were together in a comfortable space with tables and larger maps and aerial photos and physical models, their ways of describing the site and addressing spatial

18 I later learned that she acts that way toward most people and seems to know no mode of communication that is not confrontational; the other campers know how to respond to that and handle her when she is at her most difficult. This is one way I observed that the group supported each other the way any community ideally should: by being available for those who are hard to handle or even be around and by taking care of each other when members couldn't care for themselves. The group also negotiated the rift between her and me, an outsider, on more than one occasion. This aspect of connection to the less willing participants by way of those more willing to was significant.

issues opened and unfolded like complicated origami, revealing layers of understanding and imagination that floored and thrilled me. I will take this chapter to describe the methods I used, the culture I perceived, the events that followed from my methods, and the underpinnings I teased out of the results.

ETHNOGRAPHY ADAPTED TO DESIGN INQUIRY

Surely it takes more than goodwill to transcend distrust that comes out of a complex history. Though participant observers often remark on the rapport they achieve and how they are seen by the people they write about, in the end it is best to be humble about such things, because one never really knows. Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalk*

I learned about unhoused people on a very small scale; I might describe the relatively small group of campers as a micro-culture. Within the broader homeless community, here were urban homeless campers with a particular set of experiences on one particular site. My interviews unearthed issues that came up in the workshops later, like the presence of drug dealers, the different stakeholders that force the campers to move from place to place and in their cycle of eviction, the tense relationship between the campers and the homeless services (particularly Knoxville Area Rescue Mission – KARM), and the variety of services in close proximity to the site.

I took the examples presented in two texts to guide my interview process. In *Hobos, Hustlers, and Backsliders: Homeless in San Francisco*, Teresa Gowan described an extensive ethnographic study of homeless men in San Francisco. She wove intimately detailed stories into her analysis, trying not to “chop [her] data into bite-sized evidentiary segments” because she says it creates “iconic subjects rather than individuals”(xxiv). While I couldn’t spend anything like the time she did with her subjects, I tried to visit the site at least every other week, sometimes for interviews and sometimes just to visit or to offer a tarp or a blanket or firewood. In documenting and communicating the things I learned about them, I attempted to follow Gowan’s example and give as full a picture of each person I describe as possible while also being careful how I describe group characteristics. I try to use words like “often” and “many,” because everyone on the site was ultimately different. The mainstream discourse about people experiencing homelessness is already full of assumptions and generalities; reversing those assumptions rather than perpetuating them is important in order to look for new solutions to some of their struggles. As I noted on one of my first site visits when I chatted with several people: “You can see that self-perception [as a homeless person] is as varied and unique as each individual person living out there” (31 Oct 13).

Another book I found helpful was *Sidewalk* by Mitchell Duneier. His research focused on sidewalk vendors rather than the unhoused, but I found some of the same issues he described in my own exploratory experience. Duneier described meeting one vendor and, through him, gaining access to “the network” of other vendors, unhoused people, and panhandlers (11). I experienced this phenomenon as well, gaining access to more reluctant individuals by first engaging the more willing and talkative ones and then, through their encouragement of their peers, being able to get interviews with those who denied me an interview the first time I asked. Duneier’s text is also where I first found the word “unhoused” and picked it up as a better and less stigmatized descriptor for the people I met. Duneier also talks about the value of directly observing his participants’ actions rather than asking questions about the actions in interviews; I also found this helpful in some cases, because what people say about themselves can be quite different from how they really act. One pugnacious man I will discuss in my analysis (p. 80 of this text), for example, was full of compassion and pain despite his bravado and his claims that he was frequently involved in fights. Observing helped supplement my interviews and illuminate cases where people might have been saying something without fully realizing that their words didn’t align precisely with reality. As another example, even though most subjects described differences between “cliques” and an avoidance of “others,” I learned by observing that in some cases the “others” would say the same things about the first group; they all felt the same way about each other. But, more importantly, what I saw overarching the stratification-talk was a cohesiveness that gave them a degree of safety and stability in uncertain times.

Ethnographers strive to remove themselves from the equation as much as possible, but in both of the texts I focused on, the authors admitted to and honestly explored the implications of their position in the study group. Duneier in *Sidewalk* explains the “ethnographic fallacy”: that an ethnographer can become too caught up in details of the culture and can lose sight of the larger forces that are generating the culture, leading the reader to believe that the culture is self-generating rather than formed by external structures (343-44). “There is a middle ground,” he explains: “to try to grasp the connections between individual lives and the macroforces at every turn, while acknowledging one’s uncertainty when one cannot be sure how those forces come to bear on individual lives” (Duneier 344). He also points out that, as “an upper-middle-class white male academic writing about poor black men and women,” he had to use that position in helpful ways rather than letting it negatively influence the outcomes of his work (353). He

says he used himself as a “control group” to test reactions of the public to his subjects in some situations; he also asked some of his subjects as well as black scholars and professionals to give him advice on new questions to ask in the field (354). Finally, the first vendor he met and his most involved participant read his manuscript and advised him on how to think about a few aspects differently (333).

In my own work, I tried to create a similar space to oscillate between individual narratives and socio-political underpinnings. However, I found that many of the participants were well aware of the forces at work against them and understood how bureaucratic processes, religious biases of service providers, the discourse of intolerance, city ordinances, economic recession, illegal activity, lack of public services, a shortage of case managers, and barriers to affordable housing kept them pinned to their current status in life. Their frustrations were based on shrewd perception; even if their rage was ineffective, it was not unfounded. When I did discover cases of their narratives revealing limitations in their understanding of their positions, I tried to note them and use the information effectively.

Like Duneier, I recognized that my own status could become a barrier. An excerpt from my notes early in the process describes the first time I started to see where I stood in their midst, with a conversation with a man who usually lived in his car:

He said the police know he sits there a lot and they used to bother him about being there and sleeping, but now they know him and they don't bother him. But they know he's around there, so if something goes down they might think of him first, or someone might point at him and say he was the one who did it, whatever it was.

That's why, he said, he drove away when he first saw me. That he didn't know what I was doing there and, young lady by herself, if something went down the police might look at him first. That was when I realized that I'm a sort of bright warning flag waving when I'm there. Nobody wants to be caught in anything suspicious, it's all just lying low and keeping clean and out of jail. So if anything happened to me, they all know I must have people who care about me who would want to find justice. They don't want to be in the way of blame being passed around. This man who will be 60 next week and has just his car and a job he just started last Friday with an international tradesmen company working with scaffolding, even though what he does is float concrete, this black man who talks to God and is friends with Him and wants housing and good work like he had a long time ago before despair and the streets, this man doesn't want to be in the way of any blame passed around. He's got enough problems.

Fieldnotes, 22 Sept 13

Teresa Gowan also notes that her gender may have influenced her work, both in the places and times she chose to be in the field and in the results she got from her “companions.” She comments that “the work of male street ethnographers has often highlighted rambunctious group life,” but she describes

her own notes as full of “meditative, sometimes painfully confessional conversations” (Gowan 17). She understands her gender to be both limiting and advantageous in turn, and I experienced similar phenomena in my work.

Knowing these limitations and advantages is important to learning about a group, whether you are a formal researcher or a professional designer hoping to gain some insight into a target group. People in the design and building professions and in the academic realm of design might all benefit from some of these ethnographic tools and considerations. Taking this into account, I will describe what I learned from my own brief study, which was neither immersive nor lengthy but still provided valuable insight into the lives of a group that most people never see with this kind of intimacy.

DESCRIBING A MICRO-CULTURE

I don't know what happened with most of these people. I don't know why they're living outdoors, why they don't have an apartment or a house or a job. But their courage to be in the situations they're in and still smile at me and tell me about their experience as the night falls and the cold deepens and they know in their bodies that what is between them and death is a pile of blankets - - I can't understand that. I've never had to have that kind of courage.

Fieldnotes, 3 Nov 2013

The first thing I observed about this micro-culture, which occurred again and again as I introduced myself and got to know people, is that the unhoused are shocked and unsure how to react to someone asking their opinion about anything. They are sharply aware of their subjection and powerlessness. They have been rejected by society and even by services intended for the homeless, so a person seeking them out to see what they think about something at first seemed unfathomable to most of them. Questions cropped up at the start of several of the interviews; many times the participant asked the question multiple times, as if they didn't quite believe me. “Now, tell me who you're with again? Why do you want to know what we think?”

The next thing I noticed was that people observed “cliques” or strata even within their micro-culture. Comments about avoiding “those people over there” or not feeling safe in a particular area were common. Participants almost unanimously perceived these strata. Several people attributed it to different kinds of substance abuse. They described the open area where there were alcohol users and some marijuana users and more sequestered areas, the location of which was not specified, where there were harder drug users and implied illicit sexual activity. One participant commented:

Like here, down here, under the bridge, quote unquote, these are your drinkers and your smokers. They just like to get drunk, they get rowdy, and that's a rap. And that's about it. Okay, on one side of the street, up there, it's just cool laid-back people that smoke a little weed, try to earn a little extra money rollin a cigarette. Then on the *other* side of the street, is where you can really get down and dirty if you want. So you do have your groups. Everything has a magnitude, and it just depends what degree and how far do you want to go (Personal Interview, 13 Sept 2013).

Another participant described a similar perception:

There are cliques. There's the crack clique, there's a heroine clique, there's an opiate clique, there's a speed clique – but during the day they all sort of intermingle, but as night comes they tend to disperse into their own – and where 90% of them go at night, I don't even know (Personal Interview, 13 Oct 2013).

These observations later seemed more relevant when I learned that the Knoxville Police Department had recently conducted a thorough “cleaning up” of the area on Broadway under the I40 viaduct because drug dealers were using the unhoused people who stood and sat on the sidewalks most of the day as a cover for deals. Drug users seemed to be mingled somewhat imperceptibly with unhoused individuals. Some of the two groups may have overlapped, but one workshop participant, Joseph, later commented that many of the substance abusers on the site were not homeless but lived in nearby public housing.

Two responders alluded to the way “the streets” could draw people and trap them. One participant told me that he had seen it happen: someone would visit the site and “party” with the people there, then they would come back in a week, and then in another week they'd be homeless. He didn't say explicitly how, but he perceived the culture as a sort of quicksand that sucks people in. Several participants also pointed out that it was difficult to get *out* of that culture once you were in it. One individual said that he saw many people honestly struggling to get off the streets, but he perceived that the economy would limit job opportunities for anyone without college or trade school education. Another participant expressed how others are in despair or go through a process of degradation that makes it hard for them to lift themselves out of their situation. “I hate seein' those people down by the mission,” he lamented. “I hate to look at their faces. Jus' *despair*. *Despair* in their eyes. I hate to see that; that brings me down.” I wondered about the extents of this effect: how much harder is it to have the will to find work and make your life different because you see people suffering all around you, others who can't find the will either. Still, most of the participants at some point expressed variations on a theme: “This is temporary; I'm about to get off the streets.” I haven't met anyone who has said their life is here, or they're happy here. One participant, Tumble Weed, has been homeless and wandering for many years, and he seemed relaxed in his life



(a)



(b)



Figure 24. Campers and Participants. (c)



(d)

choices and at peace with the results. But Michael and a few others told me they were about to make a change, save some money, get a place. Michael told me he met “this little lady” (indicating a woman sitting close to us) and wanted to help her out, so they were going to find housing together (Personal Interview, 27 Sept 2013).

Several participants referred to a “code of respect” or an unspoken set of rules. A woman I interviewed in mid-October and another participant she knew who sat down with us, agreed that the people living on the site looked out for each other. One of the women pointed out that one individual (she mentioned one woman who “runs her mouth” and seems to annoy everyone) often annoyed the rest of the group (the unhoused people camping in the area), but she said if that individual were ever threatened, the other campers would put a stop to it. Another woman stated simply, “We’re part of a community here. We watch out for everybody” (Interview, 2 Nov 2013). Tumble Weed also mentioned this sense of community, saying that the ones who received monthly checks would sometimes put resources together to pay for the port-a-john I sometimes saw on the site. They did seem for the most part familiar with each other. Any time I asked about someone by name, if I was looking for them for an interview or a follow-up, the other campers knew who I was asking for and often remembered where or when they had seen them last. In one case, several campers even knew one woman’s schedule and told me I could go up to Water Angel Ministries because that’s where she went to eat on that day of the week. There were some, like Mark and Mariane, who made a point to stay away from most of the others as a way of protecting themselves and not getting involved in any trouble, but for the most part, they seemed close-knit. One participant addressed the negative side to some of those relationships, though, saying, “And you’ll get labeled, too. If they know you might have a few friends on the street, they know you got the money. They’ll always hit you up” (Personal Interview, 13 Sept 2013). He meant that others might act like your friend but would just ask you for money because they knew you had it. Others, he said, would just rob you (he wasn’t the only one to bring up the problem of theft; three other participants commented on the lack of security for belongings). When I asked if he had experienced conflicts among the groups he named, he said, “Absolutely. Always. I mean always, it’s always gonna happen. I got beat down by three guys like two weeks ago . . . and you know, I wasn’t hurt, so. It was ridiculous. I mean I wasn’t hurt, but I’ve never been jumped like that. They knew I had money on me” (Interview, 13 Sept 2013). He seemed to perceive that he didn’t have real friends even though he commented that many people he had met on

the street had humbled him and were good people. But he sobered after talking about his few connections and “friends,” finishing with, “Unless you don’t have anybody.” He paused for a long moment. “Then the world becomes silent.” Sometimes I didn’t know what to say and had to move on to the next question.

For the most part, nobody described positive experiences interacting with the general public. One 63-year-old woman said that when she’s under the bridge on North Broadway, where many of the unhoused (she used the term “street people” because she didn’t like to call anyone “homeless” either) spend time during the day, people pass in their cars and look out of the corner of their eye at her. “They look at you like, ‘What’s your *problem*?’” she commented (Personal Interview, 18 Oct 2013). She said she didn’t like how she felt the public perceived her, and she couldn’t think of any positive encounters she’d had with mainstream society other than with volunteer groups who bring food and clothes to them. One participant said, “I don’t exit this [campsite] because I feel like this is my people. And with them I can be safe. You understand that?” (Interview, 27 Oct 2013) In one interview where three people spoke to me at once, one participant said she had no engagement with the public at all on that particular site (though they agreed that sometimes they interacted with people outside their situation at the downtown library; they implied there were other places as well). Tumble Weed perceived differences in reactions from the public between Cumberland Avenue near the UT campus and the “Old City” downtown; he said when he panhandled in the Old City, most people treated him poorly, but when he asked for money on Cumberland



Figure 25. Participants.

Avenue, even the people who said no still smiled at him.

They did, however, consistently mention different people or groups who helped them, and in those cases they always spoke with gratitude. This was especially true of Eddie Young and *The Amplifier* and Redeemer Church as well as a woman named Maxine whose name I heard over and over. Finally I found out that it was Maxine Raines, founder and director of Lost Sheep Ministries. Every Wednesday, she and a group from the organization set out tables and chairs and give anyone who needs it a warm meal. They all spoke affectionately about her and the volunteers. “I’ve seen one of those folks take the coat of his back and give it to someone out here who didn’t have one,” said one camper outside of my formal interviews.

I discovered the ways they perceived their situation. For the most part, they acknowledged a lack of power to control their lives. They referred to most forces as being outside their control. They recognized the leniency of the Knoxville Police Department about their use of alcohol, but they also spoke of the precariousness of that allowance. One participant said every so often, an officer would stop by and make everyone pour out any alcohol. However, at the time of the interviews, most people agreed that arrests were not being made for open containers of public intoxication as long as the group was not being loud. Several of them narrated instances when their license had been taken from them or people on the street or even police officers had stolen (confiscated?) their belongings. Several people, including the couple I interviewed, Mark and Mariane, described a sense of helplessness and having to come to terms with how temporary their current campsite might be. They knew they could be evicted or asked to move at any time. Some, however, expressed that they didn’t think the police would move them because the city accepted that the site was an informal campground and informally “belonged” to the unhoused people who lived there. These were the people who were particularly shocked and devastated in early February when they were all again evicted.

Many of the participants claimed to have been in and out of homelessness for a long time. One man said, “I’ve been using this site since 1987.” A woman told me she’d been using the site for 28 years. Whether or not these statements were factually accurate, they seemed to indicate that people perceived their time on the streets as lasting a very long time. They see their options as extremely limited. They responded well to suggestions for making their situation easier – like when I proposed the idea for the bathhouse or when we talked about formalized tent camping – but it seemed like, for many of them,

their situation had become chronic and, despite their claims of looking toward improving their lives, felt inescapable. They do seem to believe in the possibility for greater acceptance of their presence, but they expressed bleak outlooks for long-term improvement in their life status. A few were optimistic, but some seemed to accept their substance abuse and inability to maintain steady work or stay in permanent housing as simply the way things were.

When we talked about the bathhouse project I designed for my studio in the spring of 2013, a few people pointed out reasons they didn't think it could be successful. One woman said that you'd have no problem convincing a homeless person to use the same shower facilities as, say, a banker using a bicycle to commute to work downtown. She pointed out that "it's convincing *them* [the banker] it can be a safe shared space. Which is totally counter-intuitive, because they're supposed to be more intelligent." The last part made me smile, because this particular participant had earned a PhD from Florida Atlantic University in 1999. Someone else thought it would be too easy to vandalize, and another participant was concerned about cleanliness. They all raised legitimate concerns, exposing the extent of their knowledge of events that take place on the site as well as the tendencies of some of the people who live there. One participant, in fact, didn't think severely intoxicated people would use a composting toilet in a bathhouse.



Figure 26. One of the community dogs.

He perceived that some people got drunk enough to just not care where they went. However, they all responded optimistically when I discussed ways I had considered to make a bathhouse safe, clean, and maintained. They were quick to point out potential problems but just as quick to be hopeful if they perceived potential solutions.

Learning about this site through the lens of these folks was rewarding in itself. I *know of* them and I also *know* them. I'm familiar with them and I also have information I didn't have before about their days, habits, and thoughts. One of the most important factors of this process, however, was becoming comfortable enough around them to allow myself to feel vulnerable and cultivate a sense of empathy with them, even if I don't really know what it feels like not to have a home to go to.

USING ETHNOGRAPHIC TOOLS TO ESTABLISH EMPATHY AND MUTUAL TRUST

I need to talk about empathy as separate from what I learned ethnographically about the micro-culture of unhoused urban campers on this Knoxville site, because establishing empathy before approaching a participatory design process is crucial for the designer as well as the participants. In *Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving*, Jon Kolko emphasizes that "Empathy is not the same as understanding, which is what most ethnographic tools provide" (45). Dr. Brene Brown, whose describes the difference between empathy and sympathy in an RSA (Royal Society for the Advancement of the Arts) talk titled "The Power of Vulnerability"¹⁹ describes empathy as including four aspects: "Perspective-taking . . . staying out of judgment . . . recognizing emotion in other people, and then communicating that. Empathy is feeling *with* people." She calls empathy a "sacred space" where we get into the same dark place the other person is in. She distinguishes this from sympathy, where we call down into that space from an above, lighted space. She calls sympathy "trying to silver-line" another person's problem. An empathic response reflects the awfulness (or the joyfulness, or the interest, or the defeat) the other person is feeling. In empathy, we try to withhold judgment and simply say, "I can't believe that happened to you, but I'm so glad you told me."

This isn't easy, and it's not pragmatic the way understanding is. It takes time and it takes an allowance for feelings and fluid interpretations. This is the process I went through, without realizing, until after the two-plus months of interviews that this is what I was doing. Even before starting this project, I established empathy by being involved with Redeeming Hope Ministries (RHM), a nonprofit

19 This talk can be found online here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sXSjc-pbXk4>

created to empower individuals experiencing homelessness. I had met a number of unhoused people and had conducted an interview for *The Amplifier*, Knoxville's street paper sold by people experiencing homelessness. I had already learned that there are people who don't want to live in mainstream society and that there are people who physically or mentally can't. I had gardened side by side with people who were homeless, in the Food In the Fort vegetable beds at Beardsley Community Farm. I had visited Redeemer Church on days when volunteers served warm meals. I had developed a close relationship with Eddie Young, "Pastor Eddie" to most of his friends and guiding force behind RHM. This relationship proved to be critical in establishing trust among the group I studied and interviewed; I discuss this in Chapter VII, Conclusions.

Eddie Young taught me many things, including the importance of humility and forgiveness. He even found out that one of his homeless friends had broken into his office one night, looking for something valuable to take. He never spoke to this friend about it, he pretended it had never happened, and he protected his friend's identity to avoid his arrest. I don't know many people who can exercise forgiveness like that, but when I questioned it, he told me, "I don't know what it's like to be that desperate. I can't judge his actions." It made me realize I don't know what that is like either. It was an important moment for me to realize that I have to approach people experiencing homelessness, to the greatest extent of my abilities, with unconditional and non-judgmental eyes. I have to firmly remind myself that *I do not understand*, so even in the face of what I think is a fabricated story to garner sympathy or a blatant violation of social contracts or laws and ordinances, I can't shake my finger and furrow my brow and place blame. I have to remember, *I don't know what it's like to be that desperate*.

This didn't come to me immediately, of course. Even after my previous experiences with people experiencing homelessness, my first time on-site was extremely intimidating. I didn't know who to talk to, where to start, or what to say. I didn't even know how to ask someone if they were homeless. As I steeled my nerve and hailed a passerby, I tried to fumble through questions and an explanation. I wanted to be tactful about seeing if he was sleeping rough in the area. "Are you . . . do you . . . I mean, do you hang around here a lot?" Knowing what I was asking, he said, "Yeah, I'm homeless." I was embarrassed, as I was trying to be tactful but instead was being transparent and therefore the opposite of tactful. But even though he didn't want to talk to me, he helped me find someone he thought might be willing. He was kind – far kinder to me than I was to him. His willingness to be helpful struck me, but it was a trait I saw

over and over, in most of the people I met on the site.²⁰ Gradually and ultimately, seeing their kindness and making myself open and receptive to their gestures helped me grow in empathy. Whoever is first to show compassion frequently sparks compassion in others who will perceive it. It's hard to be the first to show that compassion, because it makes you vulnerable, but it seemed easy for them; that made it easy for me to respond compassionately.

Jon Kolko differentiates empathy formation from traditional anthropological immersion by describing it as active rather than passive. This may not be an entirely fair distinction, but his aim is to emphasize the need not just for presence in the group but for “some form of *equitable value exchange*” (*Wicked Problems*, 45). He says the designer, instead of merely observing, should “strive to become part of the group by participating in activities, conversations, and job routines” (45). I used several methods to immerse myself in their activities and offer some sort of value exchange in the form of visiting frequently, adopting manners and ways of communicating that were comfortable for them, and working with and for them to offer value in exchange for the value of their participation.

Method 1: Become involved with the group's activities and spaces

There are likely plenty of volunteer opportunities wherever you live and work to help the unhoused, either for services that may benefit them (serving in a soup kitchen, mentoring, helping at a local shelter) or in work they are doing themselves (collecting cans, selling a street paper, finding useful items in the trash for resale). Becoming immersed in some of the activities and spaces they occupy on a given day can help you understand some of the reasons they do the things they do. You may discover someone's addiction, feel in your fingers what it's like to dig through trash to find aluminum, or see how the unhoused are treated by staff and other volunteers in service positions. You may find a mentor who has worked with people experiencing homelessness for years, someone who has plenty of firsthand knowledge about the culture of the study group, how to approach them, how to think about them, and how to talk to them. This can greatly supplement your own discoveries and guide you as you learn more on your own.

I worked in the gardens at Beardsley Community Farm, knowing that the vegetables I nurtured would

20 The only time that kindness disintegrated was when the weather turned colder and they didn't have as much energy to spare on my academic nonsense. They were just cold. Many of them were older, in their late fifties or early sixties and worried in their bones about freezing to death at worst and various aches and hungers at best.

feed people who didn't have nutritious food at hand. Two members of the homeless community came to the gardens and worked with me; I discovered that they possessed even more knowledge of sowing and growing than I did, even though I'd been through a whole growing season on the farm, learning from the people who worked there. I worked in the kitchen with a formerly unhoused individual who had gotten housing and was working to help others follow her success. I learned about the people who came to the church for a meal prepared with the vegetables we grew. I started writing for the sister organization under the same nonprofit (RHM), *The Amplifier*. This is a newspaper produced almost exclusively by volunteers that seeks to amplify the voices of the unhoused. I signed up to write an article based on an interview with an *Amplifier* vendor, and interviewing him gave me new eyes to see homeless individuals as people with the same desires for comfort and consistency that I have. Eventually, as I kept writing for the paper and maintaining contact with Pastor Eddie and others at RHM, I was invited to be managing editor for *The Amplifier*. As I already discussed, knowing Eddie helped me gain more insight into, understanding of, and compassion for the unhoused.

Method 2: Visit the study group often

Without putting ourselves in their position – for, even if we did, we would still know in the back of our minds that we have a home to escape to with a hot shower and snacks in the fridge – we can get as close as possible to true empathy with their situation. I found several actions to be important in getting closer to empathy. One discovery was that the more frequently I visited the unhoused on-site, the more my empathy with them grew. Visiting again and again allowed me to get to know some people better and also to get to know new people. It let me be with them in a variety of situations and moods, and it let me hear new and different parts of their stories. Every time I visited, I left feeling *really good* about life and the universe. Empathy can make us feel *really good*, because intimate social connection is what we're wired for. Reflecting others' emotions and having our own emotions reflected makes us feel fulfilled in relationships.

The happy, full feeling I always had leaving the site was because I was engaging in relationship with people. And it increased every time I visited. Don't we always feel that way when we make new friends? When a group of people accepts us and is kind to us, asks questions about things we value and opens up about their own values? We feel differently about a new workplace or a new class depending

on how we think we are received by the group and whether or not we “fit in” – whether or not we make an effort to reflect the group’s emotions and values and whether or not they seem to try to reflect ours. I asked them about their lives and their experience, and they asked me about school and sometimes about other things. We got to know each other. Not only was I becoming a familiar face, but they were starting to understand that they could trust me – that I was “on their side,” which meant that I would make every attempt to understand their situation and be with them in that situation rather than preaching to them a way to change it. (Imagine! If every time you saw a particular friend, they told you that you needed to lose weight. Or every time you went to bed your spouse reminded you that you needed to try harder to get a promotion at work or keep the house cleaner. Or when you spent time with a sibling they gave you a lecture about your credit card debt. I imagine you might start to find reasons to spend less time with that person. We want relationships where the other person will be honest with us when we need help or an opinion, but where they will just accept us with our faults and love us.)

I think that some of them felt the same way, at least a little, because they seemed to enjoy my visits and invited me to sit with them, often beckoning me to a seat close to them if I had been sitting somewhere else. Several times, someone pulled me aside to talk to me one-on-one, about something that didn’t relate to my research but was just something they wanted to say. One woman, after I had seen her several times, asked me to give her phone number to Pastor Eddie, because she was having some trouble that she didn’t reveal to me, but she needed to talk to him about it. Another time, a woman gestured me over to her chair and told me about how I reminded her of her daughter and how she didn’t want to see me around here too much, because she didn’t want me to get too caught up in this life. A different time, I was taking an interview when another man came and sat at my feet, put his hand on my knee, and begged me in slurred words for something I still think about but couldn’t comprehend. I think he wanted me to know the truth about something, but he was too intoxicated to communicate it well. Still, he looked up at me with feeling eyes and made that connection, even if he struggled with the words. Being on-site at different times of the day, in different seasons, around or on holidays, and in all kinds of weather conditions made me see what they cope with living outside and outcast. When I first started interviewing people, it was September – that meant balmy nights and hot afternoons. The people living in the camp could maintain a comfortable body temperature easily. But when I visited in late November and December, they had procured a barrel to keep a fire burning and were sleeping in nests piled with thick blankets (provided

by a local organization that brings a meal every Wednesday). As it became more difficult for me to be comfortable on the site for longer than 20 or 30 minutes, with the wind blowing under the bridges and, once, with a mist of rain soaking the beds and belongings below, I started to realize the full weight of having no option but to live outside.

Method 3: Adopt appropriate manners and habits

As I got to know them better, I became more relaxed in approaching and having conversations with them. I made adjustments to how I worded things, and I found myself adopting some of their slang. I don't have much of an accent even though I grew up in East Tennessee, but I almost unconsciously shifted some pronunciations. I had a chance encounter in a grocery store parking lot with one of the people I had met on the site. "Hey, bitch!" he called. I looked at him, looked around, and looked at him again. "Are you talking to me?" He told me he had seen me at Redeemer Church and asked if I was doing that tent city thing – a normal, conversational question. I told him yes, and I invited him to come to the workshop that afternoon. Instead of saying, "Please don't call me that," I recognized that this was either his accustomed way of greeting women or he was testing me for a reaction; in either case, it was more appropriate for me to take it in stride and reflect his unremarkable manner. I had to make those kinds of judgments frequently because many people said controversial things about other people or groups, including stories that seemed too far-fetched to be true. In these situations, I generally felt it was more effective to mirror their emotions than to contend with the validity of their words.

In another example, Tumble Weed relayed a tale about having a large sum of money confiscated from him by a Knoxville police officer, but part of talking with Tumble Weed effectively is listening and responding to his stories in a way that keeps him chatting amicably. If he thinks you don't believe him, he may not find it worth his time to sprinkle in the relevant bits throughout the conversation. In my notes from the day of the first workshop I observed:

Driving in a car together is something. Tumble Weed talked to me a little differently – less like he was a salesman and more like he was a friend. The other two in back were quiet. Tumble Weed told me a story about getting housing for a little while and having crack dealers come into his apartment with a key they already had. He said he went back to the caseworker and returned his keys. He told him, "I don't want a place like that." Was there truth in the story even if it wasn't a true story? (Fieldnotes, 19 Feb 2014)

Sometimes sticking with someone through a story you don't buy into encourages her or him to come

back around to a more accurate assessment of the situation. If you tell them, “That’s ridiculous, I don’t think that’s true,” they might just keep lying to you. But if you emote and show empathy, suspending your judgment, they might find satisfaction in your reflection of their emotional state and not feel the need to linger on it or tell grander fictions. Calling someone out on a fiction induces defensiveness; following along with the fiction encourages closer intimacy and greater honesty.

Adjusting the way you present yourself, reflecting the emotional presentation of the participants, and even imagining that the strangers you see are judging you the way they might judge the unhoused help both to shift your own mindset to become empathetic and to shift the participants’ way of seeing you, to allow them to trust you and open up. It’s always frightening to expose yourself in an emotional way and then be socially defeated – imagine that feeling of waving excitedly to someone you know across the street and having them not see you and not wave back. I imagine this is a feeling the unhoused have often. So if they do expose that vulnerability, it is important to treat it as the fragile and valuable thing it is.

Method 4: Offer value in exchange for the value of their participation

Giving increases empathy. It requires us to both imagine and ask what another person wants or needs and then offer some resource to meet those desires and requirements. Thus, exchanging something of value for participants’ involvement is not only socially appropriate and even ethically required but also empathically conducive. The foremost thing I exchanged for their interview participation was my companionship. I sat and heard their stories, adding value to the time they were spending by simply being a person who listens. The next step I took was to bring them snacks. I only did this once, but they enjoyed having the coffee cake I brought because “treat” foods are not as readily available to them as are volunteered meals of spaghetti and canned green beans. The most important way I forged a connection through exchange, though, was listening for their cues, whether spoken or implicit, about things they really needed, particularly in the face of the colder weather toward the end of the interview process. One woman said she needed a sleeping bag; I didn’t find her to give her our spare one, but I left the sleeping bag on the site and told the others it was for her. When the campers acquired two metal barrels in which to keep fires blazing against the dropping wind chill, I brought a load of firewood and helped my thesis advisor bring a truckload of her firewood when she had a tree cut in her back yard. I also brought a tarp to Mark and Mariane at the onset of a snowstorm when they were worried their beds would get soaked as the snow melted. These exchanges showed the participants that I was invested in them and appreciated

their involvement, but they also maintained my connection to their situation, increasing my awareness of their struggles and deepening my ability to understand their feelings.

As I went through these processes and came to a place where I felt hurt when they were hurting and felt joyful when they seemed happy, I wondered where my position as a researcher ended and where my position as a human being – a friend – began. In Jon Kolko's *Wicked Problems: Problems Worth Solving*, I came across a chapter which had been written by Kat Davis. She also wondered:

Many professions have codes of conduct—clear boundaries—when dealing with people in vulnerable situations. Psychiatrists never make physical contact with a patient and never talk about themselves. Social workers engage their clients only in the context of their job, not outside. While conducting research, I've wondered what those boundaries are for the designer. Are there situations where a designer should just walk away? Is it okay for a designer to make physical contact with a participant? Is there an ethical responsibility to share information with authorities if the participant talks about law-breaking activity? There must be a certain amount of trust between the designer and participant, but how far does this trust extend? (On Empathy, 49)

There was one moment when I did have to choose to walk away. It was a week after the big February eviction, and tensions on the site were running higher than normal. I made a woman angry because I passed by her to say hello to someone I was more familiar with, when I was passing out reminder cards for the first workshop the following day. I walked back to her finally to hand her one of the cards, and she refused it and yelled and swore at me for many moments, telling me to get away. I tried to apologize and explain, but she didn't want to hear it. I was devastated that I had made that misstep and had hurt her, but there was nothing I could say to calm her down. Someone she knew rode up on his bicycle and intervened, but I had to leave her, upset. That was not the only moment of uncertainty, when my plans and codes of conduct broke down and the weight of what I was dealing with became more than I knew how to handle. The other side of the empathy coin, especially with a difficult situation like a group of people mired in homelessness, is that it requires being emotionally vulnerable. You leave yourself open to be hurt by a betrayal of trust, a moment of misjudgment, or suffering on their part too deep for them to let you follow them into it. At some point, you will remind yourself who you really are, that you are not them and are helpless to change many things, and you may cry or bottle it up or tell someone, but it will still be that: helplessness.

ANALYZING THE PROCESS

What I discovered as I started to interview, was that there were significant barriers to having participants draw maps the way I had planned, using Kevin Lynch's terms and offering drawing supplies and maps. I initially lacked experience in talking to the unhoused, and I lacked an understanding of who was using the site and how. I was shy and uncertain, trying to learn with each visit how to talk to some of the individuals there without upsetting them or confusing them. Sometimes interviews were interrupted by other people on the site who were intoxicated, opinionated, or both. For example, one of the participants was not homeless but lived in a house nearby and used the site to get away from family difficulties and drink with his friends. He was boisterous and confrontational, and for several weeks he asked me repeated questions, suspicious of why I was there and, I think, seeking of a reaction from me. During one visit, he stood over me yelling while I tried to interview someone else; the participant I was interviewing was becoming upset with him, and I helplessly tried to turn my attention back and forth or just block out the yelling. He was becoming more and more agitated, and, while I didn't fear for my safety because of the number of people around who were friendly toward me, I did feel that I might need to leave so the disruption might die down. I was a little worried that he and the participant I was interviewing would become angry enough at each other to start a problem; the yelling man was also a bit pugnacious and talked about fighting frequently – sometimes joking, sometimes not.²¹ Around this time, another extremely intoxicated man approached me, slurrily but urgently telling me about *something* I could not quite understand. He sat at my feet and reached up to clasp my hands, staring into my eyes and *imploring* me to do something I couldn't quite catch. The man who was yelling at me interrupted that exchange too, and only when it came out that I was involved with *The Amplifier* and Eddie Young did his agitation subside. He even reached down for my hand and rubbed it apologetically while telling me he had to get his foot out of his mouth because he didn't know who I was (as if I was anyone significant). "You gotta *identify* yourself," he kept repeating. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

21 In fact, he produced one of my favorite interview moments. When I asked, "Can you walk me through a typical day for you?" he replied: "Yeah, it's called the Breakfast Club. We get up, put a half gallon of vodka on the table – we call it the Breakfast Club – we get drunk, we get rowdy, and then we *fight*." Everyone sitting with him laughed uproariously. When I asked where his daily activities took place, he pointed to an area bordered by railroad ties adjacent to us: "Right there, that's the arena right there . . . that's the Thunderdome." More hoots of laughter. The rest of the interview was similar, with all of us laughing together for the whole thing; I decided to just stick to the format and see what happened.

I also didn't know how to approach a discussion about maps when they mostly wanted to talk about their situation – not to mention I had never tried to teach *anyone* about Kevin Lynch, let alone a person with no house in the tenuous position of hoping their blankets would not be rained on that night while they slept under the open sky. I didn't come with appropriate materials, either. I had AutoCAD maps with topography, roads, and some buildings indicated with lines, but I didn't realize that this kind of graphic wouldn't help them much. They needed aerial images of the landscape so they could more directly correlate what they saw on the map with what they experienced on the ground. They understood and talked about location, but they knew how their footsteps took them there much more intimately than how their paths would look from a bird's eye view. In a few interviews, the maps were helpful in identifying places they were referring to; but their understanding of space and how they use it was both on the ground at eye level and so automatic to them that it was like asking a baseball player to write an equation and then draw a scaled diagram for where they hold their hand to catch a ball. For the most part, talking about space meant talking about actions. It took me a few weeks and some discussions with professors to figure this out and adjust accordingly as well as return with maps that would be more legible to them. But even then, other factors made participants shy away from the maps and hesitate to actually draw something.

Additionally, the physical limitations of the site were prohibitive. I had no way to display large maps, no way to provide a drawing surface, nowhere comfortable to sit. We sat on railroad ties and held papers in our laps. It was noisy under the bridges with the constant traffic, so we all frequently ended up repeating ourselves. In some cases, participants were in their beds already because it was too cold not to be wrapped in their blankets. The weather itself was a significant factor. Some days it rained, and I would leave the site feeling guilty because I had a dry house to escape to. Other days the wind blew my papers everywhere. Some days, it was just too cold for the participants to focus on much outside of keeping warm. We were physically separated by these outdoor barriers, and it made even the act of looking at the same piece of paper awkward and difficult.

Next, engaging individuals one-on-one in an activity they didn't think they would be "good at" created a situation in which they were generally not comfortable taking a piece of paper and drawing on it. They had no idea who I was and were possibly intimidated by my knowledge. I know how terrifying it can be to enter into a conversation with a professional or someone adept in their field and be asked

to contribute to the conversation. Working with your hands in an unfamiliar way can be even more intimidating. In the way of an example, I took a masonry class in my undergraduate curriculum; slapping mortar onto a brick with a trowel for the first time under the watch of a master mason was completely mortifying. That was a class I *elected* to take. And here I was, asking a stranger (at that, a stranger unused to people seeking them out for conversation at all) to take a felt pen and draw something on a map. It was almost completely unsuccessful. Holding a pen I handed them and making marks on a paper they perceived as something they didn't want to "mess up" seemed outside their capabilities and sense of propriety. If you ask anyone who hasn't been trained in drawing to sketch something, they almost universally preface the activity with, "Well, I don't really know how to draw." It's one of those muscle-memory activities that does have to be practiced if one wants to do it effectively, and, while most people *can* learn to draw, few of them *have* learned. Understanding this helped me with the workshops later, because I had learned that using a format everyone was comfortable with like moving blocks around on a model could produce much more fluent results than a format everyone felt uncomfortable using – any kind of freehand drawing. This is a thing that is specific to designers: we have been taught to translate thoughts visually with a pen on paper. Because of this, I started to understand a big part of my role as a designer to be acting as a visual translator of ideas. They could talk about spaces, and I could draw about them. My drawings would then document the ideas and reinforce their understanding of them.

I saw in my interviews, even with simple questions about space, a hesitation to make suggestions regarding spatial issues and a lack of language tools to talk about space. It's easy to ask people what activities they engage in and when, but in the interviews I held, sometimes even my questions about different parts of the city pointed out on a map drew uncertainty and silence. They can tell me they wake up in the morning and go to the Mission for a shower or that they had to move their campsite from *there* to *here* because the police or the railroad authorities told them to. But they can give no spatial explanation for the spaces they use. They were hardly able to articulate spatial reasons that they performed an activity in a particular place. They wouldn't volunteer information about light and shade, weather, storage, level ground, dimensions or proportions, or levels of privacy. If I commented on my own spatial observations, they often agreed. But they seldom volunteered any information about space during the interview process. What I found, however, was that in the design workshop format where they worked as a group and had tools they needed, they talked about adjacencies, barriers, orientations, scales, zones, and a number of

other complicated spatial concepts that generally only designers think about. I'll explore later how the spatial issues that issued easily from the workshop process helped reinforce ideas that designers have about using space, on an individual scale as well as on an urban planning scale.

Another problem was their inability to move past what the city will allow them to do. They can't fathom a situation in which their culture was accepted, fully approved, legal, and protected. So to ask them, "What should a tent city be like? What program? What formal qualities? What protective elements? What spatial sequence?" is to present an idealized world that they have never known. Thus, the next step needed to be to thoroughly convincing them that they must suspend disbelief. That was why the idea of holding design workshops came into play.

Finally, when I presented my bathhouse design to them, their reactions were all similar: initial doubtfulness of the feasibility but eventual agreement and positive commentary after I explained all of the forces I had considered in the design to subvert the issues they imagined would arise. But I felt like I was in a traditional design role. I was presenting a complete design to them and arguing for it because it was *my* design that *I* had conceived and worked through. They had no space left to step into it. I was pushing my agenda into their spaces rather than withholding an agenda to see how their spaces might expand and shift into mine. I had to start from scratch and find a location *with* them, determine a program *with* them, and engage in preliminary design *with* them.

The interviews gave me many good things, and the information I gained led me to the next phase of my research. The act of interviewing became two-tiered – one tier was to discover how the unhoused felt about their situation and the design I presented to them as a possibility for their site as well as to examine how these conversations went, what made them successful or unsuccessful. The other tier was to discover what the conversation said about the unhoused as a community and in what ways their agency is denied them by the way we currently go about developing, designing and building without acknowledging the fact of their existence or their rights to use space. This would allow me to write for both designers and researchers, showing that I found out interesting things about the site and the user's needs that could contribute to the design process but also showing that I found out things about the community and the larger civic forces that played with and against them. I learned about the history of the site and learned about interacting with the participants, generating an empathic understanding on my part and some levels of trust on their part. This part of the research was not directly design-related, but I think it was crucial to approaching design with these participants and will be important to researchers or professionals who

would repeat this exercise. I believe it is important for architects to be, to small extents, many things: geographers, sociologists, biologists, plant scientists, anthropologists, and so on. We need tools at our disposal from a variety of realms of study and method, and anthropological ethnography is important in this particular case.

USING DESIGN TOOLS

Run a participatory design session when you want to better understand how people think about a given problem, discipline, technology, or aspect of culture. The method can give **clear insight into their vocabulary, their priorities, and the things they value**. The method can be particularly useful in contexts that are hard to observe, such as things that are private, **culturally sensitive**, infrequent, or expensive. And because **the creation of ideas can be less threatening than an interview about practices**, the method can also be useful in situations that are **politically charged or that have a particularly obvious power relationship at play**. For example, if you are working with the victims of domestic abuse, creating a model of an ideal living space can be more fruitful than conducting an interview about the pros and cons of shared living space.

Jon Kolko, *Wicked Problems*, 106 (my emphases)

dMoving from interviewing to gain understanding the micro-culture of the unhoused to actually engaging in a design process with them was the second leap to take (the first being visits to the site and initial engagement in conversation) in my research. After trying to intersect the unhoused and the design process at the point of site analysis but failing to obtain tangible design results, I adjusted my tools and location as well as the phase of the design process in which to involve their participation. The evolution of my methods as a response to conditions I found in the field defined my process; each time I established a plan, I subsequently diverted and adjusted it to accommodate new information.

First, it was important to shift from an individual (interview) format to a group (workshop) format for designing, because I had already found that participants were more willing to talk freely in interviews when I talked to a group of them together rather than an individual separated from the group. Having three people contributing at once is much more efficient for information-gathering purposes than having one person contribute. I think at times talking to them individually was intimidating for them, especially when confronting spatial issues that they were familiar with but didn't know how to put into words – much less into drawings. I thought that if participants could get together in a room with tables and a projector, we could alleviate that sense of being intimidated by a one-on-one conversation. At the same time, we could circumvent the physical limitations I'd been confronting at the campsites, like inadequate

seating and writing surfaces, inclement weather, and physical distances with associated sound and activation barriers. I thought participants would feel more at ease expressing themselves in the presence of active expression by others who were experiencing similar conditions.

After determining a new format for design participation, I thought about changing the phase of the design process in which to engage them. Instead of starting with the existing site and asking site analysis questions to determine their way of cognitively mapping their site, I decided to take a less academic and more palpable track. This would also make the process more relevant to design professionals when taking the method into their own practice; locating and discussing a site and then programming activities for the site provides a more active, less theoretical discussion than cognitive mapping seemed to provide. Initially, I intended the first workshop to be about defining some proposed program so the second workshop could include space planning for the resulting program pieces. However, because of the necessity to consider other stakeholders who had some claim to the site, it made more sense to ask participants to locate a real site somewhere in the city during the first workshop so we could talk about issues like ownership, boundaries and buffers, landforms, contamination, and other constraints. After locating the project in space, we could use the second workshop to program and then plan a basic layout for the program on that site. Hypothetical or site-less design is like a sort of hologram of real design; it is sterile and, in my view, meaningless. I thought that defining a location first would encourage greater participant interest and investment.

I then considered each workshop in greater detail and decided the first workshop would include the following activities: Introduction and explanation of purpose, examination of maps and site model to help participants locate themselves in space, identification of participants' needs, identification of stakeholders' needs, discussion of possible locations, discussion and diagramming of pros and cons, final selection of location and discussion of its assets and liabilities. The second workshop would build upon needs we had already identified and take participants through the next steps: brainstorming of program pieces to fit needs and activities, examining considerations and constraints from last workshop and looking at new considerations, manipulating a "kit of parts" in a large-scale model of the selected location, and discussing potential problems and solutions to various spatial layouts while I used drawings and diagrams to make note of their concerns. We would then make a more polished version of the final layout of the model they decided on to incorporate into a proposal to the mayor of Knoxville to consider.

I would be open and flexible, able to change any of these steps as needed in response to how engaged the participants were in each phase of the workshops.

Once I had the general plan for these workshops, I had to determine how to visually and physically engage their thinking with tools that designers use. I knew I needed maps that included aerial photographs rather than the road and topography AutoCAD file I had printed to show to them in the interviews. They had responded better to the aerial photos in the interviews because they could locate themselves relatively easily by examining physical characteristics like rooftops, shadows, and trees. Conversely, topographic lines can be confusing even for those who have training in how to “see” them. The aerial photos could help them quickly see where they could and could not locate elements and would allow us freedom to move through quick iterations to deal with barriers and constraints.

Next, I imagined that physical models would be more helpful than drawings for them to work through space planning. I recognize that not everyone is comfortable drawing, but most people are comfortable manipulating a kit of parts like blocks. Also, sometimes it’s hard to talk about spatial issues, but it’s easy to “experience” them by placing yourself imaginatively in a model. I used an area model to help them locate themselves on various parts of the site under consideration and point out problems of



Figure 27. Country after the Feb. 12 eviction.

topography and ownership at a small scale but large scope. After we had determined a specific site for the tent city in the first workshop, I built a quick large-scale, small-scope model of a slice of the site so that we could create a “module” for the tent city. Given the list of elements they determined to be necessary in the first workshop, where would we locate these elements to optimize comfort, safety, privacy/ socialization, and organization?

I also wanted to use diagrams to quickly illustrate some of their ideas if one participant was having trouble visualizing what another participant was describing. I used diagrams in the introduction of the first workshop to describe some methods of design thinking to get them into a new frame of mind. However, the diagrams were largely for my own benefit, because as a designer, it is as much a form of note-taking as lists and written outlines.

As a final consideration, I tried to offer few initial structures and constraints so they would feel free to discuss what considerations and elements were most important to them. As we went along, I gradually brought up certain issues like property ownership, buffers and barriers for the stream and rail corridors, brownfield site contamination, policy barriers, and other problems in getting approval for certain pieces of the plan. In the first stages of site selection, programming, and space planning, I tried to do more listening and encouraging than introducing the limits I perceived.



Figure 28. The site after the Feb. 12 eviction.

A NEW URGENCY

I had intended the workshops to be quite hypothetical, but as I was making these final determinations, the February site eviction occurred and transformed the tempo and intensity of all conversations about a tent city. One week before the first workshop, when I went to Redeemer Church to announce the workshop to the members of the Knoxville Homeless Collective (KHC) and encourage participation, I learned that the campers had been served eviction notices that very morning. The project was no longer theoretical; fixing a real spatial location for a tent city site became crucial to the participants. I think this changed the willingness of participants to be involved and stay focused. They had a real problem to solve; we all have more determination to tackle real problems than hypothetical ones. Sitting in on the KHC meeting on the day of the eviction with Sergeant Long, I realized that locating a site where the eviction cycle could *stop* was a real need that I had to prioritize.

This changed the entire tone of the first workshop from research/experiment to action/activism. The participants did not perceive that they were part of research any more; they perceived that they were working toward an actual solution. I needed to make sure that they honestly understood the limitations of moving forward with a plan for a tent city, but I also needed to acknowledge their urgency to make rapid changes and ease the suffering they saw around them. The passion with which the participants attacked the problem was likely due to the immediacy of the situation: they weren't sure where they were going to sleep that very night. It became something outside their capabilities to think about it abstractly or hypothetically. I discovered that my involvement couldn't stop with the two workshops. I had become part of something that needed to continue beyond the boundaries of my scholarly thesis exploration.

I had intended each workshop to last for two hours, but both lasted longer. After 2 ½ hours of the second workshop, I had to request that we call it a day so I could clean up materials, drive people home, and move on with my own activities. As I drove part of the group to Sam's apartment, they asked me when the next workshop would take place. They couldn't wait.

WORKSHOP I

For the first workshop, I visited the site two hours beforehand and offered to drive those who were camping out since most of them don't have easy access to transportation. I arrived at 11:40 and there they sat amidst the shambles and noise of the most recent eviction and cleanup: machines grinding down bushes and branches, heavy tires on new gravel. They all wanted to come to the church, they said. They

would, they agreed. Tumble Weed talked to me for a long time, but I finally peeled away and regrouped, encouraged, and promised I'd be back.

The city workers made them all move before I returned

When I did return to the site, people were trying to change horses mid-stream in the face increasingly immanent removal. Most of those who had said they would attend were now reluctant or altogether absent. Because they had scattered so, it was extremely difficult to physically have enough people in one place to even get them into my car, but I was right that having the car would help. A car ride for people who don't have many opportunities for a car ride is not something to just pass up. I did bring three campers named Tumble Weed, Joseph, and Pannalal; they were all interested and willing. They joined the members of the Knoxville Homeless Collective, Sam, Stacey, and a current camper, William(called Country).²² I didn't see Country on the site or at the church that day, and I had become

22 The first time I met Country, he said he recognized me. If I can be enormously subjective for a moment, he struck me at once as discerning, sensitive, and kind: he knew what he wanted and needed and would get that, but he would make all the concessions for you that he could. He calculates people as he engages them, warming to them quickly and perceiving what tack he should take to best complement their personality and needs. He remembers people and information and is quick to recognize and engage someone he's seen before. His moments of anger at injustice are fleeting, and he returns swiftly to his positive, joyful outlook. Country in pain is a terrible thing to witness; you can see he feels deeply and though his wounds are quick to heal, he feels them in their fullness instead of pretending them away. He lives thoroughly. His contributions to the discussion in the



Figure 29. Introduction to Workshop I.

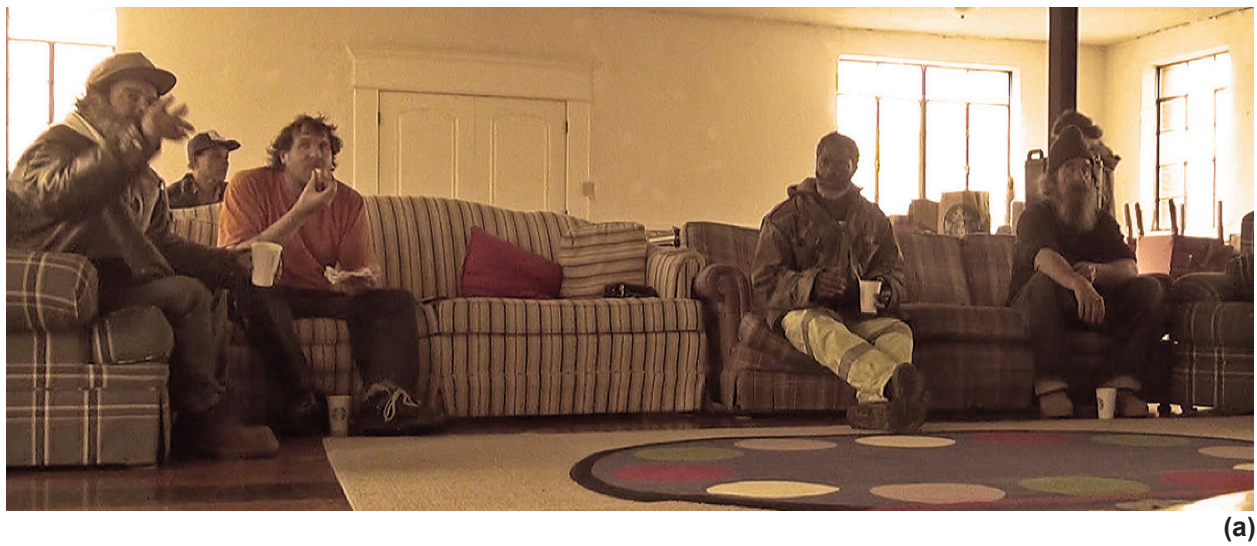
concerned that he wouldn't be involved. But then, as we were all filing into the chapel, he came up over the hill in his fluorescent yellow pants with reflective strips and his camouflage jacket – an amusing combination for his purpose, which is to be seen by cars when he's riding his bicycle. I called his name happily as he approached, and I told him how glad I was to see him and that I was afraid he wouldn't be able to make it.

They sat on couches with coffee and bagels as I fumbled with the projector on loan from the UT library, and Country helped me move the projector screen while Sam set up a taller table for the projector. Tumble Weed called out suggestions. They spoke together easily. I didn't know how many of them knew each other, but they all acted familiar. Country and Tumble Weed seemed to know Pannalal.²³ When Stacey asked Pannalal to repeat his name, Country interjected, "Just call him Lala cause you will not be able to pronounce his name." Tumble Weed interjected, "He don't even know who built the Taj Mahal. and he's from India." Pannalal was amicable to the banter.

They were waiting for my leadership. They were somewhat doubtful until I started talking. Country stared intently at me the whole time. They all watched me. I introduced the idea of my role as a designer (mediating between their community and other stakeholders like TDOT and the City of Knoxville and applying my skills where needed, in the case of building materials and methods and code issues) and explained to them that we would be selecting a location that would be possible to look into further as a place for a tent city, or a "waiting area" for housing as Pastor Eddie Young of Redeemer Church and Redeeming Hope Ministries likes to call it. They eagerly discussed possibilities for locations. Sam suggested we speak to Gene Monday, a well-known local figure who owns extensive properties around town, about donating property. Stacey pointed out part of a row of industrial warehouses built in 1884 by C.M. McClung & Co., the last of which had recently burned. Tumble Weed championed the area along Blackstock Avenue where people had recently been evicted, calling it "open territory," perhaps not quite understanding that it was mostly privately-owned land.

workshop were robust and plentiful. You could tell he'd been thinking this through a lot and picking up information he thought he could use, filing it away for just such an occasion. He rages against not only his own plight but that of the other people he's known who have been treated unfairly. I'll never forget the way he looked at me, calculating, as I introduced the workshop and outlined the basic information. The man is a sponge, thirsting for new things to know – especially if it will help him and the people he cares about take a more empowered role in the decisions made about people experiencing homelessness in Knoxville.

23 I do think many of the campers are familiar enough with each other to know names. As I mentioned in the ethnography section of this chapter, anytime I asked for someone by name, the other campers knew who I was talking about and often when they had seen them last, if not their current whereabouts.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Figure 30. Discussions in Workshop I.

Joseph fell asleep for a little while, but he activated quietly as we started looking at maps and drawing on the table. The group was interested in talking about the logistics of a tent city: making rules, ensuring safety, keeping drugs out, and so on. When I laid out butcher paper, they were skeptical. “I can’t draw.” So I laid out the maps and told them we’d put trace paper over them and trace things – that had them more interested. They liked that I had brought them sign pens and markers. The love of a good writing utensil is, perhaps not universal, but ubiquitous. Stacey set to tracing roads with the dashed lines I had used to mark overhead roads in a diagram I showed them. They enjoyed laying trace paper over the maps and outlining characteristics they recognized, labeling roads they knew and using different colors and patterns for trees, railroad tracks, major roads, minor roads, and buildings. This way of categorizing and coding by color and pattern also became important in the space planning part of the process, which occurred in the second workshop. I listened and tried to encourage new perspectives without rejecting theirs. We did establish, however, that a narrow flat swath between Second Creek and the railroad tracks, extending under 5th Avenue between I40 and the new KUB development, seemed like the most likely area to study.

They asked questions about what to do, and Stacey and Country set to tracing the map on their sheet. Stacey really enjoyed this and worked on it the rest of the meeting, asking for advice on how to represent trees and railroad tracks with different colors and line styles. They enjoyed orienting themselves on the maps; that part went better this time than it had in the individual interviews. I had larger maps with aerial details and road names. They also liked the big model, and I think it helped for them to see the topography that way. They were able to locate themselves on both the maps and in the model, though there were some confusing aspects that needed to be cleared up. This was one element for which my knowledge of the area gained by looking at maps and biking and walking was helpful: I was able to answer their questions about what the maps were showing and refreshing their knowledge of what was located in particular areas. They have on-the-ground knowledge, but designers can bring “aerial” knowledge that includes land ownership, land use, floodplain information, and other GIS and political boundaries. The different kinds of knowledge were quite complementary.

They pointed out its proximity to the homeless services. They described its walkability and called out the Food City supermarket and other shops. Stacy was concerned about proximity to health services, but Tumble Weed reminded her of the new Cherokee health place on 5th. Joseph liked that it was level

land. I found out near the end of the meeting that he was in the building trades his whole life and knows what is important from a construction standpoint. The group had an awareness of most of the issues I brought up. When I mentioned the contamination of the soil on the old site of a scrap metal yard, Country related an anecdote of a man he knew who tried to bathe in Second Creek and “somethin’ ate his skin off.” I had heard a similar story from an interview participant. With contaminants like e. coli and heavy metals, a number of skin problems could result from contact with the water from Second Creek. They did not know *who* owned much of the land they had been using, but they knew that *someone* owned it. Country guessed it was city-owned since it was the city initiating the cleanup. His reasoning was sound, but this was not necessarily the case. They were also aware of the problem of arrests for criminal trespassing and understood that land needed to be donated or they needed some kind of special permit to use it.

Participants had a disagreement over instigating a “no drinking” rule in the tent city. Stacey, who was not a drinker, felt that drinking only led to violence and that if tent city residents wanted to drink, they would have to do it somewhere else. Tumble Weed immediately disagreed, and both Country and Sam were on his side, saying that not all drinking led to violence and that asking people not to drink would be just as prohibitive as staying in the shelters to them. They compromised by agreeing that drinking on your personal campsite could be permitted but not in the shared areas.

Country pointed out that people with any kind of drugs would have to show a prescription; otherwise the drug would not be allowed in the tent city.

Joseph pointed out that the homeless were not the ones causing problems that led to eviction and that if people weren’t using the same site to get drunk and be rowdy, they would not be forced to move. He said this to point out the necessity for allowing only the people who would be responsible and truly had nowhere else to live to stay in a tent city like we were proposing. Joseph also pointed out that it wouldn’t be hard to keep a camp clean if there were regular trash pickup.

Throughout the workshop, Country asked questions about things that confused him about the evictions and the cleanup that was happening at that time. “They tore out that fence? That makes no sense. Why take a fence down?” he asked. “There’s somethin’ about this feels wrong to me. They don’t use heavy equipment to clean out camps. But now? They are using big equipment? For *us*? They’re preparing that land for something.” I think he was concerned that the Mission itself would close. He said that any time he tried to ask the city workers questions about the work being done (this was all in relation

to the February eviction), they just walked away. I was not able to answer some of these questions, but his concern for his wellbeing and that of the others using the site permeated his participation. “It’s a war against the homeless,” said Tumble Weed, half-joking. Tumble Weed perceived that many areas along greenways that used to contain camps were now under camera surveillance, and thus, no campsite could last in those areas.

As Eddie Young and I cleaned up the last of the workshop materials, I mentioned that I could bring sodas next time since two of the participants said they didn’t drink coffee. Eddie said, “If you want, next time I can just get pizzas, because RHM [Redeeming Hope Ministries] has a deal with Papa John’s.” I replied, “It just seems kindof strange, having pizza at three in the afternoon.” “Well,” Eddie said carefully, “Some of these guys haven’t had anything to eat today.” I realized that I brought coffee and bagels because that’s what *I* want to have at three in the afternoon – a snack and pick-me-up between meals. For them, a bagel is a carb-heavy and completely insufficient substitute for an actual meal. That was one example of why it’s so important to work closely with someone who knows more about the homeless community than you do. As much time as I spent with them, I was still woefully ignorant of their experience on this crucial point - and surely on so many others.



Figure 31. Diagram of location determined by participants.

WORKSHOP II

In order to recruit more participants, I had introduced the second workshop in the fellowship hall of Redeemer Church on a hot lunch Wednesday. That meant that around forty unhoused people were assembled at long tables for a meal – spaghetti with canned meat sauce and thick slabs of toast, all Eddie could scrape together since nobody is taking charge of the bi-monthly lunches right now. Eddie made a few announcements and asked some questions of the excitable group. They clamored when he asked what issues to bring before the Knoxville Homeless Collective that day after lunch. Access to housing, one man said; it takes four months to get approval. Creating jobs, another chimed in. One man just kept telling everyone else to pipe down and let The Pastor talk. A woman with a face deeply creased into a fixed smile stood up to give some thoughts before the prayer. Then Eddie gave me the floor to invite folks to the workshop after the KHC meeting.

I stood up and asked, “If you’re comfortable telling me this, who here is *currently* camping out?”

A sea of hands. Fully a third of the people in the fellowship hall.

Camping is at the front of everyone’s minds right now. The pot boiled over in a frenzy of activity: even at the time of the second workshops, two weeks after the KPD issued eviction notices, dump trucks and pickups trucks and backhoes, emblazoned with “City of Knoxville Public Works” logos still lumbered over the varied terrain, smoothing down new dirt and gravel. Men in neon vests scatter straw and grass seed. Being on the site, you felt like you could see for miles with all the brush cleared out. Half the trees were gone, and all of the low brush.

Thus, and in spite of my recruiting, the second workshop was more sparsely attended than the first because of the absence of any current campers²⁴ (except Country), but we had one person who hadn’t attended the previous one: Stacey’s fiancé, Keith. Country, Stacey, and Sam all returned for the second round of design.

24 This time I was missing Tumble Weed, Pannalal (Lala), and Joseph. Having been moved from their campsites, they had surely found new locations where they could remain undisturbed for some time longer. I didn’t know where to look yet, and the time for the second workshop was upon me. I did notice, though, the stark difference in how I felt approaching potential campsites that day, when held against my remembered feelings the first time I approached the site and the campers. My steps now were confident, over industrial rubble and garbage, toward a bridge with blankets draped over retaining walls. I didn’t find anyone, but I knew as I approached what to say if I found someone, how to make them feel safe and unthreatened by me, how to show them I was on their side. Whatever else has come of this, I feel that is valuable. I know how to access a largely forgotten group of people. I have new tools to connect with people who don’t have enough connections.

One of the first things audible on the video recording of the second workshop is Country's voice: "I'm gonna get me a cookie and let's get busy. This is a workshop, not playtime." Sam helped me set up the video camera – I think he had taken that on as his realm of expertise. He made sure the camera was on us and up high enough for an unrestricted view as we moved from table to table.

I reminded them what we had determined the time before and marked out the area on the map, showing what section I had selected for the large-scale study model. The group set upon my maps eagerly, their excitement moving them. This time, nothing held them back from picking up pens and markers and tracing over boundaries, locating themselves, talking without ceasing. I tried to break down the conversation into necessary functions so we could prescribe program to suit the functions. If we need to keep it clean, I asked, what physical things do we need to keep it clean? They proposed dumpsters, a "port-a-john" (I proposed something "more permanent" and suggested something not connected with municipal sewage, like a composting toilet), and portable showers (I mentioned my earlier ideas for harvesting rainwater). I asked how they wanted private spaces to work and whether or not to build shelters. We talked about what program pieces would keep things secure, like a security booth or some kind of post and fences along the railroad tracks. They talked about cooking and socializing, mentioning things like fire pits and barbecue grills.

They were good at pointing out potential safety issues. When I talked about solar hot water heating with copper pipes inside a plexiglass box, Keith immediately noted that people might try to steal the copper pipes. They spent some time discussing how to handle security so that people could feel safe walking to the bathroom at night and so that fights and theft could be avoided. They addressed cleanliness issues and decided that sites for tents would be more practical than permanent or semi-permanent built structures for private sleeping quarters; they didn't like the idea of sleeping on the same cot or platform as the person before them – most likely a stranger.

They also suggested that those who receive monthly checks be required to pay (Keith suggested \$20 a week) to stay in the tent city. We talked about who would be "allowed" in the tent city. I asked them how much they thought a tent city should be structured like existing homeless services and to what extent they should break away from that. They liked the idea of using ID cards, and Country suggested you would get a replacement card for free if you lost yours for the first two times, but the third time you would have to do 8 extra hours of community service for the tent city before you could replace it.

I enjoyed hearing them banter about naming the tent city when Country declared that it needed a name. He felt that people living there wouldn't want to answer with "the tent city" when someone asked them where they lived.

Keith suggested naming it after whatever street it was located close to, but nobody seconded the opinion.

"Mi casa es su casa," suggested Stacey.

"Su casa mi . . . ?" Country tried. "Can't nobody pronounce what you just said!"

"Mi casa es su casa. It means my house is your house," Stacey clarified.

"Then just say My House is Your House!" countered Country.

Sam suggested the Knoxville Homeless Collective Camp, but Stacey pointed out that not everyone staying there would be KHC members.

Finally Country said, "Let's just keep it simple." He paused, and so did everyone else.

"Second Chances," he intoned.

There was a brief silence and then Stacey repeated the name solemnly. Nobody offered further suggestions. They knew, I think, that Country would be the one to name it; he stands to gain the most.

Keith and Stacey unrolled maps. Country, more hesitant than the others, waited for his courage and his chance to speak. Finally, in the end, when Stacey moved away from the model, he put his fingers on it and confidently moved the community building away from the tents. "No, no, that's just bein lazy. It needs to go over *here*. Make people walk a little bit."

The model itself was hugely successful, once I got them focused on it. I had brought my son's wooden blocks on a whim, cylinders and rectangular prisms and cubes, and Stacey pointed out that having the different colors of blocks was helpful in showing different things. She kept redefining the "key," taking pleasure in assigning function a color: "The fire pits are gonna be blue. The dumpsters here are green. Port a johns will be red," she listed. Later the fire pits were bare wood and the toilets were blue. She labeled cardboard pieces with markers as the group became certain of their functions. "Walkway," "path," "10ft tent," and "barrier" were some of their labels. She wanted to name all the roads and write "Second Creek" in the cardboard creek bed.

Keith liked to make dramatic points by narrating hypothetical stories. "Here's what's gonna happen. Someone's gonna get drunk and leave their trash out, pass out. Then some raccoon's gonna come right through here and dump that trash out and get up in there . . ." and on it went. Sam was an idea

man, not putting his hands on the model or drawings much but coming up with verbal solutions to every problem. They looked to Country, who enjoyed putting “yes” or “no” on suggestions, because he was the one real camper in the room who would be affected. Sam had his own apartment, and Stacey and Keith had recently moved into housing together.

Their eagerness was utterly inspiring. In the midst of their hardship, they launched themselves at the design problem I was presenting. I had to force them to take breaks and, finally, clean up when we were already past our 2-hour workshop time slot. I had to carry the model out while they were still trying to move things around on it. “Will we do it again next week?” they asked. They’re so on fire for this possibility that they don’t even want to wait the six days between now and then. For both workshops, it was a little tenuous getting them into the room, but once they were there with rolls of paper and sign pens, I couldn’t keep their hands off things.

Both workshops were successful because I learned so much from the participants and because we accomplished the goals I intended: we determined a location that would help us start realizing the actual constraints we would be facing, a program that would fulfill necessary tent city activities, and a spatial layout that would make the program pieces function effectively. I was able to understand more about homelessness in Knoxville because of the issues brought to light in the participants’ discussions and the ways they went about the activities I gave them. In the following section, I will analyze these discussions and ways of doing.

ANALYZING THE RESULTS

In thinking about the results of the participatory design process, I considered both positive and negative outcomes and speculated about the causes of those outcomes, based on what I learned from my interviews and observations of the participants. The participants interacted well together and worked out disagreements easily. Why was this? What made them so comfortable discussing design issues? Was their enthusiasm typical of other attempts to engage them in organized empowering activities? Who were the participants, and why were they the ones who showed up? What was significant about that particular group? Would these results be typical if a different sample of the same group participated? In asking these questions, I determined several salient issues: unhoused people who are already connected to existing organizations are more willing to participate; an unequal distribution of participants from those organizations may reproduce certain hegemonies; providing an opportunity for participants to exercise

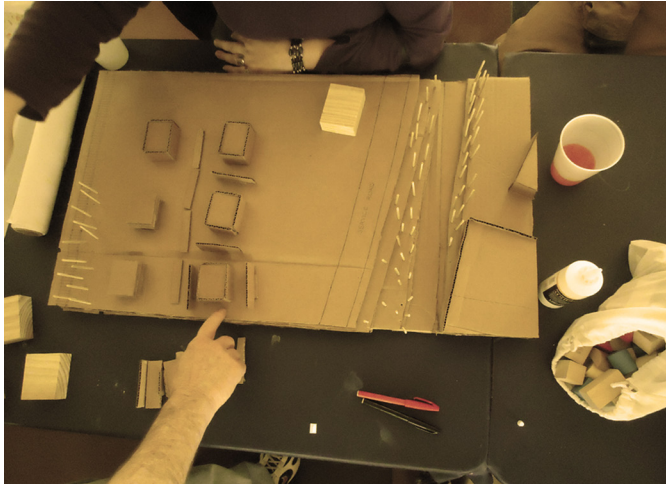


Figure 32. Model iteration 1.



Figure 33. Model iteration 2.

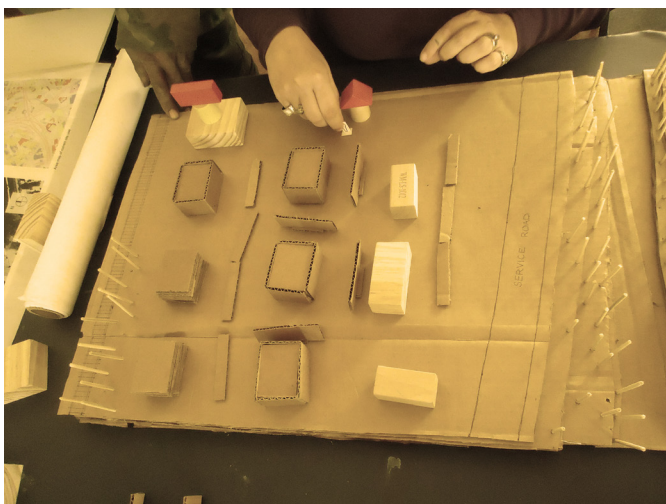


Figure 34. Model iteration 3.

This series of figures documents the participants' process as they determined placement of the program pieces they had suggested in the first workshop. They began by laying out a grid of individual campsites with a walkway in between rows. They created a separate gathering space and introduced fire pits, toilets, a dumpster, and a community building. They tested different locations for the toilets (indicated by red blocks) and changed the number and placement of the fire pits (blue blocks) from a cluster of them in the public area (figure 38) to a fire pit located at each campsite (figure 39). Afterward, however, they decided that individual fire pits would create an increased fire hazard and moved them back to the public area. In figure 41, you can see that they increased the number of toilets (now indicated by bare wood blocks) so that residents would not have to walk far to reach one in the middle of the night. In figure 38, you can see Country moving the community building (upper right corner of model) after he decided that in this case, he wanted to "make them [residents] walk a little" from the social space to reach the community building. They also experimented with the idea of having a trash can at each private campsite (not pictured), but afterward they chose to have larger trash barrels near each toilet and the big dumpster close to the entrance where a city garbage truck may access it easily. They maintained a clear path for the existing access road so that police vehicles or other emergency vehicles could drive through the tent city. They located the private tent spaces away from the access road so that they would be a place of relative quiet and decreased activity. They discussed and resolved many other issues as they manipulated parts on the model.

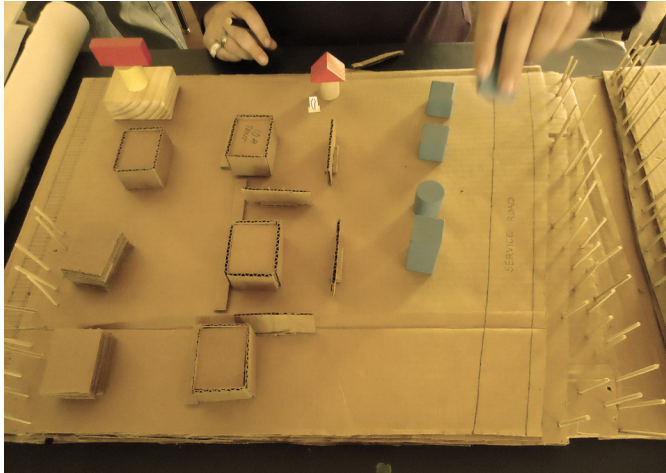


Figure 35. Model iteration 4.

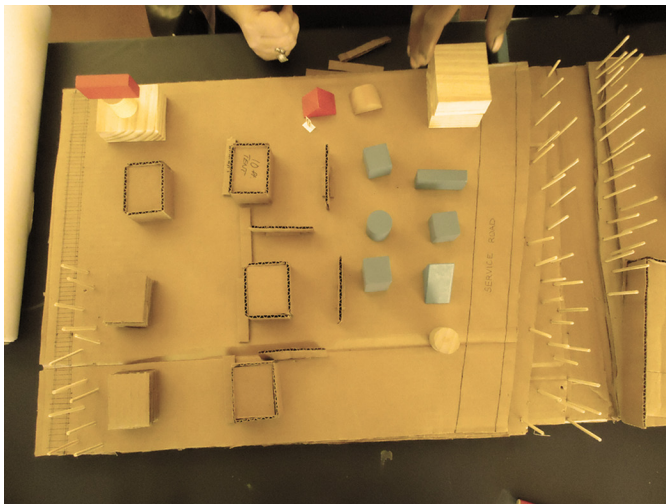


Figure 36. Model iteration 5.

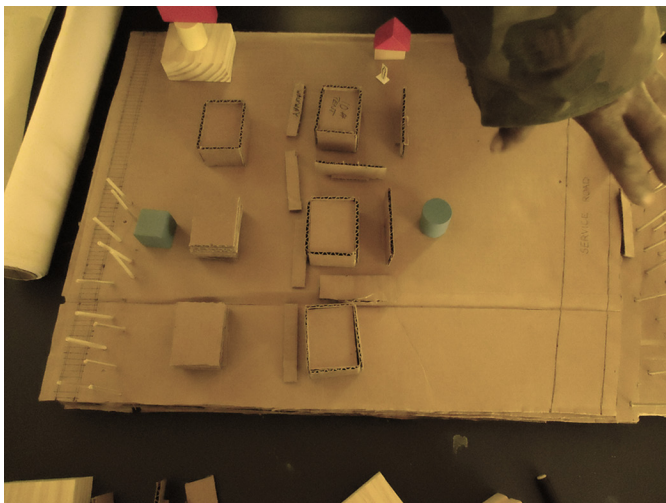


Figure 37. Model iteration 6.



Figure 38. Model iteration 7.

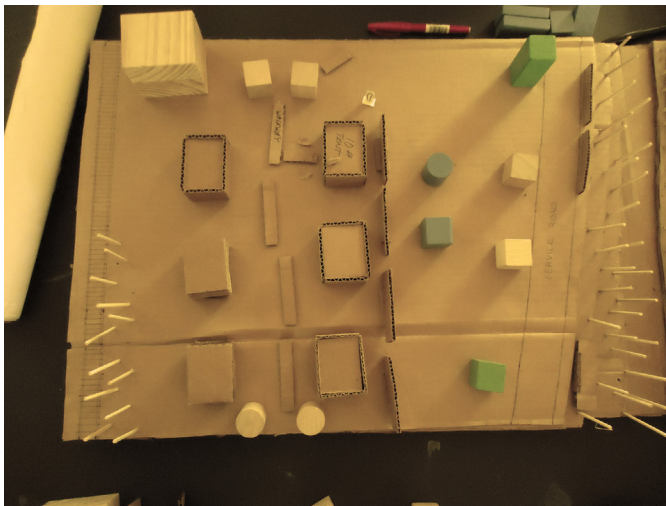


Figure 39. Model iteration 8.

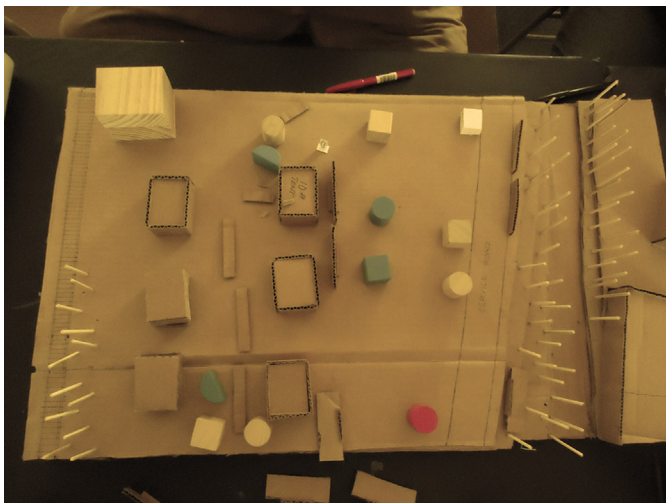


Figure 40. Model iteration 9.



Figures 41. Diagram of finalized plan.

agency made the workshops more attractive to the unhoused participants than other kinds of activities offered to them; and their “unprofessional” yet thorough understanding of design ideas reaffirmed the validity of many issues designers think about. I will tease out these issues in more detail so that readers might find some aspects to consider in their own design practices.

I considered the workshops to be successful because they helped me meet the goals I intended at the outset. The participants showed that the activities they undertook during the workshop hours held their interest, the activities resulted in a design solution to a problem of program and location, and the process showed me what parts of my planning achieved goals or produced positive results and what parts fell flat or created negative results.

THE WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS

It was significant that I had trouble finding participants and collecting them in one place, particularly for the second workshop. The temporal and spatial qualities of this group’s existence can be archetypically transient, and the learned tendencies of many members of the group can be nomadic and unpredictable. Scheduling particular times to meet or gather was not successful except in the cases of the

workshops when I passed out the reminder cards, visited the site two hours before the first workshop, and personally drove participants to Redeemer Church to be part of the discussion. I chose a day when the Knoxville Homeless Collective was meeting so that we could move to a different room right after the meeting adjourned; the members would already be in the right place at the right time. If you try to schedule a time and place and expect an unhoused person to show up then and there, they will likely not have a way to observe what time of day it is or even recall which day of the week they're living in. They keep particular schedules, though, so sometimes their other activities (meals at various homeless service facilities, meetings with counselors or case workers, work opportunities, and so on) must take precedence over talking with a researcher or a designer.

Another significant observation was that it was not successful to recruit people to the workshops who had never spoken with me before or who had declined interviews previously. In the first case, I had not had the time to cultivate a relationship with them and show them that I was invested in the project and that they could be safe knowing that their time and energy would not be wasted. Those who were most willing to participate in the workshops were KHC members, and I think the fact that they were already invested in a project that was empowering to them made them understand that something like a design workshop would be an investment in their own futures rather than a waste of their time that would ultimately come to nothing. The KHC members already trusted Pastor Eddie and the other people who were part of the Collective meetings to take them seriously and help them take action. I noticed that vendors of *The Amplifier* and people who attended meals at Redeemer Church were similarly more interested in participating in interviews. When they discovered I was affiliated with Eddie and *The Amplifier*, several people immediately trusted my investment, just by my association.

In the second case, those who never desired to get to know me or be interviewed were also unwilling to participate in the workshops. Some members of Knoxville's homeless community may have been too deep in despair and substance abuse to even have a glimmer of hope that someone could facilitate changes in their environment. Those who were more interested and willing to be involved sometimes encouraged those who were more reclusive and less inclined to participate, so forging connections with these individuals was helpful in getting a few interviews with reluctant folks. Malcom Gladwell called this type of person a "Connector" in his book *The Tipping Point*. He describes Connectors as "the kinds of people who know everyone" (*Tipping Point*, 38). He comments on their

ability “to span many different worlds”; this was true of a few of the people I met, and I think they were the ones more likely to participate in interviews and workshops or to be in a position to be invited to do such things (*Tipping Point*, 49). One participant self-identified as a “public relations” person and told me, “I’ll talk to just about anybody . . . For the most part, I get along with people” (Personal Interview, 27 Sep 2013). He was also an *Amplifier* vendor, so he knew Eddie Young. Some vendors interact with prominent local figures like city council members and business persons; these daily interactions form relationships that can be significant to shifting policy or taking other radical action in favor of the unhoused. This participant helped me meet and start an interview with another person who initially was unwilling to talk with me, revealing his importance as a “Connector.” Still, several individuals avoided interviews throughout my research, and one individual rejected my presence from the first time I saw her to the last. It is important to prepare for these rejections, to know when to walk away, and to refrain from pushing too hard for someone’s involvement when they may feel that declining to participate is a way of keeping themselves safe or protecting their tenuous routine.

CONSIDERING EXISTING HIERARCHIES

Discovering who was more or less willing to participate, I perceived some internal hierarchies. I have to heavily emphasize how this can become problematic when conducting participatory design or ethnographic research. For example, all but two of my interviews were with white people, and one of my interviews with an African American was off the record – he didn’t want me to use my tape recorder. Engaging minority groups in participatory design can always bring up difficult and complicated questions. Are members of black culture – even when it is overarched by the culture of homelessness – ever completely trusting of assistance by members of white culture? They may feel that their circumstances are produced at least in part by their racial identity, and this can leave a rhyme of mistrust around the edges of these interactions. While I did not perceive a great deal of racial tensions on the site, there were recognitions of racial differences and at least some indication of segregation between whites and blacks. If African Americans are less likely to participate in research like this, then the process could perpetuate the existing inequalities, resulting in less input by black members of the homeless community and continuing feelings of mistrust and resentment.

It could also become problematic if people who are more involved in organizations like Redeeming Hope Ministries are the ones who engage and participate the most. Again, involving only

those who are on the way to improving their circumstances or those who have more *power* in the community may exclude the needs of those who are quieter, those with more severe substance abuse, physical disability, or mental illness, and those who have been incarcerated or banned from a homeless shelter.

One thing that is particularly interesting and potentially problematic about these hierarchies is that the members of the homeless community often judge each other the same way the media and the mainstream public judges them. They perceive “other” members of the homeless community to be the ones causing problems. In the interviews, so many people indicated “those people over there” in separated spaces – in other words, people they didn’t know – as the “dangerous” ones. Only one woman seemed to have a firm grasp of the distinction between drug users and drug dealers who lived in public housing and people experiencing homelessness. While the line can blur, drug abuse is not the leading cause of homelessness and drug users do not constitute the majority of the homeless population by any measure. But they sometimes perceive one another as criminals the same way people outside of the homeless community perceive them that way.

EXERCISING AGENCY

The interviews and workshops revealed that members of the homeless community have an appreciable understanding of the forces that subjugate them, particularly some of the homeless services. Most of the people living on the site were there because KARM had restricted their use of overnight shelter or because staying at KARM was too restrictive for them to lead lives of agency. Parsell and Parsell point out that “choice can be understood as an expression of agency and a commitment to a ‘normal’ identity” (“Homelessness as a choice” 420). Several participants expressed that they stayed outside so they could have the freedom to decide when to go to bed or whether or not to take a particular medication. The significant shortcoming of (probably) well-meaning homeless services is that they implicitly do not truly offer assistance for free. While feeding those who have no other way to get food is crucial, the meal comes with implied debt; Patricio Del Real describes it as “a moral economy that effectively requires payment” (“Ask and Ye Shall” 123). You must pray before your meal; you must attend a worship service and follow the rules in order to stay in the shelter. You are expected to participate in group rehabilitation or some program to get on track for housing. A popular theoretical posture is to point to homeless persons’ rejection of these services as confirmation of their laziness, which allows

us to feel comfortable leaving them to their own miserable devices. “Well, we tried,” we tell ourselves. “They’re just hopeless.” In reality, they may be rejecting these services for complicated reasons that have much more to do with maintaining a sense that *they have options and can make choices* in their lives. Daily decisions aren’t just handed to them; they *choose* to sleep outside and continue abusing alcohol.

Eddie Young pointed out to me that the enthusiasm the participants showed in the workshops was exceptional for them; they didn’t get so excited and engaged about many things. I speculate that the prospect of making changes that many of them long for and daydream about – a safe place to stay where they can get what they need as far as shelter, drinking and bathing water, and can pattern their days as they choose to – is much more interesting to them than the other opportunities that are offered to them. I also wonder if for them, the idea of helping a number of their friends and acquaintances while simultaneously helping themselves is more attractive than one-on-one with a case worker and filling out housing applications. When I sat in on the Knoxville Homeless Collective meeting, every homeless or formerly homeless member in attendance cited a desire to help others as the reason they were involved with the Collective. This was not the only time I saw evidence that they knew something that most adults in the mainstream public don’t even know: that helping others is also self-help and that giving your time and resources to enrich others’ lives makes you *feel good*.²⁵ Additionally, design workshops embody the promise of immanent physical results in the form of new built environments; not even Knoxville Homeless Collective meetings offer that (though they offer a number of other very important opportunities).

The workshops were successful in part because I included the right people – people I had talked to already who I knew would be invested. Additionally, three of them were members of the Homeless Collective, so I knew they were already accustomed to sitting down as a group and discussing for extended periods of time. One tent camper attended in large part because he was interested in becoming an *Amplifier* vendor and wanted to connect with Eddie while he was there. Again, relationship with the street newspaper and Redeeming Hope Ministries was extremely important in getting participants involved. Success was also related to meeting as a group so that the Collective members could embolden the others. They all encouraged each other to feel comfortable speaking. They were successful because a tent city was so fresh and raw in everyone’s minds – bulldozers were out there ripping up their campsites even as we were meeting.

25 I would argue that in spite of legion philosophical and theological musings, *feeling good* is step one to solving most of your own problems. That goes for us all.

REAFFIRMING DESIGN METHODS

The workshops revealed a willingness on the part of the participants to work hard that was thrilling to be part of. It was not just enthusiasm – it was hours of dedicated concentration. It was *inspiring* and exhausting. It showed me that they have creative and analytical energies for which they may have no other outlet. It showed me that producing space was something they were driven to do, not just something I read, described theoretically, in an old book. This was affirming for me as a designer and scholar. Their enthusiasm also showed me that they can perceive and even describe space like a designer can – in part because “the creation of ideas can be less threatening than an interview about practices,” as Jon Kolko pointed out – but also because they actively engage in selecting, dividing, and utilizing space just like designers do (*Wicked Problems*, 106). While most people outside the design professions accept the spaces parceled and handed to them, sitting in uncomfortable chairs, cooking in dark, miserable kitchens, or taking the plunger *yet again* to the shower drain because, well, they’re just old pipes, people experiencing homelessness have to find the corner of the stone wall surrounding the cemetery that is in the lee of the wind. They must find flat land and clear it. They have to appropriate steel beams as shelving and look for spaces where they are protected in back and can see all around them. They have to find an old metal barrel and drag it to their site and locate wood for a fire and make sure they don’t set fire to anything else around them. I have even seen elaborate hearths of stone and brick and metal, structures of fractured limestone and plexiglass, and terraces built into a hillside with railroad ties and old metal signs, holding back earth that sprouted squash and eggplants and peppers and peas. We see boundaries that they do not. They have experience forming the materials around them into the things they need and taking note of what spatial arrangements make them feel safest and most comfortable. They are both especially able and especially willing to participate in design practice.

Additionally, their resourcefulness extended to any problem that arose, not only design problems. When I was struggling to make the projector work, they called out suggestions and helped me move the screen and the projector to get the best image. They helped me carry things and glue things back together when they broke. Their concern to make everything perfect vastly surpassed my own.

Finally, their input in the workshops confirmed the relevance of some concepts designers often use in regards to planning. They mentioned walkability as an important quality for a tent city location, because for them, being able to walk to the places they used frequently was crucial. Access to public

transportation is a necessity, not an option. Making a living space proximal to amenities is not just a LEED credit point; it's a huge part of how they select campsites. They preferred smaller campsites, which resulted in greater density; to them, excess space was wasteful and impractical. They thought about things like how far people should have to walk to a toilet, and they came to a solution that both encouraged safety at night and required people to get up and move away from the social gathering and eating space to use it. Their design considerations were complex and sensible and very similar to what I would consider as a designer.

CHAPTER VII

Conclusions

The conclusions I will present are not a sum of the things I personally take away from this work, for those things are myriad and vary in both degree and kind. Instead, I will visit the things I find most important for other designers to gain from reading this work. First, I find that parts of this process and the methods I used can benefit the design process in general. Engaging in this work has changed the way I view traditional design and will impact my methods in the future. Next, I acknowledge the difficulty of design professionals might have in finding time for this kind of work, and I consider some possible courses of action for *making* the time. I also look to some of the steps that might occur after a design process like this; what would it look like to move into a construction phase with a project that collaborates with the unhoused? Finally, I acknowledge that I have come to understand the typology of the tent city as crucial to a holistic approach to the problem of homelessness. These conclusions are an exploration of possibility rather than a prescription for specific action.

BENEFITS TO THE DESIGN PROCESS

To engage in participatory design, you must construct a path but allow for diversion from it; you must have a plan but be constantly flexible. The methods you use one day may not be the same as the ones you use the next. The lives of the unhoused are inherently unpredictable. But working closely with this group, learning about them, cooperating with them, and discovering the best ways to facilitate and connect can benefit the process we traditionally engage when we design. There are ways that have changed the way I think about designing in *any* situation, not just the opportunities I might find or create for participatory design research. Some of these methods can change how design professionals format their processes as well.

Connecting with someone already involved in homeless empowerment issues was probably the most important and influential difference between this research process and the traditional process. This connection may not be able to replace the empathy and trust a designer can establish by spending time with members of the homeless community she or he might encounter, but interfacing with someone who understands and has deep compassion for the unhoused can answer many questions that we don't have time to figure out for ourselves. This connection can facilitate the participatory design process, as these

individuals can access resources a designer needs to make participatory design successful. While it was important for me to remain in contact with Pastor Eddie Young throughout my research because of his insight and connections, I think it can be beneficial for design professionals to seek out human resources like Eddie in many other design situations. I wonder, even, to what extent designers already do this, either intentionally or in casual conversation. If a designer is working on an office for a pediatric group, for example, she or he could seek out a children's guidance counselor, an elementary school teacher, or a parents' community group to ask questions about what children tend to respond positively to and what spatial configurations and furnishings seem to encourage calm behavior or feelings of safety and comfort. Finding someone who was a sort of "expert" on homelessness concentrated the vast network of information and helped me make more educated decisions in designing the research. This connection benefited my design process and could benefit other professionals seeking to repeat my methods, but I also think designers could forge connections like this to improve how we design for comfort, efficiency, safety, and so on in many other more traditional design settings.

Designers historically generate design ideas and present them formally to clients. The need to impress clients with good design is great; it can mean landing the project or seeing it slip away to another firm. Professionals spend energy cultivating relationships that will result in more business; we must survive. Design students need to impress professors and, later, potential employers. There are power dynamics underneath our designs that we don't talk about but understand perfectly. One of the things I found so enlivening about this design process was that I didn't have it in mind to gain anything from the participants. They weren't grading me and they weren't deciding whether or not they would hire me. We had the liberty to be freely interested in each other without concerning ourselves with unspoken power struggles. The frame of mind I cultivated while talking and working with unhoused people has already filtered into my other interactions. This may seem like too subjective a point to make, but practicing a frame of mind that is both empathic and removed from thoughts of capital value exchange (though capital value exchange is, of course, necessary) can make humility more natural and easy to dwell within. Importantly, an empathic and humble frame of mind subverts conflict by creating an environment of more attentive listening and calmer emotions. This frame of mind can keep conflicts that do arise from escalating. I realize I don't need to get my way because I am in the mindset of seeking others' needs through their participation.

Another significant way the process of participatory design with the unhoused can benefit the traditional design process is that it illuminates inequalities that we may know nothing about. Margaret Crawford points out the rift between individual recognition of responsibility to equality and social justice, and “professional indifference” to such matters (“Socially Responsible” 27). Participatory design practice helps us narrow that gap, and in this kind of situation, it can reveal to us that our professional ethics and individual ethics can align much more closely than we ever believed possible. I have found this to be an interesting line walked between activism and professional practice; facing difficult “wicked” problems pushes us to ask questions about the building professions and the way things are usually done.

USING PROFESSIONAL TIME WISELY

This process took me many months. Even the “condensed version” of my research – the interviews and workshops themselves – took a number of hours. Each workshop represents almost a full business workday. Each interview represents at least two hours invested in getting to the site, finding someone to interview, and actually talking to them. Then there was time spent listening to and transcribing or at least taking notes on recorded interviews and video footage from the workshops. The time it took to cultivate working relationships with the participants, however, was the most “expensive” time investment. I conducted this work as a student, so my only job was this research. I fully recognize that for working professionals, no such luxuries exist. However, there may be ways to create time to devote to participatory design. Design professionals already spend time doing the things I did for this project: studying a site, cultivating new relationships, talking about design decisions with clients, and listening to and interpreting client input. Doing these things in a more challenging setting may not actually take that much extra time. It just takes extra willingness to move outside a comfortable professional atmosphere.

As professionals conduct site analysis, we already take time to observe and document all the issues we find relevant. We may pass off these tasks to others within the office or those working in other specialized fields like soil analysis, but we still become invested in a landscape throughout all phases of a project. We familiarize ourselves with how an elevation change feels on the ground as well as how it looks on a map. We examine the types of trees and how far their crowns spread. We look at traffic patterns and stare endlessly at parking layouts. We walk the perimeter, striding out estimated feet or pulling out the long tape measures. How little extra time might it take to say hello to someone if we come across

unhoused people on a site, sitting on a bench or passing through with their bicycle? We can cultivate relationships gradually so that if and when situations arise, we have a foundation for conversation. Could we schedule two extra meetings so that a client and an unhoused person who frequents a potential site can meet each other and talk about one another's needs? That may be all we need to change a situation from one of eviction to one of compromise.

If a designer wanted to attempt to address a larger-scale problem where multiple campers are using a space that is slated for development, she or he might be able to use pro-bono hours if working for a firm that can budget for community service. Perhaps it seems outrageous to suggest, but couldn't we even use a day's worth of vacation hours to conduct an all-day workshop as part of a bigger project? Could several local firms cooperate on a large project and combine their connective powers to involve city council, the code office, business owners, the police department, and other active community members? Could a firm located near a university engage students in volunteer work? The students might gain some experience working with professionals on a participatory design project, and the professionals would not need to sacrifice as much time to the project. Could a firm even urge employees to contribute a certain number of community service hours and offer a project to design with the homeless community as a way to gain those hours? What about interns fulfilling community service IDP hours? The opportunities could be all around us, if we just meet a few homeless friends and find ourselves set on fire by the force of their existence in the face of adversity, as I have been so set ablaze.

ANALYZING POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS FOR THE DESIGNER

My hope is that this writing will serve as a loose guidebook for professionals who have perhaps encountered homelessness in various ways while conducting business and have asked themselves if there isn't a better way than ignoring, evicting, marginalizing, fearing, or ridiculing human beings in this precarious state. I hope that by describing the ways I have stepped into the lives of the unhoused as a designer, I have shown how we can fulfill our existing role as mediator in a new situation. It is important, then, to emphasize that we need to mediate in design phases that come after preliminary design and programming.

The next step in this process should be drawing policy makers, property owners, business owners, and members of the general public into the discussion. We did determine an acceptable tent city location in the first design workshop, but that was an exercise intended to remain free of constraints to

get the group interested. I wanted it to be outside the realm of the more tricky considerations like who owns land, how a group of urban campers could possibly be allowed to use it, and how the group could become ambassadors in a community to assuage fears and doubts about safety, cleanliness, and so on. By expanding the conversation to include the people who would make these decisions and encounter tent city residents regularly, we can begin asking the relevant questions. The questions might include: what level of public-unhoused interaction is comfortable for everyone? Should such a place be proximal to public space, like a bike path or a city park? Should it be a step removed from the public eye, tucked into a site like where they were living before February 2014? How should it be bounded and secured? And, crucially, who will pay for it and how?

These questions will expose more of the marrow of the role of designer-as-mediator. A design professional trying to move into the next phases of a project like this – design development and then construction documents, building code and fire code approval, and construction administration – would need to think about many of the same things I thought about in the predesign, programming, and schematic design phases. Not only would a designer need to mediate in the traditional way, among code office and fire marshal and engineer and client; she or he would also need to mediate between these groups and the unhoused as well as policy makers and members of the public, especially those in the community in which the final project would be located. The designer might need to facilitate meetings in which these groups could sit together and talk. Designers would have to address the additional challenges of assuaging any fears the community would have about including members of the homeless population as accepted and included citizens.

TENT CITIES AND OTHER UTOPIAS

The community-based design workshops I conducted addressed a particular problem on a particular site. This was a location with high density of unhoused campers and no current development, other than surveys of Second Creek and talk about remediation of that waterway. It was also a location where the group had suffered several evictions, and the most recent one was fresh and raw on the day of the first workshop. Thus, the solution and focus for these workshops was a large-scale tent city program type, answering the immanent concerns of the campers and choosing a program that fit the site activities.

At the conclusion of this part of the research (the part my thesis work covers), I had come to hold the belief that a tent city is a valuable thing. It provides what Eddie Young calls a “waiting room” in the

process of getting housing. It can provide greater freedom and greater security. It can offer resources to make unhoused campsites nicer, cleaner places that improve both the quality of life of those experiencing homelessness and the way the community perceives them and engages them. A tent city, crucially, offers autonomy and empowerment to those whose choices have become severely limited. It also offers the opportunity for a person in a caged life, to whom fragments of space are offered as charity, to produce their own space and embrace the agency and empowerment that can come along with that. I would advocate a push for tent city proposals in many areas of any city in the United States.

However, this is certainly not the only kind of situation a designer might find in a professional scenario, or even the most likely. It may be more common that a few unhoused persons seek shelter in an empty building slated for rehabilitation. Perhaps a smaller group of unhoused campers is using part of a site where a developer is planning new construction, and, during a site feasibility study, an engineer finds the camp in a copse of trees. Maybe a city is planning an infill project where a warehouse burned and was cleared away, but a small group of people experiencing homelessness find shelter there during the day and use the site as a resting place. Maybe a designer attends merchants' association meetings to talk about new development in a commercial area; members of the merchants' association are pushing for anti-panhandling legislation and are making generalized comments about the homeless community without any members of that community being present to discuss it.

In all these cases, pieces of what I have tested and tried might be helpful in creating more equitable solutions. Can we as designers answer a call to exercise our humanity toward people in such marginalized situations? Can we take a closer look at the situation, as I have, in as much detail as we can given the constraints we may work within? Maybe we cannot all spend three months of weekly conversations with the unhoused population we find ourselves confronting. Rex Hohlbein, an architect in Seattle, Washington, gave up his successful practice to start a nonprofit called Facing Homelessness to encourage people in the community to acknowledge and accept unhoused persons as members of the community (Quirksee website. http://www.quirksee.org/2013/12/27/rex_hohlbein_homeless_in_seattle_facing_homelessness/). This is an extreme case, and most of us will not quit our jobs in pursuit of a more just future. Most projects in a thriving architectural practice will likely limit designers' abilities to use community-based design research at all; this is to say nothing of using it to generate solutions that would benefit the unhoused. But even if all we have time for is one conversation with those campers on

the site, those “squatters” in the abandoned building, some of the people the merchants’ association find distasteful – then we have done more than we’re already doing. That one conversation could lead to a different approach. Even if all you say is, “Look, I see that you have a living space here. We’re about to start clearing parts of this site, and construction begins in a month. Do you have any ideas for other places you might go? Can I help you get in touch with a local service that might get you on track for housing? Can we talk to the local law enforcement together and find another temporary location that would not be as problematic?” The response of a marginalized person who is not used to having their needs or opinions considered will likely be surprising and transformative.

And if a designer is able to take more steps, think about the possibilities available. Could a new development include an adjacent area with a simple shed-shelter and street lighting, so the couple who was camping in the trees can still have somewhere to put their sleeping bags and stay out of the rain? Could an area perceived as dangerous be altered, by interviewing a few people living on the site and unearthing if there were real dangers and where? Could we learn how those dangers could be addressed to keep everyone, the unhoused and the public alike, safer? Or even: if an architect is hired to design a new large-scale multi-purpose homeless service facility, could she or he encourage the client to include community-based design in the design process so that the members of the homeless community who would access those services have a say in forming the spaces they would use? How could that change the way shelter systems function?

These are all difficult questions about wicked problems. I do not hope to have answered them, but I hope to have offered a new framework for thinking about them and an example to inspire others to their own courses of action. Everywhere, tent cities and small campsites find purchase on abandoned soils. Human beings in dire straits warm their stiff fingers over trash barrel fires. People like us are uprooted and told to go away, we don’t want you here. Kind folks with heaps of problems are crushed by the weight of knowing that nobody cares to hear what they have to say because they have nothing. As challenging as it has been for me to step into unknown places and sit and get to know people the public tends to avoid, I have been constantly reminded of how much easier it is for me to walk up and say hello to them than it is for them to walk up to a potential employer and ask for a job, having not bathed in several days and having no address or phone number to write on an application. As challenging as it was to walk the site in the cold, asking angry and reluctant people to come with me for a *design workshop*, of all the ridiculous

things, it is infinitely more challenging to lay your head down on a pile of blanket that was snowed on earlier that day and try to go to sleep, knowing that even if you filled out a housing application tomorrow morning, it might be four months of case worker meetings before you actually got into an apartment – of unknown quality in an unknown neighborhood. If I can give them the hopefulness and excitement they have shown throughout this process, if I can even shape a sentence of a new conversation in a city by continuing to engage with this group who so desperately needs people who care - - then why wouldn't I?

I present this not as a recommendation for all design professionals but as a report on my own position and my experiences exploring that position. I have come to see this group of people as a living example of the idea of a society in conflict. They have so many forces working against them every day that I was constantly surprised by their level of involvement and their commitment to pushing the design work further and making real changes. Many of them are ready to take hold of power when they can see a way to it; they already realize their rights and freedoms and long for more ways to make decisions and express those rights and freedoms. It was thrilling for me to have the opportunity to provide a very small outlet for their energies and to wonder how it could change things for them in the future. I am excited to move forward.

Epilogue

Community:

On Christmas Day I visited the site. I brought some photographs I had promised to a couple and a small bundle of firewood. It was cold. They were appreciative and added the wood to the small pile next to their fireplace. They had a fireplace. They had blankets, warm clothes, an axe. As I was leaving, a truck pulled up with a trailer behind it piled with scrap lumber – the kind of stuff used during construction that is too damaged to use again. I assumed it was also for their fires. Because people like me and the driver of that truck know about the camps, we'll think of the residents and supply things they need. We're a community.

Production of Space:

They want to have work to do that they are interested in and can get excited about. Work that could have real results. The production of space. I can see – physically, in the complete change that comes over them – how this work constitutes exactly what Lefebvre was talking about, all the way back to Marx and division of labor vs. total human being. Do any of us want to trudge away at repetitive tasks and never see the real fruit of our work, other than numbers and a dollar sign on our paychecks? Not really. Nobody would choose repetitive low-wage labor as their ultimate goal. It's not this simple, but I can see the lifting of the bonds of the system when I'm in that room with them. They don't have to force themselves to try to do some work. They don't want to take breaks. They plow through it like racehorses out of the starting gate, each trying to surge ahead of the others, eager to contribute, to do hard work, to never stop. To be able to create their own space in this way is plainly, obviously, a total thrill for them. And they can't wait to do it again. That has to mean something. I don't think any of them have jobs for one called-out cause or another, but if they can survive by creating the spaces of their lives, they will do that to the ends of the earth. Just like if I lost everything I'd grow vegetables. In a vacuum, we still want to produce our own space. Lefebvre was right.

What We're Really Talking About:

What I talk about when I talk about this research is joy. What joy is, is times of feeling intimately connected to the world around you and the people in it. I know the solemn, intentional joy of being alone and feeling that connection with clouds and sunlight and plants and pavement, being part of all of that. But what this experience has been so full of is the distracted, unselfconscious joy of feeling connected with other people. What has happened is, I have made friends. I think of them when the weather is bad, and I visit to see if I can help. I dream about some of them at night. They have winked into being in the constellations of people in my life. I've experienced devastation with them, watching them stare around, lost, at the waste of the meager structure they had to their days. I've seen their ability to be human even in that situation, to be so angry and scared yet to be able to step back and say, "I don't hold it against them; they're just doing their job." I don't care who else they are, or what else they are, or whether they could find work if they tried harder, or whether they could get housing if they'd just go to a case worker. I suspend judgment during my time with them, the same way I do for other friends. I don't listen because I have to; I *want* to listen. Laughing at a story they tell me, or shaking my head in disgust at the injustice they are facing, or watching the creases at the corners of their eyes as they smile, reflecting my smile. The gradual process of being

accepted as someone they can talk to, someone they can trust, has thrilled me more and more and more deeply in each instance of contact. I want to be part of their meetings, their informal gatherings. I am hurt if I think I have hurt them. I don't romanticize our relationship or think that I mean the world to them, but I do not take for granted the glory of their recognition. Taking the time to cultivate a relationship so that when you see someone, you smile at each other and greet each other happily, is the most joyous thing we can do with our time. It is not the most productive thing; productivity is also part of this but belongs to another realm. It is not the most economical thing or the most helpful thing (though some may argue that it is). But connecting and being joyful in the bond is the most important thing for a healthy human being to have, of this I am sure. What they have given me over the course of these months of work is not something I can talk about academically. I *hope* for them. I *trust* them. They have changed me so. The feeling I have now approaching a campsite is as night and day with the feeling I had approaching the first time. Hesitation is now confidence. Fear is now excitement. Uncertainty is now command. I know what to say, how to look them in the face and not be so aware of our relative positions in life. If I drive up in my car and they sit on a railroad tie with all their belongings in a backpack beside them, it doesn't matter because our relative positions are pretend, formed by stories we tell about the value of money and of objects. We are adjacent and joined by the only position that is real between two humans: two simultaneously beating hearts, a whole history of experiences that we begin sharing the moment our brains look out through our eyes, meeting. I read once that you know everything you need to know about a person the first moment you look into their eyes, if you are paying attention. It's true, because all you need to know about them is that they are a person and all they need to know about you is that you are one. We know exactly how to acknowledge the light, the soul, whatever you would like to call it, that shines back at us. We pretend not to know in our fear and doubt. Once we have practiced and learned to let the fear and doubt go, all that is left is the joyfulness of transfer, of empathy. I can see your emotions in your eyes. I care about the state of your mind. Once that is in place, everything else falls easily into a natural rhythm and formation. Then if your friend says, "Can I have \$1.50?" and you say, "Yes," and hand them two dollars because you don't have coins and they say, "Make it three," and you say, "No," and they say, "Okay," neither of you have lost anything in the exchange. You have both been honest about what you need and what you are willing. It is as simple as meeting at a coffee shop with an old friend. You might both offer to pay. One of you might offer first and insist. One of you might find yourself short and ask for a favor. We take these small moments in stride because we trust ourselves and we trust our friends. You can understand and use the trust you have in people who don't have a house in the same ways. You are unafraid to say things like, "You need to leave me alone now," or "I have to leave." You are unafraid to admit that you have no cash, and you are unafraid to admit that you do but you need it for something later. You are unafraid to say, "I can't help you with that," or "I think I know someone who could help you out." You're unafraid to hug them or cry or apologize or turn away or do any of the other things people do with one another, because you have become unafraid of your own vulnerability around them – which is really what we're all afraid of. The precariousness of our own position. That their homelessness will negate the legitimacy of our own standing. It doesn't have to. You can have your own life and love it and not give it all away. They understand. They really do.

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