

# Building Futures

## PLANNING TO MITIGATE HOMELESSNESS THROUGH SELF RUN ENCAMPMENTS

Claire E. Mueller. DIY Urbanism: Design of Cities 2012



NICKELVILLE'S FAMOUS FUCHSIA TENTS IN MAGNOLIA'S DAYBREAK STAR INDIAN CULTURAL LEARNING CENTER, 2008.

Nickelsville, a homeless tent city, was founded in Seattle in 2008 in response to the lack of housing and available space for homeless people. Mayor Greg Nickels, for whom the camp is named, issued a statement saying that homeless people are no longer allowed to pitch tents on public property, and the State of Washington quickly followed suit. In Seattle, the One Night Count, a one night tally of all homeless people in the city, found that approximately 3,000 people are camped out on the streets every night. This is not because they do not seek shelter, but because the shelters provided by non-profits and the City of Seattle do not have the capacity to house any more people. A group of the remaining 3,000 homeless citizens wrote a letter to Mayor Nickels requesting that a piece of land be set aside that they would be able to pitch tents in, and no response ever came. After sweeps of the city's parks

began in 2008, Nickelsville began pitching tents in the heavily industrial SODO district, which features many derelict buildings. DIY urbanization is when a group of people decide that an action or activity is necessary or would improve the quality of life in an urban area. Nickelsville is a group of underrepresented people taking action to improve their quality of life in spite of many forces moving against them. Tent Cities were never in Seattle's

*Nickelsville was formed in the SODO industrial district of Seattle, WA.*

*Homeless people and housing activists worked together to form a safe space for homeless people to live.*

*Nickelsville pitched tents in the first official location on September 23, 2008.*

*No drugs, alcohol, or violence is allowed in Nickelsville. Those who do not follow the Code of Conduct are told to leave.*



THE EVICTION NOTICE FOR NICKELVILLE IN 2008.

plan, and yet, the city may end up the better for them.

## Fight for Life

The One Night Count has focused on tallying the number of homeless people to help define whether or not the City's "10 Year Plan to Address Homelessness" is really working. It is also used to apply for funding for Seattle's homeless shelters. The organizers generally stated that the 10 Year Plan must be going well because the numbers of homeless are decreasing in a time of economic decline. John Fox, coordinator of the Seattle Displacement Coalition, says "For every one unit of publicly-funded housing we can produce, gentrification and redevelopment causes the loss of three to four times that number. As long as these conditions prevail, we'll never solve the problem. It's one step forward, and four steps back." As Davis notes in his article, *Fortress Los Angeles: The Militarization of Urban Space*, cities are much more focused on bringing in new capital and maintaining old capital than working on social projects to improve the standard of living or opportunities of the lowest classes. Davis says that Los Angeles was willing to spend far more money moving the entire commercial center of Los Angeles several blocks further from the immigrant heavy old financial district than investing money to improve the neighborhood and decrease crime. In Seattle, the effect is less obvious, but the motivating factors are the same. Statistics have shown that crime rates do not rise due to Nickelsville's presence, according to the Seattle Police Department in the Seattle Times article, *Tent City Doesn't Seem to Affect Crime Rates*. The loss of public housing combined with the continuing problem of foreclosures is expected to increase need for public housing by approximately 155,000 homes, says Fox. The increased need for housing combined with decreasing levels of funding scares many, especially those who face sleeping on streets with drugs, alcohol, and crime. Tent cities like Nickelsville battle this problem by creating a self-sustaining community that provides a space for couples and families that is safe from the fears of the street, and creates a warm community to insulate the cold of homelessness. While the city may not like it, Nickelsville has shown that it can be thrifty, safe, and effective. Members of Nickelsville have continually made statements to the public requesting a permanent location, but the city council does not feel that Nickelsville is positive addition to Seattle. They are a drug-free, alcohol-free, self-run establishment that requires its members follow strict rules regarding participation and respect of the surrounding community. These rules are commitments that members make for the length of their stay, not just while on the Nickelsville site. As noted above, there was no noticeable increase in crime surrounding Nickelsville, and, actually, crime increased after Nickelsville left the areas observed.

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-John Fox

Coordinator of the Seattle Displacement Coalition on the topic of decreasing homeless populations in Seattle.



MEMBERS OF NICKELSVILLE MUST FOLLOW A STRICT CODE OF CONDUCT WHICH INCLUDES NO DRUGS OR ALCOHOL, PARTICIPATING IN SECURITY, CLEANING, AND FOOD DETAIL, AND MUCH MORE. THE COMMUNITY IS SELF RELIANT AND COSTS THE CITY NO MONEY WHAT-SO-EVER.

## Insulating the Problem

In Los Angeles, the city put up such barriers as walls, removal of pedestrian access areas, security guards around entrances, and below grade parking lots so that business men and shoppers do not have to touch the sidewalk before entering their destination. Seattle has not built physical barriers, but rather has threatened arrest, destruction or confiscation of property necessary for camping in illegal areas, and severe fines for homeless people and groups found in illegitimate camping areas. In both places, the once public space where people could come together is becoming a privatized space where only select individuals are allowed to participate. Now that the city has deemed all public space to be illegitimate for camping, there is nowhere that the homeless may go to support themselves. The homeless of Seattle are unfortunately left with nowhere to go, but rather than give up and become alcoholics, drug users, or people reliant on government handouts, the people of Nickelsville have taken their fate into their own hands, because they want a better, safer community to live in.

This plays into the idea of defensible urban centers mentioned by Davis. Davis says that defensible urban centers come from a “fortress effect” which entails building in a way that discourages the underclass to enter or interact with the space. This can be mirror windows so that those on the outside of a building cannot see in, the building of large foreboding entrances with security guards, and all sorts of other architecturally uninviting features. In Seattle, a city with small neighborhoods that tend to have small, local downtown areas, this “defensible urban center” happens in reverse. When the homeless can go to any park to camp or can live on their own in small cities in any part of the city, there is no form of defense for small neighborhoods; however, if the city pushes all of the homeless to stay in homeless shelters located in one area of the city and punishes them for trying to stay in other areas, it can contain them from disrupting other parts of the city. As Sorkin talks about in his article “Variations on a Theme Park”, the idea that a city can hide its true form and adopt a new persona by hiding what it does not like is both ludicrous and expensive. It involves attempting to forget the true problems of a city to create an area within that city that is entirely free of negative influence. David Bloom, one of the founders of the Emergency Service Center in downtown Seattle says “We accept homelessness as a permanent condition at our own peril. Unless we unite to redress this problem with a new human rights movement, our best efforts to eliminate homelessness and to restore a more sustainable economy for everyone will never be enough.” Policies that push the true problems of a city out of sight to create a theme park atmosphere that is attractive to well-off citizens is exactly what he is referring to. Unless the government, communities, and other social bodies recognize the interdependence in a city of one neighborhood on another, policies on homelessness will continue to fail. Insulating a small group of citizens from a problem does not result in any form of resolution. Nickelsville has been working hard to find a resolution, despite having to fight every level of

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*-David Bloom*

*Founder of the Seattle Emergency Service Center on solving the homeless problem*



SCOTT MARROW, A FOUNDER OF NICKELSVILLE, IN THE ORIGINAL LOCATION, LATE 2008.

government to do it. They believe that they have found a better method, and they want it to be acknowledged.

## Future of Tent City

The City says that they will be unveiling a plan for the 2012 fiscal year to combat homelessness, but it does not look like this plan will include any tent city funding. There are laws about how long tent cities are allowed to remain in one location, and who is allowed to host them. One such rule has made it far more difficult for individuals or even non-profits to host tent cities, but because the law's ability to manage the use of religious property is distinctly limited, churches and other religious spaces are still able to host for up to three months at a time. The city has not publically acknowledged that people who live in tent cities like Nickelsville have a higher likelihood of getting on to their feet and staying there than compared to city run shelters, and that the cost to run a tent city for 500 people is significantly less than the cost of running a shelter for 100. Shelters can become breeding grounds for substance abuse and crime. While many shelters have rules regarding what can happen while staying at their location, they cannot in any way govern people's outside activities. As mentioned above, Nickelsville residents must make a pledge to abstain from drugs and alcohol for the length of their stay, rather than only when on the grounds. This is far more beneficial to the individual as well as the community. What Nickelsville has done has been actively fought by every level of government, but they have prevailed and lived to fight on. Their hope is that they can change this city to be a place where if a person gets laid off or loses their home, they need not be found in a homeless shelter, but rather, they can team up with a group of hard working people to find a better life for themselves.

The founders of Nickelsville intended to create a space that allowed the homeless people of Seattle to live and grow out of their poverty as a self-respecting community. They want the homeless of Seattle to be able to live in a situation that affords them opportunities and support in a dignified manner. Considering the progress Nickelsville has made, it is safe to say the founders would be pleased to see what it has become. Although the City continues to refuse funding and a permanent location where they can install plumbing, electricity, and other fixtures that would allow them to live in first world conditions, Mayor Mike McGinn, Seattle's current mayor, announced that he will not seek to have Nickelsville evicted from their current location, which is the derelict lot in which they were founded. After years of mobilizing through community organizations, churches, online social media and word of mouth, they have finally reached their goal of earning a place. The obstacles that they have overcome include city and state government action, disapproval of neighbors and communities, lack of funding, and lack of education among their members. This is a perfect case of DIY Urbanism: a group of people trying to implement an idea that was never planned by City planners, or intended by the City Council. After four long years of fighting, they have succeeded in having their

cause recognized, which may, one day, lead to the legitimization of their mode of living as a solution to homelessness in urban centers.

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John Marrow Picture as well:

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