

OMAHA, NEBRASKA, JUST FEELS MORE LIKE HOME: AN URBAN TRAGEDY  
OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL MIDWEST

by

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Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Spring Semester 2015  
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Omaha, Nebraska, just feels more like home: an urban tragedy of the post-industrial  
Midwest

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy at George Mason University

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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to the downtrodden, the underserved, the forgotten, and oppressed: those poor souls on the receiving end of structural violence.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank the many friends, relatives, supporters and detractors who have made this happen. In particular, thanks to the friends and family who helped me through my divorce. My rescued West Highland Terrier, Halo, who made sure I stayed active and took breaks from the computer. Drs. Simmons, Cobb, and Dale of my committee were of invaluable. Finally, thanks Ashley and Jackie for their front porch, and in addition to all the coffee shops and bars in Omaha, Nebraska and Portland, Oregon that hosted my writing sessions and offered frequent conversations with total strangers interested in this research and topic.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

All But Dissertation .....	ABD
All Terrain Vehicle .....	ATV
American Indian Movement .....	AIM
Business District .....	BID
Chief Executive Officer .....	CEO
Community Supported Agriculture .....	CSA
Disc Jockey .....	DJ
District of Columbia .....	DC
Federal Bureau of Investigation.....	FBI
Fort.....	Ft.
George Mason University .....	GMU
Gross Domestic Product .....	GDP
Heating, Ventilating, and Air Conditioning.....	HVAC
International Workers of the World.....	IWW
Iowa.....	IA
Kansas .....	KS
Keeping North Omaha Safe for Everyone .....	KNOSE
Ku Klux Klan.....	KKK
Latter Day Saints.....	LDS
Leavenworth Neighborhood Association .....	LNA
Legislative Bill.....	LB
Lesbian Gay Bisexual Trans Queer .....	LGBTQ
Los Angeles .....	LA
Master of Social Work.....	MSW
Midtown Neighborhood Alliance .....	MNA
National Public Radio .....	NPR
Natural Resources District .....	NRD
Nebraska Department of Roads .....	NDOR
Neighborhood Conservation/Enhancement .....	NCE
Niggas With Attitude .....	NWA
Non-Governmental Organization.....	NGO
Not In My Backyard .....	NIMBY
North Downtown .....	NoDo
Ohio.....	OH
Omaha Housing Authority .....	OHA
Omaha Together One Community.....	OTOC

Oregon.....	OR
Doctorate of Philosophy .....	PhD
Responsibility to Protect.....	R2P
Sport Utility Vehicle .....	SUV
Television.....	TV
United Nations .....	UN
University of California, Los Angeles .....	UCLA
University of Nebraska Medical Center .....	UNMC
Union Pacific .....	UP
United States .....	US
United States of America .....	USA
Urban Village.....	UV
West Omaha.....	West O
Young Men’s Christian Association .....	YMCA

## **ABSTRACT**

### **OMAHA, NEBRASKA, JUST FEELS MORE LIKE HOME: AN URBAN TRAGEDY OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL MIDWEST**

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George Mason University, 2015

Dissertation Director: Dr. Solon Simmons

This dissertation is an ethnographic exploration of the post-industrial economy of Omaha, Nebraska. It investigates Omaha's consistent high ranking on a number of "Forbes standards" for places to live and the contradiction that it also has one of the worst intergenerational poverty rates, and highest per-capita black homicide rate in the nation. I offer a critique of structural forces, urban development, and typical means of addressing injustice that are related to the social and economic forces within post-industrial capitalism. It is an ethnographic accounting of the social, historical, and political forces that shaped the post-industrial cityscape and follows with theoretical intervention into urban violence. I began with an historical analysis of the social and economic forces that built the city, followed by extensive field observations and interviews. The research findings suggest problems within late-capitalism, and capitalist means of addressing injustice that contribute to the structural and direct violence of the city. I conclude with a

model to address such violence based on empirical observations, capitalist resistance, and basic human needs.

## ACT I: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

"THIS is why I propose that dealing with domestic issues (i.e. the messy milieu in which we find ourselves HERE) is a shit-ton more difficult than working out 'some problem with cows' or some similar situation in which we can assume our positions as unconscious orientalists."<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

This project set out to explore conflicts in the post-industrial urban Midwest (defined generally as the region of the US between the Appalachian Mountains and the cities and towns bordering the Missouri River) as a means to understand the structural and direct violence of the modern (present-time) city as economies, and means of making a living, transition from an industrial basis to something new, a post-industrial economy as defined by Daniel Bell, one that is based on services instead of goods<sup>2</sup>. Through this exploration has come a better understanding of the stories and institutions that generate and mediate the violence of the city.

Additionally, this project seeks to move beyond a sociological or anthropological exploration of the world, it's meaning and structures, into an agenda for action, or, Conflict Resolution. Akin to Karl Marx' classic statement, "Hitherto, philosophers have

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<sup>1</sup> April 10, 2013. \*While discussing Brad Paisley and LL Cool J's "Accidental Racist" song, and our two different styles of relating to the conflict, as well as the ethical and interactional quandaries involved in addressing and issue so close to home.

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society : A Venture in Social Forecasting* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) p. 14.

sought to understand the world; the point, however, is to change it,”<sup>3</sup> Conflict Resolution seeks to change the world as well: It is an agenda driven social science that understands, as did Aldous Huxley, “That men do not learn very much from the lessons of history is the most important of all the lessons that history has to teach”<sup>4</sup> but, Conflict Resolution, does not resign itself fatally to such an observation.

Mediating the realms between exploration, understanding, and action is the method (explored in greater depth in Appendix A). The method hinges upon epistemological questions, a lack of partiality, and the telling of a story: It’s not just the stories we choose to tell, but how we choose to tell those stories that matters. Therefore, it becomes important to assert a voice that is not impartial; the voice used throughout is my own, unless substantiated in quotations.

The use of voice in this way is an important positioning of myself within the conflict, as a partial observer and reflective critic. The use of voice serves to alert the reader to biases of the researcher as participant and intervener in the lives and conflicts of people and city. Voice is additionally important as a mechanism for sharing data and creating a story that will stick with the reader, so that they too may intervene in urban conflicts in their own micropractices.

Finally, the voice contributes to a necessarily messy set of antagonisms throughout. The social world is not a neat and definite space from which data may be extracted; neither should the presentation present a falsity that conflict and social

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<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx, “Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume One,” in *Theses on Feuerbach* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13–15, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Huxley, Aldous. Case of Voluntary Ignorance in *Collected Essays* (1959).



dynamics are simple and clean antagonisms to be defined and ordered. Social noise is as much reality as isolated variables. Further, noise and dissonance are not problems to be isolated, but aspects to be faced and incorporated into knowledge production, and the resolution to conflicts.

The Midwest is generally thought of, when thought of at all, as an agricultural center (America's breadbasket), which is fair considering the vast amount of territory devoted to agriculture and livestock between the Appalachians and the Rockies. However, most of the urban cities in this region developed along industrial paths with key industries that contributed to America's prosperity. However, due to relative geographic isolation, the fly-over states tend to be downplayed in relation to the coastal metropolises. Further, these midwestern cities have been forced to adopt strategies to adapt and cope with displacement of their industrial backbones with certain cities adapting better or worse than others. Regardless of how a city has coped with the changing economic production, there remain systems of violence that manifest in both direct and structural ways.

Within American culture there are particular reasons why midwestern cities may remain so often ignored. Many are embedded within the core mythologies of America that focus on an individual's ability to transcend the situation of their birth by pulling oneself up by their bootstraps (an idea made famous by Horatio Alger and often referred to as the "Bootstrap Myth"), or that America is in some way exceptional and generally able to stand apart from many of the social problems that face the rest of the world (a sort

of embedded "positive psychology" of America). Seymour Martin Lippsett<sup>5</sup> explained that this idea of America has shaped the very ways our country has dealt with domestic and international relations, and while it has taken on new contemporary meanings, it was popularized in the 1930s too after it was coined by Joseph Stalin to explain (criticize) American socialism,<sup>6</sup> and as a general concept is even found in the writing of de Toqueville.<sup>7</sup>

Another reason that the Midwestern cities are often overlooked, which I alluded to earlier, is their geographic proximity to much of America's population (a bicoastal parenthesis) in which the more important cities are considered the most populous cities that are close to other more populated cities (see New York City, Los Angeles, and a historical trend of the top ten most populated US cities).<sup>8</sup> In general, there is a lack of thought and sight on Midwestern cities, thus the direct and structural violence perpetuates, and perhaps entrenches (according to data sources, depending on the metrics used, the Midwest is home to 4-6 of the top ten most dangerous cities in America.<sup>9</sup>)

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<sup>5</sup> "American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword: Seymour Martin Lipset: 9780393316148: Amazon.com: Books," accessed January 2, 2014, p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Terrence McCoy, "How Joseph Stalin Invented 'American Exceptionalism,'" *The Atlantic*, March 15, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2012/03/how-joseph-stalin-invented-american-exceptionalism/254534/>.

<sup>7</sup> De Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America* (1840), Part 2, page 36.

<sup>8</sup> Of the top ten most populated US cities, the Midwest had no representation until the mid 1800s at which point, Cincinnati and St. Louis began to show up. Around the turn of the 1900s, Chicago became increasingly populated and Cincinnati and St. Louis moved off the top then list. While Chicago grew to become the second most populated city in America, its population began to decline as industry moved to the global south. Chicago is now ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>, which has less to do with LA's growth, but Chicago's declining population.

<sup>9</sup> Giuffo, John. *America's Most Dangerous Cities*. Forbes ; Kurzleben, Danielle. *The 11 Most Dangerous US Cities*. US News and World Report

Most attempts made to address the conflicts of the city across the Midwest deal almost exclusively with direct violence with the goal of an urban negative peace. Strategies range from attempted increased regulations on guns<sup>10</sup> in an attempt to curb gun violence, to targeting 'problem' neighborhoods and redeveloping them, removing old and failing infrastructure, clearing out squats, and attempting to inject cash and commerce into an area. The overall efficacy of these projects is tough to measure due to the way populations are displaced, and the non-linear dynamics of social geography. These projects tend to view neighborhoods (and their residents) as problems to be fixed, thus imposing solutions onto a community, rather than viewing the violence as a product of deindustrialization, which has impacted the trajectory of history and dynamics of power within an urban region.

This project was a reimagining of the classic Middletown studies, with a variety of key differences. The Middletown studies were scholarship conducted by Robert and Helen Lynd at the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. They explored America during periods of transition using Muncie, Indiana as a case. The studies also established Muncie in particular (and the Midwest in general) as typical of America and its social trends.<sup>10</sup> Despite the social conflicts portrayed within the Middletown studies, this work, upon reception by the American populace, created an idealized version of America--"a sort of modern pastoralism developed in which the overarching narrative suggested, not just a

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<http://www.usnews.com/news/slideshows/the-11-most-dangerous-us-cities/12>; McIntyre, Douglas A. Ashley C. Allen, Michael B. Sauter, and Charles B. Stockdale. The Atlantic. <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/05/the-10-most-dangerous-cities-in-america/239513/#slide1>

<sup>10</sup> NRA Institute for Legislative Action. "Illinois: Chicago Anti-Gun Laws to be Overhauled Following Passage of State Concealed carry Law" 9/10/13

purity, but a resiliency to the Midwest's community and cultural values. Thus, there is limited need to focus on the Midwest, because as things change, the cultural bonding capital of the Midwest remains in tact. The general assumption, then, is that in the transition to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Midwest remains resilient.

This project examines a particular midwestern city, Omaha, Nebraska. This case was selected for a variety of reasons (explored further in Chapter 2), but in part because it is the city I am most familiar with having been born and raised there, and my wife (now ex) wanted to return home for a few years. In addition to familiarity with the institutions and culture of the city, Omaha has also "successfully" transitioned (in comparison to other more well-known cities such as Detroit or Gary, and with less direct violence than Cincinnati or Chicago) from an industrial economy to something post, in which the economy continued to grow through the "Great Recession" (2008-present).<sup>11</sup> However, in spite of this "success," this transition has left a portion of the population embedded within a system of violence and ultimately removed from the lauded prosperity.

In conducting this project, I brought with me an aesthetic sensitivity that proved useful in ways I was not expecting, and these insights will emerge throughout the analysis. My assumption regarding the importance of aesthetics to a person's environment were both correct and incorrect. While history and cultural traditions contribute to the construction of aesthetic taste, and that this aesthetic taste is a performance of class-consciousness, I was not prepared for the mechanism of alienation and specific ways that

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<sup>11</sup> "Omaha Weathered Recession Better than Any Other U.S. City," *Omaha.com*, accessed February 25, 2013, <http://www.omaha.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130225/NEWS/702259941/1685>.

aesthetics is a performance of class.<sup>12</sup> This relationship is more subtle than expected (which should not have been a surprise) and what it suggests about resolution requires an attitude that the policy community may not find comfortable.

*The Averaged American*, by Sarah Igo presents a critique of Middletown, in which its heavy reliance of statistical data and search for a "typical" or "average" American created a false regime of truth about what it means to be American and the sort of values, ethics and resiliency of community. The critique also points to Middletown's unrepresentative quality of America. As, especially through the presentation and research of that project, it ignored racial and ethnic differences. Thus, the study is perhaps representative of a certain America ignoring that there "must be [at least] two Americas."<sup>13</sup> Igo's critique has its salience, pointing out the limitations of the study as a representation of America. However, while Muncie may not tell us much about America in general, it does explain small midwestern cities, and close-knit industrial settlements in America and the nature of community. Omaha, then can do similar for larger post-industrial cities. Further, regardless of any "typical" nature of the Midwest, it is full of cities that have become iconic American cities (Detroit, Chicago, Kansas City, St. Louis). producing culture and products (Cars, Music, Cereal, Livestock) for the whole of America

This project deviates from the original study in several ways. First, and most obviously, the study takes place in a different location, Muncie, Indiana. Second, this

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<sup>12</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge University Press, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008).

project focuses on a larger Midwestern City (metropolitan population around 900,000). Third, in response to critiques raised by "the Averaged American" I make no claim that Omaha is a typical, average, or normal city. Rather, a city that is in some way representative of American cities (with its own culture and history) that has in a unique way transitioned from one economy to another. Not all cities will have developed from the same historical forces, nor will they find the same path forward after the forces that built them are no longer relevant (e.g. industry). Fourth, that while Omaha is not normal, or typical, it is indicative of the overall social ecology of the United States; most American cities have had to transition from one economic mode to another, and are dealing with similar issues of violence related to this transition, and therefore if Omaha is unable to address this violence it is unlikely that larger less representative cities will do any better. Omaha can tell us something about the resolution (or efforts at the resolution) of conflicts in post-industrial cities. One final way that this study deviates from the original is that there is an overt emphasis on social change, rather than the resiliency demonstrated by *Middletown* (or even its successor *Middletown in Transition*). Much of this change within in the Omaha context is driven by deliberate strategies of "urban development".

Urban development in these cities has undergone much change over the past 60 years. The first local attempts were often to "contain" the problem to parts of town. This was accomplished through the development of certain wealthy suburbs, "cutting off" parts of town through public works projects focused on parks, highways, major

thoroughfares, etc. This Ghettoization of "the problem" was only made worse through riots and fires that occurred in reaction to unaddressed frustrations.

After containment proved a destructive way of addressing "the problem," there have been several attempts at revitalization and urban development schemes. In spite of the money that has been poured into the "problem" neighborhoods, the issue has still not been properly addressed. In fact, in many ways, it has only increased the issue by driving residents from their homes into worse situations than before. New and wealthier residents moved into the newly renovated neighborhoods in a process now referred to as gentrification. Thus, the neighborhood was fixed, but "the problem" was not.

After decades of fairly uncreative approaches to fixing this issue, the conflict has only become further entrenched. The poor, for a variety of historical reasons not fully outlined here, no longer trust the intentions of the wealthy to fix the issue. And the wealthy do not want to support micropractices because "the problem" has become the people and their culture that prevent them from developing.

These past attempts have amounted to an anaestheticization of the urban space in a way consistent with class conflict waged by the wealthy in order to first contain, and then to pacify, or at least to coerce a particular performance from the lowest classes. The performance of alienation in an anaesthetized space is not a malicious act, but because "we", the modern gentry, know what peace looks like: homogenous, uniform, and atomized.

### **Case: Why Omaha**

The urban Midwest is ripe with outliers, cities that are in many ways exceptional and atypical of the American experience. Chicago is one such example, as America's third largest city where the metropolitan population (9.5 million) almost classifies it as a megacity<sup>14</sup> (a city with a population in excess of 10 million).<sup>15</sup> There is also, Detroit, a city synonymous with American industry, in particular the automobile industry; Detroit is also a city that publicly faces some of the worst effects of deindustrialization.<sup>16</sup> Additionally, there are places like Flint, Michigan that the New York Times Magazine dubbed "Murdertown"<sup>17</sup> and Business Insider ranked the "most dangerous city in America".<sup>18</sup> The Midwest has a wide representational spread of the American conflict experience; unfortunately, the cities mentioned are as I said, outliers, and while interesting studies in their own right, are significantly removed from the familiar American experience and risk becoming too alien or abnormal to be representative of conflict, violence, or resolution in the American context.

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<sup>14</sup> "Table 1. Annual Estimates of the Population of Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas: April 1, 2010 to July 1, 2012." U.S. Census Bureau. March 2013. Retrieved December 5, 2013.

<sup>15</sup> "How Big Can Cities Get?" New Scientist Magazine, 17, June 2006, p. 41.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Binelli, "How Detroit Became the World Capital of Staring at Abandoned Old Buildings," *The New York Times*, November 9, 2012, sec. Magazine, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/11/magazine/how-detroit-became-the-world-capital-of-staring-at-abandoned-old-buildings.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Charlie Leduff, "Riding Along With the Cops in Murdertown, U.S.A.," *The New York Times*, April 15, 2011, sec. Magazine, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/17/magazine/mag-17YouRhere-t.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Warner, An, Erin Fuchs and Gus Lubin. "The 25 Most Dangerous Cities in America" Business Insider. 6/13/2013 <http://www.businessinsider.com/most-dangerous-cities-in-america-2013-6#>



Given the diversity of issues and the importance to the American economy it is interesting that the violence of midwestern cities appear to be largely ignored outside of the Robocop franchise of the 1980s and a few Michael Moore films. When the violence does reach the level of National policy on this issue, thanks to groups like the NRA, attempts to ameliorate the direct violence revolves around individual liberties and not the stark reality of structural and cultural violence reflected in the direct violence (homicide rates and violent crimes involving assault weapons and handguns). So too, in the case of Detroit, the recent structural violence that has become policy on the national stage (after filing bankruptcy) has focused on economic initiatives couched within a neoliberal framework that not only blames Unions and workers, but absolves corporations from abandoning a city they built;<sup>19</sup> this policy generally fails to address the human cost of such financial deals (thus seeming to pass on the structural economic injustice to the individual agents). While issues that infringe on individual liberties on hotly contested issues (such as gun ownership), or merely focus on financial and economic issues will be unlikely to solve such violence. They also do little to draw necessary attention to the real problems, local initiatives and community development that are likely avenues of change.

One common thread that runs through the violence and conflicts of the urban Midwest is deindustrialization, when the industries that practically built the cities and economies began to relocate elsewhere. Industrialization was a force that contributed to the growth of many of the cities and economies by creating and maintaining good paying

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<sup>19</sup> “Where Does Detroit’s Bankruptcy Go from Here? Here’s a Road Map to How It May Play out,” *Detroit Free Press*, accessed January 7, 2014, <http://www.freep.com/article/20140101/NEWS01/301010014/Detroit-bankruptcy-end-of-year>.

jobs held by generations of workers.<sup>20</sup> Deindustrialization became a noticeable force in the Midwest during the 1970s, climaxing in the 1980s thanks to the "hypermobility of capital" during that decade.<sup>21</sup> According to the CATO institute, this "myth" of de-Industrialization was a re-balancing of American industry and labor in order to maintain a competitive edge--industry moved from strong union states to "right to work states" where it could find unskilled labor for one quarter the cost.<sup>22</sup> Regardless of the reason for, or the mythology around the shift in American Industry, between 1967 and 2001, the Midwest lost 40% of it's industrial jobs, compared to a 9% national loss.<sup>23</sup> This 40% drop in a particular job sector has undoubtedly had an effect. Particularly since this region, using Daniel Bell's schema<sup>24</sup> progressed from a primarily pre-industrial to a post-industrial economy within 100-year span.

In order to explore what the effects have been, the selection of a case that has experienced broad effects (positive and negative) from industrialization is important. Particularly if the US industrial trend continues on a slow, but steady overall decline, then the rest of the US' industrial regions will eventually be faced with similar issues as the Midwest. Continuing with Daniel Bell, important changes that occur between the industrial and post-industrial shift are 1) Move from manufacturing to services; 2)

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Higgs, "The Growth of Cities in a Midwestern Region, 1870–1900\*," *Journal of Regional Science* 9, no. 3 (1969): 369–75, doi:10.1111/j.1467-9787.1969.tb01350.x.

<sup>21</sup> Highsmith, Andrew R. "Demolition Means Progress: Race, Class, and the Deconstruction of the American Dream in Flint, Michigan." ProQuest (2009) p.22-25.

<sup>22</sup> Branson, William H. "The Myth of De-Industrialization" *AEI Journal on Government and Society*. Sept/Oct 1983 (24-54).

<sup>23</sup> Doyle, Roger. "Deindustrialization: Why American Industry Continues to Decline." *Scientific American*. 5/4/2002.

<sup>24</sup> Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*.

Occupational Changes: rise of professional and technical workers and decline of skilled and semi-skilled workers; 3) Property and Education: A move from primary mode of gaining place and privilege from inheritance/entrepreneurship (starting a business) to education (even in regards to entrepreneurship which requires increasing education); 4) Financial Capital and Human Capital: Move away from money and land towards networks and an understanding of the strength of human society; 5) Technology and intellectual technology: Machines are replaced by computers and computer aided systems built on mathematics and linguistics which require more than a high school education to operate; 6) Infrastructure: Industrial infrastructure was transportation. Post-industrial infrastructure is communication. 7) Knowledge theory of value: Industrial society was built on labor theory of value and valued labor-saving devices; Post-industrial society values knowledge as the source of invention and innovation.<sup>25</sup>

The transition from an industrial to post-industrial economy (according to some local reports) began slightly earlier than other parts of the Midwest when the Union Stockyards began to lose business due to shifting trends in the industry in the 1960s, but didn't completely die off until the late 1990s when both Asarco (1997)<sup>26</sup> and Union Stockyards (1999)<sup>27</sup> closed their doors. Though, it might be argued that the continued operation of Union Pacific Railroad means that Omaha maintains a strong industrial presence, it is also true that much of Union Pacific's work fits alongside the post-

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., xv-xvii.

<sup>26</sup> EPA "ASARCO Omaha Lead Redesignation Plan." ASARCO Omaha Lead Redesignation Plan <http://www.epa.org/Region7/air/rules/nebraska/asarcoplan.htm>

<sup>27</sup> d Use Database "Omaha Stockyards" The Center for Land Use Interpretation <http://clui.org/ludb/site/omaha-stockyards>

industrial economies goals and production. Regardless of how thoroughly the transition has been, it is clear that Omaha's economy is no longer based around industrial production (accounting for only 6.7%), but post-industrial technology (insurance 8.9%, professional services 14.3%, and medical and education services 15.6%).<sup>28</sup>

In many ways, Omaha successfully transitioned to a post-industrial America, maintaining a performance of the fabled American Midwestern city, something like Smallville, KS, or Mayberry, where the American dream still lives. During the recession, unemployment never peaked 5.2% and the cost of living is well below national average.<sup>29</sup> However, if it is a dream of America, it was one written by David Lynch, where just below the harmonious surface inhabited by the majority, there lies a dark and troubled conflict riddled shadow cast by the march of modernity. Furthermore, unlike cities like Detroit, or Flint, you have to either seek out (or be unlucky enough to find) the direct conflicts manifest by the subtler forms of post industrialism, and like most characters within a David Lynch film, you may live your full life willfully ignorant of the conflicts of the city that have plagued generations of largely minority families.

Omaha, like other Midwestern cities, represents all the conflicts of any metropolitan area on the coasts of this country: immigration (both documented and not); refugees from war ravaged nations; evaporated industry; crime; urban decay; drugs; gangs; homicides; and so on. Given the ability for many people to still realize some version of the American dream, across much of the Midwest, coupled with the system

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<sup>28</sup> Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce "Greater Omaha Workforce"  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Site-Selection-Data-Demographics.aspx>

<sup>29</sup> Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce "Greater Omaha Workforce"  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Site-Selection-Data-Demographics.aspx>

and structural conflicts created through the deindustrialization of the workforce, midwestern cities are indicative of stability and robustness the larger American social ecology. This struggle has many facets, but is perhaps most clearly represented through the urban development projects within these cities, since development is an attempt to reimagine "decaying" urban spaces in ways that contribute to local economies, refresh infrastructure, and provide a new face to formerly "neglected" spaces.<sup>30</sup>

Omaha, aside from being the place I was born, raised, and therefore familiar with, performs as a typically 'normal' American city. If thought of, it is not particularly regarded as anything remarkable, but is home to many exceptional things. In general, it is a fairly pacific city, but also contains pockets of extreme violence that have made national coverage. Being composed largely of white multigenerational Midwestern families, it is a portrait of "classic" America represented on black and white television programs, but it is also a popular place to resettle refugees from conflicts around the world, and home to pockets of diversity with black and Latino neighborhoods.

The population of the city of Omaha is just over 400,000 people. However, the Omaha metropolitan area is closer to 900,000 people with an additional 300,000 people within an hours drive.<sup>31</sup> The population is primarily 'White' (approximately 73% of the population), the second largest demographics 'Black' (14%) and 'Latino' (13%) are largely separated out into communities in North Omaha and South Omaha respectively. The

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<sup>30</sup> "Decay" and "neglect" are used in quotations as these labels represent a particular narrative of power within the urban space. Often, it is not that spaces have decayed, or are actually neglected, but merely lacking in access, opportunity, or a formal economy.

<sup>31</sup> Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Site-Selection-Data-Demographics.aspx>

other 'races' are a much smaller proportion of the population and not clustered into racial or ethnic enclaves. The median age of Omaha is 34.9 years, whereas the national average is 37.1 years.<sup>32</sup> Omaha also has an above average educational level of attainment across categories, in part due to the 17 colleges and universities.<sup>33</sup>

The economy of Omaha is also thriving. There are five fortune 500 companies headquartered there, as well as a major military base, Offutt Air force Base.<sup>34</sup> Omaha rivals all but Hartford, Boston and New York as a major US insurance center<sup>35</sup> and surpassed Chicago in meatpacking.<sup>36</sup> In addition to a thriving economy, the cost of living is low,<sup>37</sup> while the median income is above the national average.<sup>38</sup> Finally, Omaha is home to the second richest man in the US, Warren Buffett.<sup>39</sup>

Outside of the middle class-white male "Forbes Magazine" style metrics used to measure how "good" a city is doing, Omaha also has consistently had a thriving artistic and cultural scene; Both music and theater have been central to Omaha's identity.

For nearly 100 years, music from Omaha has been influential in and outside of the city. During the Jazz age, Omaha produced a number of influential acts the Cotton Club

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<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Site-Selection-Data-Education.aspx>

<sup>34</sup> Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Site-Selection-Data-Economy.aspx>

<sup>35</sup> Janet Rose Daly Bednarek, *The Changing Image of the City: Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973* (U of Nebraska Press, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> Frederick C. Luebke, *Nebraska : An Illustrated History* (U of Nebraska Press, 2005).

<sup>37</sup> Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Living-in-Greater-Omaha-Cost-of-Living.aspx>

<sup>38</sup> Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership  
<http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/Site-Selection-Data-Demographics.aspx>

<sup>39</sup> rren E Buffett. <http://www.forbes.com/profile/warren-buffett/>

Boys fronted by Anna Mae Winburn and Lloyd Hunter.<sup>40</sup> Later Jazz artists would include Preston Love, Buddy Miles and Luigi Waites<sup>41</sup> and early rock pioneer Wynonie Harris.<sup>42</sup> Contemporary artists include Mannheim Steamroller and 311. As well as artists affiliated with Saddle Creek Records: Bright Eyes, The Faint, Cursive, Azure Ray, Tilly and the Wall, (referred to as the "Omaha Sound").<sup>43</sup> The most recent addition to Omaha's music is a growing hip hop scene.<sup>44</sup>

Omaha is home to the nation's largest community theater,<sup>45</sup> founded by Marlon Brando's Mother, where Henry Fonda began his career.<sup>46</sup> Fred Astaire also began his career in Omaha, before starring on Broadway.<sup>47</sup> More recently, Nick Nolte<sup>48</sup> grew up in Omaha as did director Alexander Payne, who has used it as the sight for several films (About Schmidt, Citizen Ruth, and Election).<sup>49</sup> Another famous film shot in Omaha is

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<sup>40</sup> Otto, Jesse J. "Contemporaries: Black orchestras in Omaha Before 1950." University of Nebraska at Omaha, 2010

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Yanow, Scott. Jazz Singers: The Ultimate Guide. Backbeat Books, 2005.

<sup>43</sup> Schulte, B. (2003) "The Story of Omaha; Nebraska City Gets a Makeover: Cow Town to Urban Hip," Washington Post, 12/14/03

<sup>44</sup> Mink, R. "UFC Bouts Are Child's Play for Alexander," Washington Post. Retrieved 9/25/08

<sup>45</sup> Omaha Community Playhouse Flyer

[http://www.omahaplayhouse.com/post/sections/about/files/OCP%20Fact%20Sheet\(1\).pdf](http://www.omahaplayhouse.com/post/sections/about/files/OCP%20Fact%20Sheet(1).pdf)

<sup>46</sup> Omaha Community Playhouse <http://www.omahaplayhouse.com/history.aspx>

<sup>47</sup> Fred Astaire [http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorere/artists/?entity\\_id=3690&source\\_type=A](http://www.kennedy-center.org/explorere/artists/?entity_id=3690&source_type=A)

<sup>48</sup> Nick Nolte Comes Home to Omaha <http://www.examiner.com/article/nick-nolte-comes-home-to-omaha>

<sup>49</sup> Alexander Payne Oscar's Patrick Goldstein Descendant <http://www.latimes.blogs.latimes.com/movies/2012/02/alexander-payne-oscars-patric-goldstein-descendants.html>

Boystown, a film about the eponymous landmark in the west of the city.<sup>50</sup> Other famous Americans born in Omaha were Gerald Ford<sup>51</sup> and Malcolm X,<sup>52</sup> leaders of two very different Americas (a theme that will run through this work).

For a city with so much cultural and economic capital, the 43<sup>rd</sup> largest city in the US,<sup>53</sup> Omaha still clearly demonstrates the divide between those that have and those that do not. While the second richest man in America (a man who has achieved this title twice<sup>54</sup>) calls this city home, it also has the eleventh highest poverty rate for African Americans in general<sup>55</sup> and the worst poverty rate for black children with 6 of 10 living below the poverty line. Only one other US metropolitan area has a larger economic disparity between black and white residents, Minneapolis.<sup>56</sup> According to experts, there are several factors that contribute to poverty: segregation, single parent households, and education. According to two Harvard studies, using different methods of measurement, Omaha is the 40<sup>th</sup> or 45<sup>th</sup> most racially segregated city in the US.<sup>57</sup> These studies state that segregation contributes to poverty by making communities feel isolated from employment centers and the social networks that provide avenues to better paying jobs.<sup>58</sup> Furthermore, this segregation compounds problems by increasing the likelihood that

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<sup>50</sup> Filmed in Nebraska <http://www.neded.org/filmed-in-nebraska>

<sup>51</sup> Ford's Birth Site <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/sites/ford/index.html>

<sup>52</sup> Malcolm X Foundation <http://www.malcolmxfoundation.org/MXMF/Welcome.html>

<sup>53</sup> untitled. <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0108477>

<sup>54</sup> Loomis, Carol J. "Warren Buffett gives away his fortune" Fortune Magazine 6/25/06

<sup>55</sup> Cordes, Henry J. Epidemic Poverty, Violence. Omaha World Herald 2/21/2010  
<http://www.omaha.com/article/20100221/NEWS01/702219915>

<sup>56</sup> Cordes, Henry, Cindy Gonzalez, and Erin Grace. Omaha in Black and White: Poverty Amidst Prosperity 1/6/2011

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> *ibid.*



children will attend schools with a higher concentration of low-achieving students.<sup>59</sup> Omaha's dropout rate for blacks is at more than 50 per cent.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, Omaha has the 11<sup>th</sup> highest percentage of single parent households, and a Harvard study found that single-parent homes are three times more likely to fall below the poverty line.<sup>61</sup> While, Omaha is not as well known for black poverty as other cities (take for example, New Orleans, St. Louis and Detroit) these cities also have a much higher percentage of blacks in other income brackets.<sup>62</sup>

Poverty is not the only issue facing blacks in Omaha. Violent Crime is also a problem. While Omaha's crime rate has been on a downward trend,<sup>63</sup> its overall rate is still above the national average<sup>64</sup> and concentrated in the black neighborhoods.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps more importantly, as we'll see in later chapters, the perception of violence has not generally decreased, nor has the feeling of security increased. While blacks represent only 14 per cent of Omaha's population, 55.5% of all homicide victims were black.<sup>66</sup> In Omaha, black residents were about 18 times more likely to be victims of homicides, while nationally, that averaged chance was 7 times.<sup>67</sup>

This neighborhood is also the 17th most violent neighborhood in the United States.<sup>68</sup> Additionally, Nebraska (in general) is 3<sup>rd</sup> in "per-capita black homicide[s]" with

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<sup>59</sup> Epidemic Poverty, Violence

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Omaha in Black and White: Poverty Amidst Prosperity

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Crime Statistics <http://www.opd.ci.omaha.com.ne.us/crime-information/crime-statistics>

<sup>64</sup> Crime Rate Report. <http://www.cityrating.com/crime-statistics/nebraska/omaha.html>

<sup>65</sup> Crime Map. <http://www.spotcrime.com/ne/omaha>

<sup>66</sup> Epidemic Poverty, Violence.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

Pennsylvania and Missouri as first and second.<sup>68</sup> Nebraska's black homicide rate is 65 percent above the national rate.<sup>69</sup>

Related to this homicide rate is gang violence. The Gangs of Omaha have recently made national news through a Huffington Post article about the rise of Sudanese gangs.<sup>70</sup> And, local controversy has risen over a recent gang violence report conducted by the University of Nebraska Omaha.<sup>71</sup> The report, while acknowledging the city's problems with gang violence, stated that the problem had less to do with the amount of gangs, or frequency of activity, but the relationship between citizens in gang territory and the police and city.<sup>72</sup> According to the FBI, there are 21 gangs in Nebraska (including MS-13, 18<sup>th</sup> Street, and Crips,<sup>73</sup>). However, this is misleading as elsewhere in that report they mention gangs in Omaha not on their Nebraska list. According to the Omaha Police Department, there are 80 gangs in Omaha, with an average rise in gang membership of

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<sup>68</sup> Paulson, Scott. United States Most Dangerous Neighborhoods. Examiner 8/13/14. - neighborhoods-2014-top-25

<sup>69</sup> Epidemic Poverty, Violence

<sup>70</sup> Sudanese Refugees in Omaha Struggle with the Rise of Street Gangs. Huffington Post. 12/23/2011 [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/23/sudan-sudanese-refugees-omaha-nebraska\\_n\\_1165709.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/23/sudan-sudanese-refugees-omaha-nebraska_n_1165709.html)

<sup>71</sup> KETV News "Gang study delivers scathing assessment of violence in Omaha" 6/10/2012 <http://www.ketv.com/news/local-news/Gang-study-delivers-scathing-assessment-of-violence-in-Omaha/-/9674510/15460376/-/13p51b9/-/index.html>

<sup>72</sup> Simi, Pete and Dennis Hoffman. "2011-2012 Gang Assessment" University of Nebraska Omaha School of Criminology and Criminal Justice.

<sup>73</sup> 2011 National Gang Threat Assessment <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/2011-national-gang-threat-assessment/2011%20national%20gang%20Threat%20Assessment%20%20Emerging%20Trends.pdf>

10% annually.<sup>74</sup> Omaha's gang activity began in the early 80s coinciding with large-scale deindustrialization in North Omaha, and has continued to flourish in this shadow.

While this is an admittedly brief overview, it does demonstrate how the interesting mix of urban conflicts that face the US are also present in Omaha to an unexpected level given its absence from the national discourse and the number of “standard of living” lists<sup>75</sup> Omaha is on (23 National lists in 2013). These national “livability” rankings reflect that mythic America and the promise of prosperity that seems to have faded into dreamtime. Additionally, Omaha's prosperity represents the many positive characteristics of the midwestern cities, with a hint towards the darker shadows that are clearly evident in cities like Detroit and Flint. Omaha demonstrates how in the midst of peacefulness and economic wellbeing in America that seems to support the theories of liberal peace building and neoliberal intervention, there is also the creation of extreme and inter-generational poverty and violence. During a long running recession and decades long progressive decline in our ability to attain the American dream, perhaps it is here that there is still hope for what America could be.

## **Construction of the Study**

This study begins as a reimagination of the classic Middletown studies. The first Middletown study was conducted in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Muncie, Indiana, a Midwestern city experiencing the forces of industrialization on its community fabric.

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<sup>74</sup> 2011 Reported Crime Comparison. Omaha Police Department. P. 18.

<sup>75</sup> Greater Omaha Economic Development Partnership “Look Who’s Talking About Omaha” Greater Omaha Chamber of Commerce  
[http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/News\\_Center-Recent\\_Rankings.aspx](http://www.selectgreateromaha.com/News_Center-Recent_Rankings.aspx)

Since this first study, there was a second major study decades later that suggested that in spite of massive changes to the mode of production within the community, social bonds and relationships were remarkably robust, and could be summed up as "the more things change, the more they stay the same." This classic study spawned a whole host of consumer studies, and the city has remained in the spotlight of the American experience. Instead of repeating this study, or continuing the work done on Muncie, I have looked at another time and place: post-industrial Omaha, Nebraska, rather than early-industrial Muncie, Indiana. The most profound contribution the original Middletown study has made to the project is thematic clusters that featured prominently in the original construction: Working, Home and Family, Youth, Leisure Time, Religious Activities, and Government and Community. Like most modern cities, Omaha has a diversity of means within each of these categories; and these means have changed over time. These clusters will factor in as a narrative element within the work, but not in the exact method as the original study.

Much like the original Muncie study, I will focus my research on a segment of the city. A segment in between the formerly industrialized sectors of the city, and between the downtown entertainment district and the suburban sprawl. This site, known as "Midtown" is an historically marginalized sector of the city that until recently was home to lower income and more transient populations that were less mobile than other sectors of the city. It was a space where many of the forms of violence overlapped, but did not necessarily exist in the most extreme forms. Recently this space has undergone transformation into an attempted entertainment district and space for upper-middle class

and wealth individuals to call home. In part, this follows a national trend of "revitalizing" the urban core of a city, and in part it is a reflection of the fact that there are three of five Fortune 500 companies that are headquartered here. In fact, Mutual of Omaha was the prime motivator behind this transformation sinking hundreds of millions of dollars into altering their corporate backyard. As I will explore later, they were not the only actors involved, but the ones with the most skin in the game.

In this study, I have opted for a free form interview where I discuss the project with members of the Omaha community that live, work, or engage in the particular subregion of the city known as Midtown. Participants ranged from corporate executives, to unhoused and displaced persons, and long-time residents. While participants had the option of agreeing to be recorded or not, I found early on that the recorder made people uneasy and did not contribute greatly to the data collection. Additionally, the participants' stories were recorded without a means to identify them as an individual. Eventually, the stories from 91 interviews ranging from 30 minutes to 2 hours in length gathered into saturated archetypes and each interview and response to questions became predictable.

Within these interviews, the themes from Middletown (Working, Home and Family, Youth, Leisure Time, Religious Activities, and Government and Community) were expressed, usually with limited prodding. However, in contrast with the Middletown studies, these did not appear always to be the most salient components of narrative about the city and life there; yet these themes helped to anchor the interviews and prevent them from going too far astray, but given the organic way that they came out in interviews suggests that these are themes central to the American experience, if not dominant

components to post-industrial conflicts. In addition to the themes from Middletown, another theme surfaced early on: Two Americas. The theme of two Americas is not only a reference to de Tocqueville,<sup>76</sup> but also aligns with "the processes of colonization, resistance, conflict, and negotiation" as they are "operative in many other diverse and changing" areas of the city which Janet Abu-Lughod discusses.<sup>77</sup> Whether the idea of two Americas is central to the American experience (as the early reference to de Toqueville<sup>78</sup> might suggest) or whether this relates particularly to the project and its focus on violence and urban development projects (as might be inferred from Abu-Lughod) will be address later. Regardless, this too became a central theme around which this project was constructed.

The two America's will structure the discussion and analysis in this project, within this framework, the original Middletown themes will be discussed. Working comes across not just in what types of jobs people have (situated within a personal and institutional history), but perceptions around opportunity, access, and the lived experience of what low-unemployment is. The stories of home and family relate to the changing dynamics of home and family life that reflect a changing economy, perceptions on what the home and family ought to be, and geographic importance of home within the city. Narratives on the youth in this city will reflect various class dynamics and conflicts within the city, and how people understand the effect of various conflicts within the post-industrial economy have on children. The stories around leisure explore the changing

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<sup>76</sup> de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, part 2, p. 36.

<sup>77</sup> Janet L Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village : The Battle for New York's Lower East Side* (Oxford, UK; Cambridge, USA: Blackwell, 1994) pp 349-350.

<sup>78</sup> de Tocqueville, Alexis. *Democracy in America*, part 2, p. 36.

activities of leisure, way certain forms of leisure contribute to a breakdown in the community, reconstruct community, and desire for 'zones' where leisure takes place effects neighborhoods and persons living within the city. Religious narratives play a large role in the cycle of violence, but in a far more problematic way than I had expected, and were in fact a surprise to the authors of the stories as they were told. Additionally, the religious narratives were rife with their own internal struggles and conflicts over activity/engagement within the city. The role of the government and community also play a problematic role depending on the archetypal narratives and what those categories of actors wished to see, as well as elected officials' beliefs about the role of government or the desires of constituents; a city in the midst of a very red state, the city itself trends democratic but moneyed interests dominantly oppose this.

Across all of these themes, in contrast to how the Middletown studies present an ethnographic present that could be tersely (and unfairly) summed up as "the more things change the more they stay the same", I will present an historical accounting in part borrowed from Abu-Lughod in which the "ethnographic present" whose "truncated" history provides a plotline of neighborhoods that are being "attacked and destroyed by outside forces" is rejected in favor of a discourse in which spaces and neighborhoods within a city are constantly changing, do "not occur capriciously," and the change happens upon already existing social dynamics of a space, or not "tabula rasa."<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village* pp. 349-350.

## **A Brief History: History and why history matters to the construction of Space**

"First, almost all conflicts of any significant nature are affected and informed deeply by either immediate or long-term history".<sup>80</sup> Barbara Tint makes this point in her article History Memory and Intractable Conflicts as part of her argument for not merely accepting the 'facts on the ground' and that the present state of things is not an objective reality, rather that there is a trajectory to the lived experience of those facts which make them an objective reality. This experience is termed 'embodiment', a "fancy word for a simple idea: we carry our experiences with us".<sup>81</sup> Shamus Khan discusses this in his book Privilege, stating that "Our time in the world becomes imprinted on our bodies themselves." And, while Khan was focused on the way history (and time) in elite spaces matter, because of the way they shape and create a natural performances in the body of exclusion, the effect of history and time on the body is a universal factor for both the bodily experience of individuals but also the construction of our built environment.<sup>82</sup> Simply, the mass performances in history inform the design of our built environment, and the geography of our built environment influence the physical performances of our being. Walter Benjamin wrote about this when he made aware that "shopping spaces are not just important ways of seeing – with epistemological implications--but ways of being in the city, with great suggestiveness for the formation of identity. It is not simply that they are central spaces for being-in-society, but that the forms and sites and the very experience of

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<sup>80</sup> Barbara Tint, "History, Memory and Intractable Conflict," *Conflict Resolution Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2010): 239–56.

<sup>81</sup> Shamus Rahman Khan, *Privilege: The Making of an Adolescent Elite at St. Paul's School*, Princeton Studies in Cultural Sociology (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2011) p. 196.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197



shopping they engender are part and parcel of what makes groups different."<sup>83</sup> Dennis Judd, stressed the importance of the built environment in his chapter titled "Theorizing the City" in "The City Revisited" where he discusses the impact of globalization on cities reflects "the preexisting legacies of the built environment and the traditions of governance." As a result the effects of the global economy and transitions from mode of production within a city can only be understood by understanding history and the historical impact on the construction of built space that makes city unique.<sup>84</sup>

In regards to history and regional change, scholars from the Chicago School of urban theory were highly attuned to "the global, transnational, and regional nature of urban change." The theorists stated that modern capitalism had "Loosened the transborder flows of people to congregate in the major metropolitan areas that were the driving force behind the emerging global economy." Thus, the dynamism and character of a city were shaped by "natural features" of geography and economic activities (e.g. Coal, agriculture, livestock), "political institutions", but the primary drivers were the individual "actions and strategies"; "succeeding groups would compete against each other within these metropolitan realms for space or place, material gain, and favored positions in the cultural mainstream. They would assimilate into the larger economic, cultural, and political systems, but the stages and trajectories of their assimilation would be framed by opportunity structures that themselves reflected the successes and failures of prior groups

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<sup>83</sup> Sharon Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, 1st ed. (Blackwell Publishers, 1996) p. 253.

<sup>84</sup> Judd, Dennis R. "Theorizing the City" in *The City, Revisited: Urban Theory from Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) p. 12.

seeking to establish themselves within the urban realm."<sup>85</sup> In addition to assimilation, this competition would also exclude those that the dominant group would not allow entry, or viewed as threatening. The four dimensions of difference that interact to create particular a urban character are (1) the importance of city government and urban politics in shaping the quality of everyday life, (2) the impact of density on the vitality of neighborhood life and local public spaces, (3) the impact of immigration, and (4) the political dynamic of regionalism.<sup>86</sup> These dimensions were important for the Lynds in Middletown, and will be discussed in that context.

Focused on the economic mode of production and the shape of urbanism, Guy Debord wrote about the way in which capitalist economics must "remake the totality of space into its own setting" because urbanism is "capitalism's seizure of the natural and human environment" that develops "logically into absolute domination."<sup>87</sup> Thus, through this domination, the urban landscape and social conflicts were managed structurally ("frozen") "in Hegelian terms as the absolute predominance of 'the peaceful coexistence of space' over the 'restless becoming in the passage of time.'"<sup>88</sup> Debord argues that "all the technical forces of capitalism must be understood as tools for making separations,"<sup>89</sup> and these separations are manifest as structural devices due to the absolute domination of

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<sup>85</sup> Mollenkopf, John Hull. "School is Out: The Case of New York" in *The City, Revisited: Urban Theory from Chicago, Los Angeles, and New York* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011) p. 12.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., pp. 178-179

<sup>87</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, revised ed. ([S.l.]: [s.n.], 1977) p. 169.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., p. 170

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., p. 171

space and desire for 'peaceful' coexistence. Urbanism, which manifests itself in the built environment of the city is

"the modern fulfillment of the uninterrupted task which safeguards class power: the preservation of the atomization of workers who had been dangerously brought together by urban conditions of production. The constant struggle that had to be waged against every possible form of their coming together discovers its favored field in urbanism. After the French Revolution, the efforts of all established powers to increase the means of maintaining order in the streets finally culminates in the suppression of the street." <sup>90</sup>

As I will discuss more in the analysis segments, the suppression of the street grows to include suppression of all public space. In particular urban redevelopment projects and marketplaces that seek to reclaim once 'forgotten' spaces. In particular as the economy has transitioned to a post-industrial economy, "the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control," <sup>91</sup> However, as humanity cannot live an isolated existence, there

"must also include a controlled reintegration of workers depending on the needs of production and consumption that can be planned. Integration into the system requires that isolated individuals be recaptured and isolated together: factories and halls of culture, tourist resorts and housing developments are expressly organized to serve this pseudo-community that follows the isolated individual right into the family cell." <sup>92</sup>

Perhaps this is particularly true in the absence of factory settings in a world where work is increasingly individual and isolated.

"In Hegel, the 'cunning of reason' was the evolution of man's self-consciousness--the end of the mystery of 'objectification' wherein men made things, idols, gods, societies 'outside' of themselves, and often worshipped them as fetishes--so that,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., p. 172

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p.172 Debord quoting Lewis Mumford "The City in History"

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. p. 172

finally, he could 'recognize himself in a world he has himself made. Thus the end of history--the overcoming of nature, and the overcoming of the duality of subject and object which divided the 'self'--was the beginning of freedom, of impulses of individual and social action that would no longer be subject to any determinism."<sup>93</sup>

This paragraph by Daniel Bell in his book "The Coming Post-Industrial Society" depicts a flattening of society and flourishing of the individual that happened under enlightenment, and that the idea of an end of history has erased the effects of nature or any sort of determinism. Regardless of whether this is true, and I have argued previously that it is not, the belief in its truth has a powerful effect on society; particularly among the elites in the business community (as we shall see later on). "[T]he ends have become simply efficiency and output. The ends have become means and they exist in themselves."<sup>94</sup> Bell asserts that this 'technocratic' mode of thought will spread throughout our society, and I will demonstrate how this mode of thought, particularly dominant within the business elite is insufficient to address intractable conflicts within the urban landscape. Moreover, that history has not ended regardless of the technocratic logic, but that the laws of society still flow from history.

The laws by which society develops are not predestined, they flow toward no set scheme. Flowing always from the matter of history, from the motion of society itself, they change with every turn in this essential substratum. The profound intervention in the civilization base of human life signified by the scientific and technological revolution in its entirety--viewing it in its intrinsic correlation with the whole complex of social

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<sup>93</sup> Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, p. 334.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., p. 335

revolution of our day--cannot fail to impinge on the elementary laws of history. In many respects the course of civilization acquires a new logic and time scale.<sup>95</sup>

### **Act I Concluding Comments**

Interestingly, the initial research on this case speaks primarily about conflict between the northern section of the city and the middle section of the city. There has been limited discussion so far, except for early 20<sup>th</sup> century immigrant populations on the southern section of the city, despite the well known presence of Latin American gangs and economic problems related to Latin American Immigrants and dominant US attitudes toward this group. The data collected from interviews provide some context and nuance for this, in some ways confirming the initial research, but also problematizing the seemingly clear distinction. Furthermore, there has been very little mentioned in regards to conflicts of the western suburbs and the city; this will be explained through the relational dynamics and the narratives gathered from people living in the core of the city as well as suburbanites who work in the cities core.

Before I move on to the next segments and analysis, I will briefly address my initial hypotheses, or assumptions regarding urban space and conflict, which were: Aesthetics; Class; Politics; and Economics.

My first hypothesis, aesthetics, assumed that there is an aesthetic praxis at work in community spaces, such as neighborhoods. Furthermore, that this aesthetic is a practice derived from history and culture--therefore, any attempt to resolve, manage, or alter conflict dynamics ought to do so with an aesthetic sensibility that is neither anaesthetic,

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<sup>95</sup> Karl Marx and Ben Fowkes, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1990) p. 210.

or alien. Aesthetics were often a big sticking point to the people I talked to, both those who were 'renovating' and those who lived in spaces labeled for 'renovation'. Aesthetics seemed important, but not in the way I had initially assumed: while aesthetics matters in uptake and creation, it is only a contributing factor to the graveyard of many urban development programs that has been the application of a middle-class suburban aesthetic upon an urban poor neighborhood in an attempt to anaesthetize the conflict, but ends up alienated the residents. The particular aesthetic interpretations will be explored through the analysis.

Related to my aesthetic assumption, is a theory on class. This class theory is borrowed from the ethnoconflict/ethnopraxis theory developed by Judith Messier in her dissertation. The basic assumption here is that America is composed of multiple classes based on culture, income and geography; that these classes have different ethnopraxes that drive and resolve conflicts. Furthermore, Messier first asserts that most of American Conflict Resolution is developed from an urban/sub-urban middle-class ethnopraxis in which the focus is on rights, law, property, contracts, etc., etc. Second, Messier suggests that not only are the concepts of rights, property, law, and so forth not universal in American conflict, for most of America's classes, they may not even matter, and the attempt to resolve conflicts from other classes with an urban/suburban middle-class ethnopraxis does more harm than good.<sup>96</sup> This assumption on class and ethnopraxis

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<sup>96</sup> Judith Messier. *Conflict in the Klamath Watershed and a Relationship Building Framework for Conflict Transformation*. Chapter Three: Matrix of Customary American Conflict Resolution Practice. P. 80-83.

becomes increasingly important when I explore the resistance/resolution to urban conflict.

A third hypothesis is that politics determines the conflicts that are addressed within the city and how they are addressed. Cities will tend to deal with conflicts in a way that satisfies the majority of their constituents, rather than in a way that directly addresses the needs of the community subset of the city directly affected by a conflict. This is directly related to the second hypothesis on American class ethnopraxis in that much of the cities constituents will be urban/suburban middle-class, and therefore share the resolution praxis at odds with communities directly affected by (at least certain forms of) conflict. Moreover, and related to the final assumption, the constituents that are more important are those who have the most dollars to spend and contribute to particular metrics that prove a cities value.

The final hypothesis is about the political economy of class aesthetics. First, that economics drive development and resolution of urban conflicts, and not in a necessarily productive way. Second, economic concerns are the superficial layer of a conflict. Third, the economic interests of resolution are not based on the needs of the community, rather the economic metrics that favor a particular class of American citizens; this class may or may not be the most elite class of people, but it is concerned much with the lowest socioeconomic class. The economic resolution of conflicts will promote particular metrics favorable to city government and that is productive to particular classes of the citizens, but does little to address the root causes of, or the actual, conflict. This economic focus was particularly salient in the interviews across class and region in the city.

## ACT II: ONE DIMENSIONAL LIVING

### **Doxology of late capitalism**

This local history meets up with a global history and the legacy of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union in which capitalism claimed triumph over communism, and in effect became the only game in town. This in turn had an effect that those in power who had won the struggle began to believe that a capitalist market based solution was the answer to all social problems. Alternatives to this slowly lost ground, and as such today when politicians and elites discuss successful transformations of the inner urban city, the prevailing ideology focuses discussions around revenue, property values, and general economic increases. This approach seems to echo the beliefs of the early Chicago School's belief about the globalization, local economies, and the structuring of cities.<sup>97</sup>

The typical redevelopment scenario as told by "Cities and Society" is thus:

In the past 30 years almost all the major metropolitan areas of advanced capitalist world have been affected by changes in the national and international economic system such that they have either attracted a surge of capital and well-to-do people or suffered from disinvestment and population withdrawal. In both advancing and declining cities, growth has been a contested issue, and group have mobilized to affect population and capital flows, either to limit or attract development. Within the United States business groups, usually in concert with political leaders, have promoted growth and tried to impose their objectives within the context to elite coalitions, of which Pittsburgh's Allegheny Conference is the prototype. Urban movements, driven by equity, preservationist, and environmental concerns, have opposed subsidized downtown redevelopment and unregulated profit-driven expansion. They have also, although less frequently, promoted alternative plans for neighborhood redevelopment. The outcomes of

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<sup>97</sup> Mollenkopf, "Cities and Society" in *The City, Revisited*, p. 172.



these contests have varied. Regardless, however, of whether the result has been growth or decline, greater or less equity, deal making on a project-by-project basis rather than comprehensive planning has been the main vehicle for determine the uses of space.<sup>98</sup>

This myopically capitalist and market based approach by those in power was part of the critique advanced by Herbert Marcuse in "One Dimensional Man" in which structures of society are created to discourage criticism and to create oppressive and totalizing systems that have a surface appearance of flatness (elites appear as middle class) and certain forms of deviance get folded into dominant culture.<sup>99</sup> This appearance of a flattened society is something that Shamus Khan noted in his book "Privilege" as well as the shifting sources of income for American elites from factory ownership to high income employment:

"It is enormously important that today the rich explain their position by the work they do, not the capital they have or the inheritance of their positions. The difference between "us" and "them" is not as it used to be--founded in the ownership of factories versus working in those factories. Instead, the elite seem themselves as just like everyone else: getting up in the morning and going to work for their paychecks.<sup>100</sup>

As Daniel Bell discussed in "The Coming Post-Industrial Society" "the modern business corporation has lost many of the historic features of traditional capitalism, yet it has, for lack of a new rationale, retained the old ideology--and finds itself trapped by it."<sup>101</sup> What Counts is "not ownership, but authority" and the "legal ownership of the

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<sup>98</sup> Nancy Kleniewski, *Cities and Society* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub., 2005) p. 171.

<sup>99</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991).

<sup>100</sup> Khan, *Privilege*, p. 34.

<sup>101</sup> Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, p. 293.

means of production" has diminished overtime,<sup>102</sup> thus increasingly each citizen is seen as (and sees themselves as a wage earner). Quoting Gorz, Bell asserts that "a piece of work which is "good" only to the degree that it is profitable in the short run. They discover that long-range research, creative work on the original problems, and the love of workmanship are incompatible with the criteria of capitalist profitability" and that this relationship extends into all aspects of their lives "because those who hold power over big industry also hold power over the State, the society, the region, the city, the university--over each individual's future."<sup>103</sup>

As I explore the relationship between the post-industrial economy I will engage directly in Marx' second schema that focuses on three structural activities: First, a banking system not premised on thrift and individual savings, but on "the savings of society as a whole"; Second, the corporation which separated management from ownership; and Third, the expansion of banking and credit that facilitated the growth of white-collar work.<sup>104</sup> This section will explore the growth of white-collar actors in the urban environment and the power given to them to effect change by the corporate-financial system.

In the late 60s, French author, filmmaker, theorist, and social critic, Guy Debord published "Society of the Spectacle" in which he criticizes the production of life under an advanced capitalist framework. Debord suggests that the this means of production, which I would argue has only grown with the rise of a post-industrial model, is a "material

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 51.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-151

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., pp. 59-60

reconstruction of religious illusion" that is the "technical realization of the exile of human powers into a beyond; it is a separation perfected within the interior man."<sup>105</sup> Society has become what he calls "the spectacle" which is an unreality existing instead of reality--that we have altered our existence to serve the means of production and reproduce this system.<sup>106</sup> He asserts that this unreality, the spectacle, is "capital to such a degree of accumulation that it becomes an image" and what we think of as society and freedom is really an "unreal unity and unfreedom".<sup>107</sup> Essentially, unreal unity is that which masks class division in the city, and all forms of participation within the system are in reality forms of alienation and division, producing greater hierarchy, exploitation, and reinforces structural<sup>108</sup> violence.<sup>109</sup> Further, Debord posits that within the city, capitalism now "must remake the totality of space into its own setting."<sup>110</sup> This need is satisfied by freezing life as "the absolute predominance of 'the peaceful coexistence of space' over the 'restless becoming in the passage of time'<sup>111</sup> requires separation of space from history. This observation by Debord encapsulates modern approaches to urban renewal which continues "the uninterrupted task which safeguards class power: the preservation of the atomization of workers who had been dangerously brought together by urban conditions of production." <sup>112</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

<sup>108</sup> Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6, no. 3 (1969): 167–91.

<sup>109</sup> Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, p. 72.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., p. 169

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., p. 170

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., p. 172

After the French Revolution, the efforts of all established powers to increase the means of maintaining order in the streets finally culminates in the suppression of the street. "With the present means of long-distance mass communication, sprawling isolation has proved an even more effective method of keeping a population under control," says Lewis Mumford in *The City in History*, describing "henceforth a one-way world." But the general movement of isolation, which is the reality of urbanism, must also include a controlled reintegration of workers depending on the needs of production and consumption that can be planned. Integration into the system requires that isolated individuals be recaptured and isolated together: factories and halls of culture, tourist resorts and housing developments are expressly organized to serve this pseudo-community that follows the isolated individual right into the family cell.<sup>113</sup>

This notion of Debord's, of recapturing and reintegrating isolated individuals is necessary to understand the object around which this section explores, Midtown Crossing. The object is part of the ongoing process noted by Debord which "destroys cities and reestablishes a pseudo-countryside"<sup>114</sup> lacking natural relations and direct relations of the old countryside. The new "pseudo-countryside" is complete with an "artificial peasantry" controlled through the modern "organized territory" that disperses the "artificial peasantry" and keeps them from taking "independent action and from affirming itself as creative historical force again today become characteristics of the producers-- the movement of a world which they themselves produce remaining as

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., p. 177

completely beyond their reach as the natural rhythm of tasks was for the agrarian society."<sup>115</sup>

### **Moving the Bar, an Urban Shakedown**

Enter, center stage, an object of focus within this urban center, a blighted area of land in the heart of the city literally in the shadow of corporate capital, Turner Park. Turner Park, a plot of six acres donated to the City of Omaha in 1900 in memory of Curtiss Turner, a soldier killed in the Spanish-American War. A largely forgotten war memorial to a largely forgotten war stands in one corner of the park, erected by American War Mothers.<sup>116</sup> Along another edge (prior to 2002) sprawled some artwork, large stone blocks with holes through their centers resembling the shattered vertebrae of a colossal giant. The park is located in the central corridor of the city, near an important (and controversial) highway, Highway 75 and adjacent to the major arterial road. The corporate capital that shadows this park are major economic institutions headquartered in Omaha, Mutual of Omaha, Kiewit Corporation, and Berkshire Hathaway (all Fortune 500s). The park is also near to two University campuses. However, in spite of the prominent location of this park, and its proximity to these institutions, the park had fallen into neglect; forgotten by the city much like the Spanish-American War.

I grew up in this city. Prior to moving away for graduate school, I lived a mile from the park, commuted past it each day on my way to work. All my life I knew it as a neglected space, a space where people lived or squatted in nearby unoccupied homes. It

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Garneth Peterson, *A History of Omaha's Parks and Recreation System* (Omaha, Nebraska: Omaha City Planning Department, February 1982).

had a reputation as a place where some could acquire illicit drugs or sex, or a site of an occasional neo-Nazi rally<sup>117</sup> due its proximity to a former Mexican Consulate. Regardless of my familiarity and proximity to this park, I had however, never set foot in this park while growing up--it was considered off limits by the social norms and perceptions of personal safety to which I had been acculturated. Some Creighton University students told me they used to go and sit under the trees during the daytime on nice days, an aged hippie told me he used to get high and look at the cool trees there that were apparently "far out", and an often homeless man told me the large stone artwork made convenient shelter during hard times.<sup>118</sup>

The surrounding neighborhood was also considered neglected and problematic. My youth was full of stories about shooting and violence happening in the neighborhood. University students, and a patron of the arts and one of the few homeowners in the area told me some colorful stories about pimps and prostitutes, as well as some of the continued violence (primarily domestic) that exists to this day.<sup>119</sup> In addition to the more direct forms of violence, the neighborhoods surrounding the park are historically home to a more transient population, primarily renters, and the median income floats around at or around the poverty line per household.<sup>120</sup> Not the image a Fortune 500 company wants to present at it's home campus.

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<sup>117</sup> Rick Ruggles and Kevin Cole, "Huge Police Presence Subdues Nazi Rally.," *Omaha World Herald*, September 2, 2007, <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1G1-168267233.html>.

<sup>118</sup> Dissertation Interviews (general), interview by James Filipi, 2013.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Omaha, NE Neighborhood Map <http://www.city-data.com/nbmaps/neigh-Omaha-Nebraska.html>

In 2002, a plan was hatched, spearheaded by Mutual of Omaha, in conjunction with a number of local business partners, or as the representative of Mutual of Omaha asserts this plan was hatched by the President of Mutual of Omaha after looking out of the top floor ballroom (which is supposed to be immaculate) at the surrounding area and decided that it was Mutual of Omaha's duty to transform this area for Omaha; make it a place that Mutual Executives would use instead of leaving work and directly getting on the interstate heading to their suburban homes.<sup>121</sup> This plan was ostensibly billed as something that would revitalize the park and provide desired services to the neighborhoods, and in 2007, as the economy slid into recession the park closed with little resistance, ground was broken, and construction began for a brand new urban development project that would clean up the park and inject substantially more capital into the area surrounding Mutual of Omaha's corporate headquarters.

In addition to Mutual of Omaha, there were 29 other initial partners that came together to completely redesign the space. Not all actors had the same level of involvement, some were merely responsible for one small portion of the larger project, or were in reality independent contractors of one of the larger firms. In addition to Mutual of Omaha, I spoke with several other actors in this initial list of 30.<sup>122</sup> Several points in common came out after discussing representatives from these other local institutions. The first point was they wanted to see a revitalization of the central core, to make money from real estate so advantageously located near downtown, near interstates, and on a major road, and to develop an end product that the investors would be happy with. Concern for

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<sup>121</sup> Dissertation Interviews (general).

<sup>122</sup> Partners. Midtown Crossing. <http://www.midtowncrossing.com/about/partners.aspx>

people who lived in the area clustered around three ideas: it'll get better once wealthier people are living and playing in the area; not really a concern; and the ideal project would be of mixed use and benefit to low-income as well as high-income residents.

At this point, the three overlapping goals of the prime actors are not quite met. Mutual of Omaha continues to spend money on the project, and it has yet to make any returns directly to the company, though reports<sup>123</sup> as well as interviews with the Chamber of Commerce and Mutual of Omaha,<sup>124</sup> suggest it has contributed to overall Omaha GDP. There has been increased interest in Midtown as a place to live, work, and play, and from one perspective there is revitalization, however the concept of revitalization will become contentious as the analysis moves on from here; finally, whether the investors are happy with the project is contextual on the goals and how much capital was invested upfront and throughout the project, in short there has been no clear answer that anyone is willing to give. Ancillary to any stated up front goals, this project has removed particular classes of people from the park, and as we will explore later, the design and implementation of the project has prevented others from fully taking part in activities; effectively homogenizing the citizenry.

One end of the spectrum in this initial crop of actors account of this project could be summed up as "Everything's fine. No problems here, it's all wonderful!" Which, is of course a sales pitch, and obscures aspects of life in Midtown Crossing. This pitch was given to me by a frightfully thin middle-aged woman who has been selling apartments

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<sup>123</sup> East Campus Realty, LLC. "Economic Impact of Midtown Crossing on the Omaha Economy: 2006-2012 and Beyond." 3/28/2012

<sup>124</sup> Dissertation Interviews (general).



and condos in the high rises for four years. She originally moved to Omaha to attend Creighton University, mere blocks from Midtown Crossing in the 70s, and recounts living in the neighborhood and watching it 'disintegrate' in spite of it's prime location that allows you to get anywhere in Omaha in 'five-minutes time.' Clearly on board with the Mutual of Omaha vision for midtown Omaha. Boldly telling me that 350 million has been invested in this neighborhood, and "has only contributed positive outcomes in the neighborhood. Only positive."<sup>125</sup>

Swirling around the historical residents of Midtown is the idea that Midtown Crossing is not doing well--that the stores can't stay open, and the apartments aren't full. Rumors exist that staff are hired to turn lights on in apartments so as to not leave a big black hole in the skyline where there are unoccupied apartments.<sup>126</sup> My interview with the apartment and condo management attempts to put these rumors to rest. She states that the apartments are at capacity and there is even a waiting list, when I question the recent advertisements for spaces available, she would not clarify which properties, or type of properties that waiting list was for, but stuck to her message about this place being perfect. As she is clearly making a sales pitch, I follow her lead and let her tell me about the economic diversity of the units: Studios being at \$700/month, but some of the condos go for over a million dollars! "So as you can see, it really does cater to all people and creates a unique and diverse place for all people." Understanding that the median income in the surrounding neighborhoods float around poverty, or approximately what I make, I understand that \$700 for an apartment in this city (not to mention in this neighborhood) is

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<sup>125</sup> V1\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

<sup>126</sup> Dissertation Interviews (general).

quite a lot, and I could get more space for far less just beyond the confines of this development. When I inquire into the income brackets of tenants, I'm only told "it's very diverse."<sup>127</sup>

Aware of the antagonism between historic residents and this development, which is seen as too posh and out priced, I ask about the restaurant and park usage: Who eats here, and who uses the park? My host tells me that "this place is used by all! It's a public park, and everyone uses it! The restaurants are all great, and Midtown Crossing allows for people who live nearby to do all their shopping and dining." This is an extension of her sales pitch, and contrasts with local assessment, but in this office overlooking the park and neighborhood, it's also clear this woman believes what she's selling me--from her vantage point, this transformation has been nothing but positive--the 'odds ever in your favor'.

I bring to light the perception of Midtown Crossing from a lot the historic residents I've met, formally interviewed, or just had casual one-off conversations at a coffee shop, bar, or elsewhere, namely, that as a development project, it is struggling--it can't fill the bays, it can't keep stores open, and it just doesn't have any reliable or consistent commercial presence. What I am told, is that this is not the truth--it is not the reality of the development. I am told, that part of the strategic vision has caused some of this confusion. Apparently, Mutual of Omaha did not want cranes actively working as stores were opening, so all the buildings were built and finished outside before the inside was completed, this meant that for a good six months the buildings looked complete but

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<sup>127</sup> V1\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, 1.

were far from it; they weren't complete and no stores could move in. She segues into a discussion on how advanced the building is, how the technology that went into it, and it is the most green building in the US--the University of Nebraska Lincoln students regularly make tours of the building for their architecture and engineering degrees, and she details for me data on the thickness of floors and construction of seams and other things I have no basis for understanding. Deciding not to be dissuaded by this tangent, I return to the question about emptiness and the ability of places to stay open, citing a few notable cases of closings (a high end clothing store that has recently closed, and Blanc Burgers and Bottles) and particularly apparent bays that are not filled (such as the whole Southeastern segment). Quick to respond, she asserts that it has nothing to do with Midtown Crossing, and all to do with bad management of the businesses coming in: The clothing store was a chain, and all of the stores closed around the country within a month, Blanc Burgers and Bottles closed all their locations except the original one within a few months, "this location was doing incredible business and very popular, doing millions of dollars in business!" In regards to the empty bays, she says their problem is their size--they are too small for many businesses interested in locating here. I ask about the bay sizes, she says she could probably send me a floor plan. After a few e-mails, this never happens.

Clearly, everything here is perfect, so I inquire into issues of crime and violence on property. "Almost nonexistent." As I ask for details, I am told she said "almost" only because she has never heard of anything. Security is good here: Each building is only open from 8am-6pm, and after that it requires access codes; Each building has a 24 hour concierge service; Even if you were to get in after 6pm, interior navigation requires a key

fob for doors and elevators; Beyond the physical premises, there is a 24 hour security service, "Frontline" that takes care of anything they deem "unsuitable"--a sort of private security martial law--it "keeps the un-savory activity out" since they are quick on the draw and get people to move along. Furthermore, I am assured that the grounds are so well maintained that if there were ever any vandalism or damage, like after a big public event, it is quickly taken care of before she or most people would ever notice it had happened.

As I conclude this conversation, my host tells me she sees Midtown Crossing as part of the developing Omaha, part of why Omaha continued to do well through the recession. Mutual provided for construction jobs (up to 600 per day) during this tough time, and now more jobs afterward with retail outlets and restaurants (service jobs). Further, Mutual of Omaha has inspired others to redevelop midtown, citing 'Urban Village' as an example. She explains as continued investment in this area, Mutual of Omaha has just purchased the Twin Towers condominiums directly east of the park; they are going to tear one of them down (which has been condemned for years) for parking, and renovate the other to match the new aesthetic developed for Midtown Crossing, the "new face will blend right in and make everything look great! It's already got the wonderful clean modern lines and such, it's just--it's just so--old."<sup>128</sup>

From this perch in the middle of the city, amidst the Fortune 500s and neo-modernist architecture, everyone is included, at least everyone who belongs to this version of the American dream. Before I leave this conversation, I inquire into her

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

favorite restaurant, I receive a sales pitch: a litany of each restaurant and their specials as I've already read on the developments website.

### **Knowing the Future**

A few hours after this interview, I meet with executives from Mutual of Omaha, however, given the busy schedule of an executive, and my relative unimportance, they ran late. This gave me some ample time to talk to someone in charge of marketing for Mutual of Omaha, K\_\_\_\_\_, a woman around my age who does graphic design, but also marketing for Mutual of Omaha with particular emphasis on Midtown Crossing. This woman was warm and engaging, and she offers me water, coffee, or whatever else I wanted. A naturally relaxed person, she makes me feel at ease. She tells me how the office that works most directly with Midtown Crossing is small, but looking to expand to a total of eight people; two of the people who work on this team have been with Mutual of Omaha for more than 30 years. My current host tells me she "grew up in Omaha, well, Ralston, actually." However, she "loves midtown and is not a fan of the suburbs at all"-- she likes urban and older neighborhoods; even though she confides in me that prior to working for Mutual of Omaha on this project, she had never been to midtown Omaha because it has a stigma, and there wasn't anything to draw her before this. Having grown up in midtown, I can relate, I have rarely been to Ralston for precisely the same reasons. My host tells me she's proud to work for this project, because it has "sparked interest in redeveloping these older neighborhoods that have more character."

K\_\_\_ echoes something from this morning, that this was really a Mutual of Omaha project. That Mutual wanted to make an impact on Omaha, and give back to the

neighborhood that they call home. Moreover, that this was started during really tough economic times, and people looked at Mutual like "What the hell are you guys doing?" K\_\_\_ tells me about the way they have really tried to carefully install certain retail outlets--they don't want cutthroat business folks who only care about profit, but people who care about creating a midtown community (suggesting that a perception of a lack of community in the area). When I ask about a lack of existing community, she explains that she meant a Midtown Crossing community, where the businesses work together and residents play together--where the businesses help to put on events that benefit residents, and inspire community. K\_\_\_ tells me how she enjoys spending time here--that others at Mutual do as well. Many employees go out for lunch, where before it was built, most were afraid to walk down the street and never left the building. Pointing out the beautiful weather this day, she says, before Midtown Crossing, it was her understanding that only the smokers ventured outside. While I enjoy my conversation with K\_\_\_, it is cut abruptly short when my scheduled appointment arrives.<sup>129</sup>

MS\_\_\_\_\_, Vice President Marketing and Communications, arrives. She is an older woman, were I to guess, in her 60s, she is stiff, formal, and controlled. Immediately asks where we left off so she can "jump right in." I explain that this is not a set interview, but more of a conversation about her perceptions about Midtown and Midtown Crossing. I believe she is annoyed by this, but does a good job disguising her reaction. She begins to speak slowly and clearly. She wants me to "know" certain things. She wants me to record this interview. One of the things I need to know is about the economic benefits of

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<sup>129</sup> MS\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

Midtown Crossing to Omaha. I also need to know "how powerful, influential, and strong Mutual of Omaha is when it comes to things--that this, Midtown Crossing, was the CEOs vision." The CEO wanted to transform the area to something that better reflected the Omaha of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and focus on a "neglected" part of town that was so much in the center of what Omaha has to show to outsiders. As an example, MS\_\_\_\_\_ explains that the architects had originally come to show off a far more modest design for Midtown Crossing; and "in the 12<sup>th</sup> floor executive conference room of Mutual of Omaha--a spot that overlooks Omaha and the entire downtown--the CEO tells all present that what was presented was 'OK', but not big enough! Not grand enough! That they are going to come back with something bolder--if Mutual was going to do this, they were going to do it all the way." Exemplar of the Fortune hubris, she tells me about the flagpole they had erected in the park; it's the biggest flagpole in the region at 100ft, and Woodman of the World donates flags as part of their support for Midtown Crossing and Mutual's vision for Omaha.

Inquiring into the biggest hurdles for Midtown Crossing, I'm told that, mostly, it was the economy, and the stigma. Regarding the economy, multiple times Mutual of Omaha's partners suggested scaling it back; but the top execs said that they had made a commitment to a vision, to investors, to the neighborhood they called home, to future tenants, and to Omaha, they were not about to scale anything back. Even constructing the project in phases would be a let down. Regarding the stigma, this was addressed by a series of free public events, and other publicity events like free shuttles to the College World Series for their first year at their new home, TD Ameritrade Park. She states that

she fielded several phone calls about the safety and security for children--and remembers one woman repeatedly calling her since "Turner Park was never ever ever a place she would have thought of sending her 16 year old daughter." This poor girls mother had to know all the details about what time the shuttles would leave TD Ameritrade Park, and what time and where they would arrive at Turner Park.

At this point, I ask MS\_\_\_\_\_ where she's from, to see if she has any memories of Turner Park. She tells me she's from Denver. Then 14 years in Chicago. Her husband worked for Conagra, and they came to Omaha in 2004. She was in charge of the "O!" campaign with the chamber of commerce (a three year project extended to five in which large o's with an exclamation point were erected around the city). In 2009, following that campaign, she came to work for Mutual of Omaha. I inquire into what she knew of the old Turner Park. "It was a criminal place, and had problems. But Mutual fixed all those. They built this space, and insulated the area from any of that. Now you see the effects of that spilling out into the rest of Omaha." She mentions Urban Village, and how wonderful that is for the rest of the neighborhood.

I ask her who the target clients are--what demographics does Midtown Crossing wish to attract? Neighborhood residents? Young? Old? Suburbanites? "Sophisticated people" who came from New York, London, and other Big and World cities. She's been told that "Midtown Crossing" feels more like home than anywhere else in Omaha. In part, this was the vision, "to create a destination where shopping, and dining, and entertainment, was all available right there"--she laments the lack of clothing stores, but the fact that the one they had became a dining location isn't bad either. Further, she says



that unlike the suburban destinations, Midtown Crossing has outdoor dining spaces (the fact that this is a dining zone probably says a lot about the character of Omaha). She admits she wants to see more West Omaha crowd come here, and perhaps some of Council Bluffs. I ask if she knows where most of the patrons come from? "Not yet, but a new targeted mailer campaign with a coupon card to track this has just been launched. We should know by next year." She assures me that there must be a lot of neighborhood people who come and use the facilities, and a new pavilion for jazz, concerts, and movies is being built soon.<sup>130</sup>

Inquiring into the perception about retail turnover, she explains to me that there have only been a few turnovers, and those were due to bad management on their end-- "Blanc Burgers was making over a million in burger sales, but the owner just couldn't manage anything well; he had expanded from two locations to five, but now is just one." The clothing store Republic of Couture was an outlet based out of Florida, and it dissolved over management conflicts. I know of other turnovers, but I didn't press her as she seemed keen to deflect responsibility for any turnovers. The impression she wants me to walk away from is that all stores are doing great here, for example the local chain The Afternoon, does better sales here, even if the location at the mall gets more traffic. "And Wholners' sold the other location as their sales are up 45% here, or the new Brix location does just as well here as at it's other location out in West Omaha." She admits there are a few empty bays, but there is no goal to just fill them with whatever just to have them full (which seems an odd business plan to willfully leave a retail bay empty).

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<sup>130</sup> At the point of writing this, the pavilion has been built and used multiple times.

I probe her about the choice to leave a location empty, and what the selection process is for renters. MS\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that since they don't have an H&M or a Trader Joes, some of that is tough--and she deflects any attempt to figure out if they are interested in having one of those (particularly an H&M, which locals have expressed interest in). What she does tell me, is that regarding selection process, they are primarily "interested in businesses committed to working to create a stronger Midtown" and retailers interested in "doing collaborative projects" to attract a "sophisticated elite." To which, I ask her about the existing places in Midtown just west of here, places that have been characteristic of Midtown for 15+ years like McFosters, and the Crescent Moon--locations I imagine to be outside of the "sophisticated elite". While she does not express any open antagonism, her expression makes it clear that these establishments don't really factor into her view for the future of Midtown, and there is unlikely to be any future collaboration.

Curious about this "sophisticated elite" she mentioned, I ask her what this means. To which she tells me it's people like you might find in New York, LA, Chicago, London, Paris, or any major global city, and Midtown Crossing is really the first place in Omaha to try and create this. She says, it's important that Omaha have these people living, working, and playing in the midst of three Fortune 500s. I ask her about the other Fortune 500s, and if this project has inspired them to work to attract this "sophisticated elite." So far, no, she says, but they have all been very supportive of the project--"They all eat here and, for example, the CEO of Kiewitt lives in Midtown Crossing."

Wrapping up our interview, as a phone call MS\_\_\_\_\_ takes suddenly makes me aware of the time; I ask a few general questions about the condos and apartments, as well as some general reflections on the greater Midtown area, and what her favorite restaurant is. She tells me that the Condos are all doing well, and they don't really advertise them. They advertise the apartments more, but not the condos much at all. Her dismissal of details on the apartments suggests to me that they aren't doing particularly well. Her description of the broader Midtown area hinges on the impact Midtown Crossing has had on the neighborhood--all good--infinitely proud of the impact, it illustrates her general ignorance of the area outside of this block, and what sort of person has historically lived nearby. Her favorite place to eat is, "well all of them" and the litany of food specials and restaurants almost precisely mirrors the conversation I had a few hours earlier.

From Both K\_\_\_\_ and MS\_\_\_\_\_, I got the overwhelming feeling that Mutual of Omaha really wants to contribute to Omaha--that they want to improve and make it a better place. There is no feeling of wanton colonization of space, but a sincere concern and care for the neighborhood and people who live nearby. There was an attempt to both move forward boldly, but also get input from the people, neighborhood organizations, churches and so forth: all of which is well documented in the HDR report on Midtown (more on this shortly).

Not long after my meeting with Mutual of Omaha, I met with JBG\_\_\_\_\_, Senior Director of Community Development with the Greater Omaha Chamber of

Commerce. Previously, JBG\_\_\_\_\_ worked with the Nebraska Aids Project doing outreach in the Midtown area. JBG\_\_\_\_\_ is a resident of Midtown.

Part of JBG\_\_\_\_\_ 's job with the chamber of commerce is to oversee the midtown development association, though, she does less work with that now as the office has recently transitioned to a new department. JBG\_\_\_\_\_ has worked for the chamber for six years, and tells me that she came on board after much of the initial planning had taken place, and as Midtown crossing was breaking ground. However, she is able to provide me with some context and history of the project, and Omaha's overall development style. What JBG\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about Omaha's development style will not be contradicted by anyone I talk to: She says that "Omaha's development agenda is set by the corporations. They take the lead, and the city follows."<sup>131</sup> Where as, according to JBG\_\_\_\_\_, many other cities have an agenda set by the city, organized by the city, and then partnered with the corporations to accomplish said agenda. Further, while Midtown Crossing mirrors what's happening around the US with redevelopment of urban corridors and downtowns, Midtown Crossing was really an initiative of corporate interests: it began as a conglomeration of corporate parties interested in Midtown life and Midtown development, it attracted other interests as it picked up steam, though in the end "it was probably not as representative as it could have been."<sup>132</sup> While less representative than it could have been, JBG\_\_\_\_\_ also tells me that this was the first time there was any attempt at a large-scale community engaged development project; however later

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<sup>131</sup> JBG\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

projects (after Midtown Crossing) have done a better job at being inclusive with increasing numbers attending planning functions.

### **Aesthetic Dissonance**

As a resident of Midtown, JBG\_\_\_\_\_ takes issue with the aesthetic presentation of Midtown Crossing. She confirms a hunch I had: that "most, if not all," of the aesthetic of Midtown Crossing was designed to address, control, or eliminate the "criminal element". However, from my conversation with JBG\_\_\_\_\_, and other Midtown residents, this aesthetic is removed from the authentic life of Midtown, and does not engage with the people who have chosen to call Midtown home. Following up with this discussion of 'the criminal element', I inquire into crime in Midtown, and not just Turner Park. JBG\_\_\_\_\_ 's opinion, as she does not have hard facts to support this, is that crime in Midtown is more of an issue of perception (perception of what poor neighborhoods are like, and what activities poor people engage in) than reality; so too, she says is the perception of Midtown Crossing as "empty with high commercial turnover."<sup>133</sup> Further, nothing has really changed in the neighborhood. While things have certainly changed, Midtown Crossing has had little quantitative effect on the neighborhood: "In general, incomes have not improved. Money has come in, but nothing has dispersed." The half-billion dollar answer from Midtown Crossing is that "Omaha needs to learn to better manage the public-private space partnerships; not make public spaces feel like private spaces," which is what has happened here.

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

Zooming out from Turner Park, JBG \_\_\_\_\_ discusses other nearby parts of Midtown, and the changes and problems she sees. The first point she raises is the Med Center, which is an important feature and partner in the Midtown area, but has violated the vision of "an open Midtown"<sup>134</sup> when it's new construction closed off walls to the south of it; this will not be helpful to business and commerce that border that edge. Farnam Street, which runs through Midtown Crossing, will continue to be converted into two-way traffic after the initial experiment within Midtown Crossing, and suggests that I contact the development agency responsible for redevelopment of the Blackstone Hotel. Toward the Southern edge of Midtown, she describes the Leavenworth corridor as a more organic spot of change within Midtown, and the community's tension around attracting a big-box store, and the preference for keeping the local control in the hands of many artists who have moved to this area, she provides me with a few leads on who to speak to.

On the subject of big-box stores, I ask about the vacant Target that has sat on the Western edge of Midtown for around 10 years, and why nothing has gone into that place? The Saddlecreek Target moved to 72<sup>nd</sup> and Dodge both for more space, access to homes with higher income, and as part of an ongoing project to save a troubled shopping mall. This has been a sore spot for many in the Midtown area, as this was the former location was far more convenient for many, and has since set vacant. All of the immediately adjacent stores have also vacated. JBG \_\_\_\_\_ tells me that part of the issue was that Target held the lease on that property for 3-years to deny competitors from moving in on a building in a location where people had already been taught to shop--Target wanted to

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

retrain it's base to use the new location before another business stole them away. Further complicating this, was that in the three years of vacancy, the building degraded while thieves stole all the copper and HVAC. This meant that before Target could return the lease they held, they had to replace both the copper and the HVAC, and then, after the lease was returned, the copper and HVAC were stolen again. Now, the building sits continuing to decay without copper or HVAC, causing any new tenant to have a greater upfront cost to replace all this. Unfortunately, now, the best course of action would be to demolish the building: "it's too big for local business; would require too much work were it to be divided up to accommodate multiple local businesses; and in addition to the lack of HVAC and copper, it is too old-fashioned for new big-box businesses"<sup>135</sup> as the loading docks do not comply with modern demands. For now it sits vacant until someone decides to knock it down and build something new.

Nearby, she tells me, is another place to watch: American Steel. American Steel has recently decided to move out of Omaha for cheaper taxes and more space. However, it is a large plot of land right off Saddlecreek, across from the Med Center, and in the midst of a residential neighborhood--this is really the place to watch in the coming months to get an idea of what Midtown will look like in five to 10 years.<sup>136</sup>

One of JBG\_\_\_\_\_ 's final comments speaks to the cultural and class divisions in this city. She refers to Dodge street "as the Mason Dixon line of Omaha"<sup>137</sup> dividing North and South in this city, further that anything North of dodge will always have a

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Nothing has happened to this space almost two years later

<sup>137</sup> JBG\_\_\_\_\_ Interview.

stigma to it for older residents of Omaha, though there have been great changes to certain areas, such as 33<sup>rd</sup> and California. However, this perception continues to color the opinions of the more upwardly mobile Omahans moving into Midtown. She's been alerted to many complaints about 'loiterers' in the Midtown area and in Midtown Crossing. "Unfortunately, these are not actually loiterers, but people who work;"<sup>138</sup> often people who are walking to work, to the store, or just waiting for the bus. They just don't look like middle class professionals, and are often people of color, and their stigma is associated with the stigma of anything North of Dodge.

### **Corporate Preservation**

After discussions with Mutual of Omaha, the Omaha Chamber of Commerce, and various other commentary about Midtown Crossing, I arrange a meeting with HDR, a local architecture and engineering consulting firm and the one hired by Mutual of Omaha to deal with Midtown Crossing. Due to scheduling conflicts our interview takes place over the phone. I meet with an individual who was in charge of overseeing the project, Db\_\_\_\_\_. Throughout, I get the overwhelming sense that HDR orchestrated a design that wasn't implemented as planned, or hoped. My initial line of inquiry asks about the general process that HDR used after Mutual of Omaha hired them to transform this low-income part of Omaha into a site more friendly to their corporate persona.

The process as HDR undertook it began with a series of visioning workshops designed to understand what people were thinking when they thought of transforming Turner Park. The initial workshops made it clear that not all interests were represented,

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid.



the workshops then expanded until they included 81 key stakeholders. Following these workshops, they had two separate full week "design shreds" in which all members from the workshops were allowed to critique and make comment on the designs. After the second design shred, HDR felt satisfied that most of the needs of the stakeholders would be met.<sup>139</sup>

In addition to just the transformation of Turner Park, HDR was responsible for putting together a report for the city on transforming Midtown Omaha. The city, at the time under the old mayoral regime was very supportive of this project (of course, the former mayor was a civil engineer and has a long history of work with HDR). Building on the Midtown Crossing initiative, the broader visioning for Midtown Omaha involved feedback and participation of eleven neighborhood associations, which were unified under the 'midtown neighborhood alliance (MNA)'. The MNA had a great effect of invigorating many of the neighborhood associations. I am told, that while there have always been strong connections between the people who live in Midtown to the area they call home, strengthening the neighborhood associations has changed the perception the rest of the city (and city government) has had on the neighborhoods. Further, it has changed the focus of development in the area and done wonders to reduce the stigma, associated with certain parts of Midtown but not representative of the whole of the region. HDR was concerned with incorporating as many viewpoints from as many public and private organizations as possible, as well as understanding what sort of debates were going on within organizations that operate in the Midtown area.

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<sup>139</sup> Db\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

In order to facilitate this, Db\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that HDR brought in some of the best minds on urban design from around the country, including John Barnett. Db\_\_\_\_\_ describes driving the guest experts on a tour of the city, through parts of Omaha that many of Omaha's largely suburban population never go. Parts of the city that have been forgotten about by the city's elites for 50-60 years. Places that appeared a little run down. I'm told that each place they went these experts were at awe over what Omaha had: intact neighborhoods with history and character; they seemed all very shocked that no developer had come in already and razed the area for development purposes. After the visits by the experts, some of the other neighborhood locations from across the US that were brought in for inspiration were "Over the Rhine" (Cincinnati, OH) and Pearl and Alberta (Portland, OR).<sup>140</sup> Further, there was interest by HDR and the city of Omaha to "head off some of the more destructive forms of urban development" in order to preserve these neighborhoods and character. Db\_\_\_\_\_ says that moving forward, there seems to be reasonable success in accomplishing this goal.

The final result of HDRs involvement in Midtown Crossing and the Greater Midtown area was a report<sup>141</sup> that identified the "Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within the Study Area" and created "101 programs for action, categorized by neighborhood issues, transportation enhancements, central corridor design programs, and parks and open space opportunities."<sup>142</sup> The report laid the groundwork for to make

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> HDR "Destination Midtown" 2005

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., p. 1.

Midtown a model in future environmental sustainability as well as reclaim the "once great neighborhoods."<sup>143</sup>

I inquire briefly into demographics and change in Midtown as he sees it. Db\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that the number one demographic in Midtown has always been, and continues to be single person households; not family homes. In general, he sees the changes to the area as very positive, that the renewed interest in the area has "reduced the ability for opportunistic players within the Midtown area,"<sup>144</sup> by which he means slumlords. This is particularly true, because any new investment in the area requires a high enough hurdle to match the changing zoning and planning designs as outlined by the report--"the amount of investment in the short ten years has been amazing." In regards to the higher income housing coming in, Db\_\_\_\_\_ says this is merely a result of "the product developed--the people and demographics were already changing, and the product was in response to those changes."<sup>145</sup>

Db\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that he has to get on his way to a function his kids have, but asks if I have any final questions, and encourages me to check out the report, and call him back if that sparks any other questions. I ask him a final question related to the chamber of commerce, and their response to the report placing criteria around development. Db\_\_\_\_\_ 's answer is direct, and clear "The chamber has remained very committed with this plan--they wish to see this city as the best it can be to attract

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<sup>143</sup> Db\_\_\_\_\_ Interview.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

business and investment." There has not been any fuss made over the greater restrictions on design and plan.<sup>146</sup>

Mutual of Omaha, along with a coalition of the willing "representatives of Midtown's large and small businesses, neighborhood associations, residents and city leaders"<sup>147</sup> that included HDR and the Chamber of Commerce built a movement around transforming Turner Park into a public private initiative that would develop "mixed-use, pedestrian-friendly neighborhood [and] would bring much-needed retail to serve current Midtown residents as well as new residential offerings to attract residents to the area,"<sup>148</sup> better reflect the corporate presence in the area and show Omaha in a more glamorous light to investors, clients, and employees from other larger cities. Three years, and hundreds of millions of dollars later, Midtown Crossing was born.<sup>149</sup> My first experience of this new place occurred soon after completion, and opening of the development; I had returned for a Buddhist wedding ceremony held in the interior park area. I was only in the city for a few days, I had missed most of the construction, and was amazed by the transformation of this space. A space I had known only as a park with illicit activities and homelessness. Midtown Crossing had apparently successfully accomplished its goal of reinvigorating (read reinventing) the park space and immediate location. As opposed to a neglected park area, this new park, and surrounding buildings were well maintained, landscaped, and the market spaces were clean with crisp, smooth flowing lines and

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Anon. (2012a) Birth of Midtown Crossing. Available at <http://www.midtowncrossing.com/about/history/default.aspx>

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> "Birth of Midtown Crossing," accessed December 19, 2012, <http://midtowncrossing.com/about/history/default.aspx>.

attractive signs. There were restaurants and cafes ringing the green space of the park that allowed people sit and enjoy when the weather was nice. This project brought life and social interactions to the park in a way I had never seen in this space. Moreover, and more striking than the presence of cafes and conversation was that the immediate space had become thoroughly gentrified (apparently what was meant by the project mission: "stabilize and revitalize the area"). All this transformation was accomplished by utilizing Mutual of Omaha's "under-utilized real estate" that surrounded the park, and turning that real estate into "a million-square-foot mixed-use urban redevelopment project."<sup>150</sup>

Gone were the homeless and the prostitutes; so too the shattered giant's spine sculpture that stood on the eastern edge--a piece that always seemed symbolic of where people went after their backs were broken by the economic system, as the park was once surrounded by low-income and section 8 housing; places populated by students, families, and individuals with shattered dreams. It would be tough to imagine this new space filled with its former residents, or the periodic protests against immigration, or women's rights--protests in favor of government control, and full of vitriol for, a certain population in America. A park that was always such a desperate space, now represents something different and no longer desperate.

If Turner Park was once a place that appeared desperate, it no longer does. It is now a place of high-modern aesthetics, clean policeable lines without overhangs or nooks for unhoused citizens to seek shelter. Manicured landscapes with sculpted garden plots. This change in aesthetics reflects a desire to change the cultural capital of the area:

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

Planned or not, a cultural capital thrives in the intersection of the business, nonprofit, and arts economies. Conflicts are bound to occur over whose vision dominates objects and space: that of real estate markets or cultural communities. Even if cultural strategies of economic revitalization succeed, it is not inevitable that the economic values of the space overwhelm the cultural power of the symbols.<sup>151</sup>

The new reinvigorated space has created a new aesthetics of belonging. The clean policeable lines speak to an aestheticizing of fear where "strangers mingling in public space and fears of violent crime have inspired the growth of private police forces, gated and barred communities, and a movement to design public spaces for maximum surveillance." Further, the aestheticizing of fear is developments' dominant practice of dealing with "material inequalities" particularly in an area already stigmatized by poverty and violence.<sup>152</sup> This new aesthetic is a clear marker of who ought to belong here, and who ought to be excluded.

### **The Common Denominator is Civility**

Sharon Zukin notes that, throughout the many contemporary campaigns to cleanse and close down public space, "the common denominator is 'civility.' Urban designs try to use visual aesthetics to evoke a vanished civic order associated with an equally vanished, or at least transformed, middle class. They use civility, in turn, to evoke a vanished social homogeneity."<sup>153</sup>

A Jeff Ferrell goes on to explain, ideas of "civility" and "community" are codes: "Talking of civility, they mean order, an absence of upheaval an unrest, a world in which

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<sup>151</sup> Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, p. 151.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>153</sup> Jeff Ferrell, *Tearing down the Streets: Adventures in Urban Anarchy* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), p. 228.

the marginalized go quietly into the good night of injustice." Restoration of civility and community hearkens back to an idyllic earlier time "when kids knew their place," and "when fewer uppity minorities dared to display their lives and cultures in plain view." As Ferrell discusses in his book Tearing Down the Streets and from what we know of Omaha's history, "it's not at all clear that such a time ever existed. As is often the case, the nostalgia may be mostly for a time that never was."<sup>154</sup>

Turner Park, Midtown Crossing, and the other coming developments of midtown Omaha represent a transformation and revitalization of the urban core that also presents aesthetic issues around exclusion and inclusion. "These emerging configurations of urban control are designed not only to regulate and reclaim public spaced occupied by homeless folks" and illicit markets, but also "to regulate the meaning of such people and spaces as well."<sup>155</sup> This revitalization is also contestation over who belongs and what sort of meaning populates a particular urban plot of land:

From Disney's Times Square to Dunier's sidewalk vendors, the city's public spaces--parks, streets and street corners, shopping districts, residential enclaves--function not only as utilitarian arrangements, but also as deep repositories of meaning for those who own them, occupy them, move through them. Put simply, public space always becomes cultural space, a place of contested perception and negotiated understanding, a place where people of all sorts encode their sense of self, neighborhood, and community.<sup>156</sup>

New investments and development are as much symbolic as they are physical and economic. Alongside a new aesthetic, public-private partnerships redraw the physical, social and symbolic barriers of urban space. This new configuration of space reveals

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-229

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

more than "the dynamics of contemporary urban redevelopment. They mark the changing boundaries of private property and public propriety, the emerging images of the city and its residents, and the force remapping of cultural identity and public community."<sup>157</sup>

Midtown Crossing clearly employed the Disney metaphor in construction of their new entertainment zone with "easy-access freeway off-ramps, parking garages, pedestrian shopping malls, microbreweries, and other affluent lifestyle accouterments." This Disneyfied version of the urban city is shared by other local actors, as well. The first to move in and attempt to ride this transformation is an outfit known as "Urban Village" a multi-unit housing development in Midtown all built within a mile of Midtown Crossing.

Prior to engaging with Urban Village (UV), I had heard stories about the company and the lead owner. Longtime residents of Midtown have expressed a mixture of concern over what they see as clear gentrification of their backyards, concern for rising costs of living, who is being attracted into their neighborhoods, and gratitude that UV is buying up the vacant squats (some of which caught fire on a monthly basis) and dilapidated drug houses, making beautiful old structures safe rather than tearing down and building anew, and landscaping the plots of land. Most of the residential concern deals with a perception of the lead owner, who he wants to attract into midtown, and what his vision for the neighborhoods really is. Most of the residential perception comes from two things: first, a townhall meeting in which the lead owner referred to residents of midtown as 'cockroaches' and how he planned to rid the neighborhood of these pests; second, a related perception of his identity as being from West Omaha, a suburban expanse with a

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.



perceived culture based on materialism, wealth, elitism, and disregard for those unable to keep up with the Joneses, and that this attitude meant this was who would be moving into the newly renovated buildings. Consequently, based upon two snippets of information tied to first hand accounts of the cockroach statement, and lived experience of class division in the city, what GMU's Mercatus Center economists would call 'envy', my perceptions of the owner ranged from unfavorable to monstrous: I was told that he was a racist, that he wants to make all the neighborhoods like Midtown Crossing, that he wants to evict the poor, and make midtown a place for only the wealthy, I was told a number similar things--none of it good--so I had to meet with him to try to temper my understanding.

I met JR\_\_\_\_\_, infamous co-owner of UV, at a local coffee shop in the heart of Dundee. JR\_\_\_\_\_ is a middle-aged man with light and slightly graying hair and pale blue eyes in the manner of Robert Redford. His suit jacket is blue pinstripes, but pants are blue checks, his shirt is dark blue shadow stripes, the ensemble strikes a chord as someone who is either up on fashion, or has very little idea how to dress himself. Not quite the intense monster I had conjured in my head from the stories the locals told of him.

JR\_\_\_\_\_ describes himself as a businessman who has lived all over the world in major cities (London, Tokyo, etc., etc.) and currently lives in Omaha. Prior to UV, he tells me he did development "out west" by which he means west of 72<sup>nd</sup> street with particular focus deep in the suburbs consuming cornfields and turning them into neighborhoods. Further, he explains it was only because of his business partner who hails

from Denver that he switched from suburban to urban development. He was persuaded on this gamble by a couple of factors: first he saw the data on how well it worked in Denver; second, Midtown Crossing created an economic hub; third, there is less competition in Midtown as the point of access is "harder" than out west where all you have to do is build new homes.

### **Tons of Capital**

JR\_\_\_\_\_ explains that the radius for UV is in part about Midtown Crossing, but primarily about the Fortune 500s right there. His theory is that the econometrics on neighborhoods and development are all wrong--especially when thinking about younger generations--it's no longer about average household income, rather it's about the economic capital generated by a place: Midtown generates tons of capital, whereas out west in the wealthier suburbs with far higher per capita incomes very little wealth is generated. JR\_\_\_\_\_ speculates, that investors ought to look more at where capital is generated, and not where income lives, and that given the option, people would rather live near where they work providing it's a safe neighborhood with good amenities.

These amenities were a primary concern when beginning UV. JR\_\_\_\_\_ states his philosophy with UV is never build anything he wouldn't want himself: "Each house, each apartment, each unit (of the proposed 250 units) will have the things people like [him] want. Landscaping, stainless steel, secure access, garages, and so on. If you find it in West Omaha luxury apartments, you will find it in UV."

According to JR\_\_\_\_\_, and most everyone else who lives in Omaha, there is a strong geographic divide, first north and south of Dodge, and then east and west of 72<sup>nd</sup>

street. This divide was among the major factors in getting UV started. West Omaha wants certain things--modern, updated appliances, washer/dryer in unit and so forth, and there is a different culture in East Omaha that bars West Omahans from moving closer to where they work. His goal was to find a way to merge the two: "Bring West Omaha into Midtown, do some cultural translation, and make some money." Prior to UV, no one had attempted this, and it created a lot of trouble starting up the company.

JR\_\_\_\_\_ explains that the type of development they've started doing in Midtown has been extremely problematic in Omaha for a variety of reasons. First, there is no external funding grants available since no one here is doing this type of work; people who develop in the urban core primarily knock down and start anew, or do some basic cosmetic fixes and cater to low-income, or maybe mixed-income housing. He suggests that this is primarily a problem with economics, that all the economic data "looks backward." Banks and lenders are only concerned with what has happened, and what has proven to be a reliable investment. For the most part, economics, and economic institutions have no vision of the future and what could be. Omaha had no similar projects, and therefore no metric to measure against. Consequently, no one would lend. Fortunately for them, however, they had already raised a significant amount of private equity that they used to go ahead and complete two trial projects: one north, and one south of Dodge. "Fortunately, we were right," he says, and then adds, "however, had we failed, we would have improved two buildings in the area, and that would have been a good thing for the neighborhood somehow." JR\_\_\_\_\_ then immediately clarifies that

any social benefit is peripheral to this being a business. The purpose here is to make money, not improve society; it's a bonus when you can do both.

JR\_\_\_\_\_ comes across as very much a libertarian, and this sense comes out more clear when he describes his second major problem with operating his business in Midtown. Government structures prohibit some of his business ventures, they allow the activities of certain people but deny a small business owner his ability to operate. Therefore, because of government bureaucracy and institutions, it becomes increasingly important to vote with your checkbook. "Values are something you pay for," he says, "and there are certain values you are willing to pay more for; so it's your job to figure out how to translate that pay-for-values into action." Next, he says, "Sometimes you can use collective engagement, as the collective will always outperform the individual--providing we don't constrain one another." JR\_\_\_\_\_ makes it clear that it's not the drug dealers, the homeless, the squatters, the prostitutes, or the neighbors that are problematic, but the planning department and other government agencies. He says "these laws were written for West Omaha. They always grant exceptions for my projects, but I have to waste a lot of time to fight through the bureaucracy for these exceptions." JR\_\_\_\_\_ states he isn't trying to make his properties less safe, but as an example, he says there are lines of code requiring 65 feet of lawn between curb and street, but many of these older homes have 15 feet only; this means they can't redo a home, bring it up to code, and comply with modern expectations without fighting for an exception.

The third problem he faces relates to the drug dealers, homeless, squatters, prostitutes, and so on, and that is the perception his target clientele have about this part of

town. JR\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't quite understand what it is, but he says "somehow the physical presentation of place is a marker of safety: Old = unsafe; new = safe." Many people come from West Omaha, look at an older neighborhood, and then imagine it filled with unseemly characters and environmental dangers that aren't quite fair. "For example," he says emphatically, "how many homeless are living in the area?" He looks to me to answer, and I just shrug. "Six! And I could give you all of their names, and where to find them most of the time." He continues to explain, however, that "the corporate stooge who drives out of the parking lot and hightails it out of there see the same man day after day. That one man becomes 365 different men. Mister corporate never bothered to look at who he saw, recognize him as a human, he's just faceless, nameless, homeless. That one man becomes many. It's perception! Not reality." Further, JR\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about the drug dealers, and a particular development they did. He describes how he went right up to them and started a conversation with them because they were holding business out front of his building. He approached them as one businessman to another with respect for their need to earn money. Then, as a businessman, he asked them if they wouldn't mind shifting their business a few blocks from his property, that they had an advantage of mobility he didn't, but also they would have months during the construction to retrain their customers to use the new location. "It's win-win," he says, "I get to open my business and attract customers, and they get to keep their business, turf, and customers." One year later, he tells me that very corner where he talked to the drug dealers a whole new business set up: "Some catholic school girls selling some lemonade." And that block now has a whole new perception taking root.

After his story about the drug dealers and knowledge of the area's homeless, I ask what happened to the homeless who used to live in Turner Park. "They moved. Over to 24<sup>th</sup> and Leavenworth. Midtown Crossing dispossessed the businesses that homeless use-the mom and pop "grocer" (air quotes) that sells mostly liquor and cigarettes on their SNAP card. The area's homeless tend to like to live near places that allow that." JR\_\_\_\_\_ tells me a story of Frank. Frank used to live behind one of his buildings on 33<sup>rd</sup> street, and JR\_\_\_\_\_ used to watch Frank walk past the "Avanza" food store to the "Super B" before that closed. Eventually JR\_\_\_\_\_ 's curiosity was piqued and he asked Frank why he did this since the mom and pop store sells the same goods for slightly more money. Frank explained, and JR\_\_\_\_\_ understood. When the Super B closed, it closed on January 5; it closed that day because it allowed for one more cycle of SNAP to get processed (processing happens alphabetically for participants January 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup>). Closing on January 5<sup>th</sup> would be something 'straight' business folk would never understand due to the hassle of having another economic cycle to work through and file for.

Regarding Midtown Crossing, which has remained conspicuously absent from much of what JR\_\_\_\_\_ has told me today, he described it as "a West Omaha development slapped down in the middle of Midtown. It's too corporate, too strip mall, and doesn't work for locals." The one thing he says it has done, is provide him with clients; one of two things happens: People come down to explore the apartments, and while in the neighborhood also check out his properties, and then decide on UV; or, they

rent from Midtown Crossing, get to know the neighborhood when they go running, or walk their dogs, and then they "go native and migrate" to UV without losing their lifestyle.

JR\_\_\_\_\_ explains that his properties have reached the point where they are full, and there is about a 65% retention rate; this should change over time--typically what you shoot for is 50% retention with your average tenant staying 14 months. Moreover, while the structures of the buildings are old, their current incarnation is not old enough to become "seasoned" by those residents "who will live there for 5-10-20 years. This is a largely transient area, and many tenants are young, and change happens frequently for this demographic: marriage, jobs, children, and so forth." Most landlords in this area are "mom and pops" (elsewhere, others have referred to them as slumlords). The "mom and pops are undervaluing their properties, and the neighborhood. Sure they are making money, but these properties are worth more, and can have far better returns."

JR\_\_\_\_\_ makes it clear that Midtown should be the best spot in town. There are 3 Fortune 500s, easy access to downtown, the interstate, the Med Center, Creighton University, and more. "Instead we treat it like the ghetto." Secondly, there is "the Midtown smell," which is a source of tenant landlord conflict: Tenants blame it on the landlord, and the landlord on the tenant. JR\_\_\_\_\_ explains, it's a real phenomena, but it's not really anyone's fault, and is something he figured out on accident. "It's related to cast iron plumbing," he says. JR\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about a 20-unit building he was redoing a while back, where they gutted the whole thing (including the plumbing), then had a team exterminate the roaches. The roaches never returned, but he found out later that they left the 20-unit building and flooded the home of a little old lady right next door.

The roaches never returned because they use the old cast-iron plumbing as a highway system, and the 20-unit building had brand new cast iron plumbing--cast iron is only designed to last 70-100 years, then it cracks; all the homes around here are that old if not more. They're all cracked. The cracks not only allow roaches to travel freely and escape extermination (which only lasts two weeks), but also release sewer gas, or "the Midtown smell." Unfortunately for the long-term landlords, but fortunate for him in a way, the only way to really fix this issue is to gut the place, and install new cast iron plumbing, which is a cost prohibitive to the "mom and pops." Further, JR\_\_\_\_\_ has taken great care to track all the costs, and make them freely available to any landlord or developer who asks--this upfront cost is enough to discourage many; thus it has driven down the cost of housing in the area. While rents have not changed much, and his are significantly more, the actual property cost in the area is dropping. JR\_\_\_\_\_ pays less today for properties than he did 5 years ago.

Inquiring into the classic issues of gentrification, JR\_\_\_\_\_ stops me and says, it may be happening, but not quickly. Further, he wants to impress on me something he loves about Midtown: economic diversity. JR\_\_\_\_\_ sees the primary segregating aspect in Omaha is one of class, not race. Further, that West Omaha is far more stratified than Midtown. Each suburban neighborhood is built along income brackets. Each developer, and he names off a few that work in Omaha, work within certain brackets, not that there aren't outliers, "but that's rare--probably third standard deviation." The suburbs are homogenous economic zones that allow, and encourage, people to keep up with the joneses in a way that no one is too far below, or above the other. "And once they are, they



end up selling and moving." Whereas, Midtown, has wealth and poverty side-by-side. "Billionaires are mere blocks from the dirt poor." This heterogeneous income zone makes Midtown an infinitely more interesting space to work within. Moreover, JR\_\_\_\_\_ explains that when he talks to financial advisors, they always explain to him that their clients with the most money and investment capital all live within midtown with only a few exceptions. "People in the suburbs feel wealthier, but are in fact poorer. They live at the margin of their incomes" This reminds me of a conversation I had with the Mayor's office, in which their major concern was certain suburban zones of precarious income. People who live in Midtown are drawn to this area not for show, but "for the culture they value here--perhaps it's the diversity, or the proximity to work and other things, there's something here." This draw, he has found, presented itself through the projects he's engaged in--people with more income immediately moved from their old apartments into his new ones--they are now able to upgrade within their community. They can pay double the rent and get more amenities. The only way to do this before was to move out, or to buy property and invest money and time into transforming it.

Unfazed, or at least unconcerned, by the idea of gentrification, JR\_\_\_\_\_ continues to press upon the amazing diversity of Midtown: "You will see cute girls, and people walking dogs, joggers, and homeless. This truly is a space where there is so much mingling, and once you get over the 'perceptions' of Midtown, they you can see is really a better neighborhood than the so-called good ones out in West Omaha." This is clearly part of his spiel, but he also believes in it. Further he explains that his westward properties experience far more petty crime than his Midtown properties. Petty crime is

almost unheard of around here. JR\_\_\_\_\_ knew it was a concern, however, so when he first started leasing here, he had a clause in the lease that stated "if for any reason you feel unsafe, we will return your deposit and tear up your contract." He tells me that maybe twice did anyone utilize this clause, and one of them was probably just someone trying to break the lease for some other reason.

JR\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that his dream is to make a sustainable business model that is completely transparent and able to transform urban neighborhoods. He has become so taken with urban life that while he still owns a home out west, he's waiting for the housing market to turn around a bit and "lives in Midtown, and merely sleeps out West." Realizing our short interview has turned into an entire morning session, I ask him what the general impression he gets from others about his work. He says that he often hears comments from people like "the city must love what you do and be so thankful for what you do" in a completely non-sarcastic way. His feeling is that there is no city of Omaha. "There is no city" there are departments. Lots of departments. And no one is responsible for the city and says he wishes the city had a government that resembled Apple--"at Apple you dealt with Steve Jobs and Steve Jobs dictated what gets done."

### **Suburbanites Will Never Understand**

Spurred both by Midtown Crossing, and the interest around Urban Village and the successful transformation of neglected, derelict, and old properties around Midtown, a new Business Improvement District (BID) has recently begun the transformation of the area due west of Midtown Crossing (and closer to the med center). Known as the Blackstone area, named after the Blackstone Hotel (where the Reuben was invented), it is

working with current business owners and new investors to renovate the Blackstone Hotel, and a few other vacant properties with interesting details of historic turn of the century buildings: "Beneath a half-dozen layers and decades of remodeling phases, original arched windows and exposed ceiling trusses on what will be the new Sullivan's Bar."<sup>158</sup> The Bar location alone has hauled away more than 50 tons of debris to expose the historic elements. Among the other existing small businesses participating in this transformation are "ICON hair studio, Oxide Design communications agency, Dan's Woodworking, Iwen Exposures Photography, Victor's Gyros, Black Squirrel Tattoo and Slate Architecture." There are also plans for two microbreweries, one of which will also be an eatery, which will attempt to incorporate the business murals and history uncovered from the renovations. Some of the same institutions from the Midtown Crossing Development are involved with the design and construction: Alley Poyner Machietto Architecture and Lund Company. My investigations tell me that Lund is really driving this development, and so I make arrangements to interview an eponymous developer at that company.

The Lund Company is located in a small corporate park within moneyed part of the city on the near West side of Omaha called Regency. A place locally famous for being home to the founder of Godfather's Pizza, and the founder of Pamida, as well as large mansions of ostentations display. Lund Company is located within a modern office building of white and glass. The meeting room I wait in is a glass fishbowl like many of the offices around me. You can see people talking, working, or sitting idly.

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<sup>158</sup> Gonzalez, Cindy. "Revitalization of 40<sup>th</sup>, Farnam area symbolizes goals of new preservation group" Omaha World Herald. June 1, 2013

I am meeting with JL\_\_\_\_\_, son of the founder of the company. JL\_\_\_\_\_ is in his thirties, and curious about my project, and eager to know what he should tell me. I begin by asking about him, and his relationship to Midtown. He tells me he grew up in Omaha, in a part of town he is hesitant to call suburbia, but is well in the suburbs (particularly through both his and my childhoods). Regardless, he wants to stress that he is not a suburbanite, though I think many would disagree with him. He went to school at Creighton Prep (high school affiliation is an important identifier in Omaha), then went away to Kansas State for school. He has an affinity for more urban spaces and owns a couple of buildings in Midtown around the Blackstone Neighborhood.

JL\_\_\_\_\_ reminds me immediately of JR\_\_\_\_\_, from the way he wants to associate with Midtown and Urban spaces, even while he has clear background in the suburbs. He is like JR\_\_\_\_\_, but less dynamic; like many other developers I have spoken to, he has similar concerns to JR\_\_\_\_\_ and the others. His overriding concern is to turn profit, keep government regulations to a minimum, and make an urban space 'suitable' for middle and upper middle class living. Moreover, like other developers, JL\_\_\_\_\_ has similar perspectives on what makes Midtown great. Like others, he feels that this part of Omaha is the best part of Omaha, but it has been forgotten for a few decades (Having grown up partially in this area, forgotten by whom I wonder?). "Everyone moved west for a few decades" but current trends, particularly with the younger generations, across the nation are towards older and denser parts of cities, and this is the densest part of Omaha both day and night. There are also trends towards

decreased car usage and increased pedestrian traffic, so developing around this part of town just makes sense given these trends.

JL\_\_\_\_\_ Tells me that young professionals are looking more to apartments than ever before--it allows them to be mobile and flexible with where they live--they can get out of leases and move if they want. If they see a job somewhere else, they are free to do as they want. JL\_\_\_\_\_ celebrates this mobility and emphasizes 'want' however, I wonder how much of this is also a need that correlates with the decreasing stability of work.

In addition to just watching trends, JL\_\_\_\_\_ says he really appreciates Midtown. That there is a more "authentic" presentation of the city--though he is unable to define what he means by authentic, it is both clear that it is an opposition to the homogeneity of suburbs and strip malls, and like Potter Stewart, he knows it when he sees it. Part of the authenticity of the city seems to have to do with history. Midtown has history--history that is crucial to the presentation of Omaha: Marlon Brando, Henry Fonda, Gerald Ford, Warren Buffett, the Reuben, etc., etc.). Similar to other developers, JL\_\_\_\_\_ lauds the diversity (ethnic and economic) of the area.

JL\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that he was inspired to develop here thanks to an NPR webcast about Omaha, Saddlecreek Records and Development<sup>159</sup>, as well the success story that is Urban Village, who proved this could be done and be profitable. Further, his opinion is that it's really the economic actors that he finds appealing--within walking

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<sup>159</sup> NPR. "The Indie Rock Club Behind Omaha's \$100 Million Creative Boom. Morning Edition, May 22, 2012.  
<http://www.npr.org/player/v2/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&tislist=false&id=136896920&m13912877>

distance of his properties which will include seven apartments, a microbrewery and a restaurant, you'll find the Med Center, Mutual of Omaha, Berkshire Hathaway, and Peter Kiewitt. When I ask him about the issue of gentrification, he is unfazed: first, because he doesn't see gentrification as a problem because everyone is free to move and choose where they live; second, because he believes this area is already gentrified, though he doesn't have the data on it--data that would disprove his belief, though I wonder if that would change his opinion.

My final question to JL\_\_\_\_\_ is about who he wants to attract to the area. JL\_\_\_\_\_ does not care about attracting suburbanites, but is also concerned with creating developments that will foster smaller government and less taxes. He tells me that "Suburbanites will never understand", nor does he really care if they do. There are plenty of younger professionals who will buy into these developments, and alludes to an idea that there is enough market interest out there that in this neighborhood it won't take much to fill the properties. Further, he points out that it's more expensive for cities and people to move out from the urban core, and "If you really care about smaller government and less taxes, you should logically want to move inward and develop the core." With the final comment, JL\_\_\_\_\_ hits upon a trend within the area developers I've talked to--a libertarian attitude towards government, regulations and belief in the goodness (or at the very least innocuous affects) of money.

### **Imposing an Aesthetic**

The redevelopment schema in place here is the same as discussed by Jeff Ferrell in his book, Tearing Down the Streets, where he writes:

If, as Marx noted, history arrives the first time as tragedy and the second time as farce, contemporary city planning suggest that urban development and urban identity are forged first out of industry, commerce, and labor, but next from the careful marketing of consumption, symbol, and amusement. In this sense, cities today do indeed take on the character of corporate theme parks, selling idealized images of themselves and cartoonish echoes of their former identities to residents and visitors in the form of converted loft living spaces, corporate retail chains, and gentrified historic districts. These "cultural strategies of economic development," these new "consumption spaces," as Sharon Zukin calls them, undergird urban revitalization schemes in cities across the United States, from Denver's reinvented LoDo to Monterrey's repackaged Cannery Row and Akron's retreaded downtown.<sup>160</sup>

What Ferrell alludes to but never mentions by name, is the shift in mode of production, a transition from an industrial economy of "industry, commerce and labor" to a post-industrial economy of "consumption, symbol, and amusement" but also one in which the underclass is primarily a service class that upholds this marketing regime. Further, as Zukin states in "Cultures of Cities" "People like benevolent authoritarianism, as long as it rules by imposing visual criteria" and marketing in "consumption spaces" seeks to do just that as it "reproduces the white middle-class exclusivity – the safe, socially homogenous space – of the 1950s, within acceptable limits of aesthetic diversity." This control of "diversity determines the aesthetic power of the place"--a marketed ideal.<sup>161</sup>

Interesting still within the various developers competing aesthetics is the problem of imposing an aesthetic. As Zukin states with Times Square: "Ironically, the murals and signs and 'carnival atmosphere' on 34<sup>th</sup> Street deplored by a retail consultant are the lively aesthetic element so desired – after years of public criticism – in the redevelopment of

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<sup>160</sup> Ferrell, *Tearing down the Streets*, p. 9.

<sup>161</sup> Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, p. 64.

Time Square."<sup>162</sup> So too is the grimy "authenticity" of the older neighborhoods aesthetic sought after in various inauthentic ways, whether it is the dense urban corridors of Midtown Crossing, reproducing a never existent downtown in clean and modern lines, or Urban Village gutting old shells to design a contemporary interior, or even the Blackstone Neighborhood that is removing tons of debris that had covered up the original aesthetic, in order to reclaim some sort of authentic history (ironic that that very debris is as much history as what remains).

Zukin does not outright condemn this aesthetic fascism, as she notes there are "social benefits from visual coherence." In which there is a "culture of civility and security that recalls a world long left behind." This coherence is in part what caused North Omaha to be walled off--to keep those who are not like us away; it was also what caused the growth of the suburbs--to flee the history of racial unrest and other problems and start anew in a more homogenous zone, which as our developers pointed out is far more homogeneous than just race, but it is also class. In the suburbs we created a world where "there are no guns here, no homeless people, no illegal drink or drugs." Zukin invokes Disney World in her description of this sort of place without "a visibly repressive political authority" they have been able to impose order, get a workforce to drive increasing commutes, wait in more traffic, spend less time with loved ones, and make them grateful for being there. Midtown Crossing becomes even more like Disney world, as it allows for the same sort of order through an aesthetic regime, but removes the wait

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., p. 67



time and plays at diversity. Learning from Disney, Midtown Crossing "promises to make social diversity less threatening and public space more secure." <sup>163</sup>

### **The Power to Impose a Vision**

Continuing the similarity between Midtown Crossing and Disney is that both employ their own "security force and sanitation workers, the area they control is cleaner and safer than real city streets." If Disney is as Zukin asked, a not-so-subtle argument for privatization of public space, then areas like Midtown Crossing are to some proof that this argument works in the real world. <sup>164</sup>

Disney world is not only important because it confirms and consolidates the significance of cultural power--the power to impose a vision – for social control. It is important because it offers a model of privatization and globalization; it manages social diversity; it imposes a frame of meaning on the city, a frame that earlier in history came from other forms of public culture. That frame is now based on touring, a voyeurism that thrives on the video camera and the local television news. <sup>165</sup>

Coming back to space and the concept of revitalization that runs through the language of development, including the narrative of midtown as a 'forgotten', or 'abandoned', or 'neglected' space suggests several things about the newly transformed space. First, and critical to the concept of 'revitalization' is that prior to heavy capital investment in the area there was no vitality, or no life, to the area. Somehow Midtown was a dead space in the city 'forgotten', or 'abandoned', and 'neglected' like some

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., p. 52

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 55

<sup>165</sup> Ibid., p. 77

orphaned space. Suggesting that within development of urban space is a colonial paternalism--a new white man's burden, only instead of being an overtly racial burden, it is a burden of corporations and individuals with enough capital connections to alter the standard of living within a region. A similar narrative exists within some of the founding myths of Israel "a land without people for a people without land" that reinforces the idea that one group can 'improve' a space without consequence because there wasn't anyone there to begin with, and anyone who was there wasn't being a steward of it anyway, so what does it matter. Developers seek to erase swaths of recent history much the way certain Israeli narratives seek to erase recent history; while the Israeli narrative seeks to connect modern colonization with history thousands of years past, developers seek to draw a connection between a 'glory days' 60 to 100 years ago, and both seek to erase the intermediary space with people who lived, died, worked and had families within a space.

Six years after I left the city, it's clear parts of this space have been transformed, and others are continuing to transform. One stated objective of developers here is to connect and capitalize on the three Fortune 500s right there, and to show off a new and different sort of Omaha to outsiders. Given this stated objective, and that one of the three Fortune 500s was Berkshire Hathaway whose annual meeting brings in swarms of capitalists from across the globe for a weekend carnival for very wealthy people, I was particularly intrigued to observe what part Midtown Crossing would play in this weekend event.

## **The Oracle of Omaha**

Berkshire Hathaway is roughly two blocks west of Midtown Crossing, and the remodeled Turner Park presents an appetizing front for the nearby corporations. As a more appetizing front with high end restaurants, a hotel and green space, I was initially curious how Warren Buffett would make use of this in his whirlwind travel guide to Omaha that gets printed up each year for the Annual Meeting of shareholders, and how might this be used to display Omaha to potential investors and other wealthy people on their brief visit. During this time, Omaha becomes a mess--traffic is terrible, rush hour is sluggish, and most of this is due to various 'free' events for shareholders. Shareholders line up for hours for a free hot dog, or Blizzard (which makes you wonder how much time is really worth to most of these people), in part it's their capacity to waste time to save a few dollars which is why these people have so much of it. No hourly employee could comprehend, let alone afford, this sort of action.

During this weekend event, I fight my way against traffic towards Midtown, and on a beautiful, if slightly chilly, Saturday afternoon, I easily acquire a parking spot. Leisurely stroll into the coffee shop and without delay order coffee and observe who is using this space during this weekend. This was not a site on the Berkshire Hathaway annual meeting travel guide, but it is still reasonably well used--not packed by any means, not even close to capacity but there are many people out having brunches, doing shopping for Mother's Day, or seeing a movie. Given the smart casual dress and the number of out of state plates on higher end late model cars, it's likely many of the people here today were shareholders, but I did not see the telltale lanyard with shareholder

identification that typically accompanies this crowd during this weekend as if it were a requisite passport for non-natives being in Omaha.

### **Not Designed for Comfort**

For the first time, however, I noticed a few details regarding the seating in the coffee shop and elsewhere around Midtown Crossing; in comparison to other coffee shops and social spaces in the area, the seats here were not designed for comfort: seats that were fine for typing on a computer or sitting for a brief interview, were terribly uncomfortable for a leisurely afternoon reading and people watching. The general effect was to keep inspiring me to get up, move and find a new location throughout the general complex, and not to linger too long at any one location. Mere blocks to the west were several venues better suited for this activity, and had this been my sole goal for the day, I would surely have traveled to one of those. A second major observation that struck me today was in regards to the weekend patronage. There were essentially two performances, or two broad categories of people. There were those who had either walked or driven here for the coffee shop, to get ice cream, or to see a movie, who dressed fairly casually in Nebraska 'Huskers' sweatshirts and jeans. Then there were the others, those who were dressed casually in blazers, button down shirts, dockers, and loafers; by and large these people had come for restaurants and venues serving alcohol, a few were going to see movies before or after drinks. The second group was not particularly well dressed for the day's chill--at most the men wore a light blazer or sweater, and the women a cardigan or shawl over dresses, skirts and heels. Further, the first group, in jeans and sweatshirts had

greater gender balance, roughly equal number of men and women, whereas the second group skewed male, with a few couples scattered about.

Several days later I downloaded the Berkshire Hathaway Shareholders tour book of Omaha. In this document there mentions sites all over Omaha to visit, and where to go for all the discounts. Included was the artist Co-op (Hot Shops), local books stores, the independent movie theater, a variety of performing arts venues, museums, and the zoo. However, strikingly absent were any of the stores or locations in Midtown Crossing-- There wasn't even mention of the "Element", an eco-friendly hotel, in the places to stay in the brochures "midtown hotels" section. The absence was more interesting than the potential of its inclusion, though I have only speculative reasons for this, and throughout the research phases any spokesperson from Berkshire Hathaway never returned my inquiries.

### **Poverty does not Equal Income**

As difficult as it's been to get in to speak with the Fortune 500s that set agendas in Omaha, the Mayor's office under the Jim Suttle administration was strikingly easy. All it took was a phone call, and I was immediately scheduled in for as much time as I wanted. The Suttle administration has placed a high priority on Midtown Omaha, poverty, and the lower income areas of Omaha. Over the past several years, the Suttle regime has taken a multi-pronged approach to addressing poverty in the city. The mayor's office defines poverty as lacking in three of the four following: food, shelter, education, and job. Further, aside from just lacking in this, the office has tried to develop strategies for security among these items: making sure that people will not fear for not having enough

food; have a secure and affordable place to live; the proper education for available jobs; and that any job is able to provide for basic needs, and if lost, there will be avenues to a new job in reasonable time. Admittedly, so far, they have not found universally effective and politically feasible strategies for this, but have tried to sponsor creative initiatives that might generate a solution. In spite of this, they boast they are on track to eliminate childhood hunger by 2018 thanks to increased funding for nutrition education programs, before and after school meals, and encouraging farmers markets throughout the urban food deserts of Northeast Omaha. Further, the mayor's office states that homelessness and housing are issues in Omaha: They've tried to focus on building up the shelters from just homes into places for skills and treatment. Unfortunately, the nightmare they are facing in the city is the numbers empowered out of poverty are equal to the number of middle class dropping in to poverty. Currently, the places they are most afraid of losing to poverty are suburban pockets that are living just at edge of their means and trying to perform affluence--another major hit to the economy and large swaths could drop into poverty, bankruptcy, and faced with losing their homes. Their research suggests that there is a strong link between housing and jobs, such that each reinforces the other.

Regarding more direct forms of violence, the mayor's office focuses on areas to the north and south along 24<sup>th</sup> street, with particular focus on 24<sup>th</sup> and Lake. There has been a significant effort to try and 'break bread' with the various quadrants of Omaha to try and get people to realize this city is connected and each areas problems is part of a larger problem for the city. This focus has been to try and reinforce that poverty is not just about raw income, but about food, education, shelter, and jobs. Moreover that

poverty doesn't just cut across an income barrier, a family can be poor if they make six-figures, but are lacking in these categories. Further, children ought not be punished for parents making certain choices about how to spend income, regardless of how large or small it may be. Because of economic trends of the past decades, the major issues facing America and the city are housing and jobs. These issues are why a six-figure income can raise impoverished children without proper nutrition, education, and threat of losing home or job. While the overall strategy has been a bottom up approach, there has been of late considerable effort on keeping middle class in their homes, so that when the economy turns around less of the middle-class will have hemorrhaged into poverty and the bottom up approach will be able to lift the rest out. Regardless, however, I'm told that when the economy turns around, these formerly middle-class families will be the first to climb back out of poverty.

Furthermore, this bottom-up approach has lead to a major focus on restructuring the homeless shelters and on childhood nutrition. In regards to childhood nutrition, Omaha is on track to eradicate childhood hunger by 2018. It has done so by introducing robust nutrition education programs as well as before and after school meals into the school system. In addition, there has been a concerted effort to address the Northeast Omaha food dessert by attracting farmers' markets into that area, thus providing easy access to fresh produce.

Jobs are another issue for Omaha's poor. Many of the poor in Omaha have criminal records--records that prevent good access to jobs and encourage a return to crime, which reinforces a cycle of poverty and incarceration. The mayor's office has

worked with the Urban League and local businesses to start a Job Fair for those with records--modeled after San Antonio. Employers have agreed to this with full understanding that these positions are open and to be filled by people with criminal records. Local businesses, the Urban League and the Mayor all understand that this will take many years to develop the trust with the communities in order to see the change in crime data and unemployment of those previously incarcerated. This suggests that all parties have not only agreed to the first one, but also to supporting future job fairs of this type.

A conceptual map of Omaha as provided by the Mayor's Office is as follows, Omaha is divided into 5 regions: 1) North Omaha (black), 2) South Omaha (Latino), 3) East Omaha-- The Riverfront (Young Urban Professionals), 4) Midtown (Nieman Marxists), and 5) West Omaha (primarily white suburbanites afraid of north and south Omaha). Within this divided city, there were several points of focus in regards to poverty and conflict--First, inner city development projects (24th and Lake as well as South 24th St); Second, precarious zones (108th and Fort as well as 120th and L); Third Cultural zones (Near Northside; Old Market; and Midtown Crossing).

There have been some recent attempts to cross boundaries between the various sectors of the city--but these events have failed. The mayor has an interest in restarting this project, but in a different manner than before. The first attempts were held in West Omaha with the expectation that the West Omaha residents would pay. The North and South Omaha community did not show up, many could not get transportation to these sites. And many of the West Omaha residents felt it was unfair they should pay.



This meeting was incredibly informative, the mayor's office has agreed to provide access to all their staff and records in relationship to conflicts in Omaha. They are also interested in knowing how they are failing in their goals to help inner-city and low-income people. It is suggested that I continue to broaden the scope of my research North and South of Midtown Crossing to look at some of the other communities in struggle in this city.<sup>166</sup> Soon after my meeting, elections were held and a new mayor was elected. If the campaign was to be believed, the new regime was more concerned with suburban constituents (a feeling that is reflected by later interviews with community leaders in the urban core) and lowering the cost of governance. The new mayor was unresponsive to my attempts to meet and discuss Omaha, and how they viewed the various conflicts in the city--going so far as to impose a gag order on city officials.<sup>167</sup>

Several things are illuminated by this transition. First, that Omaha residents are more concerned with suburban dilemmas than urban crises, and felt that too much money was being spent on the inner city and ailing infrastructure. Second, there is an acknowledgement of how much security is tied to the economy and while the previous regime had a focus on the poverty and violence reduction, there as still the feeling that this was really an issue related to economics and jobs, and it was in the private sector that this would get sorted out for the most part. Overall, this suggests that while Omaha is on paper has a strong mayoral administration, the city government is largely an auxiliary

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<sup>166</sup> Craig Howell, Interview with the Mayor's Office, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

<sup>167</sup> "World-Herald Editorial: Mayor's Gag Order Unnecessary," *Omaha.com*, accessed April 28, 2014, <http://www.omaha.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20130614/NEWS0802/706149960/1677>.

actor to corporate interests as well as subject to the whim of largely suburban middle-class voters. The next section will look at other auxiliary actors within Omaha's urban core and development scheme.

### **Accidental Friendships**

I spent time talking with several of the shop owners in Midtown Crossing about owning and operating a business within the new space. Most people focused on making business work, making ends meet, and the typical experience of business owners--for them Midtown Crossing could be anyplace, except that the developers of this space had offered them deals in regards to rent and so forth that they could not discuss due to contractual clauses. One person I spoke to was a former business owner, the owner of an art gallery, who had since moved to another part of town as the space really wasn't right for artists to work or show: it was too sterile and corporate with the wrong potential clientele. I'll discuss the artists perspective later on. However, there was another perspective beyond business as usual, or failure to make it work: AP\_\_\_\_\_.

AP\_\_\_\_\_ is the owner of Arlan's, a barbershop in Midtown Crossing. At the time I spoke to him, he was the only black business owner in the development, and by and large, there are very few people of color found at Midtown Crossing, those that are often in the back rooms or kitchens with nice young white kids at the point of sale. In stark contrast, however, is AP\_\_\_\_\_ 's barbershop, and it is a space where you will find numerous persons of color at any time during the day.

I scheduled an appointment with AP\_\_\_\_\_ to have my haircut, I did so by walking in one day and asking for a cut--he took out a pencil and paper scheduling book

and read off some times. Most of his available times did not seem convenient for most people, but I had a very flexible schedule and was able to make any of the times work. As I glanced at his schedule book, it was clear that AP\_\_\_\_\_ did not like to rush a haircut, and there was ample space between each appointment. Further, he appeared to try and schedule appointments in such a way that he didn't have to work too late.

I returned the next day for my haircut, and this was the first time I had ever in my life visited a barbershop. AP\_\_\_\_\_ had stepped out for lunch and was running a few minutes late, so it allowed ample time to take in the decor. Standing in direct contrast to the bland front presented by Midtown Crossing, the interior of the shop was brightly colored with vivid reds and deep blacks. It neither fit the stereotype of a barbershop, nor was did it feel like a salon. There were not the old fashioned leather and wood chairs, but instead it was outfitted in a modern decor with two chairs and stands for straight razors and a station for washing hair. Moreover, it had numerous masculine flourishes: autographed sports jerseys and memorabilia; quotes about masculinity (or just taking it easy) on the wall. AP\_\_\_\_\_ returned, and we had a brief conversation about what I wanted, then he told me what he was going to give me, and made quick work that resulted in the best haircut I can ever remember.

AP\_\_\_\_\_ explains to me that he grew up poor in Omaha. He didn't see much opportunity growing up, so he left for while. He learned to cut hair while away, and then came back to Omaha and started cutting hair. One day on a fluke, he cut the hair of the (now long time former) mayor, Hal Daub. The mayor was in a hurry and asked for just a quick trim, but AP\_\_\_\_\_ said he would not sacrifice speed for quality. Hal Daub is a

person with money and connections in Omaha and was impressed with both his speed and skill, and kept returning to get his hair cut by AP\_\_\_\_\_, following AP\_\_\_\_\_ from location to location. Eventually, the two of them became friends, and their families became friends. When Midtown Crossing opened, Hal Daub helped AP\_\_\_\_\_ to get a loan to open his own shop. AP\_\_\_\_\_ states this shop is helping him to restore his credit and provide money: money he hopes to return to his community in North Omaha.<sup>168</sup>

AP\_\_\_\_\_'s story represents the inspiration and the hope of what redevelopment is supposed to be: places for local and low-income people to start businesses and siphon off money back into low-income communities. However, it must be pointed out that AP\_\_\_\_\_'s story is more about luck than it is about design of urban development. Without the accidental friendship of the former Mayor, AP\_\_\_\_\_ could never have opened a store, or shop due to bad credit. Moreover, given the lack of small businesses owned by traditional Midtown residents, it suggest that either this is not wanted here, many low-income people are faced with the same structural barriers that would have prevented AP\_\_\_\_\_, or both. The structural barriers to business ownership will be explored more in a later section.

### **An Oasis Amidst Urban Turmoil**

As my exploration expanded outward from Midtown Crossing to include more of Midtown Omaha, I decided to interview the developers at Creighton University. Creighton has been another major transformative force within Midtown--purchasing

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<sup>168</sup> AP\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, n.d.

several of the abandoned light industrial properties on the near north side, as well as purchasing numerous houses and other structures in the area surrounding their campus.

At Creighton, I met with a middle-aged man with silver hair and a youthful expression who has done development at Creighton for 10 years, and is a Creighton Alumnus. In 2003 Creighton published a plan for development that goes from the interstate to Cumming (around 6 blocks) and 16<sup>th</sup> street to 32<sup>nd</sup> street, and then some other stuff here and there. All of this development is pre-approved and only requires proper funds before they are allowed to knock down and rebuild. Creighton is modeling it's development after University of Cincinnati and the Over-the-Rhine district, as it sees a lot of similarities between the urban geography and the issues faced by both campuses in regards to violence and safety in the surrounding area.

So far, Creighton has focused on developing the abandoned and mostly abandoned industrial areas to the east, but has also purchased homes within the neighborhoods surrounding campus. The homes, I am told, are either abandoned, pose safety hazards, or houses that the neighborhood association has determined to be 'problem spots'. Further, I am told that their moves towards further development are being supported by other development in the area (Urban Village and Midtown Crossing). As they continue to develop they would like to see greater integration between Creighton's campus and surrounding institutions like Midtown Crossing, Josslyn Art Museum, and the NoDo project (started by Saddlecreek Records, but also including the convention center). Ideally they would like to see this whole area connected through parks, walking

paths and bicycle trails--a green space is currently being developed by the city. However there is presently a concern with safe flow of people around the areas.

Safety is partly an issue of traffic, but also violence. There is currently a major street that flows through the heart of Creighton: 24<sup>th</sup> street. When I inquired into how they wished to address this, I am told their official advocacy is for traffic controlling measures (e.g. Speed bumps), as overpasses are expensive, there is no interest in the city to develop them, and it's likely students won't use them anyway. The city has been open to the use of control measures, but won't do anything unless surrounding businesses also ok them. So far, the businesses along 24<sup>th</sup> street are resistant to anything that would impede the flow of potential customers. Consequently, the city has not done anything to address this safety issue on campus. Fortunately there have been no serious incidents involving students and traffic. Additionally, it would be nice to see light rail or mass transit projects, but he isn't overly optimistic about that. Another spot of concern is 30<sup>th</sup> street: going north on 30<sup>th</sup> is impossible from Dodge Street. This is of concern for Creighton for two reasons, partly for general traffic access to the campus, but primarily for the hospital and emergency vehicles coming from the south.

Regarding violence, it is a concern of theirs, but most of that has remained contained on the outside of their proposed borders of development. "All Omahans know about North Omaha, and those issues remain North of Cumming." However, there is a place on 16<sup>th</sup> Street where there are social services, and many homeless and troubled people walk along that edge of campus. Nonetheless, given the general concern for safety in the area around campus, they offer a shuttle service to 38<sup>th</sup> street and have free on

campus taxis. Much of this concern for safety is tied up with image: what people of Omaha think of the area Creighton is situated in, as well as what out of towners think when they come for campus visits. Creighton wants to portray an image of an oasis amidst urban turmoil. Additionally, they are concerned with broader area safety as many students are now residing in the new "flashy apartments" nearby and might unknowingly walk through rougher neighborhoods.

The school has some concern for the surrounding neighborhood as they expand. They understand the perception of being seen as colonizing space, but also want to keep the neighborhood associations aware of where the boundaries are to their expansion and demonstrate who a strong alliance between the school and neighborhoods will be mutually beneficial.

When I asked about the impediments to their development plans, whether it was funding, residents, or anything. I am met with the familiar refrain: City bureaucracy. While Omaha Mayor Mike Fahey was instrumental in approving the plan with his vision for the near north side of Omaha, subsequent administrations have created hassles. Right now, the biggest impediment created by the Suttle administration came from declaring Cumming and the surrounding area a development corridor: The gateway to the city. While it makes sense that Cumming would be a gateway as it becomes the street that leaves the airport and passes by the new College World Series ballpark, it has also implemented certain design standards and other requirements that have added significant costs and specifications to projects that were already funded and designed. At this point, my time with Creighton was up, but my inquest had been satisfied. However, given how

often irritation with city government came up, I decided it was time to meet with the City of Omaha planning department to understand their perspective and concerns.

### **Spread out and Costly to Plan**

I met with two men from the planning department for the city of Omaha. I ask them about how the planning department works here in Omaha, and their response alludes to the idea that it is largely dysfunctional. Particularly it is dysfunctional of late for two reasons: First, there is no department head, and this spot is likely to remain unfilled for a while; Second, there is conflict with the new mayor, not that there wasn't with the old mayor, but the general consensus with planning is that the focus needs to be on the urban core of Omaha, and this new mayor has little to no interest in addressing this part of the city.

As a city, I learn, Omaha really hasn't grown. Contrary to local portrayal, Omaha has not grown the way cities typically grow, rather it has annexed. Annexation means that the city has not become any more dense, but more spread out and more costly to plan. I'm told that "in 1960 Omaha was at density of 6,000 and today it's at 2,500. However, the new policy put forth by Omaha by Design suggests the city aim for 4,500." Over the past 50 years, Omaha has expanded, thus adding more persons, but lost more than half the density. Further adding to this is a planning code designed in the 1980s built around the suburbs; consequently does not inspire much as far as density and each time someone tries to construct a project related to density it causes the city to draft exceptions. It is the exceptions to the code, combined with lack of a department head, and typical bureaucracy that is likely the source for the developers' complaints around city planning.



Planning would like to help these developers out and attract more people to the urban core, but each project is an exception, and thus takes time. It is frustrating for both the planning department and those seeking to develop inside the city. Midtown Crossing has inspired a second wave of Midtown development (Urban Village and others), and now a third wave, that planning is currently addressing (row houses, and duplexes). The city is not leading densification, and it is not expected to occur under the new regime, rather the city is reacting to market demands for densification. Corporations are the ones pushing and inspiring the move back towards the urban core, as they are watching the trends around the rest of the US that show people moving into the city again.

Given the emphasis on how the city is reacting to corporate interests in redeveloping the city, I inquire into grassroots organizing by residents of Omaha. Are individuals without monetary interest in development petitioning the city for increased densification? "Grassroots organizing in Omaha is not great, but it occurs. Usually, when it happens, its project based--against things like Walmart or CVS, and they don't win. They do create a compromise and certain concessions by the businesses locating at a space." The best example of grassroots organizing has been Omaha by Design: it has created a sustaining organization over many years, that has drafted and proposed real policy changes, and has become it's own wealth powerhouse. Omaha by Design instituted a lot of design and aesthetic changes that have radically altered the look of the city--particularly in the western suburbs. Before Omaha by Design, the development out west was ugly, large block buildings in strip malls, with large parking lots, and the primary material was concrete. However, all new developments are required to have more

landscaping, green spaces, design flourishes that differentiate one development from another to break up the tedious sameness of the massive suburban space.

Other recent changes to Omaha's urban scene have been the Neighborhood Conservation/Enhancement (NCE) project. NCE is a deregulated space of urban property, or a neighborhood, that gets to set its own design standards. These are typically created for historic neighborhoods that have maintained a thriving identity, market, and culture. Spaces are deregulated in order allow the particular flavor and uniqueness of a space to build it up, rather than be restrained by the suburban codes of the rest of Omaha. NCEs have been instrumental in the development in parts of South Omaha and are being implemented around other 'organic' spaces where locals are committed to improving their own neighborhood.

Also new to Omaha are mixed uses buildings. Traditionally there have been separations between commercial and residential buildings (again, a suburban code). Partly inspired by Midtown Crossing's vision, but also trends in national development have caused the planning department to write code for how to build mixed use spaces into existing properties. Other changes to the city code that have been passed are related to international standards. International standards have recently changed to become 'previously existing international standards'; this means that older buildings do not have to fully comply with modern international standards, but international standards that existed at the time of construction (e.g. Whatever the standard was in 1910 for a building built in 1910). This change in standards has reduced the financial barriers to redeveloping older parts of the city.

## **A Clear Aesthetic Gap**

My final line of inquiry is into the classic dividing lines of Omaha: 72<sup>nd</sup> Street, which is the first unbroken street traveling north and south in Omaha, that also has a clear aesthetic gap between two parts of the city; The wall of industrial shells now condos along Cumming street and the North Free way that has divided North Omaha from the rest of the city. 72<sup>nd</sup> is a curious product of history. Prior to the 60s, Omaha did not extend past 72<sup>nd</sup> street, and it really wasn't until the 80s that Omaha went far beyond that. Areas west of 72<sup>nd</sup> street comply with the normal suburban divisions on an old model (one that required X amount of parking and placement of structures so many yards off the street, thus yielding large parking lots up front with buildings in back), and this explains why it is such an open , sparse and vacant feeling space. This has been revised recently, along with their attempts to rewrite the city planning code, any new development along 72<sup>nd</sup> street will require greater density and eliminate that aesthetic gap between two parts of Omaha; it's true that all the newer buildings that have gone in over the past year are much closer to the curb and tightly packed than the older structures. Planning states the effect of the code has been to create space between two parts of the city, and has perpetuated the perceived class conflict between an older part of Omaha and the suburbs. Nothing is being done to reintegrate North Omaha into the rest of Omaha. The planning department admits to me that some of this updating of the aesthetic code is really "window dressing" and pacifies certain conflicts between parts of the city.

Returning to Midtown Crossing and looking at the neighborhoods surrounding the space in transition and transformation I take in the character of the altered Midtown

space. It was a crisp day in the 50s as I take my motorcycle down to Midtown and over to Leavenworth and down past where the Cog Factory used to be, near the apartments I once lived in, past a stretch of automotive shops, gas stations, bars, and light residential. A sparse area, historically sketchy in regards to safety--the area felt essentially the same, but some signs were new and buildings painted, buildings had been demolished, and a few properties landscaped.

As I turned onto Turner Boulevard, the road that runs to the east of Turner Park, I noticed a similar feeling to this winding road that cut south from Dodge to Leavenworth between two churches blanketed in a bed of autumn leaves. In spite of the fall weather, it too seemed to have new life breathed into it. Buildings had been repaired and repainted, the Clarendon appeared "washed" with its white columns whiter, and the painted red brick fresh. Heading east on Harney due to a one-way restriction on Turner Boulevard, I was able to see the neighborhoods east of Midtown Crossing, just across the Gerald Ford Freeway (highway 75/US 480).

The neighborhoods east seemed untouched by time. Section 8 apartments, low-density commercial zones and lower income housing. This area was just as it looked when I lived downtown near here. Doubling back up Farnam, I cross Gerald Ford Freeway and Turner Boulevard and arrive at Midtown Crossing.

It's bold but sophisticated. World class but Omaha proud. It's energy and community, the place where fresh meets the future. **Always on. Always inviting. Always in style.** It's Friday night with friends at an exclusive, four-star restaurant and a Saturday morning stroll through beautiful Turner Park. It's luxury living with all the amenities. Convenience. Not Compromise. It's time you experienced 222,000-square-feet of diverse retail and extraordinary diversion. **An**

**unprecedented development in the middle of it all.** Mid Summer to Mid Winter. Mid Morning to Mid Night. And everything in between.<sup>169</sup>

Midtown Crossing definitely stands apart from the surrounding neighborhoods--it's a dense fortress of shopping, apartments and parking. The park is an oval drive with parking along it and green space in the center and east--new in the midst of old--wealth amongst poverty--luxury in the face of need. Convenience is a good word for it if you can afford it--easy to get to with plenty of parking, all your wants in one location.

I parked my sportster in a stall on Farnam and got off to take a walk around the premises. I met a young Latino waiting for the bus to take him to work, and said hello to an Arab in his ethnic garments, also walking to the bus stop. Inside the park I spotted two white men in their mid-thirties walking their dog and a white woman in her twenties jogging the center oval. Aside from these people it was pretty dead. It was also Wednesday at 10am on one of the first really chilly days of fall.

The food to be had in Midtown Crossing was largely American Urban Upscale Chic--it reminded me of the space between Courthouse and Clarendon in Arlington Virginia.

"If there was a development project in West Omaha and Mutual of Omaha, Kiewit and Berkshire Hathaway all agreed to build their headquarters there; Creighton agreed to build a hospital, a law school and a dental school there; the University of Nebraska was going to have a medical center and two research towers; the state of Nebraska was going to move all of downtown within five minutes of this location, would you invest there? Absolutely you would. So, why do we treat Midtown differently?"

Jeremy Reimer,  
co-principal of Urban Village Development<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> From the website [midtowncrossing.com](http://midtowncrossing.com)

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

After exploring the space for a bit, I headed west on Farnam towards the University of Nebraska Medical Center, and the headquarters of Mutual of Omaha, Kiewit, and Berkshire Hathaway. Immediately west of Midtown Crossing the density returns to far lower density buildings--once again, here, little has changed from when I lived in Omaha as I pass by the headquarters towards the Medical Center. I'm now in another familiar area--middle class homes, students, and hipster youth. There were people outside raking leaves and jogging. West of the headquarters, I notice that several of these shops have had new signs installed and this space appears similar to the areas due south of Midtown Crossing. Fresh coats of paint, but no new development.

I turn onto Saddlecreek, then again onto Dodge Street--the major east-west artery of Omaha--heading east, back towards Midtown Crossing. Dodge, the street that joins east Omaha to west Omaha runs past the two Universities, past the major shopping centers, past the bigger hospitals and past the large corporate headquarters, is also the street that divides north and south Omaha. The southern bank of this road appears to have received a boost from Midtown Crossings development; however, the northern bank appears much as the neighborhoods east of the Gerald Ford Freeway. North of Dodge, it still appears old, poor, and a bit run-down--the only new development is the new Creighton University Hospital standing starkly in a large clearing off Highway 75. Circling Turner Park, I take in a final first look at Midtown Crossing and head off to someplace warm.

From the circle that rings Turner Park it is easy to see the changing aesthetic of Midtown. From the old, lived in homes, people of color, and historic to the newly built

condos, mostly white middle-class, and modern. A geography in transition, from what has always been to something attempting to capture a sanitized version of the neighborhoods in a wholly inauthentic and sterile way, the way all-inclusive resorts capture the nature and culture of a space in a sanitized way for certain people to safely consume.

### **The Slumlord Phenomenon**

If the trend around the nation, is reflected by Omaha in the desire of people to move back to the city, and if everything is going as well as developers have stated, why hasn't this area transformed as quickly as other places across the nation? Is it merely the economic crisis that has slowed the process of transformation? Or, is it the barriers to entry that JR\_\_\_\_\_ pointed to? Or is it related to bureaucracy in the city and lack of useful codes for developing the inner core? A conversation I had with a local property owner, patron of the arts, and urban living enthusiast, as well as a separate conversations I had with other residents, and an organizer from Omaha Together One Community (OTOC) shed some light on this. While the larger economic factors likely play a not insignificant role in preventing massive development, and certainly the city planning places delays into projects, none of these ought to pose that high of a barrier given the touted success of the urban projects; what becomes increasingly important through my conversations with residents is the overwhelming number of renters in the area, moreover that most of the properties are owned by a handful of people some of which don't live in the area. This category of person is generally referred to as slumlords, due to the number of properties held with limited financial investment into upkeep or improvement.

According to OTOC, this is primarily an issue with the squats or vacant lots often held by out-of-state or out-of-country individuals or organizations.

While I heard numerous stories about the owners and so-called slumlords, not a single one of them returned my phone calls, e-mails, or letters. The following segment is a reflection of the landlords as seen through those who are owners, renters, and community activists dealing with issues of property use within the Midtown area.

One of first detailed accounts of the slumlord phenomenon within Midtown was from the Secretary of the Leavenworth Neighborhood Association (LNA), JT\_\_\_\_\_, one of the more active and historic of the Midtown Neighborhood Associations. A retired civil servant who came to Omaha to work for the VA, he now does several 'odd jobs' and is an elected member of the Papio-Missouri NRD. Among the activities that the LNA is involved in is neighborhood watch, driving patrol, and spring-cleaning--basically if there is something that needs to be done to improve the neighborhood, they do it.

JT\_\_\_\_\_, moved to Omaha over thirty years ago with his wife and one child, and decided to stay and have two more children. He has lived in Midtown of Leavenworth Street the entire time he's lived here, and as he puts it "is one of the few old-timers still around." JT\_\_\_\_\_ has been a member of the LNA since 1984, when it was created to fight a chemical plant proposed within the neighborhood; after this first success, the neighborhood association just kept working on small improvements.

The neighborhood seems moderately better than when I lived down here years ago (less condemned buildings and small retail). I ask JT\_\_\_\_\_ for a description of the neighborhood when he first moved here. "Sketchy. Seedy. There used to be more bars



and fights, and the go go club down the street," he says. He continues to talk about the trash and the graffiti, there has always been drugs, and until the recent closing of the go go club, prostitution was big. Prostitution is still here, but vastly reduced. There was never a whole lot of real direct violence or shooting the way other parts of Omaha have had, however "there was one time a body was found in a dumpster on Park Avenue, over there where Marlon Brando used to live. But hey, shit happens; no place is perfect."

I asked JT\_\_\_\_\_ why he stayed here to raise his family, and he provides a somewhat non-committal answer: "I was already here. I just set to improving my home, and neighborhood, and then bought a rental property on the same block. Something about my working class background makes me stay and improve a place rather than discard it and move on for greener pastures." Inquiring into his neighbors and who lives in this neighborhood, he says "No one here is typical--just look around at the diversity. That's Midtown. Though, probably, if I were to say... it's people looking for affordable housing. Renters, maybe." "This neighborhood's been rough at times. There were Bloods and Crips, then Mexican gangs--you could see the change by the changes in graffiti. The biggest problem here is respect of property." Property damage and property rights are important to JT\_\_\_\_\_, and it's clear as he discusses vandalism, theft, breaking into cars, but mostly graffiti. For 29 years, this has been the perpetual problem, but recently began to change after the Fortune 500s decided they wanted to stay local and not expand out west. First it was Kiewitt, then Mutual who did some facelifts, and then came more developers, like UV and Bluestone (who JT\_\_\_\_\_ informs me is tearing down Marlon Brando's home to build a new \$15 million building called "The Brando."

JT\_\_\_\_\_ calls Midtown Crossing "nice," but sees it primarily as a catalyst and what is needed is more "community places and less corporate places."

"Community brings legitimacy," says JT\_\_\_\_\_. There needs to be a way to promote the transformation of the rundown homes into places people can repair to live in, or rent out. While JT\_\_\_\_\_ is largely opposed to bureaucracy, he recognizes that it's a double-edged sword that would also protect tenants from landlords and hold owners accountable for properties. He brings up the large number of landlords and absentee landlords, and says that in Minnesota they passed laws that reduced the potential for slumlords and absentee landlords. There ought to be a person, or department that helps to facilitate the local and community transformation of neighborhoods, rather than "arbitrarily sticking to regulations that either aren't relevant, or end up making things worse for the neighborhood. Too many of the current regulations impede progress." JT\_\_\_\_\_ 's complaint is similar to JR\_\_\_\_\_ 's complaint about the city bureaucracy, regulations, and getting improvements done.

JT\_\_\_\_\_ further suggests that there are three categories of landlords: 1) local, 2) absentee, and 3) slumlord. Local Landlords are people who own a few homes in an area near their primary home. These are people who really care about the community and neighborhood because they are part of it; this ought to be encouraged. The absentee are non-residents of the neighborhood, and for JT\_\_\_\_\_ this includes suburbanites who own urban properties, because they are significantly distanced from the community and neighborhood: the needs and wants of residents. Absentee landlords are ambivalent agents, some are fine, others are less so, and only really get problematic when someone

dies or there is major work that needs doing. The final category, the slumlord, is a group that JT\_\_\_\_\_ hates. According to JT\_\_\_\_\_, slumlords come in two stripes: one that owns more properties than they can manage, get overwhelmed or are just negligent, and default into slumlord tendencies of not repairing, fixing, or improving the neighborhood through ownership; the second are people who own only a few properties, but are merely concerned with what they can extract from residents. JT\_\_\_\_\_ points to a house on the corner and says "that building, and a few others, but that building in particular was owned by a slumlord. He didn't take care of that place, and rented to the girls at Sheri's, and would often trade rent for sex. This did nothing for the building, or the neighborhood, and encouraged the negative aspects associated with Sheri's and the stigma of this area." It's because of this final category, the slumlord, that JT\_\_\_\_\_ wants regulations regarding property and property ownership. The view is that slumlords devalue a neighborhood and foster a negative attitude about a community that encourages problems within a community, whereas an owner connected to the neighborhood and community will inspire the positive aspects of a community.

Loosely related to the category of slumlord, though JT\_\_\_\_\_ seems to think of it as a direct relation, are the pawnshop owners. JT\_\_\_\_\_ sees these people as another agent solely interested in extraction from a neighborhood without any responsibility or relationship to it. Pawnshops in this area are often used to fence stolen goods; JT\_\_\_\_\_ sometimes catches people attempting to walk off with property to pawn at the local pawnshop. JT\_\_\_\_\_ feels the same agency that regulates the landlords could regulate the pawnshops.

JT\_\_\_\_\_ tends to have a stern approach to describing the problems of the neighborhood. The pawnshops, slumlords, gangs, drugs, prostitution, and so on. However, as we discuss more issues of the neighborhood, it becomes clear as he discusses the Latino immigrants the true nature of his beliefs. This is a largely immigrant area with a high population of Latinos, and it is often the Latinos that are preyed upon most by the slumlords and pawnshops. Further, JT\_\_\_\_\_ has no issue with people coming to America, "the more the better" as "this is what made America so great." However, he has a bit of an issue with people who come across borders illegally: "If they want to become citizens, or guest workers, in order to play by the rules, great! This teaches the proper conduct to their children and reflects more positively on the whole group who has immigrated. If you come and do something illegal, fine, just fix it--if you set up an illegal shop in the church parking lot, fine, rent a bay and continue, or whatever that process might be." JT\_\_\_\_\_ was a bit vague about what 'the rules' are, but it's a mixture of norms, legal process, and respect for property. Whatever else JT\_\_\_\_\_ has to say about violence, urban decay and renewal, it rotates around the issues of "civic pride and community"; that we need more of this. Too many people in Omaha go home and watch TV, not enough get involved in their community and neighborhood events. We need more people engaging and knowing their neighbors--really knowing their neighbors, and not just those on either side of their home, but the people blocks over.<sup>171</sup>

Another perspective on the slumlord issue came from a local activist from Omaha Together One Community (OTOC). I met with GA\_\_\_\_\_ at a bicycle store/coffee

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<sup>171</sup> JT\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

shop in a rapidly gentrifying part of Omaha known as Benson, a hipster haven with a number of music venues, bars, and a few curious stores run by long-time merchants. GA\_\_\_\_\_ has lived in Omaha for nearly 20 years, but "a lifelong Midwesterner" born in Detroit, moved to Cincinnati, went to School in St. Louis, and now lives here in Omaha. When I explained the basic premise of this project, GA\_\_\_\_\_ immediately understood the issue having lived in cities affected far more drastically than Omaha. GA\_\_\_\_\_ explains that within OTOC, GA\_\_\_\_\_ focuses on getting rid of slumlords and trying to get owners or the city to take responsibility for properties. To her, these neglected and abandoned properties are a major issue, but also a major potential resource for transforming the urban core. OTOC was founded decades ago, remains well organized, and has paid organizers rather than just volunteers. Recently this group was successful in getting the cities condemned housing budget increased from \$250,000 to over \$1million (until the new regime reduced it to just under \$1million). Like many I've spoken to who care about the urban core of Omaha, GA\_\_\_\_\_ is not happy about the new mayor, and fears that very little good will happen in the parts of the city that need it most while she is in Office.

According to GA\_\_\_\_\_, it costs about \$10,000 to demolish a neglected property, and if that money is federal money, then the property gets slated for particular projects (e.g. low-income housing), projects that the city has also not budgeted for. Therefore, most of the houses just sit, become squats, fall apart, catch fire, and become places for violence to occur. GA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that OTOC is not trying to just propose a broken windows approach, but to create ways for to help people who want

houses to get into these houses, or have them torn down if they are problems. "There is a surplus of property and a surplus of people who need homes!" GA\_\_\_\_\_ feels there ought to be a mechanism to connect those in need of homes with the surplus of property, and mentions as an example that Gary Indiana is now selling houses almost free to anyone who can demonstrate skill and means of renovating particular homes. While Gary suffered far worse from the deindustrialization of the Midwest, there is likely much we could learn from this model.

Slumlords in Omaha are a problem, but more interesting to GA\_\_\_\_\_ is the "unpaid taxes racket." GA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that there are a number of international and out of state actors who pay unpaid taxes hoping to do so for three consecutive years, after which they are able to foreclose on the property whose taxes they've paid. While this doesn't always work, it is apparently profitable enough that people are doing it, and leaving pockets of the urban core with owners who have absolutely no interest in developing or maintaining the property. I've witnessed this process happening out in the rural town I briefly lived in, but most of those people were seeking an underhanded way to get more farm or pasture land. GA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that OTOC is seeking to find ways to allow the city to place controls on this behavior, and take care of these neglected properties, moreover that it's a shame that so much land is fallow that could be used for community enrichment.

### **Little Silos Amidst a Hurting Population**

Other issues related to the neglected property in the urban core, is the growth of the suburbs and suburban culture. Suburbs focus on exclusion, isolation and interiority.

People in suburbs want to stay at home with their family or television rather than go out and make community. There is more community in the older urban neighborhoods, but suburban culture is filtering in there too with some of the new developments going on. Suburban life disconnects a person from geography and space--"people are fine with, and even happy to, drive across town for dinner or a movie only to immediately return home. Urban spaces encourage people to mix and mingle, go for a walk with the family, grab lunch, and then go to the park, and maybe get some ice cream. All without ever getting in a car!"

GA\_\_\_\_\_ also states that there is "a lack of jobs where people need them. A lack of jobs at all levels," and "no public transportation infrastructure to get people to those jobs." There's not enough grocery stores or small business, which GA\_\_\_\_\_ suggests won't happen until the city can do something about the issues of absentee landlords with empty lots. These parts of the city won't recover until we can address the use of urban space. Further, the parts that have been developed, aren't remotely in a location to affect those who could most benefit, such as the NoDo (North Downtown) district; or aren't outfitted for consumption by residents, such as Midtown Crossing. They are in effect "little silos amidst a hurting population." GA\_\_\_\_\_ is a very religious person, and while she is not proselytizing it comes out strongly in our dialogue, and she concludes our meeting with a statement: "The biggest issue facing Omaha is a crisis of hope" in which there is not a vision of a thriving city for those that need it most, "there is no light in the darkness." Further, for her, "while immigrants have their own issues, there is still hope that the generationally entrenched poor no longer have." It's easier to

help immigrants because they "still have the spirit of hope. It'll be better for their children."<sup>172</sup>

BL\_\_\_\_\_ lives in Midtown, a half block from Midtown Crossing, and are one of two property owners living on this street. He lives there with his partner, a lawyer at Union Pacific in a duplex they've converted into a single home that has been redesigned around the inevitability of aging, and they chose this location to remain for similar concerns 1 block from grocery and a few from entertainment, "god forbid we ever have to stop driving in this city that is only designed for cars." Originally from a small town in Western Nebraska, BL\_\_\_\_\_ has lived in Midtown for 45 years, and moved here right after college to teach, and while he taught in the suburbs, he moved to Midtown as the suburbs were "an architectural wasteland like most suburbs." The diversity of architecture in Midtown drew him here, and in 45 years he's lived both in north and south Midtown, and has no desire to leave this part of town. BL\_\_\_\_\_ and his partner do a lot of fundraising for the arts in Omaha, and are well connected to some very affluent people, stating that "even Warren Buffett has attended some of our functions, somehow." While they are fairly well off themselves, BL\_\_\_\_\_ is also friends with a lot of the lower class people who live in the neighborhood. He says he finds "a lot of fault with people who don't treat the poor with dignity. Perhaps that comes from growing up poor." He makes it a point to host regular barbecues for the neighbors, and encourage residents to pick food from his garden if they are in need. Many of BL\_\_\_\_\_'s neighbors are in and out of work, or are dealing with various addictions.

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<sup>172</sup> GA\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.



BL\_\_\_\_\_ and his partner are who JT\_\_\_\_\_ would have called 'local landlords' and JT\_\_\_\_\_ would likely be proud to associate with them. The couple own several rentals in the area, many of which they have lived in, and all of which they would be happy to live in. There is a five-plex that will be donated to the city after their death for Metro Community College teachers to live in with the income from rent going towards upkeep and a scholarship fund for LGBTQ youth. Some of the properties, including the one they just moved from, are located in more affluent parts of Midtown. The one they moved from was located near Joslyn Castle (seven blocks west). BL\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that he's actually far more comfortable in this part of town, though most people would call it "seedy." He explains, "while we do have issues of college kids partying, and domestic disturbances, it was worse by Joslyn Castle! There were always functions and parties going on over in that area, but no one to hold accountable. Her at least, you can go over and talk to the college kids while they are hungover the next day: you can talk about repositioning speakers to control noise, impress upon them to clean up the next day, and so on." BL\_\_\_\_\_ tells me he has no issue escalating conflicts in the neighborhood, but prefers to do it civilly first, with "diplomacy and guile" he learned from years as a teacher.

BL\_\_\_\_\_ 's biggest issue in the neighborhood is not with those who live here, but those who don't: the slumlords and absentee landlords. He mentions two in particular by name ~~Jim O'Brian and Andy Gustafson~~. Of the two he, he tells me he has a feud with one of them, and ambivalence towards the other. The one he has ambivalence towards is a business ethics professor at Creighton who at least helps his tenants get off drugs and

alcohol, provides them with some work and cheap rent, but doesn't do much upkeep of his 60 properties, as well as neglects to do basic things like mow the yard. However, thanks to BL\_\_\_\_\_'s gentle pressure (and the fact that he knows the business department head at Creighton) have improved things. The other one, though is "a rightwing libertarian nut" who doesn't take care of his properties, charges a cheap rent, but due to the state his properties are in "cheap is still too high!" BL\_\_\_\_\_ has found a number of creative ways to try to deal with this character, and usually enlists the neighborhood in his schemes, though it's well known who's idea it is. One such scheme was to erect a large sign on a property that had gone to squat stating "This property belongs to ~~Jim O'Brian~~, his number is XXX-XXXX feel free to give him a call." Additionally, he has trained the neighborhood to respond to noise complaints with a two step process: first, call the authorities, second call the landlord. BL\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that all of this has resulted in threats by both ~~Jim~~ and his wife, and his daughters. BL\_\_\_\_\_ won't back down. BL\_\_\_\_\_ says that this neighborhood is a good neighborhood with good albeit poor people, and it needs people to stand up for it against the slumlords and bullies.

Absentee landlords are another issue, but there isn't a physical presence or person that can be attached to it. He can, and does, go over to slumlords homes and knock on their door. But he can't do this for the absentee landlord. This means his tactics are less creative, and usually result in just calling the police, then calling the landlord.

### **Would Rather Shoot a Playground Full of Kids**

I ask BL\_\_\_\_\_ about the other conflicts in the neighborhood, about violence and so forth. BL\_\_\_\_\_ tells me there are drug and alcohol issues, and domestic violence, but nothing else of note. Except, he tells me, "One nice day, I was out in the garden digging doing some work and I heard a couple of pops." He really didn't think much of it given the lack of gun violence in the area, but he learned later that it had been gunfire. "Someone had stolen a small flask of vodka from Wohlner's, and the owner chased the guy out of the store through the neighborhood over to a park where he shot several times, missing the shoplifter. The shoplifter got away, the cops were called, and when they arrived the store owner lied about the shooting." BL\_\_\_\_\_ follows this up with a short rant about "2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment nuts" who would rather "shoot a playground full of kids on a nice day while missing a petty criminal" than give up their guns. Nothing happened to the store owner except obstruction of justice and a slap on the wrist.

I ask BL\_\_\_\_\_ if the other owners on the street are as involved in the neighborhood as they are. "Goodness no! We thought another gay couple would be good progressive people that we would have some affinity with! But it turns out, that they are two of the most racist and bigoted people who could have moved in! They're constantly fighting with the Vietnamese refugees next door, and shouting at guests." There is a surplus of driveways per house in the neighborhood, and BL\_\_\_\_\_ explains that guests often (and easily) get confused over what driveway belongs to what house. "The new couple is also very suspicious and antagonistic towards people of a different shade. Just go outside and look down the block--well don't do it today, it's raining, but on a nice day it looks like the UN! Africans, Middle Easterners, Asians, Latinos and so on walking up

and does the street in various outfits of traditional, modern, and some hybrid in between. "There is also increasing diversity of class thanks to Urban Village, though this gentrification is kept in check by the slumlords." BL\_\_\_\_\_ explains he has mixed feelings about UV. While he appreciates the care the UV has taken with the historic buildings, when they first opened up, JR\_\_\_\_\_ referred to the residents as cockroaches, and stated that UV was the exterminator. This upset him as both a landlord and resident and he has trouble shaking that first impression. This is his neighborhood and he lives here! Bob agrees with Jim that landlords ought to take care of their properties and have a certain responsibility to the neighborhood and to treat residents with respect and dignity, "certainly not call them cockroaches!" BL\_\_\_\_\_ grew up poor, and sates "we can't continue to dismantle the welfare system. Everyone is entitled to a decent place to live. A decent price on rent. Basic dignity. Rich and poor alike have addictions--it's just the poor are less likely to have the support networks or means to get help when needed."

From here, BL\_\_\_\_\_ turns on the group he calls the fathers of Omaha, a group that refers to the elites, individuals and corporations with the dollars to set policy. These people continue to be backwards, and promote destructive approaches to dealing with problems. While "thankfully they aren't still doing what they did to North Omaha" when they cut it off from the rest of the city and built a freeway through the heart of it. "The continued promotion of white flight" is only going to make it worse, and "the current mayor is totally in support." Further, BL\_\_\_\_\_ talks about the culture of Omaha Police, and how it refuses to protect minorities (something expressed by many persons of

color), however BL\_\_\_\_\_ is referring to the LGBTQ community, and how Omaha Gay Pride "was held in Council Bluffs! Because the police refuse to guarantee safety." Omaha's refusal to protect minority rights is so strong that recently Union Pacific had to build offices in Austin Texas to attract the right talent they needed. "Texas! Though it is Austin, which is an anomaly in Texas, but still. If this hostility towards gays continues we may have to seriously talk about moving to Iowa."

Turning the conversation back towards gentrification vs. slumlords, I ask BL\_\_\_\_\_ about Midtown Crossing's affect on gentrification of the neighborhood, and the barriers that slumlords create to this process. BL\_\_\_\_\_ suggests that it's more complex than it might seem at first: "Take Wholner's vs. Brix. Wholners has greater diversity as it attracts and hires locals. Brix doesn't--everyone there, for the most part, is from West Omaha, including staff." Moreover, BL\_\_\_\_\_ points to the various free public events (Jazz on the Green, and Screen on the Green). While they are designed to attract a whole array of people, and they do, they don't necessarily attract the neighbors: "Last night at the movie I noticed there weren't any of the neighbors, or families--they were showing that pirate movie with Johnny Depp--so I asked about it and most of the people didn't even know it was going on!" In general, however, BL\_\_\_\_\_ concedes that Midtown Crossing is geared toward elites, particularly people who have lived in bigger cities, and are used to a less suburban scene. "Midtown Crossing provides a similar experience at a cheaper price [...] Though they will soon find that better more creative options exist nearby already well established with locals." He says, they soon get tired of the fairly mediocre array in Midtown Crossing and leave for the authentic

Midtown experience. BL\_\_\_\_\_ really isn't as concerned about gentrification as he is about the slumlords. He just wants to see the place improve and would prefer it to stay diverse. "There's a lot of beauty preserved in Midtown, and it wasn't gutted for business like downtown and the high-rises there. It wasn't burned or cut off and sent into poverty like North Omaha. And it's certainly not the desolate wastes of the suburbs. It was merely ignored by the elites and the racists and by business and left to stagnate. *Poverty preserved the beauty.*" BL\_\_\_\_\_ shares a story of an Italian city that sided against the Medici and were subsequently cut off from any further prosperity for 500 years "until some hippies discovered it and rehabbed it; then a bunch of movies got shot there."

Midtown Crossing's architecture is not inspiring, BL\_\_\_\_\_ uses the word "sterile" to describe it. "What they did well was blend the color in the with the old and beautiful art deco building of Mutual of Omaha. But the rest of the aesthetic lacks in interest. It's almost like Mutual couldn't afford to do it correct, so they did it this way. They did it in the midst of a recession--a recession that's lasted 7 years, and no one thought it would--skillful smart educated people can't find jobs--no wonder nothing stays open. None of the elites have been trained to go to Midtown Crossing yet, they still go downtown. Though that's changing as the violence from North Omaha moves into downtown." BL\_\_\_\_\_ suggests that the increased violence relates back to the police culture not protecting minorities. There has been an increase in racial diversity in downtown, and there "is not enough political will to protect places that aren't safely white. So, white people just move--many are moving to Midtown now. Another issue for downtown is that Omaha now has more options for entertainment. West O has junk,

Elkhorn is trying to be something in their downtown, there's NoDo, Benson, and other places."

Further resistance to the gentrification of Midtown lies with Creighton University. BL\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that "Creighton is gobbling up all the land." Which it does have a large swath already planned for development as mentioned previously. "The school is comprised of many East Coast students whose families have lots of money, but the kids couldn't get into Harvard." While not personally affected by this, he has several long-time friends who live nearby who have been affected by it. Their voices will be shared in later sections. Throughout my time with BL\_\_\_\_\_, I get the overwhelming feeling he is a strong believer in hospitality--hospitality that breeds security. In spite of being gay and wealthy, he is well liked and secure here. He makes it a point to host people of all classes and get to know them, help them as he can. Perhaps this is the greatest insult provided by slumlords, and why gentrification is less of a concern: slumlords don't offer anything, they purely extract, and at least gentrification attempts to bring something to a neighborhood, though they do it in an awkward insulting manner, they do so with sincere intention to bring beauty and prosperity. "One thing most upper class people--especially the ultra wealthy--never learned about the storming of the bastille: You can't put that many ultra wealthy in the midst of a bunch of people struggling to get by without finding a way for them to interact, blend, mix, and learn from each other without getting your castle stormed. Midtown needs to learn how to do this."

BL\_\_\_\_\_ leaves me with a point of irony: "That derelict park that was Turner Park, before it became Midtown Crossing, was the fault of Mutual of Omaha. Mutual tore

down buildings, bars, and restaurants to put up some parking structures and some ugly functional 60s-style buildings. They destroyed the neighborhood. They're responsible for the neglect and collapse of the park. Yet, decades later they go and tear down those same buildings, plus a few more historic architecture, and create Midtown Crossing and win awards for renovating the neighborhood and park they directly created."<sup>173</sup>

From my conversation with BL\_\_\_\_\_, I am reminded of a passage from Zukin's "The Cultures of Cities" in which she states:

Groups cannot guarantee that their idea of aesthetic quality will limit future real estate development. Neither can they always persuade other cultural communities that aesthetics is the best measure of the public good.

Planned or not, a culture capital thrives in the intersection of the business, nonprofit, and arts economies. Conflicts are bound to occur over whose vision dominates objects and space: that of real estate markets or cultural communities. Even if cultural strategies of economic revitalization succeed, it is not inevitable that the economic values of the space overwhelm the cultural power of the symbols.<sup>174</sup>

### **A Sketchy Ghetto Neighborhood Where People Still Get Shot and Such**

Finally, I had a series of short conversations with residents of the neighborhood who rent from the slumlords. Many were Creighton students in their 20s (trending male), a few were older (in their 40s and 50s) and primarily men, the minority seemed to be families, either because I didn't come in contact with any due to the sort of activities families engage in versus where I conducted my research around the neighborhood, or because the families didn't rent from the slumlords. Most of these people choose to put up with the conditions because the rent is cheap, and the location is great. Students can walk to school (or merely sleep in a little longer), walk to various good bars, and find various

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<sup>173</sup> BL\_\_\_\_\_. Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

<sup>174</sup> Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, p. 151.



nearby places to study. Out of state students don't have to worry about vehicles and due to campus rules, living off campus is preferable to most. The older men tend to not care too much about the conditions, preferring extra disposable income so long as their residence keeps the elements to a minimum, as many of the homes suffer from drafts, leaks, poor insulation, or are absent air conditioning. The older men seemed largely indifferent (or oblivious) to the surrounding issues, and weren't too concerned about losing their cheap place to stay.

The stories of the students were neatly captured by my conversation with Andy, a Medical Student at Creighton University who was in the midst of studying for some test and far too eager to take a break from it. He'd already been placed into a residency program he wanted, and just had to not screw it up. Andy, came to Creighton from Oregon, he grew up in a wealthy suburb outside the city of Portland. He enjoys the edginess of his apartment, certain "it'll be a good story for my later years when I'm making good money." He can be the hip physician with street cred that slummed it for a few years living in the ghetto while his parents paid 40grand per year for medical school.

Andy lives just two blocks northwest of Midtown Crossing, and rents from one of the infamous slumlords that BL\_\_\_\_\_ mentioned. He comes to Midtown Crossing to study at the coffee shop, or the sandwich shop, but nothing else. He says the "vibe of this place is weird. It doesn't fit the neighborhood. It's a strange what they built in the midst of a sketchy ghetto neighborhood where people still get shot and such." Andy explains how he prefers to go out to the divey places around the area--the places where the neighborhood locals go. "This place feels too suburban with all the chain restaurants. I'm

from a bigger city, and we have all these there, too." He also doesn't like coming to this place as he doesn't trust any of the stores will be open for very long. The high cost of rent practically requires them to be chains, and in the two years he's lived here, he's seen place after place close down and start up, but mostly it seems close down. Particularly the local shops close down. "In order to stay here you need a certain amount of capital to get established--money not available to the average JO \_\_\_\_\_ looking to start up a store." Andy suggests that the cost of rent likely drives the cost of goods up, and that's probably why you don't see too many of his neighbors coming here, "that and there's better stuff in the neighborhood that they already know about."

Andy tells me about the place he lives, which is typical of the apartments he's rented in the area. At first he moved every lease cycle to try and get a better building with the same cheap rent. His current building has drafty windows, one is cracked and he's taped cardboard to the pane, and either the heat doesn't work or the insulation is thin. In the summer the window unit only sort of works, but mostly just leaves you with a sort of clammy feeling. Each of his prior locations had a similar mix of issues, at least this one doesn't leak, or smell moldy all the time, and the insects aren't too bad. Andy has rented from both of the infamous slumlords, and he says neither is very good about fixing things. "The one who is also a Creighton faculty at least will send someone over. Eventually. Though, what skills they have is always questionable. It may not have been worth the hassle--it sometimes makes it worse." Both of them are buying up houses as they vacate, as well. On the bright side, he says, "while rents are rising in the neighborhood, his has always stayed the same."

I ask Andy about the other people who rent in the buildings he's been in. He tells me that his co-renters have always been pretty decent. Half of them are students. However, his neighbors are sometimes another story. "One place I lived I could hear the couple fighting--yelling and screaming at each other until late into the night. I could never make out what they were fighting over, but it was most nights." Further, he says that there is still ample drugs and prostitution in the neighborhood. It was only about six months back that the pimp and dealers across the street were kicked out. "They weren't kicked out by the presence of Midtown Crossing, or other development going on in the neighborhood. They weren't even kicked out because the landlord was upset with them. It was the pressure from the neighbors. One old man in particular--the kind of older black man you always see in the movies who sits on the stoop and shuffles up and down the street doling out advice about life and decorum." As the story goes, the pimps and dealers created a fair amount of neighborhood conflict, and various neighbors were getting sucked in to the conflicts, or trying to mitigate the conflicts, and so on. "Eventually the neighbors made it difficult enough for the pimps and dealers to do their business that they moved." Before returning to his studies, Andy tells me, "this is an interesting neighborhood, and it has a lot of seedy elements I don't tell my parents about. But I also never feel too unsafe."

Andy's portrayal of his Midtown experience reminds me of a Disneyland ride, to recall Zukin's conception of Disneyfication of urban space. If Midtown Crossing is Main Street USA, then Andy's sojourn into the neighborhood is a ride on "Pirates of Caribbean" where he can safely watch the pirates chasing women and the suggestions of

violence, but know that he is just floating through, and never really part of it. Maybe he'll get a souvenir keychain to remember it by.<sup>175</sup>

### **A Brief Outline of Hell**

What's clear here, is that in spite of the large-scale transformation of the Midtown through millions of dollars and corporate interests, they have yet to fully gentrify the neighborhoods with the speed seen in other parts of the country. This may in part be due to the recession, it may also be in part due to the suburban culture of Omaha. However, it is also clear that a good chunk of the resistance to this transformation comes not from residents fearful of displacement, though residents do not seem connected to the ongoing transformation; the major resistance to gentrification is from the slumlords who, for the time being at least, make more from extracting rent than from property sales, in fact the price per property according to JR\_\_\_\_\_ is going down, where rent is staying constant. It makes no sense to sell, but it does make sense to continue to buy. Which makes for an interesting economic question about the ecology of the space: will corporate interests continue to try to transform the space and will this transformation ever drive property values up to where it makes more sense to sell than to hold and rent; or do slumlords hold sufficient monopoly that corporate interests will be forced to stop their transformation of space? Regardless, neither of these approaches benefits the historic residents of the urban core: corporate projects out class local consumption habits and slumlords are primarily seeking to siphon off assets with as little investment into the product as possible.

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<sup>175</sup> Andy Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

The initial question around urban violence in both its physical and direct forms remains largely unchanged by the corporate transformation of space. Drugs and prostitution, direct violence (both domestic and communal), and structural violence are still a factor facing low-income residents. The particular living conditions of the masses remains unchanged due to the monopoly of slumlords on space, combined with no increase of money. The money that is spent here now, does not stay in the neighborhood, but returns back to the suburbs. In many ways the development of Midtown Crossing is merely an extension of the spatial atomization of suburban life. Further while middle class suburban life becomes increasingly decentralized and expansive, the urban poor have become increasingly rooted. Privilege here can be seen in a territorial and geographic aspect.

The forms of violence appear to be in an equilibrium, in that the strategy to address poverty, crime, and the like have done little except remove the presence from the park, but not the neighborhood. However, while those negative aspects from have been removed from view, which may be seen as positive, in the next segment we shall see how the transformation of the park has provided issues for many residents on a real and symbolic level. The imposed aesthetic changes on the park "is also a powerful means of controlling" that "symbolizes 'who belongs 'in specific places." It is not merely about architecture or "historic preservation or local heritage." But the sort of culture the corporations want around them.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*, pp. 1-2.

In certain ways this is reminiscent of what Barrington Moore described in "Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy" while talking about Germany and Japan's reactionary capitalist revolution. Whereas Moore was discussing changes occurring by a landed upper class on a rural peasant society, in both cases only enough changes are made to generate a sufficient surplus that it can appropriate and market a profit: a system Moore referred to as "labor repressive." In this system, Moore is discussing fascism as a revolution from above. However, Moore mentions three common factors of fascism that are missing from this scenario: Primarily, that "the commercial and industrial class" is strong and independent enough that they effectively rule, and don't require partnerships with the government bureaucracy and what passes for aristocracy in the US; rather it is reversed here. Also, there is no strong plebeian anticapitalism. The only factor that remains is the transformation without altering of social structures which requires increased militarism seen here through the overwhelming security presence, as well as a push for a more centralized state bureaucratic apparatus.<sup>177</sup> Further, while fascism may be understood as the marriage of the corporate with the state, this suggests that corporate/state marriage does not necessitate a fascist entity, though it may still remain dominant, oppressive, and violent.

Building a city depends on how people combine the traditional economic factors of land, labor and capital but it also depends on how they manipulate symbolic languages of exclusion and entitlement. The look and feel of cities reflect decisions about what – and who--should be visible and what should not, on concepts of order and disorder, and

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<sup>177</sup> Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Democracy and Dictatorship: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Beacon Press, 1993).

on uses of aesthetic power. In this primal sense, the city has always had a symbolic economy. Modern cities also owe their existence to a second, more abstract symbolic economy devised by 'place entrepreneurs'; (Molotch 1976), officials and investors whose ability to deal with symbols of growth yields 'real' results in real estate development, new businesses and jobs.<sup>178</sup>

This process can be understood through Neil Smith as "the resegregation of urban life, towards the aggressive reclaiming of old privileges." And as Jeff Ferrell goes on to describe, it is the "destruction of the public sphere," and the closing off of public spaces in such a way that no nonscripted forms of interaction may occur. Ferrell goes on to suggest that as public spaces become closed through this aggressive resegregation, so too does the conception of America as a melting pot.<sup>179</sup> However, while this may be true to for the park, the neighborhood itself may still hold fervently to the melting pot and storied diversity of the American project. The slumlords act as a bulwark against what Lewis Mumford described in "A Brief Outline of Hell" represented well by Midtown Crossing in it's outward expression of power and callous destruction of the "many-threaded and variegated cultural pattern" that organically existed around Turner Park. This heavy-handed approach seen across the nation by corporate interests is, according to Mumford, "deeply antagonistic to every valuable manifestation of life."<sup>180</sup> This development is part of the "Contemporary campaigns to cleanse" public space under the guise of "civility" using "visual aesthetics to evoke a vanished civic order." A civic order

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<sup>178</sup> Zukin, *The Cultures of Cities*.

<sup>179</sup> Ferrell, *Tearing down the Streets*, p.12.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., p. 18.

that Jeff Ferrell decodes as 'order,' or the "absence of upheaval and unrest, a world in which the marginalized go quietly into the good night of injustice." <sup>181</sup>

These issues of aesthetics and understanding suggest that emerging configurations of urban control are designed not only to regulate and reclaim public space occupied by homeless folks and street musicians, but to regulate the meaning of such people and spaces as well. From Disney's Times Square to Dunier's sidewalk vendors, the city's public spaces--parks, streets and street corners, shopping districts, residential enclaves--function not only as utilitarian arrangements, but also as deep repositories of meaning for those who own them, occupy them, move through them. Put simply, public space always becomes cultural space, a place of contested perception and negotiated understanding, a place where people of all sorts encode their sense of self, neighborhood, and community. <sup>182</sup>

Public space is as much symbolic as it is physical. The presence of particular class or population as well as physical and aesthetic markers create "barriers, both real and symbolic," and this presentation of public space reveals "more than just the dynamics of contemporary urban redevelopment. They mark the changing boundaries of private property and public propriety, the emerging images of the city and its residents, and the force remapping of cultural identity and public community." <sup>183</sup>

This all serves to remind that "to view gentrification as a process that happens to a space is wrong." There is deliberate intent by various "actors working on a free market to "transform" an urban space" but more than that "it is a complex system that involves some residents, outsiders, the city/state apparatus, and owners of property." <sup>184</sup> Urban neighborhoods are constantly changing "and perceives itself to be perpetually under siege from invaders of one kind or another" whether that is the homeless, drug dealers,

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid., pp. 228-229

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., p. 14

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*, p. 189.



prostitutes, or it is the corporate interests and development interests looking for cheap property.<sup>185</sup>

## **Act II Concluding Comments**

This section has explored elite ethnopraxis in the postindustrial city. It elaborates in an intentionally problematic and messy way the actions and beliefs of elite citizens impact more vulnerable populations as well as the physical geography of the urban setting. The effects of the elite ethnopraxis on the city relate to domination, design, and division.

Their activities are a form of domination, however unfair that categorization may seem, the crude analogy of class warfare is less fair: warfare implies intent to conquer or harm an enemy or other, whereas this domination is one done with intent to help. The unfortunate reality of the elite ethnopraxis, is that when exported as an aesthetic mode it cannot help but be a violent and dissonant act that serves the corporate status quo even while proposing to transform.

Elite metrics for aesthetic good are different than other urban aesthetics, and the function of capital and power within the city allow elites to impose a particular design upon other citizens: a class based vision of the good, a harmonious society reinforced through visual forms of control. In essence, to design a social landscape in which performances are more or less scripted and knowable: social spaces are to be stable, civil and predictable. This design mimics the vision of suburbia in which life is planned and organized according to performance (e.g. shopping, living, working, commuting).

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

The suburban mimicry contributes to the final effect: division. Ironically, while the mode of intervention here is aimed at designing modern live/work/play spaces within older neighborhoods, it serves to further divide. The division presents itself in stark visual ways, creating what was referred to both as “an oasis” and a “silo” within a neighborhood with a particular performance of history and class. These separate spaces then become known as successful interventions into neighborhoods affected by history of elite profiteering, described in visual ways that functionally erect symbolic markers between elite and other, contrasting new/old, clean lines/weathered, planned/organic, etc. This division provides an aesthetic by which we can know who belongs and who does not.

The next section will explore the reaction and resistance to the domination, design, and division related to urban (re)development. How is this aesthetic perceived by the historic citizens of space? How are they responding to the intervention?

### ACT III: RESISTANCE

#### Resources of the City

Current urban arrangements, we now know, are not there simply because they maximize efficiency, or because they follow a uniform pattern of capitalist exploitation. Instead, they represent the physical and social consequences of cumulative strivings by capitalists bent on profit, rentiers seeking property returns, and neighborhoods groups striving for use values from place. Each group, within its limits, has left no stone unturned in the attempt to mobilize and manipulate every political, cultural, and economic institution on its behalf. The city, the meeting ground of these activities, is the result of all this work and will be modified, transformed, or undone through similar efforts in the future.<sup>186</sup>

The quote by Logan and Molotch suggest that the resources of the city and neighborhood have been maximized by all actors and is in constant flux. Further, Logan and Molotch state that the Market cannot be relied upon to work as they are 'supposed' to work in the urban neighborhood because these markets are "especially fictitious," and "[a]ny program of serious reform must wind down the growth machine system through which places (towns, regions, and nations) contort their cultural, physical, and social agendas in order to attract capital." U.S. Cities ought to instead compete collectively against "the growth machine system that has captured them."<sup>187</sup> David Harvey states that "The surface appearance of conflicts around the built environment--the struggles against

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<sup>186</sup> John R Logan and Harvey Lusk Molotch, *Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), p. 292.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

the landlord or against urban renewal--conceals a hidden essence that is nothing more than the struggle between capital and labor." <sup>188</sup>

Harvey's statement may be true, but due to the deep level of internalization by the elite class, they do not see it as such, and are not operating with the level of intent inferred by the quotation. In most cases, individuals sincerely believe they are doing good work promoting capitalism and perpetuating the struggle between capital and labor, primarily because they have benefitted from this arrangement, and believe it is possible for all people to also benefit. With the greatest intentions, and perhaps deepest love for their fellow human they inflict violence on the poor people by destroying and disrupting their neighborhood: "Poor people's neighborhoods are the most vulnerable to social and physical transformation." Unfortunately, the "poor are more likely than other groups to be displaced, and at least for the unemployed and those who have always had trouble finding a stable place to live, dislocation" affects them in disproportionately negative ways. <sup>189</sup>

The crux of poor people's urban problem is that their routines--indeed their very being-- are often damaging to exchange values. Low-income people pay less rent than the affluent. Poor people's low buying power makes them disfavored customers and the rich, who do have money to spend, don't want to live near them. Some institutions, for example, elite universities and high-tech firms, similarly find their goals thwarted by proximity to low-income neighborhoods. Local officials often adopt an active role, therefore, in eliminating the daily round of the poor, even though the pawnshops, taverns, bookie joints, and so forth are as important to those without money as the analogous boutiques, restaurants, and corporate office complexes are to the rich. Indeed, efforts at urban "revival are often schemes to break, through either wholesale land clearance or selective destruction, just this chain of complementary relationships within poor areas. The only strong debate revolves around strategy: whether to close the tavern, arrest the prostitutes, relocate the mission, or destroy a group of physical structures that serve a use for the useless.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid., p. 112.

Often justified by planning officials' misleading cost-benefit analyses that show that the disruption of poor people's neighborhoods will create the least loss in taxes and land values, the life chances of the poor are sacrificed on behalf of profits and rents enjoyed by people living elsewhere.<sup>190</sup>

So far, we have really only seen one side of the conflict, and understood it from an elite view of poverty and urban renewal. Even when these issues are complicated by those involved in the structural transformation, the view has still been from the top, and filtered through an individual's own capital interests in space and development of neighborhood. How has this change affected the historic residents? What, if anything has been the response to such changes? As the city planning department told us, the history of grass roots organizing against corporate imposition has been weak, and often results in little more than window dressing.

### **State of Emergency**

"The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" wrote Walter Benjamin. While Benjamin was primarily discussing fascism, a lesson abstracted from here is that the success of an oppressive ideology comes when "in the name of progress its opponents treat it as a historical norm." In this case, displacement of the poor, gentrification, influx of capital, and so on are treated as norms. The question is how these norms are interpreted and understood by those being displaced and oppressed by it?<sup>191</sup>

The bulk of the interviews for this project occurred with members of the underclass--which is anyone who is not setting the policy of redevelopment in the urban

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., pp. 112-113.

<sup>191</sup> "Walter Benjamin On the Concept of History /Theses on the Philosophy of History," accessed April 19, 2013, <http://www.sfu.ca/~andrewf/CONCEPT2.html>.

core, and subsequently benefitting from it. Even the middle class residents here are underclass, as while they may benefit from some of the changes, they also lose out, as we shall see, and they are already aware, of what already makes this part of town such a dynamic and inviting space to live. These are all the people who once were instrumental in creating the atmosphere of midtown, but are now largely subject to its rearrangement.

### **Socially Conscious Middle-class**

#### **I'm not sure I really knew what racism was, even growing up in the South, until I moved here**

KW\_\_\_\_\_ works as the director of individual giving for a major non-profit in Omaha, and sits on the board of several smaller community organizations. Not originally from Omaha, but Memphis and a long-time resident of New York, he moved here with his wife (who is originally from Omaha and a lifelong midtown resident) and he settled in Midtown with his wife. KW\_\_\_\_\_ is a person of color and mixed race, part Asian and part Black. He is also a third generation college graduate and states his experience is different than most people of color living in Omaha.

KW\_\_\_\_\_ explains to me how he sees his neighborhood and contrasts it with his perception of most Omaha neighborhoods: "My neighborhood is a community where neighbors help each other out, and talk to each other, and share what little they have-- petty crime is low, probably because most people have so little they assume there's nothing to steal. Most people don't have cars, and if they do they tend to be old cars from 'buy here pay here' places--it's either that, or they're students. Access to public transportation is important in this neighborhood." Public transportation means access to jobs and the hope to improve the lives of their children. Contrasting that with the much of

the rest of Omaha, KW\_\_\_\_\_ says, "most people have cars here, and transportation doesn't concern them. People elsewhere also seem a lot more isolated into their homes. No one knows their neighbors. People don't help each other out."

KW\_\_\_\_\_ worries about gentrification now that Midtown Crossing has been built, and Urban Village is attracting people with wealth into the neighborhood--people more in his income level; while he could afford to live in an Urban Village property, he refuses to contribute to radical gentrification processes or support the company of someone widely accused of racism (referring back to the cockroach comment). The biggest issue with gentrification here as KW\_\_\_\_\_ sees it, is that Dodge street is where all the major transit lines lay, and this part of town is rare in that it has options for transportation, and as you move north or south of Dodge, the access dries up. Right in Midtown you can get to plenty of jobs in 15 minutes; however a mile north, or south, it may take you more than an hour to get somewhere. If development drives up property costs, then it will rob people of access to jobs and further undermine any mobility that exists. Compounding this is the infrequency of busses as you leave this part of the city-- "it's easy to miss a bus in Omaha, and when busses come infrequently and you are paid hourly and you are barely making it as it is, that's injustice!" Fortunately, the neighborhoods to the north have been so far spared of much of this gentrification, the focus has been on the part of midtown stretching south of Dodge.

Most of his neighbors that have jobs do labor jobs, or 'dirty service jobs'. He explains it like this, "I shower in the morning before work; most of the people who live here shower after work." I ask whether Midtown Crossing has provided jobs to the

neighborhood? "There seems to be little relationship. Maybe the college kids, but not the rest." I remark on the general whiteness of the staff I've observed, and he agrees, "aside from a few ticket sales people, the parking booth attendant, and the occasional black person working in the restaurant kitchen, it is dominantly white." However, we both then agree this may be a result of Omaha being 80% white, and this may just be a representative breakdown of staff reflecting Omaha's general demographics. In the end, he did feel it was a subtle race issue, but whether it was political or structural he dared not speculate.

KW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about his experience as a person of color within Midtown Crossing, and the aesthetics of suburban Omaha. Midtown Crossing feels like a gated community, where the aesthetics are security steeped in paranoia. "There's an overwhelming security presence" more than that, "the security all look like cops" there are security vehicles that exactly mirror police cars, the uniforms, the militarized gear, are all reminiscent of a police force. Further, it's notable that "Midtown Crossing looks inward on itself," policing the interior space, "but not the hood." The boundaries around the development create effective walls separating the newly built space from the previously existing buildings: windows, balconies, storefronts, and so forth are all interior to the park.

KW\_\_\_\_\_ then tells me "it's a bit off putting as a person of color. You can only imagine what it's like for residents who are maybe barely literate, or immigrants with a poor grasp of English." The point here being that as a native English speaker who is educated and from an educated family, he can get confused about the line between



security/police; there are hardworking people in the neighborhood who may have greater cause for concern or fear of harassment than an educated middle class person of color does. "Persons of color, the marginalized, or disenfranchised--people who generally try to go unnoticed by the police and avoid confrontations avoid this place." I've seen the way wageworkers will walk down the street and around the park and then back up to the bus stop inside Midtown Crossing instead of cutting across the park. "My neighbors use the Walgreens on the Northeast corner across from Midtown Crossing, or walk an extra mile to Avanza instead of using Wohlner's" (the grocery store located right there inside Midtown Crossing). This avoiding of Wohlner's may be in part due to price, but groceries at a drug store are not much different in cost. "If Midtown Crossing offers jobs for my low income neighbors, it also places emotional and psychological barriers to venturing in to apply for them."

KW\_\_\_\_\_ and his wife do use Midtown Crossing. They live nearby and are better off than the majority of their neighbors, they enjoy wine at brix, and on special occasions will eat at the Grey Plume (though not often or else they'd "have to take out a loan"). Further, he has two dogs and he'll go on walks through the park with them, though returning to the security issue, he remarks he has frequently noted where the security will walk past groups of people and couples, all of them white, to stop him. Whether he is stopped to make sure he is cleaning up after his dog, or what, he says it always feels like a race thing. "I have had relatively privileged life, my parents were educated, I'm educated, I make decent money, but color has an effect." KW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about growing up and learning how to act as a person of color. "We could never run in stores as

a child. Running is something you only do because you stole something. Running is what you do from the police." And, anytime you purchase something "you get a bag. If it's not in a bag, it's stolen." It doesn't matter if it's "one piece of penny candy. You get a bag."

I ask him about his general thoughts about Midtown Crossing as an object. "It's weird." He explains, "it's like pedestrian in New York, but for Omaha." In theory, you wouldn't have to leave Midtown Crossing, you could take care of everything there: groceries, theater, salon, gym, food, dry cleaning, etc., etc., the only thing missing is a clothing store--there was one for a short period, but that left. "An H&M would be good, it would drive foot traffic and not exclude all his neighbors and also blend in with "New York Urban thing." Further, he tells me based on his job, he knows for a fact that "there are 6-7 millionaires--'million-plus-aires' and a billionaire who live there. This is really who Midtown Crossing is built for--for the Mutual of Omaha Crowd," he says without a hint of distaste.

Midtown Crossing, it's aesthetic design, and urban redevelopment is strongly tied to the issue of race for KW\_\_\_\_\_. We keep returning over and over again to this point. "Omaha has an insular view of race. I'm not sure I really knew what racism was, even growing up in the South, until I moved here." He explains the strong correlation between race and class saying that white people tend to be very wealthy here, "and as a person of color asking white folk for donations for money" (his job at the non-profit) "I'm met with more resistance here than anywhere I've lived!" However, this "also gives some a strange credibility to his organization." All of the development going on in the city, with Midtown Crossing being most obvious are "clearly designed by white people with little

regard for anyone who isn't white." Further, in regard to use of the new developments by most of the neighborhoods he suspects "a lot of it comes back to Trayvon Martin, or Henry Louis Gates breaking into his own home in Cambridge. There's not just a feeling that people of color are not wanted, but that it's dangerous when too many wealthy white people get together in your presence." From his own life, he sees this, and says, "it's weird being from Memphis" not the most racially harmonious city, and having experienced a different, and in some ways stronger racial animosity; here however "what race means, is distinct. There's not the hatred I was used to, but there is a stronger expectation of who and what I am--where and what my history is. Being a person of color in Omaha means a very specific thing: poor." Moreover, that even when you have money, you're still poor.

The expectation of poverty on a person of color is so entrenched, it seems that KW\_\_\_\_\_ mentions the way construction labor is done here in Omaha. Having lived in various parts of the US, he is used to seeing road and other construction carried out by people of color, and these jobs are relatively well paying. However, here in Omaha, the only people that seem to work the better paying construction jobs are white. People of color do different labor jobs in Omaha than the rest of the country, it seems.

We briefly discuss why Midtown Crossing hasn't yet factored into promotional material for Omaha. Most notably, why it wasn't included in the recent Berkshire Hathaway Annual Meeting literature given the proximity to the office and other Fortune 500 companies the crowd might find interesting. KW\_\_\_\_\_ suggests that with Berkshire Hathaway it could be because people will already find it if they go looking

around the headquarters, but with other promotional material "the businesses keep rotating. It's tough to market something that you can't guarantee will exist in a month or a week." He goes on to point out that it's too expensive to market for businesses that you can't be sure will exist when an event actually comes in to town--once (if) the development stabilizes you'll see material popping up.

KW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that the neighborhood is interesting currently, and gentrification has yet to push people out, but will likely begin to. There have always been upwardly mobile individuals coming through the neighborhood--particularly medical students--"you can tell the med student's cars because they drape their white coats across the seat." Medical students have yet to graduate to late model cars, and rarely have much that would distinguish them from the rest of neighborhood: just white coats; a flag of truce in the war of classes. The major changes he has seen to the neighborhood has been the increase in police presence--this has been the biggest disruption to community dynamics given the history the Omaha Police Department has with minorities. I'm told the newly gentrified homes and apartments are much like Midtown Crossing in that they don't integrate with the neighborhood--the residents stick to themselves, even tend to drive to Midtown Crossing instead of walk. What's interesting is that the squat and vacant house that was a danger and not really integrated with the neighborhood was more integrated and connected to the fabric of life in the urban zone than the newly remodeled buildings. Further, property taxes are starting to go up. "The people who will leave first are the lower-class people trying to own their homes." Since rent has yet to increase, renters haven't felt the influx of wealth in the way owners and people with mortgages

have felt it--this will either free up homes for landlords, or people interested in gentrifying the neighborhood. Tragically, KW\_\_\_\_\_ doesn't expect the public transportation to follow those in need. He tells me that "the city said if the busses could be clean and safe the rich might use it; then it might be worth putting more of it in. But, shouldn't it be clean and safe anyway?" Public transportation shouldn't be designed for those who have the means to their own transportation. "Why are we concerned about public transportation for those with cars?"

KW\_\_\_\_\_ 's final question is a bit tongue in cheek, but points to the level of social autism that policy makers, and the movers and shakers of a city, have towards problems in a city. In Omaha's big issue of public transportation, the people who have money, set and advocate for policy, and see the issue of public transportation far differently than those without: for them, it's not an issue of access, mobility, or relevant connectivity, but of safety and cleanliness; if it's not safe and clean, then why not just take your car? Further, KW\_\_\_\_\_ 's point is, why should there be a separate expectation for what's available to elite vs. working class people? Transportation and neighborhoods ought not be safe for the wealthy, but for all; poor are just as entitled to safety, security, and cleanliness of environment as anyone else.<sup>192</sup>

### **It Just Feels like a Neighborhood**

Another person I met with was JSW\_\_\_\_\_. We met at a coffee shop located in Midtown Crossing, and near her house. JSW\_\_\_\_\_ is a middle class person of color who lives in Midtown, and has done so since she came here from Tennessee, "It just feels

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<sup>192</sup> KW\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

like a neighborhood, the way other places in Omaha do not." JSW\_\_\_\_\_ takes the bus, though she owns a car. For her, the bus is an easy and simple thing to do as she lives and works on a bus line. JSW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that while her route is easy to understand and fairly efficient, this is not the case of most of Omaha's bus system. "Omaha has a shitty public transportation system. It's not efficient. The stops are irregular--both distance and time--and the routes are funny, they don't seem to run how you would expect. Also, the transit book is not in color; so all the routes look the same--crisscrossing grey lines on a black street map of Omaha." We talk about how there are only two routes that are easy to understand, and maybe only one that is reasonably efficient. She tells me how she would drive to work if she lived in another part of town, in spite of her idealistic belief in the social goodness of public transportation. JSW\_\_\_\_\_ suspects that the lack of public transportation is symptomatic of the atomized culture of Omaha--why invest in something that connects people and brings them together when the natural way of living is to be individual and separate?

Regarding Midtown Crossing, JSW\_\_\_\_\_ does not know the city before its construction. She came here to work for one of the over 300 non-profits based in Omaha. She is sweet about the place as though she is attempting to be neutral, but essentially saying it was a wonderful attempt to "something" here, though there were some "serious class blinders on"--according to JSW\_\_\_\_\_ it was clear that the designers have no idea (or concern) what lower class people do for fun or entertainment. She likes this space, but feels it really missed the mark and character of the neighborhood, completely ignoring why someone would choose to live here over the suburbs. The development reflects the

dominant Omaha culture (movies, food, drink) but ignores what immigrants and their families do with their time, or the economic realities of the poor non-immigrant Omahans that live nearby. She suggests the major evidence for this is that her neighbors don't use this place--they will walk to other grocers farther away, and bars and restaurants outside of this zone--a few people will go to Ingredient or some of the 'lower' priced restaurants, but this is basically a dead zone to them. She doubts they even attend the few free events held here.

JSW\_\_\_\_\_ suspects that Midtown Crossing is not going to gentrify the neighborhood--it draws people from out west to come here, but then they just go back home again. To paraphrase the sentiments of JSW\_\_\_\_\_, she believes that there is no connection between Midtown Crossing and the neighborhood--there is no designed invitation to the park, as it's practically walled off. I've heard this place referred to as an Oasis by suburbanites, but it feels more like a local lacuna. People don't use it, and even struggle to find words to describe it. There is no antagonistic attitude between Midtown Crossing and the neighborhood, rather they seem to exist in separate realities. JSW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that there is little active pursuit of her neighbors as consumers of the space; further many of the ways used to market the space don't reach the class that lives around here (e.g. E-mail, electronic newspapers, and the like require technology and skills many of her neighbors simply do not have). In addition, JSW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me, that many of the events held here cut across class lines--the exception is Jazz on the Green, and an outdoor farmers market that used to be held here--the farmers' market is now held in the garage and does not attract as many residents who happened to walk by on a

Saturday. In general, the operation and construction of Midtown Crossing was "not done with much community buy in" and now residents make use of parks elsewhere nearby; not this one right here.

Gentrification of Midtown will come from the other development going on around here. Midtown Crossing has no effect, but other things do. First, there is the Urban Village development that has been buying of, what are admittedly problem buildings, and transforming them into high-income properties. The success of Urban Village has driven others to attempt to replicate this in various ways. Urban Village is the only development project going on north of Dodge (with the exclusion of Creighton University). South of Dodge there is much more going on--to the South are a number of bicycle lanes being installed, and there are a few small business initiatives and other experiments in community along Leavenworth Street that JSW\_\_\_\_\_ has heard of (discussed more later). She wishes that more bicycle lanes would be installed throughout midtown, as well as exploration into other means to strengthen the bus system, either through increased walkability, bicycle lanes, or other forms of alternate transportation.

As we look out at the nearly empty park space, JSW\_\_\_\_\_ mentions that she remembers a little bit about the park before the construction. It broke ground right after she moved here, and remembers the giant "sounding stones" being moved to Elmwood Park. She recalls that the old park was not a place where she would go to "for a picnic, or do yoga. There were a lot of transients." However, now, the park is not a place for the neighborhood--everyone goes to other parks north and south of Turner Park for picnics,



playgrounds, or grilling. She ponders if the heavy security presence has something to do with why many of the poor residents do not make use of this space.

As someone who makes use of Midtown Crossing, and could be considered part of the target demographic, the emptiness of space is a concern. She regularly works out at the fitness center, and makes use of several of the restaurants and bars around the park, but has noticed a powerful emptiness throughout the condos, apartments, and certain retail bays. Over the past two years, she has watched specific units waiting for lights to turn on to signify occupancy. "There seem to be a lot of empty and vacant units." So too the stores, "it's been interesting to watch things go in and go out. I really wish, and think we could use, a reasonably priced clothing store--not a high end store," and she wonders whether there is a strategy or overall plan for filling bays and seeking renters, "it seems a bit random." Further, she's curious about rent prices--"As pricey as things are here, could anyone from the neighborhood start a small business here?" While I know they give people a deal on rent to begin with, I suspect the answer is no. At least not after the discounted rent ends.

Later in the evening after our conversation, JSW \_\_\_\_\_ e-mails me:

Very inspired after talking to you. I told [my husband] that I want to engage in our neighborhood more! I need to work on my Spanish and chat more. I did minor in Spanish!"<sup>193</sup>

### **Aesthetics of Humility and Hubris**

I later met with a long-term resident of Midtown, a local writer, musician, and one time business owner, MIC\_\_\_\_\_. MIC\_\_\_\_\_ has lived in Midtown for 30 years he

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

tells me with astonishment that it's been that long. We meet in a small local bar, "Cork and Barrel" with an occupancy of about 15. He orders a glass of wine and I glance quickly at the menu and order a Guinness. MIC\_\_\_\_\_ was suggested to me as someone who is in tune with Midtown, and the creative class that lives within--he is described as someone just ahead of the cultural curve, and attributed with really starting the Benson Music Scene.<sup>194</sup> MIC\_\_\_\_\_ is very curious about my work, and as we talk he is unsure what he can contribute. Generally, he is in agreement with my findings, the conflicts and issues facing the neighborhood, the struggles of those who live in the area, and the oddity that is Midtown Crossing.

As a longtime resident of Midtown, he doesn't feel called to visit Midtown Crossing; he'll go there on occasion for gifts for foodies (there's a new fantastic olive oil, vinegar, and salt shop), and says regarding restaurants "The Grey Plume is fantastic, but other than that you can forget about it. And that's expensive." Mostly, he doesn't feel comfortable in Midtown Crossing. There was a reason he settled in Midtown three decades ago rather than joining the newly built suburbs with many of the other Omahans in the upper middle class. This said, he acknowledges that while he doesn't feel comfortable, it's doubtful the rest of the historically lower-class demographics feel at all welcome. What saddens him the most, he tells me, is that "I really can't remember what was there before." He explains that the radical transformation of space has come with a sense of loss of history, like a swatch in the fabric of the neighborhood has been cut and will never return. "There's an ahistorical feeling to Midtown Crossing. The aesthetics

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don't jive with the history of the neighborhood. It would have been possible to blend new and old, but why didn't they?" Further he explains that the corporate offices nearby now feel increasingly detached from the neighborhood, in a way they didn't before. They were somehow part of the neighborhood ten years ago, and now they are part of Midtown Crossing, which is not part of the neighborhood. "As if the neighborhood is divided between an aesthetics of humility and hubris." Humility incorporates a rich lived history (good and bad, triumphs and failures, glory and trauma, with perhaps the second half of each pair weighing more heavily); Hubris escapes history with privilege and is overwhelmingly about success, domination, presence with the ability to even erase history--to forget what was there before, like Columbus discovering America, a narrative that allows us to forget there were rich cultural lives living there already.

This melancholy description that relates to corporate power and influence on space is tempered by MIC\_\_\_\_\_'s observation that this aesthetics has yet to have much impact on the neighborhood, and hopefully it won't. Though recent developments and uproar over wealthy Omahans moving in and tearing down historic homes<sup>195</sup> might suggest this was an unfortunately premature diagnosis. Further, the lack impact of Midtown Crossing MIC\_\_\_\_ mentioned cut both ways: it was neither positive (as Mutual of Omaha would have one believe), nor negative (as people fear with gentrification).<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Facebook pages Save the Clarinda, Restoration Exchange, and various Omaha.com articles. Facebook.com/restorationexchange ; facebook.com/savetheclarinda

<sup>196</sup> MIC\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

### **Tenacity of Those That Dared Revolt**

DP\_\_\_\_\_ is a man in his 60s, with long hair tied back into a ponytail and a mustache, a professor of theater and clearly a child of the 60s and veteran of social movements and community activism. We meet in the Dundee neighborhood of Midtown at a long-standing coffee shop, "Blue Line" which sits at the now-paved-over Blue Trolley Line for which it was named. DP\_\_\_\_\_ has just come from a morning of gardening, and we talk just before a Theater of the Oppressed conference focusing on theater and intimate violence. The group has produced a series of plays for various age groups, kids to adults, and DP\_\_\_\_\_ sits on the board of this organization.

DP\_\_\_\_\_ was born in Omaha in 1945. His father was stationed at Fort Omaha, but by 1946 they had moved on. However, he eventually returned to the city in 1981. On returning to Omaha he met several people and tried to become a part of collective organizations to improve the lives of those in Omaha. "OTOC, Omaha Together One Community, was one such organization. They are strongly affiliated with the churches, but somehow, in spite of the importance of churches in the civil rights movements, the churches have become toxic." For some reason, DP\_\_\_\_\_ suspects it relates to the rise of the evangelical right, any mention of churches causes progressive people to scatter like roaches in the light. "OTOC did do some good work, but it's died out. The people who want to affect change in this city are few, and they all have their own projects and focus on those. There is not much great coalition work done." I had met with OTOC earlier, and while they are still active, I would agree with DP\_\_\_\_\_, that they are focused on some smaller, but necessary projects and are not particularly visible.

Most recently, DP\_\_\_\_\_ has been working on North Omaha violence-- primarily police violence. "A few weeks back a kid got beat up by the cops after he was denied seeing his partner (who had been shot by the cops) in the hospital." Nebraska does not have visitation rights for domestic partners. However, "the city councilman was able to get in, but not the romantic partner." Once the kid left, DP\_\_\_\_\_ tells me "he was tackled and beat in the parking lot." Because of this and incidents like this in North Omaha, they've organized KNOSE (Keeping North Omaha Save for Everyone).

"Two weeks back, the police arrested eleven gang leaders." He says 'gang leaders' with air quotes. "These arrests have suspended the direct violence in the area, but if the police had known of them for so long, why did they let it go on? Why did they not do something earlier? It's all very fishy. But the Police in North Omaha have always been fishy." DP\_\_\_\_\_ 's assessment of police and suspicion of them and any police activity are typical of residents who live in the area, and not without cause. Further, DP\_\_\_\_\_ suspects that this violence/neglect by police, general disregard, and lack of development in the area all relates back to "the tenacity of black in the 60s who dared revolt." During that time, he summarizes "the neighborhood burned, afterwards it was cut off by 75, then little interest has gone back in." Which is a fair assessment of a once vibrant black cultural community. The 'joke' is that in thirty years, Omaha expanded from 72<sup>nd</sup> to 180<sup>th</sup> and beyond while North Omaha got a streetlight. A hyperbolic statement that captures the overall level of regard for Omaha and the least amongst its citizens.

### **A Benevolent Cabal**

Now, "Midtown Crossing is a bad joke on North Omaha. 350-plus million dollars on a small plot of land, when there is entrenched poverty and conflicts for 50 years and no investment! No regard! Dundee was declared a blighted area!! Dundee! Dundee's always been reasonably posh. There was one building built in North Omaha a while back, and then nothing again. This is clear gentrification. Clear. If it hasn't yet, it will push established residents out. In the 1970s and 80s there was white flight and all the wealthy white people moved out to the suburbs and the sprawl began. This is the return. They children are coming back. So, you see in the style and design of Midtown Crossing the suburbs recalling to the city. It doesn't look like the rest of the area, and it's not intended to. It's an outpost." DP \_\_\_\_\_'s mild rant shows the clear class preference of Omaha: upper middle class. Concerned primarily with helping the upper middle maintain their status, and helping them out once that begins to dip slightly, as in declaring Dundee a blighted area. His rant further hints at an entitlement among the elites in the city and their children. Midtown belongs to them, even if they haven't used it in 40 years. They are returning to it to do with as they please, and if they please to turn a block into a parking lot they may do so, and who's to stop them? What's happening here is a mirror of what's going on elsewhere in the US. The construction of inorganic entertainment zones. Places where there is stuff happening. Novel places that are kind of neat, but inorganic and imposed upon space. Further, Midtown Crossing is supposed to be a place where everyone can live and work and play, but it's broken. Some of that relates to opening in the midst of a recession, which led to a stigma that there was nothing going on there; that it was empty. The other part relates to being overpriced for the neighborhood, and lacking

some things that would truly make it live/work/play. Elsewhere in Omaha, this space has been done better, whether it is the planned space of AkSarBen (yes, that's Nebraska spelled backwards) Village (30 blocks west on the border of what some would call Midtown) or the organic space of Benson on the Northern edge of Midtown which has become a thriving nighttime spot with music, art, breweries and so forth. Both Benson and AkSarBen Village have inspired urban infill; Benson for the artistic and creative class, and AkSarBen Village for the young urban professionals.

What DP\_\_\_\_\_ finds most disgusting is "the complete lack of resistance. None. No one is fighting the corporate encroachment into the urban neighborhoods." Which is a more dramatic stance than BL\_\_\_\_\_ took who had explained that Mutual of Omaha has always been there destroying the neighborhood. "Omaha is extremely atomized. Citizens retreat to their TVs and creature comforts." Like TV dinners invented by a Swedish immigrant living in Omaha. "And most importantly is the culture of corporate support in Omaha. This reverence of corporations in Omaha is different than the rest of the US in that corporate power filled the vacuum after the Dennison Machine left power. The decline of Dennison and the rise of corporations in fit hand in hand. This is why corporations really run this town. It's always corporate decisions on parks, neighborhoods, direction of growth--perhaps not decision, but they are always consulted and allowed and encouraged to lead."<sup>197</sup> DP\_\_\_\_\_ 's assessment seems an apt expression of the typical Omahan attitude towards corporations. Where the church once was, now is the corporation. They way the church once allowed for a space of community

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<sup>197</sup> DP\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

and togetherness, the corporation now allows for individualism and private property. Further, the corporations housed within Omaha are central to many of the modernist 'improvements' of the 20<sup>th</sup> century lifestyle, and so it is easy to see how the corporate here in Omaha has become the benevolent cabal that orchestrates a comfortable middle class lifestyle.

### **Age and Warmth Contrasting the New and Cold**

SW\_\_\_\_\_ is an older male who has lived in Omaha for 14 years, and regardless of whatever his income or degree earned sees himself as part of the working class--it's a part of his identity; he lives in Midtown. When he was younger he was in the Peace Corps, he married a Nicaraguan woman, and then left the Peace Corps to provide for his family. Later in the late 70s he left his family to join with the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Now single, he lives in Midtown. SW\_\_\_\_\_ hadn't put a whole lot of thought to why he chose Midtown, after he came back from Nicaragua he had been living with an aunt helping take care of her until she died; after she died he had to find someplace new, and after driving around Omaha he found himself drawn to the look and feel of the neighborhood. Rent was cheap, there were a lot of small cool locally owned shops, and it had convenient access to downtown where he works. "It's generally a quiet neighborhood, mostly working class, and partially employed. Lots of college kids live nearby." During the summer he tells me he sees "lots of Hispanics in the park. I suspect they live a bit further south--no blacks in this part of midtown, they seem to still be pretty segregated to the north." I ask SW\_\_\_\_\_ about the various stereotypes suburbanites have about Midtown: crime, violence, drugs, prostitution, etc. "Oh no. This is a quiet



neighborhood, and safe. I know of no real crime, except one time a car stereo was stolen." Regarding the drugs and prostitutes, "Well, I live a few blocks from a head shop, but there aren't any dealers in my neighborhood, you have to go about a mile east, or north across Dodge to find them. Prostitution exists. But, that's a bit southeast of me--you'll find them, they're not hard to miss." SW\_\_\_\_\_ continues to explain that these things exist within Midtown, and you don't have to look too hard for them, but they really stay localized to a few blocks. Since he's lived there, there has been some mild migration, but only by a few blocks and in response to the Urban Village properties. "I've lived in dodgy neighborhoods. Places where there are dealers and prostitutes, and squatters, and this is not that sort of neighborhood." SW\_\_\_\_\_ makes it clear that while he wouldn't describe those neighborhoods as unsafe, he would definitely describe the Midtown neighborhoods as safe. However, as he thinks back to Turner Park, he would have described that as "unsafe," though he's not sure if that was true, or just stigma, "Turner Park was a shithole and had a stigma. Today that stigma is gone." He recently had his parents visit, and said they really thought this area was a nice area, and they were really impressed with Midtown Crossing. "Aside from Midtown Crossing, the only major change to the neighborhood has been the Urban Village properties. They've been putting tons of money into their properties. I'm not sure how much they cost?" I tell him they're \$1,200+, to which he's shocked. He wouldn't want to pay that much. "That just seems ridiculous--even \$500/month for working class folk with hourly wages seems a bit steep! Even though I might be able to afford Urban Village, I'd rather not."

I explain to SW\_\_\_\_\_ the current narrative of Urban Village about Midtown, it's diversity in terms of both race and class, and their not only celebration of it, but also desire to see this continue, only with upscale housing options for those who can afford it. SW\_\_\_\_\_ immediately questions this heterotopic vision with the reality of gentrification. "If he's just building high income places without working to improve the lot for low-income people, this story he's selling won't last long. I'm sure he doesn't really care, though." Truth is, I believe SW\_\_\_\_\_. JR\_\_\_\_\_ even said his primary goal is to make money above all else, and even though he states he loves Midtown and the culture there, I believe he won't fight for it providing he's still capable of turning a profit.

I ask SW\_\_\_\_\_ about the feel of his neighborhood, and of Midtown Crossing. He states that he's settled in Midtown for the feel of the neighborhood, "it's age and warmth," the way the years and subtle decay are inviting, particularly to someone who has seen a lot of life. Decay and wear on a neighborhood can be as welcoming as the lines in a grandmother's smile, reminding you that this is a place filled with stories, life, and experience. Midtown Crossing by contrast: "It's kind of cold," all glass and steel and chrome; impressive, but not warm or inviting. While SW\_\_\_\_\_ acknowledges that he likes the food and drink available, "my income's pretty good, so unlike my neighbors I can afford it. I even took my parents to the Grey Plume, which is sort of a once a year splurge--I think for many people in this neighborhood, it's never a never in their life sort of meal." While "there are a few moderately priced restaurants, they're nothing fancy", and for most residents he knows to spend that sort of money, it "better be moderately

fancy". "There's also a theater that's kinda neat--you can eat there, and order drinks. But the selection isn't great, and it's a bit pricey for a movie."

My final question to SW\_\_\_\_\_ asks him what he would like to see happen with Midtown. He responds with "Affordable housing." He's mildly concerned about gentrification, but it's nothing existential for him. However, he knows many will never have "the ability to own a home. This shouldn't be limited to the wealthy, but easily available for everyone. AND, you shouldn't have to need full-time, let alone multiple incomes to afford it. There are plenty of people who work less than full-time and also seasonal work--this makes ownership impossible and rent difficult."<sup>198</sup> SW\_\_\_\_\_ would also like to see more community centers built that host free events for the public: "space for people to meet and mix and socialize and get to know their larger neighborhood. We need more community. More life." SW\_\_\_\_\_ 's cry for community and socialization resonates with what I hear from many older residents with nostalgia for the 50s and 60s, when the American dream felt like the American Adventure. Unlike others, however, SW\_\_\_\_\_ seems fairly aware that the isolation and withdrawal of Americans from the neighborhood has been a manufactured process by corporate interests to sell more goods to more individuals.

### **It's all window-dressing for projects out only to make money**

The next person I talked to is a local dentist, coordinator for codePINK, and huge supporter of indie media: frankly a bit of a legend among the left and liberal organizers within Omaha as she has been active within the small peace and justice community for

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<sup>198</sup> SW\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

many years. Nearly everyone I met North of Dodge told me to talk with FM\_\_\_\_\_. FM\_\_\_\_\_ and I had been swirling around in the same groups for years, but never officially met until this evening when I was invited to her home for dinner and conversation with her housemates (her husband, and a man named John).

FM\_\_\_\_\_ is a local dentist. I'm unclear what her husband does, but he is originally from Chicago and moved to Omaha. Her other housemate, John, is an older guy who works labor jobs, does a lot of union organizing, and has a strong and intimate understanding of Omaha History. John takes the bus most places and dominated the conversation. All three were "left-sympathetic" which they described as meaning they believe that the cause of poverty and violence are related directly to the capitalist mode of production. The legacy of capitalism has left huge scars across the country and devastated blue-collar workers who have become the lower class when they were once middle class.

I'm told that up until the closing of the Omaha Stockyards, there was a strong Union presence in Omaha. This was responsible for working class citizens to buy homes and for their families to become upwardly mobile. Combined with strong Catholicism meant the flourishing of catholic schools and churches "now dying like flies. Now, no one from these families can afford much, let alone support a catholic school or parish-- unless they were able to make it out of the underclass."

All the voices at FM\_\_\_\_\_ 's table were in agreement that the local corporations have figured out how to make the most out of labor. "Places like Con-Agra or Ameritrade, that rely on interns and after college jobs with high attrition rates. The stability of a job has all but vanished from the workplace, and capital itself has issues

looming around the corner, since no one can afford homes. If no one can afford homes, they won't buy appliances or other furnishings. I suspect soon many won't be able to buy cars, or any of that. It's all about to become a new crisis." Further, the group was surprised at the failure of Occupy to affect change.

A generally cynical crowd, no one believed that there was any real interest in improving the lives of the downtrodden. "It's all window-dressing for projects out only to make money. And a unfortunately basic understanding of geography contributes to the way the city and state address issues of poverty. As if these were issues of geography and place, and not of capital!" Apparently, according to John, due to economic, geographic, and political issues, the manual labor in Omaha is largely done by out of state, or even out of country contractors. There is a disincentive for many people to apprentice into those jobs here in Omaha, though his ability to articulate precisely why this was never made clear. He's just seen the workers and contractors become increasingly non-local. Jobs for North Omaha, are either short term, or underpaid, or both. "All the 'created' jobs in the near north side will never allow a person to own property, or advance their family-- Maybe a night manager, maybe." Inquiring about the idea of placing a call center in North Omaha, they responded (nearly in unison) "Who wants to hear the voice of the inner city?" Then FM\_\_\_\_\_ ' husband clarifies, "The very reason call centers locate in Omaha is the neutral accent. This neutral accent is the very thing that excludes the poor, mostly black urbanites of North Omaha from getting jobs. Were there even to be transportation for them to get to work. Call centers and customer support jobs are

common low-skilled jobs available in Omaha, however they are looking for the "voice of NPR, not NWA."

The house I'm sitting in is on Hamilton Street, which seems to be the northernmost border of Midtown--it also seems to be the outermost marker of white Omaha. However, John and FM\_\_\_\_\_ provide a bit of history: this stretch was the first 'suburb' of Omaha. It was originally a wealthy area (you can walk the neighborhood and see plaques to founding wealthy residents that lived around here). However, after WWII, the land just north was the first place in Omaha where blacks were allowed to own property--some of the houses still stand, and you can see them from the front stoop. This neighborhood is clearly no longer well off, however it is now home to many of the edgier, hipper, more liberal and left-leaning interviewees. It's also a division between some really great old properties built by real craftsmen, and post-war properties of cheap materials and perhaps built by individuals with just enough skill to make functional but not pretty homes. These latter cheaply made homes are mostly in a high state of decay and "not good for the environment" but were the ones that "were able to be purchased by black veterans after the war." Further, this is the neighborhood where "A Time for Burning" took place, and the house is next door to the church that took a central role in the film.

This dividing line points to an issue in Omaha not often discussed, racism. "Racism is very much alive and kicking. It's a strange place, where races may interact, but races must also stick to their class. Any attempt otherwise is actively pushed back against! Simply put," FM\_\_\_\_\_ says, "black and white kids may be friends, but black

kids must stay poor--preferable get more poor, where white kids are allowed to advance their status. Racism shaped the growth of this city, and will continue for many years to come." John chimes in "city contracts routinely go outside the city for work--and never go to locally owned black businesses. Slightly less rare are Union jobs."

According to a theory they posed this night, Unions will not flourish, nor any other form of large-scale solidarity like at Tahrir Square, until the cost of living is not lessened by such an activity. John says, "as it is now, organizing can get you killed in an accident. Stuff is safe enough that, while dangerous, you will likely not accidentally die. You may not be free, and you may be broke as fuck, but at least you have your life."

It's getting late, and so I ask what their greatest concern for the city is. The answer came a bit left-field: health. "The Midwestern desire for meat and Monsanto products is killing them. There is a disconnect between the body and life." The table is overwhelmingly surprised how in spite of knowledge regarding the dangers of red meat consumption, and the lack of vegetables, Midwesterners cling to a diet deprived in vegetables and rich in red meat. Further, that it precludes anyone from doing much organizing against this--"there is a post-industrial disconnect from the body that might explain the lack of transportation, the strict reverence for increasing car-, home-, food portion- size and overall alienation of the self from the world." I suspect that the table views the connection between poor health and violence as a very direct one and quite causal--that somehow if we could improve health by teaching people about the

interrelation of food and person, violence would melt away. This may be true, but I will not understand this connection until much later.<sup>199</sup>

### **Collateral Damage of Deindustrialization**

AF\_\_\_\_\_ is a nursing student at University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC) and mother who works as a home aid and newsroom technician. I met her by chance at McFoster's Natural Kind Cafe, a mostly vegetarian restaurant a few blocks west of Midtown Crossing in the shadows of Warren Buffett's penthouse and across from the Colonial Hotel (a living complex whose regular tenants include sex offenders and addicts). AF\_\_\_\_\_ tells me how the neighborhood has changed over the past three years while she's gone to nursing school. She states bluntly, "This was never the best of neighborhoods, but Midtown [Crossing] has had an impact on the larger neighborhood for the worse." As she describes the old neighborhood as "sketchy, but fine", however, now there are places in greater Midtown she won't travel by herself, though the immediate zone surrounding Midtown Crossing and to the South of Dodge has become nicer.

AF\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that this reminds her of issues in her home-state of Michigan, where "middle and upper-class developments aim to rehab a zone, but end up harming the poor families living in that area. A lot of my family are now worse off from this sort of help." She describes a process she witnessed growing up in Michigan: where first, the older neighborhoods decay as "collateral damage of deindustrialization"; second, the older residents are displaced by "attempts to help" and the "rehabilitation of the

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<sup>199</sup> FM\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.



neighborhood"; Third, what happened in Michigan, that she doesn't see here, is the retraining of the former industrial work force, "A lot of my family got retrained into new 'green tech' jobs, but those jobs all died, too, along with expectation that stable jobs, or any sort of financial security, will return again."

For AF\_\_\_\_\_there is a problem that "policy people and wealthier people seem to be indifferent to the struggles of good people who have spent a generation paying for a family home and lose their money and home when the property taxes go outside their ability." Another issue AF\_\_\_\_\_finds frustrating is that "during times of economic hardship, like a recession, speculators come in and make undervalued bids on homes--this provides desperately needed short-term cash for families, but requires moving to a more dangerous neighborhood, a rental property instead of home ownership, or a place that requires greater expense in upkeep."

She has never been to Midtown Crossing due to her school, work (two-jobs), and being a single mother, but since both jobs and her school are in Midtown she has witnessed the effects of Midtown Crossing. The past three years have not provided her much social life, let alone time to check out Midtown Crossing. Further, there seems to be little curiosity about it. She likes the locally owned small restaurants on the days she forgets to bring a lunch, and she'd rather check out those than a high-end chain restaurant.

**Aesthetics: the feel, texture, and diversity of place**

Given AF\_\_\_\_\_ 's sensitivity to class dynamics I ask her whether she would feel weird, or uncomfortable, visiting Midtown Crossing. "Perhaps," she says, "but maybe not. If I had grown up in the area, and were my family affected directly by the changes,

then I would. However, I am soon to have two degrees, and I don't carry with me the experience of the neighborhood--were this Michigan, then I would. No doubt." She continues to explain that she'll likely not go ever, not because of class dynamics, or the sterile and unappealing presentation of space, but because of "the effects on people who once lived there." Solidarity with the struggle of working people is still very much a part of her identity and class, regardless of her own achievements, or dislocation from the city and state she grew up in.<sup>200</sup>

JO\_\_\_\_\_ is a diversity trainer, formerly of the military. He's bald with a beard and several tattoos. He initially moved to Omaha thanks to his "starter marriage" and initially hated it. However, before he left, he decided to get involved in the community and see what it's about. He decided to stay. He got remarried. He's now spent most of his life in Omaha living in Midtown. He's recently moved out west to accommodate a growing family--he wants more space than he can afford in Midtown without buying a fixer-upper, and that's not his style. However he still spends a great deal of time in Midtown. His office is the coffee shop we're currently sitting in. Further, midtown remains very near and dear to his heart. He's always appreciated the diversity of the area, and by this he means "diversity of all sorts. Race, class, sexuality, politics--you name it, it's here. My current neighborhood is really homogenous. Out west the houses, streets, and residents all look the same."

JO\_\_\_\_\_ states that "AkSarBen village did a better job than Midtown Crossing at capturing the diversity and integrity of the neighborhood." He makes it clear has no

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<sup>200</sup> AF\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

appreciation for Midtown Crossing, except for the Grey Plume, but suggests it's not really a restaurant for the neighborhood. JO\_\_\_\_\_ goes on to mention several "locations throughout the US that do a better job of capturing diversity than Midtown Crossing, or Omaha in general:" the Des Moines' East Village, Kansas City's Power and Light District, Portland's Pearl District. "These places are walkable. These are places you can waste a day, or part of day. These are places that blend the aesthetic of the surrounding neighborhood into their new development. Where, Midtown Crossing, on the contrary, is a tall fortress-like wall of buildings that block the exterior neighborhoods from entry." JO\_\_\_\_\_ tells me it reminds him more of the suburban neighborhood he lives in now with "gates and security and all of that. It's inviting to some, but repellant to many."

"Corporate Omaha--the people who decide and make power in Omaha, don't understand the intangibles. Aesthetics: the feel, texture, and diversity of place," says JO\_\_\_\_\_, "they know for some reason they value art and diversity, but they don't understand it--they don't know how to fund, or spend money on, or produce these things." JO\_\_\_\_\_, who seems to have libertarian leanings continues on to say something remarkably critical, "All progress [in Omaha], all means of addressing change, must have a business model, and that raw business model does not work for places that are diverse and struggling. These places have their own projects, but are blocked from avenues of power, groups traditionally marginalized, colonized, and otherwise controlled by dominant classes are left out of any pure business model." His alternative would be to legislate smaller and more locally controlled commuter and walking friendly spaces. "We need small locations for mixing and interacting, store fronts that invite people in, and

have places to stop, chat, socialize and so forth." Unfortunately, and something that JO\_\_\_\_\_ knows, it's tough if not impossible, to quantify the returns for a business model to incorporate these ideas.<sup>201</sup>

For the most part, the middle-class residents of Midtown saw the area as one that wasn't perfect, but it certainly not a bad place to live. Furthermore, in regards to crime and other forms of violence, these people felt it was exaggerated and not any worse than the suburbs, but these are based on stigma more than reality. In regards to development of the area, most middle-class residents appreciated the attention brought to the neighborhood, and acknowledged that it has made it a better place for them to live: felt a bit safer and looked a bit cleaner. Gentrification was on the mind of these people, but not to a great extent, mostly viewing the process as both inevitable and slow, but also with distinct positives even if they understood that it was ultimately not good for those of lower-class.

## **Multi-Generational Residents**

### **Great Care and Diversity**

Somehow, someone had given me AL\_\_\_\_\_ 's name as a great person to talk to whose lived in Midtown all her life and having insight into the world of corporate engagement in urban spaces. I met AL\_\_\_\_\_ at Caffeine Dreams, a local coffee shop/roaster/art gallery. She lives in Midtown, works at Union Pacific, and commutes via bicycle as many days per year as she is able. For the most part, AL\_\_\_\_\_ confirms a

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<sup>201</sup> JO\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

lot of what had already been stated by other residents, and was importantly able to provide some glue to the fragments I had already heard.

AL\_\_\_\_\_ begins by talking about the "great care" that people have for their neighborhood and homes in Midtown--care that you don't really find out in the newer suburbs. "Old homes are a labor of love--they require you to love your home," she contrasts this with the newer homes that are built to be moved out of once lived in. "Midtown has great and unique architecture from different periods of the city's development; so unlike the burbs, homes don't all look the same on a block, or cost the same." She continues by describing the way these older homes are remodeled over and over again, such that homes once identical are no longer recognizable as twins. She asserts that people in Midtown remodel their home to suit changing needs, whereas suburban households move to a new home when their needs change. There is a bit of derision in her tone, and a hint at the wastefulness and disposability of suburban life. Further, as a parent, she discusses the schools in the area, stating "they may not have the highest overall achievement, but there is cultural and vertical integration of students--this diversity ensures that you meet many people you disagree with, but also that you will find people who you bond with. Oddballs in the burbs may never do so." To which she wonders if the overt homogeneity may be responsible for schools shootings carried out by alienated youth. "This diversity teaches you lessons you'll never learn in a better performing school in the burbs."

Regarding business and community relationships, AL\_\_\_\_\_ states that "Midtown has a plethora of small businesses and local economic activities that help to

spawn relationships." She mentions several icons of Midtown from Dundee Hardware (which has been gone several years now) to Caffeine Dreams, as "places where people can come and talk with each other across boundaries and learn from each other." At this moment, Jeff Koterba, political cartoonist of the Omaha World Herald stops by to briefly echo what his friend AL\_\_\_\_\_ has just said, and adds that "people also develop more awareness of who is in their neighborhood by seeing them regularly at the same small shops, stores and restaurants, or walking home instead of always driving."

### **Social Immobility**

Regarding Midtown Crossing, AL\_\_\_\_\_ says that it has done a great job of providing an upscale place east of 72<sup>nd</sup>, but in her opinion does little to integrate the city. "Most of the stores there are chains and also available further out west." She continues by suggesting that the divide between east and west Omaha along 72<sup>nd</sup> street is growing "increasingly stark" and Midtown Crossing is only "an oasis between home and work downtown or at the corporations next door," and it exists as "an exception to what they perceive as a violent, dangerous, and low-class part of town. Yet," she continues, "when you look at the map of crime data, most crimes are in the suburbs," (primarily theft) "and violence is rare outside of certain neighborhoods. The primary issue is poverty, or at least wage stagnation."

Poverty is not a focus issue for AL\_\_\_\_\_, though she does believe there is a problem with the economic focus that hones in on the higher echelons of economic activity. "Upper middle class wages have risen a bit, an upper class incomes have increased, but middle class wages are stagnant, and low class wages are falling. There are

less and less jobs available for people without college education--at least good jobs. This means that you need an upfront economic investment that looks increasingly like it won't pay off," and exception, she mentions is Union Pacific, where she works. At Union Pacific there are many people without a formal education who have and will rise to high levels within the company. Even at the lower levels Union Pacific provides a good job for its workers.

### **Corporate R2P**

From her mentioning of Union Pacific, AL\_\_\_\_\_ moves on to talk about corporate responsibility to inner urban areas. She suggests that "There ought to be responsibility for companies that move their jobs elsewhere solely for increased profits. Especially when the community they are leaving are the communities are responsible for building their business." However, she makes a distinction between "companies like GM, which move for profits and destroy lives and families, and those that cease to be relevant, like the Omaha Stockyards." The same sort of violence occurs, but there exists culpability in regards to intentionality; Stockyards did not intend to abandon the workers, GM does. However, who's responsibility is it then? During the transition to a new economy, one that may never be as profitable, or equitable as the old, who takes care of those left behind? For Omaha, those old businesses were the Osarka lead smelting plant, Omaha Stockyards, and various light industry no longer able to compete transitioning to the new businesses of telecom and insurance. What entity is responsible for helping with this motion?

From AL\_\_\_\_\_’s perspective so far, the development of Midtown Crossing and the "growth" of Midtown has yet to adversely affect the community. Though "the imposition of \$1000 apartments in an area where there is historically \$250 apartments is bound to eventually have an effect, but given the eclectic and diverse economic makeup of Midtown, it may not be as bad as it could be. Especially since the suburban stigma against Midtown is unlikely to be going away anytime soon." Moreover, AL\_\_\_\_\_ says, the general growth of Omaha has not improved the places that really need opportunities. Particularly she speaks of North Omaha. "The Near North Downtown, or NoDo, development is physically isolated from North Omaha," it's not really connotative of North Omaha, "and it doesn't really provide good jobs anyway. All the construction was also done by out of state work, so not even that benefited Omaha." Further compounding the issues of North Omaha are the competition of charities for limited funds. AL\_\_\_\_\_ also speaks of major donor "recruitment programs" such as one Union Pacific attempted in North Omaha. "The had set up a series of workshops, some featured out of town talent, to help people prepare to work for Union Pacific or other corporate firms. The First night, only one woman showed up. That was basically the end of that project--it didn't make sense to provide all those resources for one person." I later learn from the Urban League, that most of the North Omaha residents felt various prior criminal activity, lack of education, or racial prejudice had already denied them the job being that it is Omaha, so why even try. What's happened in North Omaha is a crisis of hope. All of the programs, or programs similar, have been tried. All of the programs have failed. The programs were then tried again, and failed again. Coupled with a legacy of



racism and overt city programs to disenfranchise black workers has resulted in this crisis of hope. Now, in North Omaha, hope is deadly and rare, and may even be seen as a betrayal of your community. Something big needs to be done to organize the charities and address the violence on a block-by-block basis. Something needs to be done to bring the community together and inspire hope. How much longer until no one will try programs remotely like what Union Pacific tried? Already businesses are unwilling to locate within North Omaha: the only businesses within that zone are the few businesses where the owners are from there, and even that I'll learn later is not capable of sustaining hope.<sup>202</sup>

### **Bourgeois Responsibility**

At a coffees shop on another end of Midtown, I met with GA\_\_\_\_\_. GA\_\_\_\_\_ has lived in Omaha for 20 years and mostly raised her kids here, her husband's family for multiple generations. She is a lifelong Midwesterner and while growing up lived in Detroit, Cincinnati, and St. Louis. GA\_\_\_\_\_ was very interested in this topic, having witnessed parts of her childhood--the places she's lived and family members, devastated by the transition away from an industrial economy to a post-industrial one. GA\_\_\_\_\_ is an activist with Omaha Together One Community (OTOC), which another interviewee had mentioned as a once important community institution for justice. GA\_\_\_\_\_ 's focus is to work on slumlords, and other landlords to take responsibility for the homes and properties they rent in this city--something other residents, who are also landlords have also expressed interest in. Much of OTOC's

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<sup>202</sup> AL\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

current work seems to revolve around housing justice for low-income folk and refugees. The organization holds regular forums and has recently influenced the city government to improve its condemned housing budget from 250,000 to almost one million. GA\_\_\_\_\_ is a bit disappointed, she tells me, because the previous mayor had raised the budget over one million, but the new mayor made cuts to just under one-million, and while this is a great improvement, it's still not enough to take care of the issue of condemned and dangerous properties in eastern Omaha. Further, GA\_\_\_\_\_ makes it known that she has no expectation for urban justice under the new mayor--"the new mayor campaigned on suburban issues, lives in the suburbs, and probably never went into older neighborhoods before this election." This sentiment is widely held within the OTOC organization.

GA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that the budget allocation is important for taking care of dangerous properties, and explains why it is not nearly enough: "It costs 10,000 to demolish a neglected property," and if that property is demolished using "federal money, it then becomes slated for particular projects, like low-income housing or something, which is something this city never budgets for." As a result "most of these houses just sit. They become squats. They fall apart, and catch fire, or become places where other forms of violence occur." GA\_\_\_\_\_ makes a point to say that OTOC isn't just proposing a 'broken windows' approach to this issue, but also trying to figure out how to get houses to those who actually want the houses, instead of waiting for them to fall apart and require being torn down. "Gary [Indiana] is now selling houses for almost free! People just need to demonstrate skill and a means for renovating the houses. Not all houses, of course, but

certain houses that have passed some criteria." Gary, of course, is in a much worse state than most of Omaha, and it's taken them a long time to begin to try to address the issues creatively. However, there are lessons to be learned from the various experiments across the post-industrial landscape.

### **Libertarian Misery Profiteering**

Along with slumlords, another racket Omaha suffers from is "the unpaid taxes racket." GA\_\_\_\_\_ explains that there are "people who pay for unpaid taxes, hoping to do so for three years. After three years they can foreclose on that property. There are many international and out of state people who are doing this in Omaha's urban core. It doesn't always work, but it's apparently profitable enough that people do this." I've seen this at work in rural Nebraska with people looking to capitalize on the libertarian spirit and/or bad luck of others for cheap farmsteads, more grazing land, and so forth. GA\_\_\_\_\_ hopes to preserve the older inner neighborhoods as much as possible, and not have new construction move in. There's a certain cheapness and aesthetic of interiority to new homes that is prized in the suburbs, but is antithetic to what makes "urban life so rich." GA\_\_\_\_\_ states matter of factly, "People in the suburbs are looking to stay at home, possibly with family, rather than go out and make community, but older neighborhoods, like Benson or Dundee, that are intact have a richer and more community centric life." Further GA\_\_\_\_\_ explains the atomized and disconnected life of the suburbanite: "In the suburbs you drive everywhere. Your home is here, your church is over there, shopping is this way and that. Nothing is centrally located and it really disconnects your geography." Then contrasts it with the urban residents who have

"places to mix and mingle. They bring the family out for lunch, then go to the park and grab ice cream. All this without ever needing a car."

### **Built Environment and the Crisis of Hope**

Additional issues of the built environment of Omaha that GA\_\_\_\_\_ mentions is the way the city has been "cut up to deal with race problems in the past. The subsequent burning of North Omaha that has never recovered, and construction of new projects like NoDo, or Midtown Crossing that become weird little worlds unto themselves rather than remodeled or refreshed aspects of an existing neighborhood." On top of this there is the lack of good jobs for low skilled workers--lack of jobs at all levels, really, absence of transportation infrastructure for people without a car, and the lack of grocery stores in east Omaha, and primarily Northeast Omaha. Omaha is a structurally divided and highly segregated city full of locked doors where the only real key is a car.

GA\_\_\_\_\_ is a very religious person and constantly refers to being a "blessed person." She's not out prosthetizing, but it comes through. For her, the biggest issue in Omaha is the crisis of hope I mentioned earlier. There is so much intergenerational pain and failure to address the conflicts that we have "collectively given up on a vision of a thriving city for those who need it most--there is only darkness, so we focus on the bright spots, our Fortune 500s and other things." GA\_\_\_\_\_ 's analogy is steeped in a religious metaphor, but speaks to a lack of aesthetics to the vision of Omaha, the darkness is ignored, traded for shades of white. For her, immigrants are important for Omaha. While they have their own issues, they still have hope. According to her they live a full, and maybe glorified, life of loss, pain, but also hopes and triumphs--they've been the

easiest population for OTOC to help because of this. They still have hope and their spirit allows for progress to be made. This spirit is probably a thing akin to grace.<sup>203</sup>

#### A Development at Odds with Historic Residents

MAR\_\_\_\_\_ is a middle aged white women I met while exploring the green space of Midtown Crossing. She was out walking her dog, and I had made the assumption she was one of the people who lived in the apartments or condos. As it turns out, she was a semi-retired teacher (which meant she subbed frequently) and lives in the neighborhood behind Midtown Crossing. I had initially approached her to understand the perspective of someone who lived in the new development, who up to this point had just been uninteresting fraternity types looking for a certain style of living associated with larger cities than Omaha. MAR\_\_\_\_\_ tells me she only lives a few blocks away and was just taking advantage of the green space.

"My husband and I don't come here except with the dog. We have our restaurants we enjoy," she says. I ask about the coffee shop, where I had seen some residents of the neighborhood. "I prefer Blue Line over in Dundee. I know people over there, the regulars, and I have gone there for years to meet friends." I also ask about the Wohlner's grocery, "Yeah, I will go there, but about as often as I went to it when it was over on 50<sup>th</sup> and Leavenworth, which is to say not very often."

When I asked MAR\_\_\_\_\_ what she thinks of this place, she shrugs and says, "it's nice to see attention being paid to Midtown. For a while all the focus was out west, and then people moved out west. It's nice to see people returning. Maybe some of the

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<sup>203</sup> GA\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

neighborhoods will feel like neighborhoods again." I ask about neighborhoods not feeling like neighborhoods, and she explains that a lot of their friends moved out, in the 80s and are returning. You see more people walking and running in certain parts of Midtown. It's clear that MAR\_\_\_\_\_ felt certain parts of Midtown always felt like neighborhoods, where others hadn't due to stigma she hopes Midtown Crossing with resolve. I asked her if she thought Midtown Crossing was responsible for this. "I'm not sure. I think people are just placing more attention on the middle and downtown part of the city. Probably, Jim Suttle helped that. The last Mayor [Mike Fahey] just wanted to expand the city." I asked her about the election of the most recent mayor. She responded curtly, "I was sure he was going to lose. I don't have much faith in the new one." Taking this as a sign that she didn't feel like discussing politics, I inquired about what she thought of the neighborhoods around Midtown Crossing now that this has been built. "I don't really know all of them, but I like what's happened to the park. I don't feel like I'm going to be hassled by anyone any more. The neighborhoods are changing, but I'm not sure if it's better or worse.

MAR\_\_\_\_\_ represents my image of a typical middle-aged middle class midwestern housewife. Politically neutral, but engaged in her community. Interested in what's going on and changes, but slow to make condemnations. I got the sense from her that Midtown Crossing had positioned itself in the midst of the neighborhoods, but had not established itself into the routines of many of the longstanding residents. It wasn't a nuisance, but it also wasn't useful. It simply wasn't relevant.<sup>204</sup>

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<sup>204</sup> MAR\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

### **Education is Not a Means, and Violence is Inevitable**

JAN\_\_\_\_\_ is a geography teacher at North High, and the only active full time school employee that agreed to meet with me. She graduated from Westside High School and was educated in Washington DC. She is now middle aged and has two children. She asked me to meet her at Blue Line Coffee. JAN\_\_\_\_\_ states that the biggest issues are in north Midtown and the near north side. Teaching at North, she sees the issues already part of the performance of the children. For the children living in the extreme poverty and violent areas, "education is not seen as a means for anything, and violence is understood as part of life--inevitable, or at least non-causal." Children do not see violence to be the result of actions, it's mostly random, and affects the good and bad alike. Thus, they grow up learning "you must fight to survive--never back down." Not only is backing down a sign of weakness, but also resignation to the regular violence of their lives. Further, JAN\_\_\_\_\_ explains, there is a belief and reality that you "must escape to thrive."

"In North Omaha, joblessness is around 25% compared with the rest of the city at 5%, so jobs are not seen as a reality" a reality reinforced by lack of public transportation. "North Omaha was established in the second wave of black migration, and today, North Omaha, is really the remnants and left behind black people. The northwest is where the middle class [blacks] moved, and the wealthy went elsewhere in the city once redlining ended." While redlining was terrible, JAN\_\_\_\_\_ explains that it at least kept neighborhoods in tact. It kept the various social strata in relation to one another, and contributed to a healthier environment. However, once people could leave, they did, and the communities fell apart rapidly. The way black Omahans left North Omaha in the 80s

was similar to how many of the middle- and upper- class residents North of Dodge ran to the suburbs leaving the poorer residents alone in a section of town.

### **Without History, Dreams are Small**

"Dreams are not big. Of course they dream, but they don't dream extravagantly of the future." Income is always spent. For two reasons, she explains, first "there is rarely enough to save at the end of the month" there are the bills and costs of living that eat a large chunk if not all of the income, and second, "it's a means of protection against getting hit up for money", no one can ask for what you don't honestly have. "Display of means become the output of extra cash--shoes, hats, cars, stereos, and so forth." There isn't a great variation in incomes, but you can tell who has a better job than another based on the show they put on. Furthermore, she tells me that as a geography teacher, these kids don't dream of travel, if they dream of leaving the city it's largely domestic to places like Chicago, Atlanta, LA, New York, "A few honors students dream of seeing London or Paris." Children born in these urban conflict spaces have a limited view of geography. "Geography becomes extremely condensed with particular focus on their block," the idea that child's world exists on a fixed point in space is a radical notion to me having grown up with regular trips to see family or sights around the country and visiting cousins in Europe when I was nine years old. The very notion that these children have no real conception of a larger Omaha turns my conception of geography around. The geography of conflict then is one that is very narrow in scope. JAN\_\_\_\_\_ continues, "Most kids don't understand the history or geography of the city. They don't see that their hood was constructed by white people to keep them out of the rest of the city." Part of what she



tries to do with her curriculum is to show this to kids by getting them out into their neighborhoods on specific projects. She then reinforces the idea of escape "Most blacks here who go to college go out to Morehouse in Atlanta. If you can leave, you will leave, and that is how you become successful." JAN\_\_\_\_\_ suspects that for black children of Omaha to become successful they have to leave to see a city that can show you how to be a successful middle-class black person before you can become a successful middle-class black person. Omaha just isn't set up, or prepared to teach this to people.

"It's sad that Walmart is a step up for people." Walmart moving in to the near north side of Omaha will create a lot of jobs. "It' won't alter the perception the suburbs have of black people--it won't take them off welfare, it won't make them rich, but it will bring food into the food desert, and perhaps that will provide a bit of hope." Again, we return to the abject hopelessness of a certain part of Omaha in the shadow of the bright and glorious success touted by Forbes. Is it really so bad that Walmart's dismal opportunity is the only thing believable enough to provide hope? "There are two cities," JAN\_\_\_\_\_ says, "And urban planners tend to view geography like a cancer to be excised; and North Omaha ahs been cut off, because it wasn't valuable enough to transform."<sup>205</sup>

### **Echoes From a Time Before Partitioning**

In the north of Midtown I meet with KK\_\_\_\_\_ at Lisa's Radial Cafe. KK\_\_\_\_\_ is a retired nurse who has lived in Omaha her entire life, born to parents born in Omaha, she has raised a couple of kids now married and still living in Omaha.

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<sup>205</sup> JAN\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

While we are in a northern segment of Omaha, for KK\_\_\_\_\_ this is the heart of Midtown, and she can recall a time when North Omaha was more integrated into Midtown. A time before Cumming was such a barrier, and before the North Freeway chopped it in two. This is the Cathedral Neighborhood, and this restaurant has existed forever it seems, and is a staple in this part of town.

KK\_\_\_\_\_ was born to an Irish Catholic family of nine, she is close to my mother's age, and it's likely that her siblings knew my mom or her siblings. KK\_\_\_\_\_ knows of, and remembers my dad from working at Methodist Hospital. "The Cathedral and Gold Coast neighborhood used to be primarily Catholics, big families with lots of children." She suspects the families are still here mostly, but the children have all gone. So too, the stores. Most of the stores are closed or unstable small businesses. "It seems Lisa's Radial and the adjacent bakery are the only stable stores here. The grocery across the street used to be vacant for years, before it was a grocery it was something else, but years and years ago it was a grocery. It's good to see a grocery return to this part of town. I hope it makes it." KK\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that unlike places closer to Midtown Crossing and further North, the houses around here are owned by folk who have lived here for 30 years or more--long-term residents.

KK\_\_\_\_\_ tells me this area has been pretty stable over the years, "except for a period in the 70s and 80s when everyone moved west--white flight. Blacks were moving closer in from North Omaha. When I got married, my dad told us not to buy a house North of Dodge because of the blacks!" She tells me they eventually did anyway, because during the 80s "houses north of Dodge were going for less than 40k, now they go for

180k or more. There are also mansions on the Gold Coast that are gorgeous Victorian beasts that are 400K and up!" The mansions she speaks of are probably similar square footage of McMansions built out in western Omaha, and the cost of homes here ought to make anyone in coastal metropolises laugh.

Inquiring about crime in the area, which is all the suburban folk can talk about in the northeast parts of Omaha, KK\_\_\_\_\_ says, "This area has never been too hard up on that. Now, if you head a bit north of Cumming, and a bit east of here, you can get that, but this area has remained a good hood." KK\_\_\_\_\_ makes it abundantly clear, that the real reason she likes this part of town has to do with community and the closeness of houses and the sort of thing that creates a homey feeling. She tells me she wouldn't want to live in the condos at Midtown as "they are sterile. But, maybe the condos downtown, they are older and far warmer. Never out west, though. I hate the sprawl. Everything out west is so far apart, the houses, the stores, the curbs, the sidewalks, everything. I don't like that you have to drive to everything. There's comfort--security in density. There's something inviting about having neighbors--doing with less space and less material stuff."

### **A Kind Word / Orchestrated and Inorganic Reality**

I ask her opinion on Midtown Crossing. "It's nice. I've been a few times. I really liked the theater and the restaurants looked appetizing." As she continues, she makes it apparent that she's really only been a few times, and this is not a high traffic destination for her. "I pretty much just go during Jazz on the Green. Oh! And the farmer's market is nice." Finally I meet someone who's been. "It's in the garage, which is nice on hot days, and when it rains, but it's a strange location. It's also a little bit different. There are only

eight vendors, but you can get all the stuff you want. There's no duplicate food, produce, or handmade goods." Like much of Midtown Crossing, the farmers market reflects the orchestrated and inorganic reality that's been constructed here. There are eight hand-selected vendors providing the diversity of a farmers market without any overlap, or inconsistency typically associated with farmers markets.

As we talk about Midtown Crossing, KK\_\_\_\_\_ suggests that "Perhaps the neighborhood just hasn't accepted it yet. It's definitely nice to have it, it brings services down into the area, and shifted public attention back to the older parts of the city." KK\_\_\_\_\_ has made it abundantly clear she hates the suburbs, so is happy that there may be a shift away from them, even if the current product isn't one geared at the current residents. KK\_\_\_\_\_ talks about changes that have undergone since Midtown Crossing was proposed, from community gardens, to a new violin store that opened up and found an old theater inside as it began to renovate, as well as a variety of other things. "Midtown Crossing is bringing more people in, reducing stigma, and allowed some of the older buildings and stores to re-establish themselves and renovate. All good things."<sup>206</sup>

### **Geography of Class**

CC\_\_\_\_\_ is a teacher of History and Economics at North High in her mid-to-late 20s, recently married and living in Midtown. The first thing she tells me is she is frequently asked if she feels safe teaching in North Omaha, to which she always replies "yes," and in spite of all the violence and shooting, it is a safe place for teachers. "People

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<sup>206</sup> KK\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

in North Omaha really respect teachers as part of the community in a way other parts of the city don't."

CC\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that whatever change is to happen must come from within, and cannot be placed on a community by outsiders. "East Omaha needs more jobs. North Omaha needs them desperately. It's a shame that Walmart is a step forward for many." One program she works with at North High allows for students to go to school for free if they keep good grades; there is a 50% drop out rate through high school, and 50% of the remainder drop out in college. Which means that 25% of all the enrolled students get free college.

CC\_\_\_\_\_ sees several major factors that keep people trapped in poverty and violence. The first big one is that Omaha is a car centric city. "Transportation is functionally non-existent in this city if you don't have a car." There is also a complete ignorance of culture and history that could "inspire the downtrodden. We've been working on education events to show how vibrant North Omaha used to be. Perhaps remembering the past could inspire the future." Related to history, is that the poor people blame themselves for being poor, but in reality it was constructed. "First there was redlining, and then a history of built projects that cut off the racially segregated neighborhoods." Officially, redlining ended in the 70s, but today it still exists, she tells me, "redlining still exists." But instead of being along overt racial lines, it is "officially (meaning in written form) along class lines" unofficially, people are still only shown homes in neighborhoods where they can ethnically blend in. Outside of Midtown, there are very few mixed neighborhoods, either by race or class. Currently, the history that all

kids know is that poverty is bad, and keeps getting worse. They have no understanding of how the elites constructed this poverty, nor do they realize there wasn't always poverty here. As such, the rhetoric is always about "getting out" and never about "transforming." "There are a lot of really good kids," she tells me "but none of them have hope for the future. No one expects things to change. Doesn't matter what they do."

"Most of these kids are very block focused. It's their world." The children who grow up in the poor neighborhoods only know a small part of the neighborhood. There is only a small spot in the world where they identify, or feel comfortable. Combined with the poor public transportation, this does not allow children to see many good examples of what could be. Further compounding this are other issues facing the poor people of Omaha. "Black life expectancy is the lowest in the nation," she tells me, and the homicide rate for blacks is the highest.<sup>207</sup> Further, thanks to the poverty rate, and the way utilities are structured, children enter adulthood with negative credit. "Parents too frequently end up getting declined for utility service. As a result they are faced with a tough situation come Winter, and often end up signing their kids up for utilities after they are no longer able to get service. Thus, because of a life and death situation, the kids have wrecked credit before they are out of the home. So many cards are stacked against them."

Jobs are another issue. Poor work skills and poor social skills, partly a legacy of lead contamination, are one issue that requires training programs. However, beyond that Omaha is not willing to gamble on putting jobs in these neighborhoods. Anytime a store

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<sup>207</sup> "Omaha, Nebraska: The Most Dangerous Place In America To Be Black," accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.ibtimes.com/omaha-nebraska-most-dangerous-place-america-be-black-1548466>.

contemplates going in, 'the residents of the suburbs make comments about how 'it's just another place for more shootings' or conversely, 'hopefully it will get those people out of 'my Walmart.'" CC\_\_\_\_\_ wants to know how kids can learn to work and contribute to society when they can't see society working or contributing. "There is limited ability for summer jobs. There's nothing in walking distance. There's no transportation. Many families don't own cars. Busses don't even run certain places on the weekend, and cabs here aren't cheap." CC\_\_\_\_\_ assures me she is not yet burnt out, but figures it's only a matter of time. Something has to change for the better, but she can't see how that will be.<sup>208</sup>

### **It's the Environment, Stupid**

Some time later I was at my friend's comic and coffee shop, going over some notes and reading "Ideology of Hatred" when I met DJ\_\_\_\_\_, a white male in his forties, father, college lecturer, and PhD student at Creighton. DJ\_\_\_\_\_ was originally drawn to the book I was reading being what he called "the typical left-leaning academic, who is also interested in using comics to encourage literacy." Our initial conversations were on discourse analysis, which lead into a discussion on my dissertation, and discipline, "Conflict Analysis and Resolution, if it can, or even should be called a discipline." Further intrigued, DJ\_\_\_\_\_ asked whether I was studying at Creighton for the program at the Werner Institute, and questions about writing a dissertation as he was soon approaching ABD. After a lengthy discussion on academia, he tells me that he's got

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<sup>208</sup> CC\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

some insight into Omaha as a lifelong native of Midtown, first living to the north, and currently to the south.

"I grew up in North Omaha--born and raised. Several generations of my family have lived there, all blue collar workers who worked in the lead smelting plant and other industries once based there." While some of the older generation still live there, many have moved away to seek other forms of work. "I remember growing up listening to my grandfather tell stories about the untold amount of lead accidentally dropped into the river." Lead used to come up river to the Asarco plant to be unloaded, which DJ \_\_\_\_\_ mentions parenthetically to be one of the worst superfund sites around, "frequently enough, huge lead ingots would slip into the river while being unloaded. There they would sink and remain, as of course they were far too heavy to be retrieved once they immediately lodged in the river mud. So, there it lies to this day, leaching lead into the environment."

This excess of lead in the area DJ \_\_\_\_\_ believes to be among the factors that contribute to the pockets of extreme violence, "It's not just the well-known intergenerational poverty, or the lack of jobs that traps people in a cycle of violence and poverty, but the fact that all of North Omaha is a superfund that was never cleaned up. This lead blankets all of the north reaching into midtown." He continues by talking about the students he teaches at the community college in the city, many are from North Omaha and the northern parts of Midtown. "Many of my students barely know how to read by the time they enter college. A lot of them suffer from extremely limited attention, and a lot of the tasks many of us would take for granted are an immense struggle. I know



poverty plays a part, as well as parental engagement, but I'm certain a lot of it can also be explained by the lead levels and other environmental factors."

Along with never properly cleaning up the superfund site, or helping to rebuild after the race riots and burning, DJ\_\_\_\_\_ feels the 'renewal' projects aimed at North Omaha are atrocious. "There needs to be more than just Habitat for Humanity and Projects providing people homes. The Project on 24<sup>th</sup> and Lake is a good idea, but is stalled since apparently no one thought to fund it," he chuckles. "While those things are nice for the city, potentially were someone to fund them, they don't address basic concerns of those most directly and intimately connected to the space. There's a food shortage. There's no transportation. There's lead in everything." DJ\_\_\_\_\_ explains that his family who still lives up there uses raised beds for their garden to avoid the lead. But acknowledges that cost of raised beds, which prohibits community gardens, or gardens for those struggling to pay a mortgage.

### **Ethnopraxis Engagement**

To the south, where he currently lives is far whiter than his old neighborhoods, and many of the people "are at least lower middle income. Most of the children will go to college, or do well in high school, and land fairly respectable jobs, providing the economy turns around." Further, in this neighborhood, for whatever reason "whether it's luxury of class and status, or culture, but my neighbors are fairly involved in local politics and have, so far, successfully resisted large-scale development of the neighborhood--they're not protesting, or fighting, but are presenting a basic organized opposition based in neighborhood associations." He speculates part of the ease in

resisting development is that there are "still far cheaper neighborhoods to exploit. There may come a time when these people have to show stronger force. They may need to take legal action." Interesting that DJ\_\_\_\_\_ suggests that his largely white neighborhood of middle class residents would organize first in traditional institutions, but later be prepared for using the courts and legal system. This particular ethnopraxis would be barely entertained in lower income and ethnic neighborhoods. Residents there have expressed lack of trust in the legal system, for good reasons. White middle-class expect that the law and legal process exist to protect people and their rights and property; lower class and typically darker skinned people know a different reality.

Another concern for residents in his neighborhood is the new land-bank initiative. Interestingly GA\_\_\_\_\_ had not said anything about this. The new land-bank initiative was proposed by a liberal senator to help the city to 'clean up' neglected properties. "On one hand, good for the neighborhood, right? But what are the long-term effects of 'cleaning'? This could be a process that just removes the condemned and dangerous homes, but then what? Once the lots are vacant and opened up, what use will they be? Are they going to be sold on the market, and to whom? Will the city develop them, and for what? Also, what happens when you've cleaned all the vacant lots and want to develop a space where older homes are, will they be labeled dangerous and evictions forced on residents?" It starts to get problematic quickly in his neighborhood where there are homes that could use some work, but are functional near a bunch of condemnable properties. That home that needs some work, and is owned by a slumlord, or an elderly

couple could be marked condemned, or purchased without much resistance thus clearing a block for major projects and erasing the community they work to maintain.

### **Development: A Corporate Power Grab**

After describing both north and south Midtown, I ask him about Midtown Crossing. "Such a bizarre thing. It was built by Mutual of Omaha!" His interpretation is that this is a clear expansion of corporate influence on the city. "It's a corporation attempting to not only improve the look of the corporate headquarters, but also gain greater influence on the city, and the way and direction it develops land, allocates resources, and stuff!" He says this isn't the first corporate bid for city influence, "Conagra did that with their downtown campus. They razed a bunch of historic buildings and 'the old market' was sacked to become what it is today." He tells me he's interested in preserving the culture and history of this city, but wonders what other historic buildings, landmarks, and so forth the city and corporations have their eyes on. "Clearly Midtown Crossing was not developed with community partnerships or the local residents in mind. It was solely the corporations nearby and the particular economic metrics cities like--it may have had something to do with nearby universities, or some future tourism... But clearly corporations factored first. I don't see it as a tourist stop yet, but perhaps down the line it could become one after a few more historic buildings nearby get demolished."

DJ\_\_\_\_\_ is skeptical that many of the locals actually make use of the development. "Either they know, and would rather support, the owners of local established small businesses, or they're the yuppie liberal class that want to support local and non-chain stores for some political reason they don't understand not being remotely

versed in Marxism, or they're just economically unable to partake. I would guess it's mostly suburban conservatives that go to slum it in Midtown and marvel at the spectacle of urban renewal." Overall, he is disgusted by the way the city has handled historic buildings along Dodge Street in the east of Omaha, notably the 49r, a popular bar on 49<sup>th</sup> street that is now a CVS. In spite of his cynicism, DJ\_\_\_\_\_ suggests I take a look at some of collectives north of Dodge, there is an alternative trying to eke out another way, he has no names or specifics, and so I make a note to search them out after I run through a few more interviews.<sup>209</sup>

### **A Conservative Discovers Structural Violence, Fails to Imagine an Alternative, and Sticks to His Guns**

As with most Sundays, my family has lunch together, it's a ritual we've done for as long as I can recall. Locations are usually chosen by grandpa, and he and my father alternate who pays. On occasion, my grandpa invites 'family friends', which are really just his friends who know my father and met us children once upon a time. Today was one such day, and we ate lunch with a selection of the M\_\_\_\_\_ family from my grandfather's church. The M\_\_\_\_\_s are a large family at the church who has married with other large families from the church forming a sort of multigenerational churchgoer dynasty that prominently occupies several pews near the front. The matriarch of the whole group is my grandpa's age, mid-nineties, and she boasts she has fourteen grandchildren, who are a few years my senior, with great grandchildren on their way. I was raised in the same church, however, in spite of being close in age to the

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<sup>209</sup> DJ\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

grandchildren, as a backslider who has rarely been to church since leaving my parents home at 18, I do not know the family well.

My grandpa introduced my dissertation work, by saying that I was doing a dissertation and he "couldn't explain it," but asked if I could "do so in layman's terms." I've gotten better at this as I've had conversations with people, and this time I was careful to explain it in a politically neutral way. A few moments of random chatter following my conversation, J1\_\_\_\_\_ (who is my dad's age) piped up saying. "I'm not sure if you knew this, but I am president of the Omaha Home for Boys, and I'm very conservative." I was immediately concerned that my politically neutral explanation was not what I had intended, however, J1\_\_\_\_\_ went on to say, "That means I believe in economics, and balancing budget, business, and growth. However, I never realized how many barriers there were to people in poverty until I became president two years back." Further, now that he's now aware of these barriers, he's not sure there is anything to be done about them, except for charity. For him, the things I find necessary are not economically feasible--they won't make money. Public transportation, and empowerment projects are "wastes of money, because the return is not readily realized or quantified. While some may pan out over time, most take more time than economics should allow." This said, he is firmly committed to doing those things that could turn profit, or at least become sustainable and pay back the investment, or was charity with clear measurable outcomes for the individuals served and not just tallies on the amount of people served. J1\_\_\_\_\_ represents the most frustrating sort of person I meet--people interested in doing good, but interested in economics and capitalism more. It's almost impossible to explain to these

people why human needs are important on their own, or that human flourishing is important regardless of profit, or that most people would be creative outside of the profit motive. It's not that these people are wicked, and vile, but have priorities that inhibit espoused beliefs; priorities that prevent good work and social safety net programs for their own sake. J1\_\_\_\_\_ is the sort of person who would advocate privatization of services under the promise of growth, and revenue.<sup>210</sup>

The multi-generational residents had the unique ability to remember the rise and fall of Midtown. These people could all recall when Midtown was thriving, when people had good jobs, and remember when that ended, and that it wasn't that long ago, either. Most of these residents disliked the state of Midtown currently having a nostalgia for the space. In some ways that nostalgia prevented them from seeing the space as it is both in positive and negative ways. For many of these residents, Midtown and the nostalgia for Midtown held the American promise in which all classes, races, faiths, interacted and could pursue life, liberty, and property. Moreover, this group related the fall of the area to a time in the 70s and 80s, whether it was due to racial unrest, white flight, deindustrialization, or something else. It was this period of post-Viet Nam disenchantment that hollowed out the urban core and scattered residents into a bloated suburbia that was unlike the urban growth following World War II that built industry and community, but fostered isolation and withdrawal from the world leading into the post-industrial world. The complaints about development have little to do with gentrification, but erasure of history, and how what is being built is not necessarily a reflection of the

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<sup>210</sup> J1\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

continued history of Midtown, but an opportunistic land grab to bring an ahistorical suburban presence into city living.

## **Artists**

### **Weaving the Social Fabric**

I've known BC\_\_\_\_\_ for almost twenty years, we went to school together, attended the same church and camp, and he is the first artist I meet with to understand what relation the arts play in the social transformation of the field. I meet with BC\_\_\_\_\_ at La Buvette, a French Restaurant downtown known for it's great food and terrible service.

Primarily, I talk to BC\_\_\_\_\_ about his ongoing project, Loom. BC\_\_\_\_\_ is a DJ and began Loom almost 10 years ago with the expressed interest in bringing the segregated people of Omaha together through dance music. He realized early on in his career that while he might play all over town, these tended to be highly homogenous groups of people; yet they all appreciated the same music. Further, he felt that the segregation of Omaha has contributed to the injustice faced by the poor and minority populations in the city. So, he along with a spoken word artist in town decided to organize events using common media that celebrate the cultural icons and heritage that compose the cultures within Omaha. Thus, Loom, "weaving the social fabric" was born. The idea was "to bring people together through a common interest. Get them dancing and having a good time. Sharing a positive experience. And hopefully, hopefully they might have a conversation."

"In some ways this has been successful, however in other ways, this has not been as successful as hoped." I ask BC \_\_\_\_\_ to expand on this statement. In what ways has it been unsuccessful? Since I left town, he has gone from hosting a once-per-week party after hours at a tapas restaurant to owning his own club. "Business is ok," he tells me though makes it a point that he really doesn't handle the money aspect. His business partner does that and understands that part. BC \_\_\_\_\_ holds the tension against the profit motive towards his espoused interest in "bringing people together, educating, advocating, celebrating culture and introducing people to each other." His disappointment comes from not knowing how many people he impacts, and suspects "that only about 10% of the participants are really impacted" in the way he hoped, and he'd really like to see that number climb.

### **Business is Bad for Justice**

Further, he feels that there are sometimes a negative impact on his staff who are suddenly confronted by a variety of cultures that have different attitudes towards servers and bartenders. Owning a club has forced him to deal with the culture shock his spoiled suburban staff face, and there have been regular complaints about tipping, and cultural appreciation of service employees. He has never dealt with culture shock or issues from patrons who come looking for a diverse, or cultural experience. BC \_\_\_\_\_ has also become skeptical, or at least suggests there is a very limited ability for a for-profit business to do social good, and laments the move from party host to club owner, questioning if that was a good move for his interests. Owning a club has certainly made him good money, and it has allowed him to open a second business here in Omaha, but it



seems to be worse for the cause. He's currently developing a non-profit for the arts. This new endeavor aims to connect disenfranchised people and the arts community, and the disenfranchised communities with the large amount of money available for the arts in Omaha. "Disenfranchised people don't know anyone in the arts community with money, they're unable to leverage networks, and have never been taught how to construct a grant application. This non-profit hopes to balance this dynamic."

BC\_\_\_\_\_ has tried to use art as a political tool. One that seems apolitical. Art used to unite people and break barriers, thus making positive social change. It hasn't been as successful as he's hoped, in part he blames the transition from a hosted event to a business. He's not given up on social justice, but has become quickly jaded and skeptical that social justice can ever be achieved through a business medium. "Business is bad for justice."<sup>211</sup>

### **Persistence of Racism**

AA\_\_\_\_\_ is an architect, and his mother is a well-known artist in town. His studio is above his mothers' in a building his family owns where his brother repairs and builds bicycles. The building is on 26<sup>th</sup> and Leavenworth, an area that was once home to a more vibrant collection of artists, but is now largely demolished, and is not far from where the Cog Factory once stood--a firetrap of a venue that hosted numerous Omaha bands. I lived near here in my early 20s and remember more buildings than there are currently. AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me they have been knocked down only in the past few years, but they have been vacant for far longer than this. AA\_\_\_\_\_ grew up in Omaha, and

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<sup>211</sup> BC\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

his childhood was spent on Leavenworth in the company of artists and other creative people. "Omaha was much different than today."

"It was sometime in the 80s or 90s when Leavenworth became a bombed out wasteland. After they shut down the projects and redistributed the people across Omaha." One of the major places people were distributed to was the OHA tower near here. After the low-income people moved in to the OHA, many of the elderly moved out to the suburbs, and those who stayed soon died. This influx of people changed the dynamic of the neighborhood. "This area has never been high income, and has always had prostitutes, but there used to be more owners and more working people."<sup>212</sup> This most recent wave of white flight caused a lot of buildings to remain empty for decades, and they finally got torn down. This vacancy meant that the Leavenworth corridor became a place people drove through to downtown; not a place to stop and look around as the buildings decayed around them.

AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me his family has owned this particular building for 40 years, and that there used to be many artist galleries and studios nearby. Now, most of those have shifted over to Benson. To a certain degree he's resentful of Benson's success, but also glad it's there. He just wishes someone would begin doing some infill behind the strip. "That strips become essentially saturated, which is good, but they need to build denser life spaces and other storefronts into the spaces and streets behind Maple."

AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me he's always been a huge advocate of live-work spaces. "There are

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<sup>212</sup> Prostitutes were relocated here by police from other parts of the town to facilitate the development of the Gold Coast. During the early 1900s this area was actually home to very wealthy Omahans.

plenty of vacant lots for people to set up new buildings to attract new residents to this neighborhood. There are also a number that can be easily rehabbed. This area is better than Benson, as it has more growth potential and is really more urban than Benson. Plus, it's walking distance from the Old Market and Midtown Crossing." If it were up to AA\_\_\_\_\_, there would only be mixed use developments allowed, though he will work on other projects. "We need more live-work spaces. We shouldn't do as we do now with suburban strip malls that people drive to from their suburban homes. People need to walk. People need to interact." Unfortunately, AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me, Omaha is typically opposed to mixed-use spaces. They say it doesn't work. AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me "it just hasn't worked here, yet. Elsewhere it's been successful." Further, AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me he has lived in other cities that are in ways similar to Omaha, but also different. "What Omaha lacks is it is not a walking city--there are no communities, and suburbs are not built for community. People moving to Omaha are missing that."

### **Market Forces Trump Community**

AA\_\_\_\_\_ muses whether there are just not enough people in Omaha. That, perhaps there is no critical mass of non-corporatist people here. "Most people here desire whatever the market tells them they desire: Granite, stainless steel, big yards, kitchens that look a certain way, or a certain style of floor plan. This is why all the houses look the same. Why everyone has a yard, and drives an SUV. Corporate trappings of statuses." AA\_\_\_\_\_ asserts more boldly now, that there is not a critical mass of artists, homosexuals, intellectuals, and so forth that will gentrify an area and build a

neighborhood from a grassroots perspective merging past with present. "We don't have urban pioneers in this city."

More importantly, AA\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that Omaha is "lazy." Whenever there is enough demand for a certain urban experience, "they just build new shit. And that shit is literal copies of things built ten years prior in another city! Omaha's planning and architecture are shortsighted and lazy. They're stop gaps, like the Red Lion (now the Double Tree) or the North Freeway." The planning and architecture are designed to 'fix' certain conflicts, and in actuality cause other conflicts and prevent future changes in the city. "We need amenities in the urban system. You can look at not only food deserts, but also restaurant and small business deserts. We need more local spots that ensure and enshrine community interaction. Local, local, local."

### **Sterile: The Aesthetics of Suburbs**

"Omaha's aesthetics are also terrible. They've been terrible for a long while. It's all very corporate, very suburban, very sterile. There's little to reflect the culture of space, or the history of space in anything built around here. Not that it always has to." AA\_\_\_\_\_ explains that while he's a fan of historic buildings, not every space needs to be historic preservations. You can do modern takes on old architecture, or build things that are influenced by the history and environment. AA\_\_\_\_\_ stresses the importance of aesthetics, though it's not something he can put into words. He instead shows me a dozen objects that illustrate what he's trying to say: maps, pictures, models, articles on historic events at a particular space; all these things go into what it means to design aesthetics. Further he discusses places he's seen in cities that do this better. His examples range from

a Boston brownstone that is a facade with glass and steel on the backend, to an ultra modern home in Amsterdam where the lines and dimensions of the glass and steel building correspond with 400 year old homes on either side--clean but also blending with the skyline, or Chicago where new construction is done to mimic older construction but increase density. His ultimate point is that there are histories, memories, feelings, and textures in an aesthetic presentation of space that makes an object interesting and meaningful. Further that most of Omaha architecture denies this-- it's uninteresting and cookie cutter. While there are a number of good examples of how to make architecture meaningful, "we only do it here in cold corporate models--a development model; not the way an architect would, or an artist, or a person who actually gives a shit about where they live. We construct our built spaces in this city based around material possession and what property says about who you are."

I end my conversation with AA\_\_\_\_\_ by asking him directly about Midtown Crossing, already suspecting the answer he gives. "That is a perfect example of what not to do."<sup>213</sup>

### **Cool Artsy People**

I met DE1\_\_\_\_\_ at her studio in Benson. DE1\_\_\_\_\_ is an artist, and so is her husband. They used to run a studio and gallery in Midtown Crossing. Both her husband and she are in their mid-to-late twenties. DE1\_\_\_\_\_ begins by stating she's not allowed to talk about the terms of arrangements regarding rent at Midtown Crossing. She only tells me it was generous, and their only expectation was to have the doors open, play

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<sup>213</sup> AA\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

music, have events, and draw "cool artsy people" to the space. However, in the end, they left, not because of Midtown Crossing, but because it was not the sort of business they wanted to run, and would rather focus on their own creations and not run a gallery. "It was always intended as an experiment."

However, she does suggest to me that Midtown Crossing is poorly managed. She's not sure what they were thinking with their picks for stores or restaurants. She can't figure out who they're trying to attract, or what they think their image is. "Clearly it's something West O, but why move West O into Midtown. The aesthetic is very corporate. Very West O, and not very Midtown at all--it feels disconnected from the surrounding area." Furthermore, she says it was weird being there with a constant feeling of surveillance. "It was like you were always watched, or observed." The disembodied voice of a fellow artist from behind a partition constructed from letters of the alphabet concurs. The feeling of observation was accompanied with an overplayed security apparatus. "There were key fobs for all the buildings, patrolling guards, everything about the security looked like actual police. It was all too much!" She says she can kind of understand why they felt the need to do this, but the presence was over-played and dominating.

**Did not Fulfill the Promise: "The Park is not a Park"**

DE1 \_\_\_\_\_ tells me she was originally from California, but lived in Dundee for several years before moving in with her husband a block away north from where Midtown Crossing was built. I ask her about living there prior to Midtown Crossing. She smiles, and says, "It was fine. I never felt in danger. But, I feel like Midtown is not a

place you live in if you are afraid of a lot." Regarding Turner Park, she says, "I didn't spend a lot of time there. The public art was cool. And there were really cool trees." She says it always felt like it was primarily a place for transient people to pass through, sleep, or gather. Again, from behind the stack of alphabets, I'm told it "was a place of diversity. There were sometimes picnics, but also homeless sleeping, and drug deals going down. It was a diverse and interesting place." Regarding the contrast between then and now, DE1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me "the park is not a park." I probe a bit, "It's not really a park anymore. It's a thing to be looked at--a piece of art, and you are kinda discouraged from using it. It's not overtly prohibited, but subtle cues say not to." She suggests it's these subtle cues which explain why no one is ever in the park anymore, when there used to always be people there.

I inquire into her usage of the space. She tells me they don't really go there much. Occasionally they'll meet friends at brix, but prefer to stay in other parts of Midtown, or Benson. She adds that, "we like the wine at brix, but it's not a place to go except Monday night when drinks are half off." As we talk more, she questions aloud "where does the typical patron come from? Who are these people who wear blazers and boat shoes on the weekend? Who thinks of khakis as casual wear? Where do they live? Who are they!?" This is not the typical person she runs into around the rest of Midtown or parts of Omaha she spends time in. "That place is strange."

DE1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me they have moved since Midtown Crossing was built, and now live off Leavenworth. "There are many more families and people involved in their community off Leavenworth than over by Dodge." I ask her about difference in security

or safety, and she says simply "It's a nicer neighborhood." Further I ask about Sheri's and if they lived there when Sheri's was there? She tells me, "yeah, but we live a block off Leavenworth, and the traffic and prostitution did not extend that far into the neighborhood. It pretty much stayed on Leavenworth, Park Ave, and 30<sup>th</sup> Street." Pretty much confirming what I had been told by others. "It's still there, of course, but now it's migrated down to 24<sup>th</sup> and Leavenworth." Further, she tells me that the closing of Sheri's and the new stores aren't really connected with the development of Midtown Crossing. "Maybe it is, but it doesn't feel that way. Places are doing well, Mother India and so forth, independent of Midtown Crossing. Midtown Crossing isn't doing so well. They are having issues with keeping apartments full, and the stores don't remain in the bays very long." I tell her that JR\_\_\_\_\_ at UV stated they came to Midtown because of Midtown Crossing. To which she replies, "That's a version of the story. But UV is different project, they try to be part of the neighborhood, and as such are having an impact. Midtown Crossing, however, is a separate space. It's an anomaly. It doesn't participate with the neighborhood." It's clear DE1\_\_\_\_\_ prefers UV's development model, and while a fellow at the studio says it will still contribute to gentrification, this is not a concern that seems to register strongly with DE1\_\_\_\_\_.

Finally, I ask her about cycling in the neighborhoods around Midtown. She tells me that there are a lot of people doing this, particularly along Leavenworth, but in general it is still dangerous. She tells me she knows someone who's almost been killed a few times just passing through Midtown Crossing. "Midtown Crossing's probably the most dangerous spot for bicycles. It's just not well designed for them, and perhaps people



who come and go from there just aren't very aware of alternative modes of transportation." In general there has been some progress on cycling in Omaha, but it has a long way to go, and simply watching the news will tell you how common bicycle deaths in this city are.

DE1\_\_\_\_\_ 's final comment regarding Midtown Crossing is that it "did not fulfill the promise." Whatever the promise was, it wasn't fulfilled. And it seems clear from DE1\_\_\_\_\_ that there was an overall lack of vision beyond the basic construction in the whole thing. It does not know what it wants to be except that it certainly doesn't want to belong to the neighborhood.<sup>214</sup>

### **The Heart and Soul of Community**

The artists represent the heart and soul of community. Concerns ranged from aesthetic presentation to concerns for the least among society. Not typically engaging in structural and built ways, artists engage through an affective plain seeking to bridge divides. Aside from cost of housing, artists are drawn to Midtown and urban spaces because this is a tapestry in which they are able to work bridging myriad human divides, a conceptual playground in which to experiment with how to bring people together and make them feel something about life, each other, the world. The heart and soul is performed in an aesthetic way (art, music, architecture) to inspire people, to make people feel what cannot be simply articulated or provided for by physical structures. The artist, too, engages with history and lived experience of people, and much of the gentrification and urban renewal is not just exploitation of space, but also an assault on aesthetic

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<sup>214</sup> DE1\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

sensibility by people incapable of understanding this. In some way, these projects are destined to move people away because they are anaesthetic objects designed to numb people into a sense of safety, which is distasteful to people who need to be alert in order to survive in an economic situation that barely provides.

### **Small Business Owners:**

#### **Business Model Development Yields Unidimensionality**

There are a variety of small businesses throughout Midtown that I interviewed. A few of them provided insight into Midtown and Midtown Crossing. The first that I talked to was JO\_\_\_\_\_. JO\_\_\_\_\_ is a diversity trainer by profession, though he was formerly in the military and has the appearance, with his shaved head, close-cropped beard, and multiple visible tattoos, of someone you wouldn't want to cross. Further he comes across as an intense individual, though he is friendly and engaging.

JO\_\_\_\_\_ came to Omaha he says "thanks to a starter marriage." Initially, he hated Omaha. However, before he decided to leave he also decided to give it a chance, and got involved in the community. He ended up staying, remarrying, and raising a growing family. Most of the time he has spent in Omaha has been spent in Midtown though he currently lives in a western suburb with his family due to the living space they now require thanks to their newest addition. In order to stay in Midtown with the space they wanted, he would have had to buy a fixer upper, which he states: "it's not for me." Regardless of the current geographic location of his home, he assures me that Midtown is something "very near and dear to [his] heart." Which is why I am meeting him in his daily office in Midtown, a coffee shop in the heart of Dundee called Blue Line. Of the

things he misses most about Midtown is "the diversity--diversity of all sorts. Out west in my current neighborhood, it's all homogenous. The houses, the streets, the people, the incomes." JO\_\_\_\_\_ isn't referring to just race, or class, or aesthetics, but all of these things that are a watered down performance of living the fabled American dream.

JO\_\_\_\_\_ 's primary interest appears to be in diversity, for when I ask him about Midtown Crossing, he wants me to know he hates it because it's as unidimensional as the suburbs he now lives in. "AkSarBen Village did a better job than Midtown Crossing at capturing the diversity of the area and integrating into the existing neighborhood. Even the look and feel of the apartment buildings blend into the skyline--it's not a Helmsdeep style fortress." JO\_\_\_\_\_ discusses the aesthetic of the place as "very suburban. And with the security and all that, it's inviting to some, I'm sure, but repellant to many." Most of whom it invites are those longing for a gated community and repressive landscaping covenant, while the ones repelled by this are those that live closest to the site. Further, JO\_\_\_\_\_ mentions other locations throughout the US that he feels that did a better job--places not too far away or dissimilar to Omaha, such as Des Moines' corporate art district, or Kansas City's Industrial and Lighting or Crown Plaza. "All these places are walkable. Places where you can waste a day, or part of day. Many of these places also blend the old architecture into the new. Seeming to blend into the neighborhoods they aline with." He points to how Midtown Crossing seems to have purposefully built a wall-like fortress to keep the existing neighborhood at bay, as though the neighborhoods were attacking armies.

As JO\_\_\_\_\_ sees it, it's "Corporate Omaha" that makes decisions for the rest of us. "Corporate Omaha decides and makes power. These people don't understand any of the intangibles. The look, the feel, the texture, and diversity of Omaha. They know for some reason they value art and diversity, or are supposed to. But they don't understand any of it." Echoing much of what other people have said about corporate elites in Omaha really setting the pace for development, investment, and any changes that go on in the city, and being completely out of touch with regular working sensibilities. "Unfortunately for Omaha," JO\_\_\_\_\_ says with disdain, "All progress, all means of addressing change in Omaha, must have a business model, and that raw business model does not work for places that are diverse and struggling. These places have their own projects, interests, desires, but are often blocked from avenues of power that allow them to enact these projects." JO\_\_\_\_\_ speaks intuitively of a critique of the capital model of development and urban renewal. With a firm understanding that "groups traditionally marginalized, colonized, and otherwise controlled by dominant classes" are unable to benefit or even access the leverage provided by these models. While he doesn't know what might change this, he suggests the place to begin is by taking profit out of development. Further, instead of behemoth structures of business and capital, we might try "smaller and more local and more commuter, walking friendly spaces. Small locations for social interaction with storefronts that invite people in, or have places to stop to chat or socialize."

It's clear from talking with JO\_\_\_\_\_ that he feels that within spaces where people are struggling that smaller and more connected and interconnected spaces to work

and socialize would help. Unfortunately, this is also not how Omaha does things. Life in the city is separated by vast spaces of like objects clustered together.<sup>215</sup>

### **It's About Presentation**

MIC\_\_\_\_\_ is an Omaha entrepreneur I was introduced as being someone who is routinely about 5 years too early to a trend, and while he has managed to remain fairly successful in other endeavors, the ones he cares most about have failed only for a trend or neighborhood he lost money on to become successful soon after his loss. MIC\_\_\_\_\_ is a part time musician who has lived in Midtown for 30 years, which astonishes him how long it's been. We meet around lunchtime in a small bar in Midtown.

By the time I talk to MIC\_\_\_\_\_, I've heard many of the insights he had to share. He tells me, however, that as an upper middle class white male, Midtown Crossing doesn't bother him to visit, but that it doesn't belong to the area. "Midtown Crossing is all about the presentation of hubris--an aesthetics of hubris would be a good way of describing it. Whereas the rest of Midtown is humble, and the buildings display more humility--even in the wealthier neighborhoods. Hubris versus humility is probably why it sticks out." He goes on to describe how nothing in that space, from the storefronts to the park call upon the feelings or aesthetics of the rest of Midtown, and while he'll occasionally meet people there, he is never drawn to it in spite of living a couple of blocks away. "It just feels like a corporate office park."

Further, MIC\_\_\_\_\_ explains that as a long term resident it doesn't feel like home, and he wishes he could recall what used to be there. He'd like to see if there were

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<sup>215</sup> JO\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

any echoes of the old buildings incorporated into the new design, though he doubts it. He suspects that for those who are lower income, and/or nonwhite that Midtown Crossing feels even less like home, and even less inviting. "I suspect that in the way that I am not drawn to visit, there are many who are repelled by the design." Fortunately, he tells me he has yet to witness that design take hold on the neighborhood, and it is really just an anomaly, "a space unto its own." Like others, MIC\_\_\_\_\_ tells me there are two places worth your time or money: a specialty cooking store, and the Grey Plume. "Aside from those, you can forget it!"

While being critical of Midtown Crossing, MIC\_\_\_\_\_ was also dismissive of it. Like what was overtly stated by others, Midtown Crossing seems to have no idea who they are marketing for aside from people who appreciate the suburbs. There is no draw aside from it's weird novelty and insulation from the rest of the environment, and while it transformed the immediate space, it alone has had no direct impact on anything outside.<sup>216</sup>

### **Growing a Community**

It's a cold November morning as I walk from my car to meet with AC1\_\_\_\_\_, a 24-year-old partner in an Urban Farm in Omaha known as the Big Muddy. November has finally brought winter to Omaha, and I am certain that farming and agriculture are concepts farther from most urbanites minds than usual.

I'm at Blue Line again, a community space where I have met many people throughout my time researching this project. Further, as it turns out, there are a number of

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<sup>216</sup> MIC\_\_\_\_\_ Interview.

other Urban Farmers that day in the coffee shop working on end of year reports, planning for next season, and just hanging out. I was unaware until recently how much movement there was being made in regards to urban agriculture in Omaha. I'm introduced to a woman from Truck Farm, and another person from City Sprouts. AC1\_\_\_\_\_ finds it strange and remarks that it's strange "all these urban farmers have decided to use the same spot today." On one hand it's strange that they are all here today, but on the other, today is the first real cold day, and Blue Line has a robust community calendar and is routinely stocked with socially active people interested in empowerment, or networking. Blue Line is an urban hub for information on what's going on in Midtown and the rest of Omaha. While my conversation today is primarily with AC1\_\_\_\_\_, other urban agriculturalists will chime in and reinforce things that AC1\_\_\_\_\_ will tell me.

I begin the conversation asking AC1\_\_\_\_\_ what got her started along the path towards urban Agriculture. She refuses to answer the question directly and tells me a story about her outdoor cat that got lost for slightly over 24 hours before it returned. AC1\_\_\_\_\_ had not seen the cat in a while and placed signs along the pedestrian trafficked street, it was not long before she received two calls about the cat. By the following afternoon, the cat returned itself to AC1\_\_\_\_\_'s possession. The day following the cat's return, AC1\_\_\_\_\_ received a two-page hand written note from a neighbor chastising her about her care of the cat. That she should keep the cat indoors, and so on. Reminding her that there were troubled kids from broken homes that might torture the cat, and that there are dog fighters in the neighborhood for which an easily captured cat makes good bait, and there is a busy street that the cat could get killed by.

The letter went on and on. This put AC1 \_\_\_\_\_ off--that certain forms of violence are normalized, and that the response is to "turtle in. Stay inside, keep you cat (or kid) inside away from anything." Instead of causing AC1 \_\_\_\_\_ to put up walls, she instead redoubled her efforts to engage the community, and resist what is a growing movement in America where people put up walls, and barriers, and stay inside, and cease to be community. "This year in Omaha, primarily in the suburbs, there were a number of 'trunk-or-treating' events." For those who were like me and do not know, trunk-or-treating is where parents buy candy which they place in their car's trunk, they then circle cars in a strip mall parking lot, and kids walk from car to car enacting "trick-or-treating" with a high level of social controls and policing by all parents involved. "This largely unwarranted fear is aiding in further dividing an already divided community!"

### **Economics Sans Expansion and Growth**

While still not directly answering my question, it has set the ground for AC1 \_\_\_\_\_'s attitude towards community, and so I asked her again about urban agriculture. She tells me for starters, she's not from Omaha. She's from Wisconsin. And she was an economics major. Further, she's fed up with the mass commodification of food and food processes and the continued alienation of people from food production. She moved to Omaha to work for City Sprouts and explore the local food and urban farming movement with that nonprofit. From there, she met some friends that wanted to grow the organization, but were told no. These friends and her split and started their own organization. They also decided to make it a business collective, rather than a non-profit



as that would give them greater control over the type of activity they did. Today, the farm they started has 36 chickens and several plots. Next season they may add some goats.

Much of the work that Big Muddy does involves skill building and skill sharing. Everyone who works at Big Muddy also works a second job to support themselves and the work they do. None of the employees/owners are actually paid for what they do at Big Muddy "It's only in its second year." AC1 \_\_\_\_\_ tells me that "the collective started with seven, and is now at six. It's tough to guide a collective that large, and five is probably an ideal size." She has no interest in growing Big Muddy, but would like to see the capacity of urban farming grow. "More urban farmers, and the development of an urban farm cooperative of collective farms to service an increasing portion of Omaha's population." That said, she also plans on moving outside Madison next year to farm her Grandfather's land. "In fact, it's from Madison I got the model for the farm cooperative. There's a non-profit coop that has a ton of for profit small farms under it. Everyone pays into the coop a small fee each year and that pays for 2.5 full-time positions to do all the marketing and event planning. This frees the farmers up to farm." She wishes the Big Muddy had someone who could take care of all the non-farming business for them. Someone with primary skills in that sort of thing, and did not have to also spend 30 hours per week gardening.

I ask AC1 \_\_\_\_\_ about resources at the farm. She tells me that "On the farm itself there is little waste, but there is waste among those that purchase. We have explored the idea of urban composting, but have yet to get around to buying the receptacles to do this." Further, she says that the produce is sold through 25 CSA shares, and some

additional to the farmer's market and a business partnership with Table Grace Cafe (a pay what you can restaurant). "The partnership with Table Grace reflects our business model of pay what you can. We accept various forms of payment from cash, to time banking, to skills, or labor. Some people pay more, others pay less. We also gently encourage people to haggle at the farmers market. We'd rather see people with produce."

I ask how an economics major ended up with this business model and no desire to grow their business. Was this an untraditional program? AC1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that she graduated from a pretty "traditional economics program" but through this, she came to understand that "modern advanced capitalism and market system breeds a certain violence." In a roundabout way she discusses the alienation of consumer from means production that in turn destroys how we relate to one another, and hastens the destruction of the planet. "The economic system has contributed to the dissolution of community--we're taught in economics to replace relationships with dollars. And the more mass commodified a product is, the more this is true. We really need more experimentation in creative economies that support, build, and empower local communities. Local products that return to local economies. Mass consumerism has destroyed the artisan, which has in turn destroyed the community, destroyed livelihood, and grown fear and distrust!"

As I talk with AC1\_\_\_\_\_ I pick up theories by the Situationist International, Anarchists, and Marxists, but whenever I check origins with her, she gets a puzzled and quizzical look that tells me what she later vocalizes: she has not read them and is only indirectly familiar with Marx. She just has an understanding of how economics works, and has observed the way that the large-scale econometrics leave the lower levels of

society increasingly behind. Further, she was taught through these models, that it doesn't matter who was left behind, or how unequal things became, because boosting people up and promoting equality was inefficient, and efficiency is prized above justice, compassion, or people. "I really don't believe that mythology that it'll all sort itself out. There's no evidence it's going to do anything but make things worse. I'm not sure this alternative creative market system will help people. I just can't continue to contribute to the breakdown of society," and with an almost pleading tone she adds, "that's got to help, right?" I unfortunately have no answer for her, and instead of offering encouragement or support I do something incredibly stupid and ask her what she contributes Big Muddy's success to. "Youthfulness has gotten us a lot of awareness among the Omaha community. But, at the same time, it's also why we can be dismissed. As if the business community is saying 'look that's cool, and cute, but in a few years they'll be doing real work in real jobs.' As if this sort of creative economy is a youthful folly. But by the time you're your age," she points to me, "you should leave that behind and join the real world."<sup>217</sup>

The small business owner tends to be rooted in a community, and while they enjoy working for themselves, they also respect the struggling families and history of space in which they have set up shop. Drawn to the diversity and interesting environment of Midtown, they are also drawn to the Earthy-Midwestern humility they find in the space. Hard working people, neighborly people, people not concerned as much with material prestige (after all, it is home to Warren Buffett and working class alike). Development for small business owners ought to reflect the more humble people who

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<sup>217</sup> AC1\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

live here. It's fine and even positive to redo historic buildings, but the bulk of these ought to reflect the diversity of class and experience in the neighborhoods.

## **Activists**

### **To Work and Live with the Poor and Disadvantaged**

One of the very first people interviewed were the B1\_\_\_\_s, a young couple about my age if not a bit younger. JoB1\_\_\_\_ looks a bit like the lead singer of Radiohead, and is far quieter than his wife. He works as a contractor doing carpentry. Originally from Iowa, he went to college in Denver and moved to Omaha about three years ago. Two year ago he moved in with MB1\_\_\_\_ and at some point they got married. MB1\_\_\_\_ is a student of social work, also originally from Iowa, but did her undergraduate work in Indiana before moving to Omaha six years ago to work for a non-profit. She is currently pursuing an MSW at UNO. JoB1\_\_\_\_ is Caucasian, and MB1\_\_\_\_ is black and more gregarious than her husband.

They live in an older house with beautiful woodwork in the front room where we sit and talk. They tell me the house is owned by an older man in the neighborhood named Pat, who owns most of the houses on that side of the block. They tell me Pat's been buying up the houses as the neighbors die. Three years ago he only owned this house, but today he owns several in the area. They tell me Pat does this because he grew up in the neighborhood and remembers how it was in the forties, and is looking to exercise control over who lives in the area--essentially clean out the drug dealers and pimps, provide cheaper and safe housing options for low-income families, and resist some of the gentrifying he sees going on. Pat is known as the "Mayor of 31<sup>st</sup> Street."

MB1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me when she first moved to Omaha she lived in Dundee with a friend. They chose Dundee because it was an established and safe feeling neighborhood for a couple of 22-year-old girls. It was real nice, but small, and they were looking to add another roommate, so needed a larger place. Additionally, they were working in poor neighborhoods, and felt it was important to have experience living in the areas they were working. She tells me there were a series of discussions about safety, but decided to look anyway. When they first found the house, she tells me that Pat interviewed her friend and her on two separate occasions for a total of three hours before offering to rent to them.

JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ moved here three years back and lived in an apartment down the street. He attends the church nearby, and says he's never felt unsafe in the neighborhood. However, there is definite domestic conflict, and graffiti. Not infrequently you can hear the domestic conflicts and fights in the evening and at night. His opinion is that the graffiti has been on the increase the past year and a half.

### **The Changes Are Weird, but Not All Bad...**

MB1\_\_\_\_\_ tells a slightly different story. When she first moved here, she did not feel safe walking after dark, or before light. Though, she felt fine during the daylight hours. Moreover, when she first moved here she was frequently stopped by men trying to solicit her along Leavenworth and Park Ave. during her morning walk to work. Thankfully, after Sheri's Showgirls closed, this behavior has stopped.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> The issue of safety may be a product of aesthetics, but I am careful to distance myself from a “broken windows” theory, as “broken windows”, among it’s issues, is that it operates on a particular (probably white elite) aesthetic ethnopraxis.

I ask MB1\_\_\_\_\_ and JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ about changes to the neighborhood since they've lived there. Last year there were drug dealers that lived a block over, but they were unwelcome in the neighborhood, and the residents eventually got them evicted. The parking lot across the street used to be a place where stolen cars that could not be fenced or chopped were ditched. This no longer happens.

The B1\_\_\_\_\_s live near a couple of Urban Village developments. I ask them what impact that's had on the neighborhood. "It's weird," JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ says. MB1\_\_\_\_\_ adds, "In general, it's been good, but it's weird." MB1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that the building closest to them occupies used to sit vacant for a long time, and caught fire at least once per year. There is another one down the street, too. "That building sat empty forever," says MB1\_\_\_\_\_, "it's good to see it occupied. It's just nice that someone is coming in and investing into the properties without just leveling them. And that they are investing in the neighborhood." JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ and MB1\_\_\_\_\_ are aware that it is clearly gentrification. The properties rent one room what an entire house rents for in the rest of the neighborhood. "It's also been strange to suddenly see the yuppies walking their little toy dogs up and down the street," says MB1\_\_\_\_\_. JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ adds that "almost no one in the neighborhood has pet dogs. Especially not toy dogs."

### **... But Not Everything Should Change**

Furthermore, neither of them are a fan or JR\_\_\_\_\_ of UV. They tell me a story: "We took a tour of UV after that one apartment opened on Leavenworth." They describe them as nice, but more than what they would pay for. "Why not just buy a property down here to live instead of continuing to live out west and develop this area?"

Further, JR\_\_\_\_\_ JR\_\_\_\_\_ is a big personality and made some offensive comments towards people of lower classes and talking about winning the neighborhood. "He said, we'll know we've won when there's a Whole Foods at the Avanza." Avanza is a local grocery store that many in the neighborhood shop at, and while the B1\_\_\_\_\_s wouldn't be opposed to a Whole Foods nearby, they don't want to see Avanza disappear. They like Avanza. There's also "a few things they like at Whole Foods" but they don't like having to drive 10 miles to get them.

As I continue talking with the B1\_\_\_\_\_s I realize I identify with them quite a bit. They are not people who make much money, they prefer dense neighborhood full of diversity. While they have more education and have had greater means than many who live near them they do not see this as something that makes them better than their neighbor. They are reflective of their position and are aware of the ongoing changes to the neighborhood and future problems due to gentrification. They have chosen to do work and volunteer in ways that help empower and mobilize people of color and the lower classes.

The B1\_\_\_\_\_s are aware that Midtown Crossing started the changes, and that it is responsible for bringing JR\_\_\_\_\_ and eventually others, and while Midtown Crossing may have come first, JR\_\_\_\_\_ has more influence in the neighborhood than Mutual of Omaha and Midtown Crossing. To their understanding, Midtown Crossing is mostly empty. They pass on rumors of people who turn on the lights to make the place look occupied at night. Further, the stores never stay open, and half of the bays are empty. They make use of the theater occasionally because they can walk there, and

like everyone else I've spoken to they rave about the Grey Plume, in spite of the price. JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ hates Delice. Overall, they prefer places like Elevenworth Cafe, The Brothers Lounge, The Crescent Moon, Mother India, and other established local places.

I inquire about more changes to the neighborhood, such as the bike lanes. Fairly defensively, MB1\_\_\_\_\_ states "They're used a lot!" I laugh, and she realizes the naïveté of my question. She explains that the lanes were a topic in the mayoral debates with the incumbent defending his decision to promote them while the challenger, supported by many of the suburban citizens, was critical. MB1\_\_\_\_\_ says it took a while for Omaha drivers to understand what the lanes were and how they are not for driving in, but there are always cyclists using them. It's even inspired people to cycle in areas where there aren't explicit lanes.

They also tell me that prostitution at Turner Park has cleared up, and whether that was due to Sheri's closing or that the park itself was closed for a year or more. Further, MB1\_\_\_\_\_ says the neighborhood feels safer, but whether that is a reality, or just perception from living there she cannot adequately say. They do tell me that there was a drive-by a while back. "But not a real one, like kids playing at drive-by"--they don't successfully clarify what kids playing at drive-by means. There were also some break-ins, but only small things were taken, and again "it was like kids playing at break-ins." Whenever things happen in the neighborhood, everyone who belongs to the Leavenworth Neighborhood Association gets an e-mail--graffiti, break-ins, and other crimes are all alerted soon after they occur.



I ask JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ and MB1\_\_\_\_\_ what they like about the neighborhood. They both like the older architectures and that not all the houses look the same. The architecture is as diverse as the people who live here. Further, there isn't the regime of uniformity imposed on lawns either. MB1\_\_\_\_\_ says she likes to garden, and there are no prohibitions on gardening. Many suburban covenants place restrictions on size, location, and other things, but there is none of that in this neighborhood, and so long as that remains, and they are able to pay property taxes, the yuppies don't bother them.

Changes JoB1\_\_\_\_\_ would like to see in the neighborhood is more good small businesses and less vacant storefronts along Leavenworth with community focused retail. Currently the stores and businesses along Leavenworth are uniform stores and warehouses. MB1\_\_\_\_\_ says she would like to see changes in the schools. She tells me that south of Leavenworth there is a large Latino population and many of them don't really speak English (said matter of fact without judgment). The schools south of Leavenworth, however are underfunded and lack the resources to adequately address the needs of the neighborhood. As it is now, she would not want to send her kids to the public schools in this neighborhood.

### **Maintain Space for the Poor and Disadvantaged**

In spite of the issues in the neighborhood, the B1\_\_\_\_\_s call this place home and even before they called this home they committed to working to improve it for the lives of others. Now that they have become part of the fabric of the neighborhood they are even more committed to this cause. As residents they aren't opposed to the influx of

wealth providing it still leaves space for people like them and the low-income residents that live here.<sup>219</sup>

### **Training Minorities for Corporate Work**

MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ is in his mid-thirties. I was randomly introduced to him by a previous interviewee I ran into at an event at Midtown Crossing. MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ and his husband moved here about three years ago when his husband was installed as Pastor at First Central United Church of Christ in Midtown. MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ works for the Urban League currently, but has worked in non-profits for 10 years.

MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ begins by telling me that the primary foci of the Urban League in Nebraska is to deal with jobs and education. Regarding jobs, they focus on partnering with corporate Omaha to provide knowledge and access. For example, they will ask corporations what entry level jobs there are, and what specific skills they are looking for in regard to filling those jobs. The Urban League will then help develop those skills for people of the community, help residents tailor a resume and finally link them to the corporate jobs. MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that Union Pacific has been the best corporate partner, and help to bring in training every Wednesday. Other corporations have not been as much help. Ironically, all the corporations are aware they need diversity, particularly when trying to attract people from other locations to move to Omaha, but aren't competent in creating this diversity. Further compounding the issue is "many corporate offices have cracked down on misdemeanors and this disproportionately affects minority communities." MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ 's assessment of Corporate Omaha being unskilled in

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<sup>219</sup> JoB1 and MB1\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

diversity agrees with what JO \_\_\_\_\_ told me, though his description of Union Pacific is slightly out of step with what I had heard regarding UPs willingness to continue with these programs.

In regards to their work on education, he says the focus on retention rates, as well as educating the community about services, and bringing them up to speed with requisite skills to qualify for public services and skills for the workforce. MCJ \_\_\_\_\_ says "there are a lot of people who don't know how to use basic word processing or computer office programs." Further, many of the services have moved to digital and internet applications in order to reduce waste, but there are many people without internet access or skill with digital media, and thereby become disenfranchised from necessary services. In regards to retention rates, they focus on many of the same skills they use with assisting people get jobs: computer skills, time management skills, and behavioral skills. Not only does this help children stay in school and finish high school, but it also better prepares them for finding jobs, applying for services, and generally improving their status in life.

### **Beyond Service Jobs: You've Arrived at the Foothills of the Mountain of Prosperity, but You May Go No Further**

Jobs are tough for urban residents. "Mostly we're dealing with service jobs, and those are few and far between in this part of town. It's a food desert, so there are only fast food restaurants and a few gas stations, and call centers are far away, and none of these pay living wages. It's really fucking dire." Adding to essentially basic issues of jobs and education, MCJ \_\_\_\_\_ tells me, "the criminal justice system is broken, and the industry that profits off it sucks. It's well known that the police are unfairly abusive in North Omaha, and the Omaha World Herald disproportionately covers area crime and

violence." There was a recent report documenting police abuse in North Omaha against minorities, and MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ points to the extreme lack of coverage regarding violence that does occur in the rest of Omaha. Though, he does acknowledge a certain area of North Omaha does have more violence, but when you compare the coverage with police data, the two don't line up properly. And this all contributes to one of the worst factors facing urban residents "stigma. Stigma is something we have very little control over, and the only way to counteract that is for residents to prove people wrong. But more than that, it means they have to be better. They have to be the best. But only be acknowledged for being adequate. Imagine the strength that takes..." MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ points to a reality of another America, and America in which no matter how good you are, you will only ever be good enough. He suggests one way we could change this is to discuss the triumphs of the inner city, the successes and the progress made. "There are plenty of examples, but Omaha only focuses on the negatives." Urban Omaha, and primarily North Omaha is a city divided not just physically through built environment, but also spiritually. Echoing the crisis of hope/crisis of spirit discussions from earlier. The spiritual divide is not just shattered optimism, but a reality that polices success and governs it as merely good enough; where optimism means to merely rise to the top of an underclass and know you won't go any further. Neither will your children. Or anyone else in the neighborhood. You've arrived at the foothills of the mountain of prosperity, but you may go no further.

MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ is the first person to speak positively about the new mayoral regime, though it is contingent of her holding consistently to certain ideological campaign issues. He says, "North Omaha has a bunch of organizations that have proven

themselves fiscally responsible for a long time, and so on this language we can speak." MCJ\_\_\_\_\_ suggest that it's possible that while some of the experiments that began under the last regime will be defunded, it's also possible that certain organizations will experience an influx of money. "The voices of minorities speak louder than perhaps she was expecting to hear. She will have to deal with that!" This tempered optimism of yet is the best I have heard regarding what the future holds under the current mayor. Hopefully he is at least somewhat correct.

### **Power of Lived History**

During my conversation with MCJ\_\_\_\_\_, the overwhelming thing that he has impressed upon me that the lived experience of history has a powerful effect on people. For the disadvantaged, history matters in a way it does not for those of privilege, and perhaps this is why you rarely see disadvantaged lives improved under libertarian economics. For poor and minorities in this city people are reminded every day that the city has tried to exclude them. As recently as thirty years ago major structural works were put in place to divide them from the rest of the city. Every initiative to improve lives that is tried has been tried before at least once, and they have failed. They failed either because of wrong leadership, or overt racism, or both. The people here remember. The community remembers. For most people here, there is a legacy of disenfranchisement and every attempt at enfranchisement comes with it that legacy and memory. It's going to take a long time to overcome the burden of that history here. Omaha is going to have to work very hard to rebuild trust. Further, the successes the city touts are built on the southern

and western edges of this swath of land, just outside the barriers. Something that certainly does not lend credibility or trust in the face of history.<sup>220</sup>

### **Called to Serve Radical Justice**

FrKV \_\_\_\_\_ is a bit of a local legend. A radical priest, now retired. Early in his priesthood, he served in North Omaha and worked alongside local Black Panthers to improve conditions affecting the community. He was at the Pine Ridge Reservation during the AIM standoff with the FBI. After the shooting ended, he helped with the wounded seeing to their spiritual needs, and then redeployed in Yemen to work with lepers until he was arrested. After release from prison he served with Mother Theresa in Calcutta. Next he was stationed in Liberia as head of Catholic Relief Services, a post that brought him in contact with Charles Taylor, but he was forced to return to the US after contracting malaria. He returned to Omaha to serve as priest replacing a pedophile priest and served a community primarily comprised of Sudanese refugees. After he retired, he remained active with the Sudanese population, and remains outspoken about racial tension and violence in Omaha. A vocal proponent of peace, he regularly writes letters to the editor calling for the forgiveness of terrorists, criminals, and for the church to become open to homosexuals. He is also a friend of my grandpa, though my grandpa 20 years his senior, they grew up in the same Nebraska town where my great-grandfather was minister. My grandpa introduces us, and though my grandpa considers him "a radical, and about as left as you can be" he has great respect for him and his life's mission.

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<sup>220</sup> MCJ \_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

FrKV\_\_\_\_\_tells me, "your grandpa is just awesome. I admire him. Though we may disagree initially, we eventually agree where it counts."

### **Minimal Infrastructure Repair, Maximal Community Disruption**

Today I am meeting with FrKV\_\_\_\_\_, who insists I call him Ken, on 24<sup>th</sup> and Grant Street at a Catholic Church St. Benedict the Moor. This is FrKV\_\_\_\_\_’s church before he retired, and now sits on the board of concerned citizens who are all volunteers. This is less of an interview and more sitting in with a group of community activists dealing with conflicts in the neighborhood. Only half of the board shows up today, there was some major infrastructure work going on in neighborhood thanks to a project built out west that caused the sewage system to back up down here (all sewage flows east to the river) and the roads were torn up in front of their homes blocking them inside. Those who made it today were late because this infrastructure work. Apparently, there was no notice given to residents about this work starting, and everyone was caught off guard. I am told that all the infrastructure down here is old, and whenever something is built out west or downtown, the infrastructure here breaks. "Mostly it's plumbing. However, instead of fixing the plumbing infrastructure, the city does the bare minimum--tears up a chunk of street and rigs it to work until the next project comes along." The woman speaking, Therese, I am informed is Gabrielle Union's mother. "This neighborhood is continuously torn up."

### **Now We Just Pray No One Gets Shot**

The program they are discussing began in 1966 as a basketball program. The founder, an older black man was a minor sports star, and used that success to give back to

his community and provide children an outlet and place to be that didn't involve getting in to trouble. Today, the program is struggling. In part this is because of increased violence brought by drugs and changes in how gangs work (this has contributed to parish membership leaving the community, which compounds their problems), but the other part comes from competition. In 1966 when this program began, they were the only group doing it, it turns out it was successful, and so every other group started doing it. "There's now a section of the Omaha World Herald that displays all the b-ball programs serving the city and surrounding areas--four pages of programs. Most of the programs have better funding than we do. So, less and less people show up." I'm told, however, that they do attract an older crowd than most. Adults and young adults looking for something to do. There is a lot of unemployment in the area, and this activity is free.

Recently, within the past few years, the program has tried to diversify. They now offer job skills, tae Kwan do, and other activities, but is struggling to meet the rent and pay bills. They also recently developed a new program to run called "Youth Opportunities Program," designed to provide job skills and access for juvenile offenders, it was unfortunately stolen by the YMCA. "Clearly it was a good program. It just got stolen." There was also an anger management and conflict coaching project hosted by Creighton, but for some reason or another, and no one knew why, those plans fell through.

Amidst trying to find a new niche, I'm informed that the pool of money for the are is swallowed up by other NGOs, all of which are competing for a seemingly limited pool of funds. There are many well-known NGOs that pretend to offer services they don't



really offer, or don't do adequately. Further, what several of the parents admit freely to, is the service that the Boys and Girls Club and Girls, Inc. are providing, "babysitting. Both these organizations are used by working parents to watch their kids. We know they don't do half of what they say they do, but for a hundred dollars a year you get someone to watch your kid through the day and you know they'll be safe. They even transport them from school for you if there are enough enrolled at that school." These services severely cut into the pool of kids that come to the program, as the nearby schools have enough parents making use of the low-cost babysitters that they are transported.

Another major problem they discuss is public transportation infrastructure in this city. Some of the regular children walk 30+ blocks to get to this program, "and only come because it's free. Any other activity they might do would require transportation that is too costly to do on their own, or just not available in this city." Many members find it concerning how far some of the children walk because of the violence in the area. I'm informed they once had hired security for their program, but had to stop because of funding. Security ate up half of the operating cost. FrKV\_\_\_\_\_says, "now we just pray no one gets shot." Theresa Union adds, "We thought about adding in midnight basketball. Many would come. It works in LA, but unlike LA there isn't enough funds to hire security to make it feasible."

By the end of the meeting I do not have a sense of optimism for the program, but I am aware of all the struggles trying to work to address the structural and direct violence in this neighborhood. In the end, like many of the other crises facing the city, the biggest impediment is the monetary system and access to funding. It's also striking to see how

much the NGO opportunism is as prevalent here as any other conflict zone, and typical of what I hear from many interventions, big names get all the money for doing nothing, while the little names do a lot of work without any money. A universal problem of conflict zones.<sup>221</sup>

### **Transportation Alternatives: Struggles**

The Omaha Bicycle Company is a small shop in Benson that also sells coffee. Both owners are originally from Omaha, but lived elsewhere in more bike friendly cities than Omaha and have returned to try to develop a more bike friendly Omaha. They settled in Benson for the variety of interesting things going on, and the plethora of youth and artists interested in alternative forms of transportation.

A major reason for choosing Benson was it was one of the few in tact neighborhoods in Omaha. While this is untrue, it is their perception. Moreover, it is currently the most lively of in tact neighborhoods, and most neighborhoods don't capitalize on their structures as reported by the destination midtown report.

They would love to turn Benson into a walking/biking corridor where no cars are allowed on the downtown street. Unfortunately, Maple, which runs through the heart of the city is a state highway, and thereby maintained by the state. This means the city has not power to change this, and has no desire to do so because it is essentially a free road maintained by the state. If the Benson district could rally the rest of Maple to their cause, then it might change; unfortunately, this is impeded by the westward expansion of the city. There are 180 suburban blocks to the west to convince, and they have little

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<sup>221</sup> FrKV\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

incentive. Their idea would be to demonstrate the benefit of a walking/biking corridor for local businesses, and then to replicate this in other parts of the city.

Another problem, I am told, is that alternative transportation in general faces an uphill battle. In regards to light rail, better bussing, bicycles, and so forth, there is not just the car culture to compete with, but also "Nebraska is the last state to have a Department of Roads rather than a Department of Transportation. While it sounds like a semantic distinction, it really says a lot about where the emphasis is in regards to moving people."<sup>222</sup>

### **Transportation Alternatives: Successes**

Another bike-focused activist is Charles. I met Charles at the Community Bike Project, a building that screams coop as you step through the door. A repurposed house north of Dodge it uses a back room for classes and a front room as a free community bicycle workshop, pro repairs, and bicycle sales. They rent the upstairs as an apartment for \$500, and pay a \$1 lease on the property. The money from the apartment goes toward Charles' salary and supplies.

The coop was founded about the time I left Omaha for grad school, six years ago. Charles tells me it started very child focused, around fixing kids' bikes, but has changed in tactic over time. Since he started here, they have switched from providing a kids bike for volunteer hours, to requiring them to take 6 classes before they get their bike. "We used to basically just give them bikes. Kids didn't take care of them, or really know how. Instead it was just easier to ditch the bike where it broke down and come back for a new

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<sup>222</sup> SBC \_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

one. We also now serve adults, but we let them just volunteer, or pay \$25 for a bike." The classes, Charles tells me, are an hour long and focus on basic bicycle maintenance and repair. After six classes, they have the skills needed to keep a bicycle running and travel safely around the community. "We'd like to see more coops in Omaha in poor parts of town." I ask about competition between the cooperatives and the other bicycle shops. "Right now we're not competing. We serve different people. Though, this has happened elsewhere."

Charles tells me why bicycles are important for low-income children. "Bikes are an easy inexpensive way to broaden their horizons. They provide transportation and empower them holistically. Mind, body, spirit." He tells me how along with providing bicycles for children, the most important thing they do is group rides. "Showing kids that now that they have a bike, they can get out! They can go wherever the fuck they want! Explore this world and be free! It starts by taking them to the zoo. The zoo shows them the city is open to them. Next we take them to Council Bluffs," he laughs, "The act of crossing a state border shows them they aren't limited to the city."

Even though they are a non-profit, I inquire about the business end of it. What do they charge for parts? "Our policy is that all the parts are free if you need them. Except for tires and wheels, which are still free to those who can't afford them. Otherwise we appreciate donations." Regarding help in repairs, he says between adults and other children volunteering time here, he's a trained bicycle mechanic and always around to help out. He tells me that there are a number of children really involved in the coop, and many other children love spending their free time hanging around.

Regarding child safety, I ask him if there has ever been any issues. He assures me that while much of Omaha is averse to bicycles, the midtown and downtown areas are open to them and growing in acceptance. Further, he adds, "That's also why I require them to take classes. Bicycle safety is an important thing to keep children safe."

Charles asks if I know of "Bikes not Bombs" to which I confess I have heard of the group out of Philadelphia, but know little about them. He tells me, this is the model he wants to replicate and grow the organization into. "I don't want to just offer kids basic bicycle skills and rudimentary transportation, but also provide more advanced job skills." He explains that Bikes Not Bombs has a store. Having an actual store teaches point of service skills, stock room skills, and provides some income that provides stability and teaches the children how to write and research grants. "More advanced skills. Through bicycles, kids can grow and learn and develop into productive social members."

I tell Charles how much this neighborhood has changed since I last drove through here. It's far more inviting and open than last I recall. The violence and despair that was such a visible part of this neighborhood has faded. "There's still a lot of poverty, but the other violence is gone, mostly. There are still a few targeted violent revenge acts, but it's no longer random. Most importantly, though, it's been the kids. More than anyone, the kids are getting upset every time there is violence, vandalism, or a car blown up. They are the ones out here policing the neighborhood. Years ago the violence was normal, and nobody thought anything of it. Today, the kids make everyone think about it." Charles shows me that there really are some simple fixes, and starting with the youth is important. The coop has brought kids out into the community in a way not seen in many years doing

constructive acts. It is yet to be known how this will affect them after they graduate high school. The first high school graduate of the program has yet to occur, but will this year. Charles has a lot of pride in the child, and says he will be going on to do some college work, and that it will be interesting "and hopefully inspiring to see what he does." Building community and taking back the right of to the city is important. Reclaiming your right, regardless of your income or class, perhaps in spite of your class, is a large focus of the coop.

Charles says he thinks "having a community space is an important part of building community. We provide this, but so do the gardens. A lot of our kids will roam between here and the urban gardens. Between working on bikes and weeding. Everyone knows the kids, and the kids know everyone. With limited resources we've made a huge impact on this neighborhood. The farms have helped, too."

Charles tells me something he wishes would change about Omaha, but isn't particular to Omaha. He tells me there aren't a lot of daytime activities or commerce. "Particularly around here, most of what's going on is nightlife oriented--even in nearby neighborhoods, they focus on adult and nighttime activities. But, a grocer, or a hardware store would help." This would provide jobs and places for kids to start developing their own means beyond what the coop can provide. "Ideally, each neighborhood ought to be about 80% self sufficient, and between three neighborhoods it ought to be 100% autonomous." Charles holds that as citizens we ought not to be required to travel by car in order to get what we need for survival. "I get most of my produce at the local outpost

stocked by the nearby urban agriculture. We've got better options, as far as diversity goes, here than the Omaha Farmers' Market has.<sup>223</sup>

### **Sustainability and the Theory of Capitalism**

I find myself once again at Blue Line Coffee to meet with EW1\_\_\_\_\_ from Transitions Omaha to talk about what the organization does. He selected Blue Line as it is mere blocks from his home, and we can meet before he goes to work. It turns out that EW1\_\_\_\_\_ and I went to high school together, he was a year older than I, we rarely talked then, and did not stay in contact after graduation. EW1\_\_\_\_\_ works for the city in the sustainability department, a department the new Mayor is shutting down and deeming it unnecessary. EW1\_\_\_\_\_ is upset about this, and says the department made fiscal sense, explaining that just through changing city lighting gradually to more sustainable options (as bulbs burnt out), they could save enough money to fund 1.5 departments of sustainability each year.

EW1\_\_\_\_\_ sheepishly tells me he's changed a lot since high school. He "was one of the kids who never thought to go past 72<sup>nd</sup> street eastward." Now he lives in Dundee and has no reason to ever go the other direction. EW1\_\_\_\_\_ points out that everything in Omaha is actually in the east and it makes sense to build up and not expand from a sustainability standpoint. "Though for some reason there is still a stigma regarding east Omaha. I've lived in Midtown nearly ten years and my grandparents haven't visited once. They once dropped me off at my apartment. I consider that a victory."

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<sup>223</sup> Charles at bicycle Coop Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

Regarding Transition Omaha, he tells me they primarily work on post peak oil and relocalization of food production as means of addressing inequality in the long run. One of the products they're experimenting with here in Omaha is time banking and use hourworld.com software. He explains that time banking means that someone can work an hour and bank it, then someone can pay them later in an hour of work using whatever skill they have to offer. "For example, someone can spend an hour fixing a fence, and another person can repay them spending an hour cleaning their home. All work is necessary, so all work is equal." He discusses several models of time banking. Some work for only certain services, others translate directly into straight monetary value, but he prefers the traditional egalitarian model of "an hour for an hour, regardless of skills, services, or type of work done." Theoretically, this means that neither a lawyers nor a babysitter's time are worth any different. "It's likely it will take a long time for this to ramp up into the upper tiers of society as they have the most to lose and least to gain as anyone else."

EW1\_\_\_\_\_ talks about the "theory of capitalism" and how "it doesn't work at all." While he doesn't strike me as a Marxist, he makes a joke about being at a coffee shop discussing the failures of capitalism, and that he ought to call me comrade. EW1\_\_\_\_\_ isn't particularly anti-capitalist either, but strongly in favor of exploring what alternatives might exist to circumvent inequality generated by the capitalist system for the benefit of those who need it most.



**Inequality**

Regarding inequality, wealth, and wellbeing, EW1\_\_\_\_\_ uses an example of \$750. "\$750 is base line survival for the world, and there is a great number that exist on less than this." However, he goes on, "if we increase this ten-fold, which we would consider poor in the US, we could give everyone a far greater standard of living. Many people in the world could now afford homes and stuff to put into the those homes." Increasing that ten fold again, to \$75,000 is "middle class and the standard of living is far better still! At this rate in America you could afford a home, car, and so forth." Another ten fold \$750,000, "you basically tap out your standard of living increase. At this level you can buy whatever you need, most of what you want, and take care of family if something arises." However, EW1\_\_\_\_\_ says, "this is also a marginal increase from \$75,000 in regards to standard of living. So, what could we do with that \$675,000 that would be more efficient? We could give it to the world's most poor and radically improve their standard of living." EW1\_\_\_\_\_ uses this not to propose a salary cap, but to suggest that the laws of efficiency that the "capitalist theory" proposes to live by, is not a reality, and a degree of redistribution would be more efficient. "It also demonstrates the extreme level of inequality to standard of living."

Next EW1\_\_\_\_\_ talks of food production. "It's a retraining process. It begins by retraining people what food is to begin with. And, that the basic scenario is you get a job to get money to buy food." Whereas with an urban agriculture system, you could "get food without getting a job. Handy in times of layoffs or underemployment. It's actually a better use of time for a low-income person to have only one job, even if that's not full-time, and do urban agriculture, then it is to have two jobs and eat junk. Especially when

that junk not only contributes to poverty by requiring money, but also contributes to overall poorer health and depression." Furthermore, EW1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me, this local control of the food production allows people to reestablish neighborhood and work on empowering groups and knowing one another. "We don't have to live so isolated from each other, and we can do far better when we restructure the world to live collectively and not so individualistically." He mentions as an aside that there are literally people right now who live off amazon.com," you can make all purchases and even order pizza through the company."

### **The Poor: Capitalism's Canary**

Finally, EW1\_\_\_\_\_ tells me before excusing himself to run off to work, "we live in post peak oil, so the global capital model is going to end up costing people more and more. At first, it's just the poorest of society who will feel the pain. They already do." The poor always feel the most pain. "People need to stop thinking about post-peak as a time when they are unable to drive their Hummers, but as a time when they are unable to heat their homes and unable to afford food." It's unclear how far off EW1\_\_\_\_\_ thinks we have, but he's interested in looking down the road in a way that the current system and the majority of Omaha is unwilling or uninterested in doing. His focus on sustainability has caused him to think about the sustainability of the system, and he's determined it is not. At the very least, we are in a moment of grace when we ought to experiment and prepare for the inevitable.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> EW1\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

**Legacy of Malcolm X**

I planned to meet SLW\_\_\_\_\_ Thursday morning at a small coffee shop I had never been to but was well within my range of activities throughout my life in Omaha. It was only a few blocks from where several of my friends lived growing up, across the street from a restaurant and bar my family used to eat at while I was younger, half block from an alternative theater whose midnight movies I frequented during college, and even shared a parking lot with my dentist. Even though this coffee shop was in the midst of three other coffee shops I used through college and adulthood, I had never been to this one. In fact until today, I was unaware it was more than a drive through. I arrived early, and made a space inside the cozy confines of the shop and ordered a 'Kona blend', which turned out to be fine, but not the bold Kona flavor I expected. On the plus side it was more than affordable. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ shows up just on time, the barista knows his order and he doesn't even have to order, and instead just joins me at the table.

**Legitimacy**

I have known SLW\_\_\_\_\_ for many years. For a time during my undergraduate studies he was the director of student programming at University of Nebraska--Omaha, and I was a troublemaker. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ aided in my trouble making, helping me navigate regulations bureaucracy. During undergrad, SLW\_\_\_\_\_ invited me to sit on the Cultural Advisory Board where I felt a bit like the token white boy. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ 's coffee arrives as we catch up with our families and the work we've been doing. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is still president of the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation, and his father who recently passed was a bit of a radical, who met Malcolm X on two separate occasions and converted to Islam while serving time for attempting to bust Angela Davis

out of jail, and eventually earned a PhD in Psychology. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ 's family are all politically engaged Muslims working to promote African history, and celebration of education. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is himself a family man with a couple of kids. The oldest is now leaving for college. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is not a native of Nebraska, but came here during high school, and were it not for his senior year at North High, he explains he wouldn't have much credibility in Omaha. "People ask where you're from, and unlike other cities, they really mean what high school you went to. This cuts across demographics. Poor, white, black, and rich, all ask want to know where you went to high school." Furthermore, he says he almost didn't get to go to North High, thanks to a peculiarity around anti-segregation practices in Omaha Public Schools. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is black, and North is primarily black. If it were not for his white brother, he would have had to take the bus across town to a different school. Ironically, however, he was unable to ride the bus to school (which his brother was able to do) and was forced to take public transportation (even though the bus stop was right outside his house). Omaha's history of segregation has created a host of peculiar laws and regulations to try and appear less structurally racist. It has the opposite effect on those who end up caught within the strange set of rules and bureaucracy.

Experiences like this, he tells me, along with growing up black and Muslim in America, and "having the fortune of being raised by his parents" have contributed to the political way of life. "One example is I call all good people brother and sister. A lot of black Americans use this term, but I don't limit that to race or religion. This is something that confuses many black Americans." He says, "in a few weeks you might run into

someone from his community who gives you an odd look. This will be because they know I had a meeting with Brother Filipi today, and they are expecting that you are black."

We discuss the geography of the city, and the way high school is a signifier of the space you belong to. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is thankful he came to Omaha in time to go to North, otherwise much of the work he does within the community would seem questionable. The school question is important, and in order to avoid suspicious looks from people when I mention my high school and find myself qualifying my response by explaining my stronger connection to Midtown than the rest of my school district, and how I am, and was as skeptical of students from Westside as they are. SLW\_\_\_\_\_ says that a mutual friend of ours does the same thing explaining his East Omaha activism and engagement. It's a burden of a certain kind of privilege that carries a semiological code that refers to particular geography of the city and attitude towards others, and while these spaces are just physical constructions, they are important part of the symbolic geography of the city.

### **Complexity: power and structure**

Throughout our conversation we talk about many emotional and depressing issues, but in spite of it all SLW\_\_\_\_\_ has an awesome way about him. He is someone who continuously engages people of all backgrounds. He tells me another story from a few years back when there was a big white power rally in Omaha. Somehow, he found himself face to face with a member of the KKK. "So, I said to myself, when will I get this opportunity again? I asked him to have coffee with me and let him tell me his story." He said they ended up talking for a couple hours and he was better able to understand the

individual perspective as well as the movement. "I have an impossible time agreeing with any of it, but I am now better able to understand what leads someone to participate in those movements and interact with far less radical conservatives with far less overt racism because of this encounter." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is someone who regularly witnesses and engages with the pain of a forgotten people every day, but still rises above to see the hope, humanity, and positive potential abounding.

I ask SLW\_\_\_\_\_ about a point of contention I heard from residents of North Omaha. That residents perceive they are always on the receiving end of the city, but never in dialogue with the city. That projects happen to them, such as city sewer ordinances that address overflow issues and tear up blocks for weeks disrupting an already precarious existence. "I've heard these complaints, and it is an issue," he tells me, "but I think the heart of the issue is communication rather than care or the city intending to disrupt lives. The city does not do a good job communicating things, like what a CSO (combined sewage overflow) is and how that will affect the neighborhood. It doesn't give any timeline for how long a project will take, or who to contact if there are issues." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ says that people ought to be better educated by the city about the sort of impacts of various projects, and for example, when there is work right in front of their home what "No Through Traffic" means to people who live on that street. He tells me a lot of people think that means you can't drive to or from your home. Furthermore, "the city isn't real reflective about how things impact residents. Which means, if people really feel it's impacting their homes and ability to move freely within the city, they need to take up advocacy. Sure, people complain, but it's easy for the city to assume it is randomly

disgruntled individuals and not a systemic lack of communication. We need more people to show up to meetings and talk about their brothers and sisters issues and to be supportive of their plight and cause. We have this on police brutality, but not most other forms of city relations." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ does not mean to blame the victim here, but propose that people like him need to do better jobs educating folk on how to engage the city in more constructive ways. "Most poor folk don't know the structure of power. People don't know who to press regarding the resolution of issues." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ goes on to explain most people assume if you have an issue you just write or call your elected official, but the reality is that elected official may have no power in the matter, or "plain just not the best person to contact on that issue. There's a whole bureaucracy out there. There are departments dedicated to every aspect of city life." Further, not only do people not know who to talk to, but "unlike in white areas of the city no one lives next door to power. People in suburbs and other wealthier parts of the city have access to those who act as a gateway to the system." People may not know department heads, but white middle and upper class people know half a dozen city bureaucrats, and they can provide them numbers and contact information for who they really ought to talk to.

Another way to contextualize what SLW\_\_\_\_\_ has spoken about is aesthetic dissonance. It may be that the city does no better or worse job communicating intent on projects in the urban core than anywhere else, rather that communication is an aesthetic act that varies across ethnopraxes. Further, that the default mode of communication might be a suburban middle class aesthetic ethnopraxis that is fairly opaque to poor urban

dwellers—it is not just what we say to one another, but how we say it (the aesthetic mode engaged).

"There are a lot of issues in the inner city, and there are often more immediately pressing issues in the community, police brutality for example." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ says that the issues that cause direct violence override the systemic issues that contribute to poverty and fragmentation. A lot of behaviors that may seem counterintuitive to some can be explained this way, "X is frustrating, but Y is urgent." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ tells me there is little awareness on a macro level of how things like wage slavery affects individuals, "There is little true understanding in the hood about how wage slavery interrupts life. There is an awareness and a felling and recognition that time is needed to address issues, but poverty wages are taken as a given, but people don't realize how low wages eat into the time available to address an issue, and the time available to think about how to address an issue, and there is a limited number of ways emotions can be vented constructively," he says. He tells me often people are dealing with broken homes, poverty, debt, raising kids (or grandkids), and other issues that prevent time to engage and change the system of low wages. Furthermore, when people do have the time and energy to work on an issue they have some more immediate issue that needs work, such as police brutality, cancer, and so forth, that prevent them from working on deeper and more systemic issues affecting all life in the inner city.

Because of these issues, one of the things that the Malcolm X Memorial Foundation tries to do is act as a hub for people. To inform, educate, connect, and take the first steps with people to change their world. "Most of the time the MXMF cannot



ride the whole case through, but it can assist people with how to start. How to engage power. How to understand what part of the government they ought to engage. What form of direct action might be most effective at what time. For example, it may be better to just pick up a phone and call someone than organize a protest outside some office."

SLW\_\_\_\_\_ constantly tries to look at multiple sides of an issue. He tells me that North Omaha is 40% impoverished. "Wow! 40%! That's a lot of people in poverty, but what that also means is 60% are not. Although, being borderline hurts a lot, too. But, what's going on with the other 60%, and are they doing anything to help the community?" He tells me a story about a gathering of the black business leaders. "A room full of black professionals in suits" and they were all talking about poverty and what could be done to empower people, and get more black businesses thriving in Omaha. And being a troublemaker, he said "Other places around the US, a gathering like this will sponsor a business and provide startup cash, and I proposed this. What are we going to invest into the next small business? The white people will front a few million on developing a space." What he learned, is that there isn't enough money in the black business community to pool resources to open another small business. "If all of us dug real deep we couldn't do it. We could probably come up with 10 grand. Middle-class here means just not impoverished."

North Omaha is what SLW\_\_\_\_\_ calls a clean poor community. By this he means there is not an excess of drugs. There is not an excess of trash. There is not an excess of homeless. Of course, these things exist, but not to the extent of most inner cities he's familiar with. "Mostly it's full of underemployed and working poor." There also is

very little understanding of how North Omaha is connected to South Omaha, or even greater Omaha. "On the flip, greater Omaha does not see itself connected to North Omaha. The interconnection between all parts of Omaha is not recognized, felt, or understood.

### **Geography**

Speaking of geography, I ask SLW\_\_\_\_\_ about the conflation of space in the city. He agrees that this is true, but for a variety of reasons. "First, this is a residential chunk of the city. There are no small businesses, no corner stores, no commercial plots for people to hang out. Second, there is some violence--it's concentrated, but it's there--so parents drive their kids places. This means kids don't learn their geography aside from points. School, church, home, friends' house, and so forth. Third," a point SLW\_\_\_\_\_ emphasizes, "the community is no less divided and alienated than any other. Adults don't interact here, just like adults don't interact in the suburbs. It's just more noticeable since North Omaha seems to be in greater need of community and solidarity. Y'all just perceive it as tragic here because we need it more. Our social fabric is no less alienated than wealthy folk. We just don't have the means to make that lifestyle work." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ 's final point illustrates the sort of outsider judgment given to poor and minority places. Modern society has become increasingly isolated and separated. Omaha in particular with suburban culture and suburban sprawl is built around individual units, with very limited mass centers for people to interact. Radical individualism, and the promotion of it, is a very privileged point in society. Radical individualism both works for the extremely privileged and promotes the power structure. Their privilege only exists because of places

like North Omaha, and radical individualism allows for places like North Omaha to remain oppressed. "We don't really have any community spaces in North Omaha. Most places in North Omaha you could take a 5 by 5 set of blocks, or even a 10 by 10 block of territory and not find a single store, or space for community interaction. Even if you find a place like a church, most of these churches aren't neighborhood churches, but churches in neighborhoods." By this last comment he means the congregation lives outside the neighborhood, and sometimes far outside that neighborhood. This is not uncommon for Omaha. Many people commute to a church because it is more politically savvy, or connotes a certain class, or because it's connected with the first generation of their family in the city.

Inner city development "needs to happen at a very small and diffuse level. A little here, a little there," says SLW\_\_\_\_\_, "A strip with a grocer, laundromat, barber, and sandwich shop. Then another similar place a few blocks over. Fast-food places, even. People dismiss and dis these spots, but unlike other small businesses like an auto parts store, which is needed--poor folks cars die frequently, auto parts stores only employ about 4-5 people per week. Fast food provides 10 jobs three times per day, and some even provide educational credits to workers. We can argue about adult jobs vs. student jobs, and good jobs vs. poor jobs, but we really just need jobs. Whatever we can take." SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is talking about very well intentioned people who don't want to see the sort of low-paying exploitative jobs being the only option for adults and families missing the point about living in poverty: even if that's your only option, then at least you have an option. Furthermore, SLW\_\_\_\_\_ talks about places like in-and-out burger, which cuts

into profits to be able to pay employees better, roughly twice minimum wage. "If more fast food joints were willing to do this, that would really help." He even is glad about Walmart moving in, "people have been talking about this being a food desert for years, but no one was willing to invest in a string of neighborhood grocers. Walmart was the only one. So, it's not a perfect solution, but it's a start. At least here no one is getting put out of business by a Walmart going in. There are no businesses to put out." Walmart isn't going to get people off assistance, but it might prevent the extremes of poverty they see today, and it will bring produce.

**"We consume these things, and act them back out. We decide the forms of violence we want to consume and enact."**

"Poverty makes it difficult to help your kids," he says. "My wife and I have Masters degrees, and now I have a job that allows me to take time off, or work from home if one of our kids is sick, or there is a day off from school." Most people have to figure out some sort of arrangement, or hope they don't get fired for staying home with their kids. Many people lose jobs for taking a sick day. "Also, when our kids have struggled in subjects, either my wife or I were able to help them. That's a luxury here. Not many are able, either because they are working multiple jobs, or they just don't have the ability. And then people have the audacity to ask why parents don't show up to conferences. Schools perpetuate the shame of poverty by making parents feel guilty their kid's not doing well. And that's a violent cycle in itself!" SLW\_\_\_\_\_ keeps illuminating violent cycles within cycles of violence. Stressors that spread a person thin, and are part of the lived fabric of experience within the inner city. It's easy to see where

the angst and frustration comes from in regards to any project that gets started to affect change. Where does one begin, and which cycles feed the others?

I ask SLW\_\_\_\_\_ what he thinks of the new mayor. He says, "Previous mayors have been supportive and aware of east Omaha unlike the current one. I'm pretty certain that the campaign was her first visit to these parts. Suttle came to a lot of events, and spent time with people, and not just for political appearances, but it's tough to see that that improved things. The mayor has some proving to do for North Omaha, but that may benefit us. She may have to throw us some help since no one trusts her yet, and she has no cred." Less than an endorsement of her, but not as negative as I've heard from most people on the east side of the city. Basically, SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is giving her the benefit of doubt, and a chance to prove herself even if he suspects that is not what she wants to do, it may be something she has to do. And, lack of support does not mean she won't make positive change, because support hasn't historically meant positive change.

Looking at Omaha, the big negatives that SLW\_\_\_\_\_ sees is the way that violence, sexism, poverty, and lack of education are perpetuated by our culture. It's commodified and reified. "We consume these things, and act them back out. We decide the forms of violence we want to consume and enact. The very thing we deplore is sliced up and fed back to us. The counter to this is critical thinking--it's what I teach my kids. Especially since I know I can't protect them from everything. I don't deny them the ability to consume any form of culture, but they must be critical consumers of culture. There are things they can't watch or listen to in front of my wife or I. That's it. Just not in front of the parents, and be critical." But more than negative, SLW\_\_\_\_\_ is positive. "There's a

growing sense of community among the youth. There are more and more students getting involved in diverse ways. Kids are volunteering. Kids are caring. Kids are creating a community and habits of engagement." He says that may be because there are no jobs, but this isn't a new thing. What's new is that the kids aren't just joining gangs, but resisting violence in positive ways.

After a morning conversing with SLW\_\_\_\_\_, I took with me several powerful ideas, but undergirding it all is the idea that the root of problems lay with structural poverty and a history of racism that is built into the structure of society. The other problems we face in society are problems we all face, it's just that when they happen to people of color and poor people, society twists them around to further victimize the ghetto, and to see issues as particular to poverty or inner city life rather than a reflection of society as a whole. Being forced to deal with immediate issues further ensnare one within the poverty trap, but issues really are structural and we need to find ways to deal with this. As depressing as the situation is, and as emotional as the conversation sometimes was with SLW\_\_\_\_\_, I walk away affected by SLW\_\_\_\_\_ 's optimism that together we can overcome.<sup>225</sup>

The activist is expressly not interested in development, at least not as traditionally understood. The activist seeks empowerment, and to build a neighborhood up from the poorest to maintain a space for them to live as long as they choose, but also in which they can better themselves, or at least are better able to provide for basic needs. The activist sees marginalized people as a group that elites push and pull, use and discard. A group

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<sup>225</sup> SLW\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

whose space is continuously exploited for capital gain, while the people are left with the cast off shells of some project 50 or 100 years old. In some cases, people are actively used to foster transition, in most cases, however they are not given a choice. For the activist, the city is not a space in which the lowest-classes are free, but forced to live in the shadows of America's discarded dream.

## **Resistance**

### **They Still Hope for their Children**

On the south side of Midtown I'm meeting with an organization that works addressing issues of systemic disadvantage. Completely Kids, used to be Campfire USA, but recently stopped spending money to license the name and invest that directly into the community. The population served by Completely kids is urban, 60% Latino, and 100% need. Many are immigrants or children of immigrants, they suspect about 50% are undocumented but for reasons political they do not keep this data. My host introduces herself as AL\_\_\_\_\_.

Unlike in the North, the primary issues faced by kids here are domestic. Violence is in the home behind closed doors, and not in the community for all to see. Various forms of abuse exist in the home context that affect the kids, and Completely Kids attempts to help prevent other aspects of life from slipping. Other issues that kids see in this area are public intoxication and drunken scuffling, but any sort of stabbing/shooting is a rare thing.

There is a degree of hopelessness in the community, but mostly outweighed by optimism. Most of the population to the South who receive their services are escaping

violent countries, war zones, worse economic conditions, and while some of the adults may have given up hope for themselves, they are still very optimistic for the children and future generations. Undocumented immigrants are here because getting caught is better than staying home, and the immigration system doesn't get them anywhere. "We provide services to kids in grade school, and middle school. We help them to set goals, stay motivated, make positive life choices, and learn English." The other big thing they do is "nature play." They have a community garden for the kids to grow plants and vegetables in, and they get to keep the harvest. As well they have a playground built to simulate the natural world in the inner city: logs, dirt, water, trees, and so on. This 'natural' playground and the garden allow kids to learn about the physical world through both structured and unstructured ways that, I'm told, is real beneficial to development. The playground is locked when not supervised, for liability reasons, but the gardens are not and they go "unmolested by neighbors."

I inquire into community relations: how much community is there, and how does this project impact the community? "Most of the neighborhood exists in little pockets of community--most people are from the same villages and have maintained those bonds. We've also had some effects on general disorderliness in the area because we create real public presence. We walk from place to place with the kids, and most people are on better behavior when they suspect there may be groups of kids around. Just being visible seems to have helped the immediate area. We also do parents nights, and find other ways to get parents involved, but we don't make it a requirement of their kid getting service." She says that most of the parents do get involved if they are able. There's usually a big turnout



for the community night, and they help out at the parks. "Additionally, about 25% find additional ways to get involved." Next I inquire into the relationship with authorities around here. "The relationship with the cops is pretty good here. There are the same beat cops, and they try to get to know the community and be respectful. Providing there are no major issues, the cops tend not to harass residents regarding legal status."

I ask my host about tracking the post program retention rates. She tells me that there really isn't any tracking once the kids leave. "We would love to be able to, but we don't have the resources right now. A few of the kids call and let us know where they are at and what they are doing, but it's only been a few years since we shifted out of Campfire USA to our own program."

Before I leave, I ask what changes she has seen in the neighborhood in the past few years since the construction of Midtown Crossing. Has anything reached this far south? "It's definitely not gentrifying, but it is changing." She mentions little things, like who lives in the area, a little more money seems to be coming in, but still mostly lower-class. There was recently a UV building built not too far away, and there is plans to tear down Marlon Brando's childhood home to create a multiplex called "the Brando." This area was always diverse, and she hopes it remains that way.

My short time with Completely Kids tells me that issues south are different than those north. Importantly, that while poverty and associated issues affects people here, it is not systematized in the same way as the north. People are optimistic, and their lives are improving down here, whereas north of Dodge, it is the opposite. Further, the people working at Completely Kids are themselves more optimistic about change than those

working North. This strikes me as a sort of resistance to what might be. While AL\_\_\_\_\_ provided me with some anecdotal evidence of positive change, it is a form of early intervention given we already know what could become of the fresh crop of minorities striving for a better life in this post-industrial city.<sup>226</sup>

### **Building Bridges and Connecting**

Not far from Completely Kids, in the South of Omaha, I meet with CSm\_\_\_\_\_ during one of his last weeks at a non-profit once known as Mosaic, but is now inCommon due to multiple local organizations using the label "mosaic." Most the work they do is in the Midtown area and South of Dodge. He tells me he is originally from Denver, but was living in Salt Lake City before coming to Omaha. His wife is 'from' Omaha, having lived most of her life here, but born somewhere else. CSm\_\_\_\_\_ moved here soon after Midtown Crossing was finishing up, and while he currently lives in North Omaha, he lived in southern Midtown right behind where Sheri's Showgirls was, and is highly familiar with the area in which he works.

InCommon's (incommoncd.org) goal is to unite and strengthen vulnerable neighborhoods by stopping poverty and rebuilding together. The organization seeks to address the root causes of troubled neighborhoods by addressing poverty, crime, and the lack of affordable housing. Currently the organization provides space and resources to develop social capital within a neighborhood. Bridging the divide between people of class and ethnicity and attempting to bond them together in a meaningful way. They primarily work through a network of churches between Dodge and Woolworth Streets

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<sup>226</sup> AL\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

and 33<sup>rd</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> street. CSm\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that "part of the problem with persistent poverty is the isolation and alienation of individuals." And in a Midwestern city like Omaha, that is "exacerbated by the lack of good public transportation." To illustrate this point, CSm\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about his morning commute. "It takes me about 8 minutes, if I hit the lights right, about 15 if I don't. However, if I take the bus? Then it takes an hour and twenty minutes!" He goes on to explain how this contributes to a variety of factors, particularly the learning of English. "Let's pretend someone lives near inCommon and doesn't speak English. Not a big stretch of the imagination, but who cares? Next, let's pretend they want to learn English through the classes held at Metro. In order to commute from home to class, which is near my home, it takes two extra hours from their day. Who has the time? Let alone low-income people." Then he provides another illustration regarding just working. "Let's pretend you own a car and it's a 15 minute commute from where you live, and your car breaks down. How do you then get your kids to school and self to work? Most of these people don't have jobs that afford the luxury of taking a day off unexpectedly like that!"

Another issue CSm\_\_\_\_\_ discusses is food scarcity. Currently the organization hosts a community meal each Saturday for 180+ people. This not just provides food, but also allows networking time where you might find a babysitter or meet someone who knows of a job somewhere. You might also find someone to help fix your porch, or car. "This is only a small portion of people that could be served--there is not a lot of Latino turnout to the events as there is much fear that they might be thought of as

undocumented, or tip off about those who are undocumented in the area. The result is only a small portion of potential people are fed by this.

### **Building Space**

I ask CSm\_\_\_\_\_ if they do any inter-class mixers. "So far, not yet. Although, we recently acquired a building that will be known as the Midtown Commons. We'll use this for a variety of community activities. The goal is that everyone who lives in the surrounding neighborhoods, from the high-rises to low-rents, will walk through the doors at least once during each year." He tells me the building they are going to rent belongs to the Acme Rug Cleaners who has been part of this neighborhood for more than 60 years. However, the owners are no longer happy with the neighborhood, but are chained to it thanks to the rug cleaning equipment in the basement of the building. All of Acme's customers have moved out west, and don't feel safe coming down to this part of town to have rugs cleaned. In turn, this requires Acme to drive all over town to collect rugs. This alone does not turn enough profit for the time spent doing so. Originally, inCommon had planned on renting the old Sherri's Showgirls, but that required too much work to make functional. "I'm glad to see that place go. It was not good for the neighborhood, or families living nearby. I used to live behind it and routinely witnessed acts of prostitution happening in the parking lot outside. Sometimes within sight of young children." Furthermore, he tells me, in the absence of Sherri's the expectation that prostitutes will be easy to come by in the area has dropped. "My wife and I used to live in the area, and before we were married, she would walk the two blocks to my house, and cars would pullover and attempt to solicit her." I inquire whether prostitution has gone down, or just

gone underground, and allow people to solicit while looking like they were just going out for drinks or dinner at Midtown Crossing? "I think it's reduced prostitution. If it hasn't it's radically changed the habits of those looking. The most common time to solicit prostitutes is in the morning," he tells me, "Men 'go to work early' but are really just buying sexual acts. You don't see any of that around in the morning anymore."

Back to the proposed Midtown Commons, CSm\_\_\_\_\_ tells me that he wants to see it look "like the Elevenworth Cafe, a place where all walks of life come together, but do not engage in usual activities." At the Elevenworth, it is not uncommon to see a mayor, local politician, homeless person, junkie, pimp, or any other person you could think of. Further, inside the Elevenworth is neutral ground. No dealing, no drugs, no drink. While the Elevenworth does not sell liquor, several patrons come in drunk, and just outside the doors you can find a street pharmacist ready to provide. Regardless, it's a place where wealthy and homeless coexist with the sober and intoxicated alike. "Midtown Commons ought to open up sometime next summer."

Regarding the overall safety of the area, CSm\_\_\_\_\_ tells me what his wife told him just the other day, "she feels safe walking here in the daylight, and when she used to live in the neighborhood she always carried a screwdriver for protection, but now she is no longer worried like that providing the sun is up." In regards to Midtown Crossing, CSm\_\_\_\_\_ says he's never actually been there. "It seems to be completely goofy. It's an ironic space. It's ugly, and why didn't they do mixed income? Why didn't they create more social zones? Porches and patios would have been nice! It's just so cold and isolating. And it definitely doesn't fit with any of the surrounding neighborhood and

looks more like an office building than a shopping center or apartment complex." Most of CSm\_\_\_\_\_ 's questions were rhetorical. He knows the reason why they didn't do mixed use, or any of the other things like porches. They wanted a clean look, and a clean start to a space they considered blighted. To improve, they needed to first remove that which was problematic.

**Ownership of Public Space: Who Designs a Neighborhood, Who has the Right, and Who is Most Prone to Disruption?**

CSm\_\_\_\_\_ tells me about a friend of his who is an amateur photographer. "One day, my friend was taking pictures of that place, and a security guard came up on his Segway, and told him to erase those pictures, they are property of Midtown Crossing. That's just absurd, especially in a day when everyone has a camera on their phone and Midtown Crossing hosts public events like Jazz on the Green!" He recants his statement about not having gone to Midtown Crossing a bit to say he's been to two places there. He and his wife recently went to brix, but would never have explored the clothing store that previously occupied that space, and "some friends of mine had an art gallery in there when it first opened. They were given six-months free rent, or something. They were supposed to generate interest and bring hip people down to the area in hopes that all the apartments would rent, and the bays would fill and Midtown Crossing would become interesting. That has yet to happen, and the gallery isn't there anymore. It's been interesting to watch all the places that try to go in there and fail. It's a total turn and burn!"

I ask CSm\_\_\_\_\_ what he hears from those he works with about Midtown Crossing. Has it impacted them any? "I haven't heard much. Most of the people I work

with, and a majority of this neighborhood are unable to afford anything at a glorified shopping mall that sells a \$4 dog cupcake. The median income is less than \$25,000 per year. That's not \$4 dog cupcake bracket. Most people are worried about basic food for themselves, not gourmet treats for their pets. And if they do have income to go out--which there are many who do--they tend to go to the neighborhood places--the established hangouts. Perhaps in ten years, as people are driven further north and south Midtown Crossing will do better." Anecdotally, CSm\_\_\_\_\_ states a friend of his used to work for Midtown Crossing, and his job was to "turn on lights in empty apartments. They wanted the place to look filled."

"Have you talked to Urban Village?" They would have a different approach to this whole thing than I do. They speak of cleaning up the neighborhood and enforcing law and order here. He'll call the police on and wishes to manage the neighborhood to keep down the disturbances. We here want to help people and empower them. He just wants to change the neighborhood and profit." CSm\_\_\_\_\_ does not hide his distaste for Urban Village well if he was trying. Development of the low-income urban area is clearly something CSm\_\_\_\_\_ sees as a social ailment, and has acknowledged that all people need places to be safe and better themselves as opposed to space only existing for profit.

Finally, CSm\_\_\_\_\_ tells me, that as far as disrupting the lives of people who live in the neighborhood, "the poor people who live here are mostly already transient. Their lives are prone to disruption, and those who have been in one place for a long time are well enough off that they are not going to be kicked out anytime soon." He also tells me that there are a fair amount of college students and younger adults in the area from

reasonably well off families who don't typically own property, and are likely not interested in owning the place they are currently living but live there nonetheless because the rent is ridiculously cheap. "This population will likely continue to live there, even if rent increases a bit due to the proximity of colleges, and it will likely take a radical increase in rent to remove most of them. I doubt the transition to a wealthier neighborhood will be felt immediately." CSm\_\_\_\_\_ does not expect gentrification to be a quick process here, but it is inevitable. College students exit college and relocate for work, or get married and look for a starter home. This neighborhood is going to change, but it will take time, and in the meantime, there is plenty of work to be done empowering the low-income people and resisting the institutionalization of poverty and poverty related violence in the south of Omaha.<sup>227</sup>

### **Shifting Urban Landscapes**

Looking for people actively fighting the increasing suburbanization of Omaha (a scarcity) and purposefully trying to engage with the community and shift the culture away from car-centric life, I find myself at University of Nebraska-Omaha in a meeting of loosely affiliated individuals known as "ModeShift." The current meeting was designed to generate ideas for questions to pose to the incoming mayor, while I'm not sure how much of that was accomplished, just how loosely affiliated they are became apparent by then end. Regardless, their intentions are grand. ModeShift is looking to improve health through increase alternative modes of transportation and better environmental protection, and they want to protect the environment through increased

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<sup>227</sup> CSm\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.



alternative and public transportation. To increase public transportation, the group is focusing on promoting densification of the city and improve infrastructure for public and alternative transportation, something they tell me go hand in hand. However, since Omaha is such a suburban minded city, and part of the Omaha dream is to own your own home with a large yard, and there is a fetishization of large newly constructed homes, they hope to tap into the libertarian fears regarding big government and government waste by showing how reliant suburban life is on governmental spending as well as the cost/waste of living in the suburbs. So far there has been little success, likely because those costs are socialized and the individual impact is negligible.

The first item of discussion is regarding recent concerns about the unanimous passing of environmental controls that are lacking the metrics and means portion of the bill, which means that everyone basically only agreed that it was a good idea in theory. This illustrates the general frustration all the members have with the legislative process and the meaninglessness of resolutions. This discussion passes on to suburban isolation with lack of meaningful streets (aka through streets), and how this sort of lifestyle is a reflection of the meaningless environmental protections, a linkage I never quite got. Following some trash talking on the suburbs, came concerns about access to jobs and transportation for low-income neighborhoods, and how this has been hurt by recent cut to transportation funds. The outrage over this leads to a discussion on what to do and where to find information. From this I learn that a recent audit of NDOR (Nebraska Department of Roads) said that they do a terrible job of communicating information, and while they do as required by law and make it all public, everything is also impossible to find within

their system. Furthermore, the transportation infrastructure is built for rural and agricultural small towns. This means that essentially, priority goes to maintaining rural roads, dirt roads, transporting elderly from small towns to hospitals and so forth, and then whatever is left over goes to Omaha to use for what is able. First comes road repair, next comes public transportation. This means that the recent cuts to the local transportation budget will make their work exponentially more difficult.

The meeting ends with a wrap up on the state legislature. A recent land bank act was passed that enables groups or municipalities to acquire delinquent properties for redevelopment instead of the land going to the county and then the assessor selling off properties. Elsewhere this has been used to create community gardens, parks, and public spaces, but in this case it is likely to soon open up for greater commercial development. There was also much discussion over a proposed bill, LB 85, that would allow vehicles under 1,200 lbs. to stop for 30 seconds and move through a red light. A bill aimed at motorcycles and ATVs, the group thought it might be used to promote bicycles and other alternative vehicles.

After the meeting ended, I asked the apparent head of the loose coalition whether there were other organizations working on these issues. I was told, not to their knowledge, and why would there need to be? If they want to work on them, they should come here and join with their projects. While ModeShift acts like they have contributed greatly to the change in transportation over the past several years, I am skeptical about their skills now that an antagonistic mayor has come to office. The previous administration was already open and in favor of these ideas merely needing a community

group to be supportive. It will be interesting to find out if they can maintain success when the new regime made it clear they disapprove of ModeShift's very goals.<sup>228</sup>

### **Structural Injustice: Worse Than the South**

I met NTN\_\_\_\_\_ at a coffee shop in Midtown, Caffeine Dreams. He is a middle aged male from Mobile Alabama currently working for a non-profit in Omaha. The focus of his work is on Urban Agriculture, which he believes is instrumental to empowering poor people and improving lives, along with issues environmental justice.

Initially confused about what he can do for my project, I begin to explain to him in greater detail what I am researching. In the midst of a lengthy introduction to the project, he stops me, and says, "Our offices are on 26<sup>th</sup> and Farnam. I've seen first hand how this city has been purposefully constructed in a way to keep low-income and homeless marginalized and isolated. Little things. The construction of the benches with arms in the middle that bar homeless from using them to sleep. The security presence that harasses any loitering people who appear to not have high enough social standing. And the big things like buildings clearly designed to separate segments of the city." No longer confused about the way he can help me to understand Midtown, he explains his current project.

"Right now, the project focuses on community gardens, which are small scale non-monetary projects that engage the community in shared goals and as a space for interaction." While the current project focuses on the small-scale projects, he eventually hopes that they can transition some areas into urban farming endeavors. "Urban farming

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<sup>228</sup> ModeShift Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.

is a larger scale project, and these are not only more sustainable, but would also provide revenue and empowerment to the community, as well as address the issues of food deserts." NTN\_\_\_\_\_ sees urban farming as projects given to a community, and not something a developer will profit off of. "The worst that could happen would be a sharecropping scenario." NTN\_\_\_\_\_ tells me coming from the South and having seen a variety of poverty and structurally unjust situations, he was surprised at how bad it was in Omaha. All he read about it when taking this job had been positive things. "You know how bad things are when Walmart is a step up. And I hate Walmart, but they are bringing fresh produce and providing jobs. This will, surprisingly improve things. Even low paying jobs are something."

### **Fences Bring Trouble**

I ask NTN\_\_\_\_\_ about the major obstacles in constructing the gardens. There are quite a few. "To begin with, there is the issue with lead and the superfund rating. A few areas have been cleared, but mostly we do raised beds." He tells me that raised beds are expensive, but so is treating the ground for lead and other toxins. "The initial cost is the first barrier for people in impoverished areas to start a similar project on their own." Another, surprising issue is fences. "Fences bring trouble. Any garden that has a fence invites vandalism and crime. The fence signals that it belongs to someone, and not to the community," he explains that since not many people own much property of their own, let alone land to grow on, this is something envied, and perceive unattainable. The fence serves to reinforce private property and that they are excluded from that. "I try to make sure none of our gardens have fences. It seems counterintuitive and I get a lot of

resistance to it. Sometimes I have to just let them witness on their own what I mean." In addition to a fenceless property, every time he starts a project he has the sponsors go door-to-door and invite each person whose house overlooks the garden to get involved. "Not everyone will get involved, but reaching out to them is important to a successful garden." Additionally, he tells me, "and this is very important, but myself and others, must approach a project recognizing our own power and status in life. I'm white, male, not a native Nebraskan, and can only do so much within a community of color. I can reach out, teach, and accept invitations for help. Ultimately I'm limited to what I'm allowed to do." He says with any sort of mission work, you must be humble, you must only do as much as you are asked, and if you are asked to leave, you do that as well. This is their home and you must respect that.

### **Invitation to Leave is a Sign of Success**

Any successful project in a poor neighborhood must go beyond charity and be empowering and "community driven." He tells me that "sponsoring organizations must accept that people may say 'we don't want you here', or 'we no longer need you, we can do it on our own now.' Sponsors are the people with power, and it's sometimes difficult to accept invitations to leave as signs of success." He adds that these are also signs of pain and a legacy of exploitation and "the failure of dominant groups to do the right thing. We've spent too long objectifying the community." One example has come from people seeking data on low-income people, and treating them as objects to research. "Low-income people have become so used to being surveyed that researchers have resorted to using incentives. And they've found the incentive that works best is a visa gift card. Now,

much of the community has become so cynical of surveys and their effects they won't engage without incentives."

"Strangely enough," NTN\_\_\_\_\_ says, "some of the worst groups on this empowerment not charity issue are the churches. Churches really like charity because it's easy and they like to be needed." He goes on to explain how the more conservative and the less the church membership comes from the surrounding neighborhoods, the less likely they will want to go beyond charity. "Many churches aren't accepting the changing neighborhood, the new faces and colors that might be joining a congregation. There is, therefore, a great resistance to transforming and empowering the community, as that would mean accepting the change." Furthermore, he tells me that churches also don't want to scale-up from gardens to agriculture (an economic empowerment tool) because "the churches feel they will then lose their purpose when no longer doling out charity."

### **Now I've Got a Tomato, What Do I Do With It?**

"You haven't asked this yet, but some of the more interesting obstacles happen after we get a garden built." NTN\_\_\_\_\_ says that once they go through all the work of getting a garden constructed, whether it's new soil or raised beds, and he's made sure there are no fences, they run into obstacles with lack of garden knowledge. "We're dealing with people who are generations removed from the land. They moved here for industrial jobs, and many of the older generations still associated agricultural work with slavery. So this was intentionally not passed down." NTN\_\_\_\_\_ says they usually run classes on gardening starting with the basics of how seeds work, soil preparation, tending, and so on. Later in the season they will teach how to harvest various plants. "The issue I

wasn't prepared for, was "now I've got a tomato, what do I do with it?" There is an intense lack of knowledge regarding how to prepare food. Real food, and not processed foods. We get volunteers to come in before harvest time to teach how to use the food just grown and about to be harvested." He tells me they bring in examples and feed the people who show up with the type of foods they are about to harvest.

### **Not A Bandage**

I ask him what he says to his critics, people who might say this is a bandage, or wrong headed, that what they need are jobs and to open up businesses; once they have money they will buy food, and not grow it. "Those people have it exactly backwards. We've already passed the post-peak oil economy. Jobs are a temporary solution to a bigger justice crisis we've got to start thinking about. Instead of being a bandage, what urban ag actually does is prepare these people for the inevitable. If projects like this are successful, then the urban core will be better prepared for the time when even the middle class can no longer afford to truck their food in." Furthermore, NTN\_\_\_\_\_ says, he's also concerned that in the time it takes for good small businesses to take hold, the poor will have gone through more unnecessarily pain, and the area will gentrify pushing "the least among us to worse places. Gentrification isn't all negative, there are positives, but in the end, we need to figure out how to improve the lot of the poor without making their homes prey for development."

I ask him if they are seeking to make use of the new land bank act? "These acts have their positives. I'm a little ambivalent about this one. Unfortunately, so far, it seems geared towards traditional development and not towards urban ag. This city tends to

focus on moving wealth around rather than what could be done to really help grow the community, and repair the years of damage." Finally, looking to the future, I ask him what his concerns are with the community gardens. "I'm afraid of the foodie movement and the locally sourced movement in Omaha becoming elitist. These movements certainly don't have to, but definitely has that potential. Right now in Omaha, most of the local sourced food is a low-income project focused in low-income spaces."

NTN\_\_\_\_\_ takes a holistic look at justice that combines concern for the Earth with a desire to empower those on the lower rungs of society. He is sincerely concerned that too often the work done on their behalf really only improves the lives of those who already have money. Clearly not antagonistic to capital, NTN\_\_\_\_\_ is, however, fully aware that there is a severe limitation for those without money to engage with the system. Essential to empowerment is non-monetary systems that provide for basic needs and can lift people up to a position where they might be able to then engage in crude mercantilism, as in the selling of surplus produce. NTN\_\_\_\_\_ 's model is one that is not only empowering, and sustainable, but positions the poor well for a future where oil prices are ever increasing.<sup>229</sup>

### **Act III Concluding Comments**

The myriad reaction of the urban base and middle to elite interventions into urban issues do not create a unified aesthetic, though the consciousness of the classes involved reflects greater understanding of the disunity between modes of being, and values the lived experience of history. Further, as one might have suspected, these citizens are not

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<sup>229</sup> NTN\_\_\_\_\_ Interview, interview by James Filipi, 2013.



sold on the particular aesthetic being imposed on them, and seek to maintain some authenticity in relation to a narrowing of choice. This authenticity is connected to a consciousness around aesthetics, history, and the environment.

To begin with, most urban non-elites understand that there is a crisis in the city around resources that contributes to particular violences within a geographic region. This crisis is understood to be relating to history and corporate greed, though not all are opposed to corporations, the accumulation of wealth, or what the elites contribute to the geographic space when they intervene. Resistance is not typically a conscious endeavor, but rather a reaction based in individual and group preservation of aesthetic performance. A performance in which individuals have chosen to call a particular space their home, and while recognizing problems, have also taken pride in a number of aspects that make it feel like a neighborhood, a feeling that is tied to history, diversity, and care for that history and diversity.

If the elites had a more or less unified view of aesthetics, then the rest have conflicting views that recognize the way aesthetic taste is constructed through lived experience and presentations of history, and while there was no evidence to suggest they equally enjoy other urban aesthetics, they do not denigrate or wish to destroy them. Further, elite interventions are perceived as an erasure of history.

Resistance to elite interventions are embedded in a history of urban lives in which the elites took away jobs, silenced legitimate grievances by building physical barriers, and routinely claimed whatever they wanted. This history, which has been physically imprinted on the urban tapestry has lead to a lack of trust, and general assumptions that

urban (re)development is about money, power, and finding a way to profit off the misery of others, rather than an act of good intentions. Particularly, among the poor, there is a feeling that market forces are more important than justice, greed will always triumph over humanity, and nature is disposable.

Environmental concerns are organic outgrowth from people who have always lived in the cast off shells of the elites. While, there isn't always 'environmentalism' at play, there is awareness of the way people interact with their immediate environment (e.g. the reality that poor need to preserve old buildings and cars vs the perception that elites view these objects as disposable). This awareness of environmental interrelation lends itself to openness to environmentalist action in ways that preserve a particular aesthetic ethnopraxis.

Similar to how the elites created division between elite and other, urban non-elites have aesthetic divisions relating to age, history, and warmth vs. new, modern, and cold. However, this aesthetic is a reaction to the perceived colonization of the urban by suburban aesthetics rather than a particularly anti-elite positioning. This stance can be summed up as humility (urban and non-elite) vs. hubris (suburban and elite), believing that humility is required for fostering community.

## **EPILOGUE: FUTURE MOVEMENT**

### **Intervention**

Resistance is a resistance to the post-industrial economy and sees the violence, poverty, and issues within Midtown as a systemic issue within the economic system. Those working on resistance are actively seeking to engage stakeholders in transforming their social relations in a way that does not require them to be subject to development and 'progress'. Resistance focuses on three legs, and in fact, is partly carried out by many of the actors within Midtown, though not always as an organized approach to changing the world. The three aspects of resistance involve restructuring community, environment, and income.

### **Community: Restitching and restructuring a fractured people**

Throughout the interviews was a concern for community. While community is a vague term, it seems to imply a geographic set of people positively interconnected with one another. Elites tend to focus on the lack of community within urban centers where primarily people of color resided, however as SLW\_\_\_\_\_ pointed out, this lack of community is part of the modern condition in the post-industrial society. Furthermore, the degree to which it ever existed might be contended, however, industrial works like Middletown, suggest that this sense of community was once an important component of the industrial society, and very likely the pre-industrial society. Where once were places like churches and other community focused neighborhood institutions stood are the same

buildings now housing far different institutions; geographically set, whereas the contents are widely dispersed, these institutions no longer serve the function of holding a community together. This transformation of such institutions appears to have begun alongside the rampant deindustrialization and period of white-flight that coincided with racial unrest following the not-fully-realized civil rights movements, and it was in this time that new structures of an ethnically homogenized class society were set, or perhaps more accurately, the structures reinforced the older structures in new ways.

The dissolution of the industrial workplace and good working class jobs that were also multi-generational careers, the venue for community further eroded. Current workplaces are low-wage, typically short-term, and non-careers, if they are available at all. This means, that like the churches housing people who are not neighbors, the workplace, which is unlikely to be based in your neighborhood, has no stable colleagues with which you might form deep bonds and have shared history. Further, the dissolution of this workplace has led to increasing bifurcation in the locations where skilled and unskilled, educated and apprenticed jobs exist, in turn leading to lack of class mixing and growing gaps between inter-class upward mobility (an example we saw in the black business community). Thus, community has dissolved, and not just for working class people, but for all people as even the white collar jobs as the recent recessions have painfully taught us are neither localized nor stable. The post-industrial society has left a workforce that is not only increasingly alienated from work, but also isolated from one another, beneficial for capitalists disinterested in unionization, but not beneficial for social cohesion and a sense of community.

Compounding the lack of mixing spaces in which social bridging and bonding occur has been the development of technology based around the individual. The technology focused on individualization of lifestyles has produced a culture of disengagement with the social and potentially awkward for one of individual comfort. The technologies that I refer to are TV, TV Dinners, computers, video games, and so forth. Moreover, while the relatively recent advent of social networking develops a community of sorts, it is a reflection of the transformation that happened to religious sites, and is not a community sharing a geography or local ecology, but one diffuse (my friends in Syria, South Africa, China and Washington DC are no farther and in some ways more easily accessible than my physical neighbor. Not to be overly luddite about the advance of technology, for it is truly remarkable to stay in easy regular contact with friends around the world, it is no substitute for the direct physical companionship and camaraderie that once existed in the social spaces of the industrial plant and religious institution.

Today, if one seeks social engagement it is through the avenue of commerce, bars, cafes, and restaurants. While commercial spaces have long been sources for engagement, they are not always based in ones own community, and the degree to which chain restaurants not owned by local operators undermine this space is still in question. However, these spaces are based on economic transaction, and such transaction may be designed in such a way to either discourage leisurely communication such as in a restaurant desiring people to leave once through eating, or reinforce class divisions, as in why pay \$4 for coffee when the gas station sells it for less than half that? Or, going to a

club vs. a neighborhood bar. Moreover, these institutions exist only for those who become hungry enough to seek them out, particularly given the technology of the individual that, for the most part, allows all these products to be bought and consumed alone and at home.

Various forms of resistance have emerged around the restitching of community. On a simple level, SLW\_\_\_\_\_ discussed walking his big white husky his neighbors think is "a wolf" as a way of engaging back into the community, wherein his choice of a big white dog in contrast to the pit bulls and boxers popular with residents who have dogs calls people to be curious and allow him to engage with them and learn about them as they learn about this dog. The bicycle coop has promoted the social through more children out in the streets riding bikes, as well as providing a space for people to come together and learn. Community gardens, provide the space to interact together and are expressly based in a geography that connects others rooted there as well, in fact NTN\_\_\_\_\_ encouraged to the point of requiring his people to go and invite all adjacent properties to garden in the space.

Other examples of rebuilding community came from artists, like BC\_\_\_\_\_, who sought to use creative media to bring people together through shared interest and bodily activity. Incommon, that hoped for a community space that all people in the neighborhood would engage in. Public events like "Jazz on the Green" and "Screen on the Green" that provide space for people of all classes to come together and interact. However, with the exception of Incommon, most of these work on the same level as the post-industrial religious institution and do not stitch together a tight community within a

geography and ecology. This lack of centralized geography/ecology may be the very reason that Loom, while not anything close to a failure, was not as successful as hoped. As several people suggested, neighborhoods really need to become central to existence again, and not self contained apparatuses per se, but community units that share resources with adjacent neighborhoods, allowing for cross pollination of people, but also robust network creating community. A definite key to effective production of community seems to be (re)localization.

### **Environment: Restructuring Our Relationship with Built Space and Earth**

Component with reestablishment of community is the restructuring of the relationship that residents have with the urban space, or built environment. Historically the built environment is not something many residents have a say in, particularly when it comes to large scale structural devices (roads, warehouses, apartment blocks, bridges, etc.) and particularly here in Midtown, where the east and historic sections of the city were purposefully divided up to impede racial mixing in hopes of staving off racial unrest. For residents of this space, large-scale development is not only seen as a way of life, and inevitable, but something that happens to them and will interrupt their daily lives. Witnessing this was residents in North Omaha whose streets were torn up every time a project downtown and out west was constructed in order to manage sewer overflow, so too the historic wall along Cumming, and Highway 75, and the Double Tree (formerly Red Lion). Therefore, the leveling of a block and relandscaping of a park in a way that creates a lacuna of space for persons of lower-class and of color is not necessarily unique. Additionally, the near absence of an effective public transportation

system in which frequency of busses and reliability from season to season of bus lines is a given for the less fortunate in the city. However, there are modes of resistance to built space being practiced.

In regards to transportation, the best form of resistance that restructures the relationship with the urban environment is bicycling as a supplement to public transportation. There have been numerous studies on the benefits of commuting to work via bicycle, but more importantly, the economy of bicycle transportation makes it ideal. Economically speaking, most bicycles are cheaper than most cars, and at the point that bicycles and cars overlap, a bicycle is more reliable. Furthermore, when a bicycle breaks down, it does not cost exorbitant amounts to fix it, nor does it require a high level of mechanical competence to repair or maintain a bicycle. Furthermore, bicycling works on an affective level reconnecting an individual with the environment, unlike a car that places a box around you and resigns you to grid driving, and alienates you from the world around you. The walls of warehouses, other structures, and roadwork that once disrupted your day are now easily passed on bicycle. Instead of being isolated inside your box, or cage as many on two wheels refer to it, you are able to talk and interact with your neighbors on the street and at stop signs. The exchange of social data and information on the neighborhood goings on becomes an easier task and happens in an organic way instead of needing to be sought out, or received through the media filters. Most importantly, as witnessed by the Bike Co-Op, the mere presence of children riding bikes in the neighborhood has reduced neighborhood violence as well as the fear from what previous perception of violence is. People both became aware of how violent things



really were (which was less than the perception) and their presence helped to mobilize against violence, or assist as a group when property was damaged.

An additional mechanism for restructuring the relationship with the urban environment relates to production and helps to rebuild community: Urban agriculture. Urban agriculture transforms an individual's relationship with the local environment in several ways. First, it changes the inner city urban space, often associated with violence and decay, into a space of life, growth, and sustenance. Further, this creates a social location for individuals to come together as collectives working towards a common goal and fostering community; this community is based on geography and shared struggle, but also is one where individuals may help others out feeling powerful and empowered in a way not felt before. Urban agriculture also provides food: where once was a food desert, now stands an oasis of food provided for by an individual; food now comes from within a space, provided for by community effort, rather than outside of a space by unknown persons. Instead of working a second job that does not pay well, and steals time from family and transgenerational progress, urban agriculture becomes a second job that returns family time and grants time to focus on the next generation. Basically put, for the growing seasons of the year, urban agriculture allows a person to forsake a second 29 hour per week job to provide food (for when income - transportation cost - meal expenses is counted all the second job does is pay for food) for a 10 hour per week job that is local, does the same thing, and provides a sense of community and empowerment, as well as nutrition and increased family time. Finally, in very concrete, but also subtle ways, urban agriculture transforms the city from a place where things happen to lower class persons

into a place in which the lower class can provide and grow; the abandoned lots are now potential space of growth and empowerment rather than fallow spaces waiting for development. As NTN\_\_\_\_\_ suggested, as post-peak-oil moves farther into history, this mode of production will become increasingly important, which sets the lower-class at an advantage when tomorrow comes.

The final component is restructuring relationship with income and jobs as a means of survival and satisfaction and maintenance of basic needs. There is a basic way of thinking about jobs and income in our advanced capitalistic world, a way that has become an internet meme of sorts recurring in a number of graphic critiques of jobs: "Get a job to make money to buy the things you need to have a life. But then spend all your time at work and have no time to live the life you're working for." A sort of cruel reality, which from the privileged point of middle- and upper- class life resembles the world enough that we can laugh at it, but is far enough distanced that we can carry on because we still get to enjoy enough of our lives that this quote is not maxim. However, for many working class families, this is too much the truth of life to be funny: either the job they have does not afford a life and they struggle to get by existing rather than living; or, they are working multiple jobs to afford life, and a basic life at that. Therefore, while a job and the pressures of income may seem like a trap for middle class persons, and in fact is a trap for many considered middle class, it is absolutely a trap for those at the lower levels of our society. This is a form of violence, known as poverty.

For some in impoverished conditions, without serious prospect of jobs or income that allows an escape from poverty, alternatives are dreamt up, escapes from the tyranny

of capital into an informal system, an illicit market that brings with it other forms of violence, mirrors of the macro and formal system but less well policed and more direct in violence. To address these forms and mechanisms of violence requires restructuring the relationship we have with jobs and income, or the mechanisms by which we acquire and maintain our basic needs.

### **Income: Restructuring our Relationship with the Economy, Jobs, Etc.**

Restructuring our relationship with incomes, jobs, and so forth relates to ideas that come out of the "sharing economy" and work done by people like Lisa Gansky and Elinor Ostrom that implies on one hand that access is more important than ownership, and second that sharing resources is more efficient than sole ownership. Further, work by anthropologists like David Graeber in his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*,<sup>230</sup> suggest that many of the alternative economic modes, such as bartering and trading are actually symptoms of when cash markets fail to provide necessary resources. My research has shown that both shared resources and alternative economies exist in spaces where violence is reducing.

The shared resources that exist for people typically exist and are taken for granted are things like public transportation, roads, and other government provided infrastructure. However, what we have learned first hand is that low-income people aren't well served by public transportation, the roads too are problematic (given individual access to vehicles, the cities will to maintain in poor neighborhoods, and the lack of advocacy for improved resources where most needed). Therefore, communities have begun to develop

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<sup>230</sup> Graeber, David. "Debt: The First 5,000 Years." Melville House (2011).

alternative shared resources within public space. In Omaha, community gardens have started taking off, a few bicycle cooperatives exist to increase access to low-maintenance-cost vehicles freely provided for people with shared workshops for maintenance, which provide access to parts and tools for free to all who need them. Other organizations exist that seek to produce a shared resource for people, such as "food not bombs", the occasional anarchist bookstore, cafes like "Table Grace" that provide food at whatever price you are able to pay. Additionally there are non-profit organizations (such as inCommon) that work to develop community organization spaces in which people can come together to either host an event or partake in culture. Finally, even businesses like Big Muddy Urban Farms is promoting shared resources, pushing for community recycling, supporting urban agriculture, and not-so-subtly pushing alternative to currency markets. Big Muddy advocates both haggling over cash prices, bartering, and time/skill sharing as means of purchase; people who may not have much cash at hand often have some other surplus: time, expertise, or other. People short on cash are not any less short on need for food and will willingly trade time, skill, or surplus if it helps them fulfill basic needs.

Alternative to cash markets are nothing new, but for many years in the US, currency has become a standard unit by which we accept value. However, within a portion of the population most affected by direct and structural violence, currency becomes problematic when it is not in great enough supply to fulfill or maintain basic needs. The modes explicitly discussed were variable prices, bartering, time banking, and skill sharing. Variable prices were demonstrated by Big Muddy and Table Grace by not

fixing prices firmly, but allowing price to be determined in relationship with the consumer, Table Grace giving the consumer more power in the decision, and Big Muddy taking a lead allowing the consumer agency if they feel the need. Bartering is often the go to when it comes to failure of currency, and here too people discussed exchanging surplus goods for surplus of things they need, regarding food and services, several people discussed exchanging surplus raw materials and even producing objects in exchange for work or food (e.g. Surplus wood in exchange for a box of produce). Bartering seems to work well when there is excess production of various materials without equitable distribution. Time banking is a radical idea that suggests no one person's labor is worth any more than another person's labor. In theory, an hour of babysitting or bus driving is equal to an hour spent practicing law because all are skills necessary to keeping our society functioning. While most time-banks function on service and blue-collar jobs, it is possible to use it across class divisions. The basic model allows a person to work X hours doing X task, later that person can pay their hours towards another person's labor in equal exchange; it is also possible to request work in order to go in to time-debt to be paid off with work in the future (useful if something accidental or time-sensitive work is required). The radically egalitarian model works well among the lower classes, however, among those who view themselves as upwardly mobile have greater difficulty understanding or accepting the egalitarian proposal herein. The final mode discussed is skill sharing, in which skills are given without expectation of equal time returned. For example, my neighbor may make regular repairs to my house, and I may watch their children, and another might clean our homes. This is a purely non-monetary system that

calls upon each individual to use what skills they have to help each other out on the basis of us all being interconnected and sharing a particular geography or social relationship. Skill sharing is frequently practiced within families and close communal groups, and while I heard mention of this idea, I saw little scaled-up practice in larger social contexts.

What seems fairly obvious, though not a directed critique at particular mechanisms, is that capitalism, and particularly post-industrial capitalism has failed the lowest tiers of society. Occupy Wall Street had the mantra that the 99 were left behind and betrayed by the 1, and there is considerable debate as to whether it's indeed the 1, or the 2, or the 0.1 per cent that really benefits and leaves the rest of us to suffer. However, the reality is, is that capitalism seems to work well enough for a significant portion of the population; certainly greater than 1-2%. In fact, most middle class persons would swear by this system as still a means of mobility and growth. According to the Social Security Administration, the median income in the US was \$44,321.67 in 2014<sup>231</sup> and according to Advisor Perspectives, average household income was \$53,891,<sup>232</sup> and so perhaps the number is closer to Mitt Romney's famous 47%?<sup>233</sup> According to a Forbes.com article reporting a study by Brookings Institute, that since 1987 the rich have gotten richer, while

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<sup>231</sup> Social Security Administration. National Average Wage

<http://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/AWI.html>

<sup>232</sup> Advisor Perspectives. Household Income

<http://www.advisorperspectives.com/dshort/updates/Median-Household-Income-Update.php>

<sup>233</sup> Christopherson, John. Romney's 47% chosen as year's best quote. Associated Press. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2012/12/09/romneys-47-percent-chosen-as-years-best-quote/1756833>

the poor have steadily become more so.<sup>234</sup> Further, a recent Mother Jones article displayed a graphic of the data on how much over the past decade the poor have lost, while the top 40% has made minor gains and the top 20% making reasonable gains.<sup>235</sup> The former research by Brookings shows that even during reasonably good times the poor suffer, and the latter shows that even during poor economic conditions, the top 40% are able to make gains. Suggesting that it's not as simple as 99:1, or whatever, but closer to 60:40. Therefore, for a large portion of the population (less than half, but a large portion), capitalism works just fine, and the higher up you are the better it works for you. Conversely, however, the bottom 40% suffer and certainly the further down the line you are the more oppressive, tyrannical, and unjust the system is. What this suggests regarding interventions into poverty and violence, the mechanism ought not be standard urban development practices that inject capital into neighborhoods, but interventions that seek to liberate people from the violent cycle of capital and inequality.

Recently [filmsforaction.org](http://filmsforaction.org) produced a list of ways to build an economy beyond capitalism.<sup>236</sup> This list had many actionable ideas, some of which were impractical and did not particularly help overcome the problems associated with capital. However, a number of the actions correlated with the projects and activity of people seeking to

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<sup>234</sup> Novacek, Janet. "New Study Using IRS Tax Data Shows Rich Are Staying Richer, poor Poorer" *Forbes.com* <http://www.forbes.com/sites/janetnovacek/2013/03/21/new-study-using-irs-tax-data-shows-rich-are-staying-richer-poor-poorer/>

<sup>235</sup> Drum, Kevin. Chart of the Day: The Horrible Recession on the Poor. *Mother Jones* <http://www.motherjones.com/kevin-drum/2014/08/chart-dat-horrible-toll-recession-poor>

<sup>236</sup> "42 Ways to Build a Liberated Society Beyond Corporate Capitalism," *Films For Action*, accessed May 15, 2014, [http://www.filmsforaction.org/takeaction/42\\_ways\\_to\\_build\\_a\\_culture\\_and\\_economy\\_beyond\\_capitalism/](http://www.filmsforaction.org/takeaction/42_ways_to_build_a_culture_and_economy_beyond_capitalism/).

improve their lives and address issues of violence in the post-industrial urban environment. Several examples included building a 'meeting hall' such as the one inCommon was building, creating a land trust or land bank, urban agriculture and community gardens, and finally building family beyond the nuclear family including your immediate neighbors and friends. Additional suggestions were cooperative housing associations owned by those who would be traditionally renters, local currencies that would function in similar ways to alternative to currency markets already experimented in, switching to alternative energies like wind and solar, neighborhood storehouses that would store and facilitate distribution of surplus goods produced by residents, and to quit recycling and start reusing waste locally.

### **Synthesis: Resistance to Aesthetic Fascism in Urban Development**

My research has pretty clear suggestions that post-industrial capitalism, like it's previous incarnations, is not a positive means of organizing life for those in the lower tiers of society. Therefore, in order to effectively address the violence of the city I propose a system that seeks to liberate lower classes from the tyranny of capital markets, but not seek to undo capitalism itself, as this is a system that works just fine for 40% of the population. The system I propose starts with the findings that community/relocalization, access, and basic needs are essential to prosocial transformations of the urban environment and to reduce violence, and borrows from many earlier and famous attempts to do the same such as the Paris Commune and other long established permaculture societies. However, unlike most attempts at communal and co-housing systems that exist on the fringes of society, I suggest a few modest tweaks to



the design in order to connect more fully with the American dream and guiding principles of the country: life, liberty, and the pursuit of property. Further, based on interviews throughout this project that confirm an initial hunch I held, is a theory of aesthetic ethnopraxis. The aesthetics of any intervention must be one that melds with the current aesthetic ethnopraxis of a space, for example, as MIC\_\_\_\_\_ stated, Midtown has an aesthetics of humility not captured by the current development projects contained within, thus ultimately making them alien, or as KW\_\_\_\_\_ suggested is equally repellent to people not of that ethnopraxis. Additionally, within many of these older neighborhoods is both diversity presented (JO\_\_\_\_\_), and a craftsmanship designed to last, unlike what is found in the suburbs (GA\_\_\_\_\_).

The model I propose does not directly flow from practice in Omaha, but from the observations about what is required to transform the urban environment. Further, it does not propose any radically new model or design, rather borrows from a previous anti-capitalist model designed around relocalization/community, access, and basic human needs: permaculture. Further, that my tweaks are one proposed experimental approach to dealing with the problems of post-industrial capitalism. There are multiple anti-capitalist alternatives (some yet to be explored) that can, and should be experimented with in order to find what sorts of interventions work when and where.

According to "Permaculture: Principles and Pathways Beyond Sustainability," there are 12 principles of permaculture, several that tie into the restructuring of the lived relationship with the urban world discussed earlier: Observation and Interaction with nature to design solutions for the particular situation; catch and store energy; obtain yield

from work; apply self-regulation and accept feedback; use and value renewable resources and services; produce no waste; design in accordance with nature and society; integrate rather than segregate; use small and slow solutions; use and value diversity; use edges and margins of space, society, and interaction; creatively use and respond to change.<sup>237</sup> Most permaculture models and societies create communal space in suburban or agricultural settings away from the congestion, violence, and activity of urban life. These are often associated with hippies, though are found across the left-right spectrum; on the left they are often called communes, on the right compounds. Philosophically, I disagree with the tendency to remove from society and attempt to 'start-over' or distance from the source of conflict, as this is a form of dropping out rather than engaging. Moreover, it is a largely white upper and middle class ethnopraxis, therefore affecting a marginal segment of the population, and not helping the issues of urban violence any more than gentrification schemes. It is therefore fundamental to locate such communities within an urban space. Urbanity is not a new concept in this old movement; it's just become marginal. While I do not know exact reasons, I could conjecture about land cost, and issues of violence and safety where costs are cheaper. There are, however plenty of unused plots of land in urban spaces, which many are using currently for urban agriculture, which is good, but only partial in restructuring our relationship with urban spaces. A more optimal solution would be to use these plots as places that integrate all

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<sup>237</sup> "Permaculture: Principles & Pathways Beyond Sustainability," *Holmgren Permaculture Design for Sustainable Living*, accessed August 31, 2014, <http://holmgren.com.au/product/principles/>.

mechanisms: at its most basic, an urban garden flanked by cheap residences with a workshop for construction of bicycles for the community.

The best way for the hands of the weak to gain strength is for the privileged places to get tougher. By squeezing capital's locational options from the top, residents can force firms to move down the place hierarchy in their search for satisfactory sites. This will strengthen the bargaining position at each place below, and each place, by imposing its own tougher criteria, will have the same effect on places still lower. All places will gain through this process, even places at the bottom of the hierarchy that must make the most deleterious deals. This is a trickle-down we can believe in. This general strategy of getting tough with capital does not, we reemphasize, require bluffing. It only demands that localities do in fact act in their own fiscal and social interests. That simple move would be sufficient to set off a dramatic reverberation throughout the urban system.<sup>238</sup>

Further, to maximize the American Dream, I do not propose simple tenement homes, or high-rise projects, but small houses and tiny homes: property that families and individuals would own and be able to maintain for less than renting an apartment. Further, use of tiny homes would allow families and individuals mobility if desired or required in search of better living and life (e.g. In the advent of a new job, or life circumstances, the home as well as the family could be moved, thus incurring more minimal disruption of life and maintenance of property accumulation). Additionally, a component of this community could involve the construction of the home by the family unit occupying the space, which would in turn develop skills for manual labor that might

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 294

diversify options for employment (electrical, plumbing, carpentry, and so on). Finally, anecdotal evidence suggests a great deal of the reasons many modern communes fail has to do with lack of private space (sharing rooms with 3 people, or differing levels of individual cleanliness inside the house). A shared garden or aquaponics facility would provide for much of the communities food (with a greenhouse, likely all could be produced on site) with shared responsibility over production reduces cost and increases time individuals and families have to build community, or better themselves. The bicycle workshop provides cheap transportation that integrates with existing transportation infrastructure, a component that expands the individual's geography and access to work and leisure opportunities. An additional component that the bicycle shop offers is a permeable layer to the community--a means to bring outsiders in to the space, thus reducing the alienness of the project and reducing the cult-like stigma that could develop. Further, both surplus from the garden and bicycle shop could be sold to generate social wealth.

Currently, there are similar models underway in rural areas, there is a women's community in Sedona for victims of abuse outside of the city built around sustainable living and tiny houses. There is Quixote Village in Washington state geared towards the homeless. The city of Austin has recently announced construction of tinyhomes in the city as shelters for the homeless, as well. Perhaps a fault of these initiatives is they target people as victims, instead of inviting them to take part in their own empowerment. Further, they seek out a homogenous group of people, instead of embracing diversity, which is a principle of permaculture. The biggest hurdle, to such projects comes from

legal and policy questions about the status of tinyhomes and land usage, as well as NYMBYism of particular communities. However, just because these are current issues that haven't been resolved, doesn't mean they are issues that can't be resolved, particularly with evidence to support them.

## APPENDIX A: METHODOLOGICAL NOTE

"In order to understand processes of marginalization in cities we have to embed them in the historical matrix of class, state and space characteristic of each society at a given epoch"<sup>239</sup>

"I don't feel that it is necessary to know exactly what I am. The main interest in life and work is to become someone else that you were not in the beginning. If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for love relationships is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know where it will end."

— Michel Foucault<sup>240<sub>82</sub></sup>

This quote by Foucault is in some ways the methodological approach to this project in recognition of the evolving city and the evolving narratives that exist within, my assumption was that a methodological type would blind me to what this project could be. Moreover, that the field of conflict resolution is a transdisciplinary project (a project that both overlaps with but spans the gap between disciplinary modes of knowledge

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<sup>239</sup> "New Left Project | Articles | Revolt of the Urban Periphery: Sweden's Riots in Context," accessed June 2, 2013, [http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/revolt\\_of\\_the\\_urban\\_periphery\\_swedens\\_riots\\_in\\_context?utm\\_source=feedly](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/revolt_of_the_urban_periphery_swedens_riots_in_context?utm_source=feedly).

<sup>240</sup> Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar With Michel Foucault* (Univ of Massachusetts Press, 1988).

production) discussed by Johan Galtung in the *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution*,<sup>241</sup> and that methodology are regimes of knowledge production that are themselves products of a particular discipline and disciplinary mechanism that shapes and informs the assumption for producing knowledge. Therefore, as a transdisciplinary project, the regime of knowledge production ought to be firmly grounded in an epistemological and chaotic production that reflects our political positions in the world of action and of scholarship.

This said, the engagement with the data borrows heavily from a variety of knowledge production regimes of which this project shares an affinity. However, it would be unfair to assert that any one approach was the approach taken.

Drawing upon lessons from my Masters Thesis, I learned that strict adherence to an established method is not particularly the best approach to generation of knowledge within a transdisciplinary field.<sup>242</sup> Instead, I created an epistemologically grounded approach that reflects the field within which I am researching. This is not a critique of the traditions or particular related methodologies as useful and important in the production of knowledge. Rather, it is an illumination of a contradiction of a transdisciplinary field like peace and conflict studies--that it is an amalgam of disciplines all looking at an object/subject trying to produce something relevant to describe the injustices they see--and yet, each discipline stays true to their own methodology, each believing that their

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<sup>241</sup> Galtung, Johan. "Toward a Conflictology: The quest for transdisciplinarity", *Handbook of Conflict Analysis and Resolution* (ed. Dennis J. D. Sandole) pp. 509-522.

<sup>242</sup> James Filipi, "This Machine Kills Fascists: An Exploration into the Machinery of Music and Conflict" (George Mason University, 2010), [http://digilib.gmu.edu/dspace/bitstream/1920/5995/1/filipi\\_2010\\_thesis.pdf](http://digilib.gmu.edu/dspace/bitstream/1920/5995/1/filipi_2010_thesis.pdf).

disciplinary tradition has taught them the best way to view a problem, and that that is the angle that speaks the best. This stance is less a critique of pure methodology, but a recognition of tradition and history that shaped the methodology produced by various fields and disciplines, or as my father used to say when I was small "Philosophy was the first science" as an introduction to a story about how the world fragmented into approaches to knowledge and truth.<sup>243</sup>

Today, we don't think of philosophy as a science, but the lesson is important as we approach fields of transdisciplinarity (such as Peace and Conflict Studies) that may be comprised of sciences, but also humanities, and are not themselves sciences per se; and to echo the Foucault quote that frames this segment, this is part of the processes of becoming within academic fields. Peace and Conflict Studies was [insert whatever field here], but is becoming something else, and ought to perform as it's own thing respectful of the histories and traditions that created it.

As the pursuit of knowledge meanders about the social world, it eventually becomes a variety of products: Philosophy, Art, History, Sociology, Anthropology, etc., etc. Each of these products constitutes a particular alignment of power/knowledge,<sup>244</sup> and regime of knowledge production; they are a chosen point of observation within the social that provides a particular kind of insight into the unknown. That is, they codify a set of rules by which we analyze a slice of social data to create a particular type of answer; this

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<sup>243</sup> My father was a philosopher and journalist who, during the Viet Nam War went to medical School and became a physician to avoid being drafted into a war he did not believe in. At the time, Nebraska was only granting conscientious objector status to Quakers.

<sup>244</sup> Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, First American Edition, Stained (Vintage, 1980).



idea and these traditions will be reflected in my approach to a city with neighborhoods, structures, and ethnicities that perform and produce the social differently and occupy the same space. Further, in crafting an approach to this project I felt it important to borrow from traditions that submersed me within the story in order to not produce knowledge from an alien standpoint. In essence to understand how the conflict is narrated and crafted from the center of the storm, rather than some pretense of externality.

In contrast to the Middletown studies, I was interested in portraying an image of a city with a history, a rejection of the "ethnographic present,"<sup>245</sup> wherein the variables and cyclical processes of domination, colonization and the resistance may be understood as related and intersubjective experiences of the city. This holistic, and historic dynamic knowledge is the knowledge that Peace and Conflict Studies ought to be producing; yet few true methodologies or disciplines from which we borrow are designed to facilitate that. Which is to say that we can no longer rely on existing regimes of knowledge production in transdisciplinary fields, for we don't know where they are going (at least not yet, if ever). Moreover, over-reliance on methodology is a holdover from positivistic traditions, of which I am skeptical of as its blind adherence may lead us astray.

Given that this 'new' field of transdisciplinary knowledge traverses, at least in part, older (or at least, established) regimes of knowledge production, it makes sense to borrow from their methodology as seems to fit the aspect of knowledge to be produced. The question, however, is how to do so in a way that is not superficial and merely playing at scholarship, but answering deep and important questions, like the ones that Peace and

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<sup>245</sup> Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*, pp. 349-350.

Conflict Studies espouses to do. In *Reflections on Reflective Practice*, Warfield, Cheldelin and Makamba discuss the history of Reflective Practice and how reflective practice and theory/research diverged into two separate regimes of knowledge production concerned with different types of knowledge; similar to my point earlier, the authors assert that each form of knowledge brings with it certain skills and assumptions on the best form of knowledge. These are different regimes that manage our perception and processing of knowledge. The authors discuss that the reflective model has traditionally been denigrated by higher education as it not a regime that can easily be written about, and thus learned in a traditional disciplining of the student/academic/mind. The conclusion in this piece is for a connectedness of both regimes of knowledge production.<sup>246</sup> This article provides a convenient reframing of how knowledge ought to be produced in fields that span disciplines: suggesting that it's not one regime, but all in new and creative ways--ways that fit the problem at hand.

More recently, Solon Simmons wrote what he hoped would be "helpful to any of [his] students who have an interest in cobbling together some similar an analysis in their own work."<sup>247</sup> And, while he was referring to a discourse analysis of "Meet the Press", there are components of this 'cobbled together method' that might be useful when formulating a mechanism for the production of knowledge. "Step 1: The Puzzle Trap" in which a project is formulated as a set of interlocking puzzles. Simmons suggests the key

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<sup>246</sup> Sandra I Cheldelin, Wallace Warfield, and January Makamba, "Reflections on Reflective Practice," in *Research Frontiers in Conflict Analysis and Resolution*. (Fairfax: Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University., 2004), 64–78.

<sup>247</sup> Solon Simmons, "Analyzing Discourse: A Methodological Note," *Confrontations*, accessed May 16, 2013, <http://solonsimmons.wordpress.com/2013/04/23/analyzing-discourse-a-methodological-note/>.

to this is, the "first priority" is to locate "a coherent stream of discourse that you would like to analyze--some discursive arena on which to set your attention."<sup>248</sup> Moreover, Simmons asserts that there is a difference between the "puzzles we spin and the problems our subjects manage"; that this is "the first methodological insight. If you want actionable results in your social science, you can't rely on the way you and your colleagues frame the problems" and instead one must understand how the participants frame the problem.<sup>249</sup> Simmons suggests that "the ethnographic mood" comes close to the approach we desire, but cautions against ethnography's tendency to romanticize otherness, and that this approach "is probably more appropriate to the era of colonial expansion than it is to our era of global convergence. The classic ethnographer studies someone else, not himself."<sup>250</sup> And, if we agree with the essay by Cheldelin, Makamba and Warfield,<sup>251</sup> then we, and our reflective practice, are party to our research and studying ourself and not just someone else. Step two, in Simmons' essay on methodology, asserts that we must care about our data. More importantly, that we "have to come clean with yourself about what you love about the data, what about it arrests you and what it really says about the people who produce it by living their lives. There is a potential chasm between what it means to you and what it says about us/them, but you have to find your way to the latter insight through the former."<sup>252</sup> My take away from this is that playing at objectivity does a disservice to our agenda as Peace and Conflict researchers. That we are engaged in a

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<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Sandra I Cheldelin, Wallace Warfield, and January Makamba, "Reflections on Reflective Practice."

<sup>252</sup> Simmons, "Analyzing Discourse."

normative field; a field in which our own politics matter. It is therefore, an academic necessity to be forthright about our own personal connections to the data and puzzles and problems of our research, otherwise we are in danger of making false claims and producing improper knowledge. Steps 3 and 4 are about the stories we choose to tell and how we choose to tell those stories about our research.<sup>253</sup> This points to an idea that an engaged field must not simply look, find and produce knowledge, but do so in a way that is compelling enough to get picked up and carried--in essence becoming part of an intervention into the problems and puzzles of the social world.

Returning to Foucault, it becomes important to analyze our analysis as Foucault points out that "Science has become institutionalized as a power through a university system and through its own constricting apparatus",<sup>254</sup> which is to say that science produces knowledge which becomes a truth regime. Therefore, for fields outside of disciplines, it is important to disrupt the older truth regimes and institutionalized power, in order to produce a syncretic knowledge reflexive of the subject of study: to engage in a guerilla warfare of the mind. This approach at producing new mechanisms of knowledge production requires less a process and more a focus on deeper epistemological questions combined with politics. A discovery driven approach that refuses to become routinized: each subject is unique and requires the respect of a new approach, and each examination changes the subject for future exploration.

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<sup>253</sup> Ibid.

<sup>254</sup> Lawrence Kritzman, *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984* (Psychology Press, 1990).

This project is primarily qualitative in nature and, in a broad sense could be called participant observation. Various communities and individuals within Omaha were engaged using informal interviews, observation, and general interaction with the people who live work and play in Omaha as another person who has, and once again does, live work and play in Omaha. In addition to experiential engagement with the people of Omaha, I have taken data from newspapers, history books, and documents created by institutions within the metropolitan area. The interplay between the formal written histories of these documents and the narrative lived and performed histories of the people has been explored. Data was collected from 91 informal interviews and many hours of observations over a 14-month period from October of 2012 through December of 2013. During this time, much occurred within Omaha and my own life, and there will be analysis and personal reflection that spans this project and the conflicts historic and new.

As expected, many of the conflicts of this urban space were visible--conflicts such as inequality, direct violence, and the history of city planning/ modern development. However, through the narratives of individuals living conflicts daily in this city, the mythologies of America and what it means to be an American and/or Midwesterner, become elaborated and explored in the way they dictate (or write prophecy) for the actions and behaviors, as well as labels of "deviancy" or "acceptability". Finally, there is an examination of the tension between the formal and public discourse of the city and the private practices of individuals.

The structure of the research has borrowed heavily from two major sources. First, the Middletown studies provide a useful social framework of six categories in which to

analyze aspects of contemporary urban life: Working, Home and Family, Youth, Leisure Time, Religious Activities, and Government and Community. No additional categories evolved over the course of this project, but the importance of each category was determined by the data itself and does not carry the same weight it did in the Lynds' study; this suggests that the categories developed by the Lynds during an industrial America still carry influence in the post-industrial America, even if the individual impact of each category have changed. The second source that this project takes insight from is Janet Abu-Lughod's "From Urban Village to East Village." Abu-Lughod's method for studying "complex urban subareas" has been applied to the city of Omaha, and "the processes of colonization, resistance, conflict, and negotiation" as they are "operative in many other diverse and changing" areas of the city have been analyzed. An important contribution that comes from Abu-Lughod is a rejection of the "ethnographic present" whose "truncated" history provides a plotline of neighborhoods that are being "attacked and destroyed by outside forces." Instead, spaces and neighborhoods within a city are constantly changing, do "not occur capriciously," and the change happens upon already existing social dynamics of a space, or not "tabula rasa." Finally,<sup>255</sup> Abu-Lughod provides an interesting concept of the "protest space," or places within the city that are regularly the site of conflict of the city. These spaces "are also symbolic spaces, deriving significance from historic precedents." Furthermore, they "recall earlier struggles and have their collective resolve strengthened by the connection, through social memory to

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<sup>255</sup> Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*, pp. 349-350.

past battles."<sup>256</sup> Some of these protest spaces have been live for generations, whereas others spring up from time to time. Further she provides three concepts "for studying complex urban subareas": Change is a normal part of urban landscape; "change does not occur capriciously"; and "change is never written on a tabula rasa."<sup>257</sup>

In addition to broad participant observation, I have incorporated a critical perspective into the research process. This comes from a philosophical stance that I, as the researcher am intrinsically linked to the subject of study; therefore, my own perspective will be important, as well as the interrogation of my own biases. Important to the critical perspective (as well as the field of conflict resolution), is the question: what could be? How does power prevent certain social realities from manifesting?

Finally, the project has utilized narrative inquiry. This process has brought forth an emphasis on the subjectivity of the speech act and its relationship to context. Therefore, the stories people tell about past events and conflicts of the city are more than just historical references, but experiences of history as told in the present to a particular audience.<sup>258</sup> Narrative provides a way to validate the stories of the disenfranchised and provide a vehicle through which their histories and memories can contribute to resolution and transformation of conflict.

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid., pp. 233-234.

<sup>257</sup> Ibid., pp. 349-350.

<sup>258</sup> J. Bruner, "Acts of Meaning: Four Lectures on Mind and Culture," 1990.

## **APPENDIX B: OMAHA AND MUNCIE: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF MIDDLE AMERICA IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> AND 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

The past 30 years of development in most advanced capitalism metropolitan areas have been affected by changes in the economic system. These changes have brought investment and disinvestment, population growth and population decline both between and within the cities. The story of the United States is one in which business groups work in concert with politicians and

Urban movements, driven by equity, preservationist, and environmental concerns, have opposed subsidized downtown redevelopment and unregulated profit-driven expansion. They have also, although less frequently, promoted alternative plans for neighborhood redevelopment. The outcomes of these contests have varied. Regardless, however, of whether the result has been growth or decline, greater or less equity, deal making on a project-by-project basis rather than comprehensive planning has been the main vehicle for determine the uses of space.<sup>259</sup>

What follows is a history of a case on how we got to where we are now, from the development of industrial capital, that shaped the design of the city, to the change in mode of production and the current conflicts laced with history and memory that allow us to discuss the present movements within the city and techniques for managing conflicts.

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<sup>259</sup> Kleniewski, *Cities and Society*, p. 171.



The organization borrows from the Lynds and will incorporate interests from later theorists of the American experience.

## **Working**

Prior to the official founding of Omaha, the area was the settlement of three trading posts Ft. Lisa (1807),<sup>260</sup> Ft. Atkinson (1819),<sup>261</sup> and Cabanne (1833).<sup>262</sup> These posts provided supplies to traders, trappers, soldiers and frontiers folk. In 1854, "Omaha City" was officially founded by the Council Bluffs-Nebraska Ferry Company following the Nebraska-Kansas Act in attempt to lure the transcontinental railroad to Council Bluffs, IA.<sup>263</sup> Omaha was slow to capitalize on the Steamboat trade,<sup>264</sup> however it made up for it's commercial interest by the promotion of the Oregon Trail used by Mormons, "Buffalo and Indians" as a shorter route to "the West."<sup>265</sup> This was, of course, a lie. Omaha developed through its early years with great prosperity and diversity of business, however the rough frontier attitude of the city continued to sway outside investors.<sup>266</sup> In 1863, Abraham Lincoln declared that the eastern terminus of the Union Pacific would be in Council Bluffs, IA. Thomas C. Durant declared that the Western branch would begin in Omaha and run to California. Combined with publicity events and the financial cost of

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<sup>260</sup> Pam Rietsch, Ted Miller, and Carole Miller, "Semi-Centennial History of Nebraska - 1904," 2002, p. 42.

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., p.48

<sup>263</sup> Lawrence Harold Larsen and Barbara J. Cottrell, *The Gate City: A History of Omaha* (U of Nebraska Press, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>266</sup> Ibid., pp. 19-23.

building a bridge across the Missouri, Omaha became the central city, of the transcontinental railroad.<sup>267</sup>

The railroad soon lead to the founding of "the Union Stockyards Company of Omaha" in 1870.<sup>268</sup> Omaha quickly became a fierce rival of Chicago and eventually overtook Chicago as livestock and meat packing capitol of the US.<sup>269</sup> Soon after the stockyards were built, several packing houses were built.<sup>270</sup> These industries brought in several waves of immigrants (Irish, Greeks, Italians, Slavs, and high concentrations of Germans, Jews and African Americans) establishing ethnic neighborhoods along the river.<sup>271</sup> It was during this period that Omaha was considered the fastest growing city in the US; this growth brought with it prosperity, but also organized crime and prostitution.<sup>272</sup>

The growth and waves of immigration lead to cultural and economic tensions in Omaha. Fueled by economics as well as culture, two ethnic riots occurred in the early part of the century during Omaha's rapid industrialization. The first was the "Greek Town Riot"<sup>273</sup> that destroyed many of the homes and businesses of Greek Town and quickly

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid., p. 24.

<sup>268</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

<sup>269</sup> Graham, J. (1999) "Omaha Stockyards packing it in." Chicago Tribune. 3/28/99. Retrieved 6/23/07.

<sup>270</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 144.

<sup>271</sup> Fimple, Kathleen Louise, "An analysis of the changing spatial dimensions of ethnic neighborhoods in Omaha, Nebraska, 1880-1900" (January 1, 1989) ETD collection for University of Nebraska – Lincoln.

<sup>272</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 144.

<sup>273</sup> "South Omaha Mob Wars on Greeks. New York Times. February 22, 1909. accessed May 14, 2012, <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive-free/pdf?res=9C05E1D91731E733A25751C2A9649C946897D6CF>.

forcing the Greeks, who had come to Omaha as strikebreakers,<sup>274</sup> to leave Omaha for Council Bluffs. During subsequent trials the question about the cities failure to protect Greeks was brought up, but never answered.<sup>275</sup>

The next race riot occurred once again after non-whites were hired as strikebreakers. This time, in 1919, the target was the cities black population.<sup>276</sup> During this riot, three men ended up lynched and the Omaha courthouse set ablaze. Investigations following the incident suggested that alleged crimes that lead to an assault on blacks in Omaha were actually committed by white men in blackface.<sup>277</sup> Following the race riots, the Blacks North Omaha became increasingly cut off from the rest of the city. Meanwhile, the working conditions in North Omaha improved over the next ten years thanks to the Black workers organizing the I.W.W. Unfortunately, the North Omaha packinghouses closed during the depression leaving only the South Omaha packinghouses still in operation.<sup>278</sup> Through the Forties, organized labor won significant battles for workers in Omaha<sup>279</sup> and helped the Omaha Stockyards to surpass Chicago in the 50s and 60s.<sup>280</sup>

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<sup>274</sup> Luebke, *Nebraska*.

<sup>275</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 166.

<sup>276</sup> Frenzied Thousands Join in an Orgy of Blood and Fire. Omaha World Herald 9/29/1919

<sup>277</sup> "A Horrible Lynching: Who Was to Blame?," accessed May 14, 2012, [http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/frameset\\_reset.html?http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/stories/0701\\_0136.html](http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/frameset_reset.html?http://www.nebraskastudies.org/0700/stories/0701_0136.html).

<sup>278</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*.

<sup>279</sup> "Stockyards Shut by Omaha Strike," The New York Times. June 25, 1947.

<sup>280</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 180.

By 1955, the Streetcar system had closed and began signaling the end of good public transportation in Omaha.<sup>281</sup> By the late 60s, Omaha's racial tension had reached another boiling point and a series of race riots from 1966-1969 destroyed many of the black businesses in North Omaha's business corridor.<sup>282</sup> Much of this area has yet to recover. By the middle of the 1970s most of Omaha's packinghouses were closed and by the early 80s meatpacking was no longer an important part of the economy.<sup>283</sup> By the later part of the 1990s, the lead smelting plant, the last major industrial work in Omaha was closed.<sup>284</sup> However, while labor decreased its presence in Omaha, commerce grew and by 2005, Omaha was home to five fortune 500 companies.<sup>285</sup> What remains is a healthy economy for white-collar jobs in Omaha, with a dearth of jobs available for skilled and unskilled factory laborers. Today, much of the work in Omaha is done in an office setting.<sup>286</sup> Just how these changes have affected the conflicts in Omaha need to be researched. How this shall be done will be addressed later in this document. Jobs in particular in this modern history seem particularly focused upon by those interviewed.

Daniel Bell stated that "In existentialist terminology, man is 'thrown' into the world, confronting alien and hostile powers which he seeks to understand and master. The first confrontation was with nature, and for most of the thousands of years of man's

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<sup>281</sup> Omaha/Douglas County History in a Trunk Project. Omaha/Douglas County History Timeline. p. 104.

<sup>282</sup> Luebke, *Nebraska*, p. 372.

<sup>283</sup> Omaha/Douglas County History in a Trunk Project. Omaha/Douglas County History Timeline. pp. 123-128.

<sup>284</sup> Ibid., pp. 123-128

<sup>285</sup> Ibid., p. 154.

<sup>286</sup> Omaha Chamber of Commerce Data. <http://www.city-data-com/us-cities/The-Midwest/Omaha-Economy.html>

existence, life has been a game against nature: to find shelter from the elements, to ride the waters and the wind, to wrest food and sustenance from the soil, the waters, and other creatures."<sup>287</sup> By the development of Omaha, this battle had been largely won, as contrary to popular myth, this was never a true frontier town in the way of Deadwood, SD, but an industrial city.

Man as homo faber sought to make things, and in making things he dreamt of remaking nature. To be dependent on nature was to bend to its caprices and acknowledge its tyrannies and diminishing returns. To rework nature, to make fabricated things, was to enhance man's powers. The industrial revolution was, at the bottom, an effort to substitute a technical order for the natural order. An engineering conception of function and rationality for the haphazard ecological distributions of resources and climates. In the industrial society, the cosmological vision was the game against fabricated nature.<sup>288</sup>

The very design of the urban city follows this function, and the functional separation between the cities components and ethnic classes was not merely structural violence imposed upon class and ethnic groups, but a product of the technical rational industrial city. Unfortunately, as the industrial city waned and the post-industrial grew up in it's place the material legacy created conflicts and inefficiencies that are yet to be addressed. " The post-industrial society turns its back on both. In the salient experience of work, men live more and more outside nature, and less and less with machinery and things; they live with and encounter one another."<sup>289</sup> In part, the transition of economy

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<sup>287</sup> Bell, *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society*, p. 488.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

has lead to a transformation of the way in which humanity interacts with its world. "The group life that was hitched to things gave men a huge sense of power as they created mechanical artifacts to transform the world." Now, however "in the daily round of work, men no longer confront nature, as either alien or beneficent, and few now handle artifacts and things. The post-industrial society is essentially a game between persons."<sup>290</sup> This game has had it's effects on policy and business leaders in their inability to see the structural legacy of the industrial city instead focusing on the individual and engaging in a sort of victim blaming, which I shall discuss more in depth later.

Whereas the industrial city and work places had compartmentalized and centralized space in which work occurred, the post-industrial city faces new issues over how to engage workers spread across a diverse and growing terrain as well as overcoming the costs in time and money required for participation, interaction, and transaction. Moreover, in regards to planning and regulation the post-industrial city has yet to figure out a means to navigate the increasingly complex and increasingly need for these in the shell of the industrial city. In particular with concern to time and energy needs, the "new scarcity"<sup>291</sup> of the post-industrial city.

The new scarcities have no doubt had their effects on the world apart from work life, in particular regards to home and family. Home and family were important for the Lynds, and many Americans still espouse value of home and family, even though they may act in paradoxical ways. How has this category of home and family changed with the transition from one economy to another?

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<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., pp. 467-74.

## Home and Family

Omaha grew as a development scheme by Council Bluffs, IA to attract the transcontinental railroad.<sup>292</sup> Early neighborhoods, were the "Sporting District" known for gambling and drinking,<sup>293</sup> and the "Burnt District" known for prostitution and sex work.<sup>294</sup> Another early neighborhood was "Scriptown", currently known as the Near North Side, home to much of the Black population.<sup>295</sup> Soon after Omaha's founding, an Irish enclave was developed, known as "Sheelytown" named after a packing house "Sheely Brothers."<sup>296</sup> As the city grew and developed, the areas around the older neighborhoods and the downtown grew and developed. In 1870, Hanscom Park was developed, and 1929, Bemis Park was platted and developed as a wealthy suburb.<sup>297</sup> Other older neighborhoods grew and developed organically later receiving names related to people or ethnic communities that lived there, such as Kountze Place and Little Bohemia. Other neighborhoods, such as Benson and Dundee were small towns annexed by the city in its early days, or much later such as Millard and Elkhorn.<sup>298</sup> There are currently 189 different neighborhood associations in Omaha.<sup>299</sup> However, it is unclear as

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<sup>292</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 6.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>294</sup> Bristow, D. *A Dirty, Wicked Town: Tales of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Omaha*. Caxton Press, 1997.

<sup>295</sup> Nebraska historical Society. *Transactions and reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, Volume 4, (1892). p. 250.

<sup>296</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 158.

<sup>297</sup> Mead and Hunt, Inc. *Reconnaissance Survey of Selected Neighborhoods in Central Omaha, Nebraska*. Nebraska Historic Buildings Survey.

<sup>298</sup> *City of Elkhorn v. City of Omaha*. 2007-01-12

<http://www.court.state.ne.us/opinions/2007/january/jan12/s05-1006.pdf>.

<sup>299</sup> 2012 Neighborhood Association Directory.

<http://www.cityofomaha.org/mayor/images/wordpress/uploads/2012/03/neighborhood-directory-030512.pdf>

to how these neighborhoods are "decided." An application may be downloaded from the Mayor's office website.<sup>300</sup>

Like many cities of, Omaha had a suburban growth that began in the post-war decades<sup>301</sup> and continued with speed and shows little sign of stopping. Originally, this growth was a response to minority and Black empowerment and racial unrest happening in the older parts of the city.<sup>302</sup> However, the current growth, which outpaces urban growth,<sup>303</sup> is a more direct promotion by finance capital billed as a means to property ownership and cheap custom homes.<sup>304</sup>

Within Omaha, the suburbs are thought of as places of wealth and material gain, whereas the inner parts of the city may have wealthy neighborhoods, but are primarily for those struggling with poverty. However, based on a conversation I had with the Mayor's office in 2012, while there is more material acquisition occurring in suburbia, these are also the places of greatest concern during the recession, as there are large swaths of territory so precariously thrust into middle class, that these neighborhoods could become large tracts of abandoned and foreclosed homes.<sup>305</sup>

The Structure of the family in Omaha varies depending on the historical, social and economic structures of the neighborhoods. With certain parts of the city falling close

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<sup>300</sup> Mayor's office. City of Omaha/Neighborhoods.

<http://www.cityofomaha.org/mayor/component/wordpress/neighborhoods>

<sup>301</sup> Larsen and Cottrell, *The Gate City*, p. 308.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., p. 313.

<sup>303</sup> Anderson, Mark and Sheila Story. Suburbs Out-Pace Omaha Growth. Lincoln Journal Star 3/2/2011 [http://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/suburbs-out-pace-omaha-growth/article\\_c73921a4-4979-5362-928b-1410fa7fe482.html](http://journalstar.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/suburbs-out-pace-omaha-growth/article_c73921a4-4979-5362-928b-1410fa7fe482.html).

<sup>304</sup> Robert D. Lewis, *Manufacturing Suburbs: Building Work and Home on the Metropolitan Fringe* (Temple University Press, 2004).

<sup>305</sup> Howell, Interview with the Mayor's Office.



to the national trend and resembling the modern nuclear family,<sup>306</sup> and other's being higher than average in single parent.<sup>307</sup> Issues of home and family are discussed but not centrally focused upon by people, aside from particular class dynamics and class based struggles regarding home and family. What is clear, however, is that like elsewhere, the "new suburb" was (and still is) marketed as a site for "strong community cohesion combined with the amenities associated with escape from the city: less crowding, less crime, less filth." This became the ideal life for citizens of Omaha, under the surface of this ideal is the reality that with "less crowding, less crime, less filth" came less contact with minorities and poor people. However, as Betty Friedan noted, with this freedom from crime, filth, crowding, contact with the "other" came "the isolation of women," "and the community-debilitating consequences of rigid separations between home, work, and market," as well as the "the characteristic alienation and occasional antisocial behavior of suburban youth."<sup>308</sup> Further, as much of the United States, Omaha did not undergo any "explicit planning" to grow suburbs while simultaneously preserving a livable city core. "Instead, policy makers implemented an array of policies that helped push Americans into suburbia -- with little regard either for those left behind in central cities or for the character of the new suburban communities."<sup>309</sup>

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<sup>306</sup> 2010 Census Brief. Household and Families.

<http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-14.pdf>

<sup>307</sup> Cordes, Henry, Cindy Gonzalez, and Erin Grace. Omaha in Black and White: Poverty Amidst Prosperity.

<sup>308</sup> Kleniewski, *Cities and Society*.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

## Youth

Some of those who are left behind in the central cities are youth. This section tells a short history of youth in Omaha with an initial foray into some of the problems evident here. What happens to youth in Omaha, Nebraska? The state provides that each child must start school by the time they reach six years of age.<sup>310</sup> Most frequently this occurs in a public institution run by the state, however there is also private, generally religious, institutions, and some choose to educate their young at home.<sup>311</sup> Children must also stay in school until they are 16 years of age.<sup>312</sup> Overall, there are 218 Kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade institutions in Omaha spread across 15 districts; roughly 3/4ths of these are public.<sup>313</sup> In addition to formal mandated education, there are 477 private pre-school institutions, and 121 public pre-schools, that provide children with some education and preparation for Kindergarten.<sup>314</sup> In spite of no mandate on graduation from High School, a majority of Omaha's students do graduate with a high school degree (88.3%).<sup>315</sup> Of

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<sup>310</sup> Nebraska Department of Education. Exempt (Home) School Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) 2011-2012 School Year.  
<http://www.education.ne.gov/fos/OrgServices/ExemptSchools/Downloads/1112/FAQs.pdf>

<sup>311</sup> Omaha World Herald. Schools Report Card.  
<http://maps.dataomaha.com/schools/rankings/index#hs>

<sup>312</sup> Nebraska Department of Education. Exempt (Home) School Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) 2011-2012 School Year.  
<http://www.education.ne.gov/fos/OrgServices/ExemptSchools/Downloads/1112/FAQs.pdf>

<sup>313</sup> Omaha World Herald. Schools Report Card.  
<http://maps.dataomaha.com/schools/rankings/index#hs>

<sup>314</sup> GreatSchools.Org. Pre-School Search Page. <http://www.greatschools.org/>

<sup>315</sup> United States Census. Omaha, Nebraska Quick Facts.  
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/31/3137000.html>

those who graduate high school, less than half go on to college and finish with a Bachelor's Degree.<sup>316</sup>

Nine months out of the year, school fulfills much of the youth's time. However, in addition to school, there are many activities that youth are encouraged to engage in. Some of these include religious organizations, sports, Boy or Girl Scouts of America. Older youth may also engage in part time jobs. Three months out of the year, youth participate in a different schedule. This schedule may be governed by summer camps, or jobs, but it may also be a time when they are free to socialize with their peers with limited surveillance from parents. Omaha is also historically a place where there are a variety of music venues where youth may go and listen to or perform particular brands of music representing a particular subculture.

Public Schooling began in Omaha in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when one-room schoolhouses were opened, one of the first opened was Saratoga. While this school is no longer a one room school house, it still stands in it's original location and serves the youth of the community through academic and community citizenship programs, such as the B.E.A.R.S Club.<sup>317</sup> This school is part of Omaha Public Schools, the largest and most diverse of Omaha's districts.<sup>318</sup> As Omaha grew and developed, it incorporated small towns and other school districts generally joined the Omaha Public Schools District. This expansion initially followed the river, north and south of the city, but in more recent

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<sup>316</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>317</sup> Omaha Public Schools. History of Saratoga Elementary.  
<http://www.ops.org/elementary/saratoga/ABOUTOURSCHOOL/History/tabid/59/Default.aspx>

<sup>318</sup> Omaha Public Schools. About OPS.  
<http://www.ops.org/district/HOME/AboutOPS/tabid/196/Default.aspx>

years, has spread westward as the city's annexation has moved that direction. In 2005, Omaha Public Schools "voted to absorb 21 Millard and four Ralston schools districts within the city limits. It cited an 1891 law as its authority." OPS decision was based primarily on an 1891 statute that gave the district authority to annex all new schools into the district. The single exception was a 1947 statute that protected the affluent District 66.<sup>319</sup> The districts fought hard against each other with the conflict finally ending up in the Nebraska Legislature, where Senator Ernie Chambers, the sole black senator, proposed a bill that would not integrate the school districts, but split the district into three distinct units. The bill passed and the nation noticed. Chambers' bill (potentially and probably) divided Omaha into three racially (and economically) distinct districts. Civil Rights Lawyers and others, including billionaire Warren Buffett were quick to criticize the bill. Chambers' response was "Several years ago I began discussing in my community the possibility of carving our area out of Omaha Public Schools and establishing a district over which we would have control, my intent is not to have an exclusionary system, but we, meaning black people, whose children make up the vast majority of the student population, would control."<sup>320</sup> Functionally, nothing changes and the lawsuit is still pending.

As Senator Chambers was illustrating, the public school system in Omaha had left behind the urban core and ethnic others, Sharon Zukin noted in "The Cultures of Cities":

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<sup>319</sup> Reist, Margaret. OPS' Vision: One City, One School. 9/23/2007  
[http://journalstar.com/special-section/news/article\\_fabab7bb-23e5-5911-8e1a-21f5065a997a.html](http://journalstar.com/special-section/news/article_fabab7bb-23e5-5911-8e1a-21f5065a997a.html)

<sup>320</sup> Dillon, Sam. Law to Segregate Omaha Schools Divides Nebraska. 4/15/2006  
<http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/15/us/15omaha.html?pagewanted=print>

From a similar point of view, American attitudes toward cities smell strongly of fear of the old and disdain for those who inherit it. As urban public spaces have included more strangers, those who look and talk so differently they are considered 'Others,' the Americans who used them before have abandoned them, leaving them to a generalized ethnic Other, a victim of the politics of fear. An anthropologist concluded her study of 'urban danger' in Philadelphia (Merry 1981) by saying that people tend to think Others are criminals; eventually, crime becomes a device, an idiom, for thinking about the Other.<sup>321</sup>

In Omaha, this fear and disdain for those that inherit the old parts of the city is almost palpable, and the disregard for those who inherit this legacy, the youth, feels clear. In particular to many of the families who have little control over the education of their own. Similar to how when "people tend to think Others are criminals; eventually, crime becomes a device, an idiom for thinking about the Other."<sup>322</sup> Poor education, and low achievement has become a device and idiom for thinking of youth from certain areas of town.

Neighborhoods organize life chances in the same sense as do the more familiar dimensions of class and caste. Giddens (1973:108-10) notes the importance of spatial segregation as a "proximate factor of class structuration ... an aspect of consumption rather than production which acts to reinforce the separations" produced by unequal market capacity. Richard Peet emphasizes that "each social group operates within a typical daily 'prism,' which for the disadvantaged closes into a 'prison of space and resources.' ... Deficiencies in the environment--limitations on mobility and the density

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<sup>321</sup> Zukin, Sharon. "The Cultures of Cities" Blackwell (1996) p. 41.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

and equality of social resources--must clearly limit an individual's potential" (Peet, 1975:484-85)<sup>323</sup>

These 'prisons of space' become the environment in which a particular ethnic class of youth is born into, while much of the rest of the city prides itself on good schools and providing education as a key to a larger world. The question in the underserved neighborhoods, which Senator Chambers was hoping to either address or highlight, is whether or not the institutions in charge of preparing youth for adulthood are even providing the skills and access to resources to function in the current economy.

During the industrial age of America, adolescence ended more or less, once a person left school and began working. This generally occurred between the late teens and early twenties. Today, this period of life often extends well into a persons twenties.<sup>324</sup>

The liberated periods of summer break, the extended period of adolescence, access/exposure (or lack thereof) to pre-school education, post-secondary education, different educational institutions, and extra-curricular activities contribute to the urban conflict of the post-industrial Midwestern Omaha. Further, these are factors that exacerbate poverty and the conflicts of an urban life that is in part shaped by the historical development of the school districts and communities served. As a number of interviewees told me, the extra curricular activities available for their families to serve the youth are primarily utilized as babysitting devices while parents work long shifts or

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<sup>323</sup> Logan, John and Harvey Molotch, "Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place" University of California Press (2007) p. 19.

<sup>324</sup> Furstenberg, Frank F. Jr., (et. Al) Between Adolescence and Adulthood: Expectations about the Timing of Adulthood.  
<http://www.transad.pop.upenn.edu/downloads/between.pdf>

multiple low paying jobs. While many of these are ostensibly billed to investors, parents, and the community as enrichment, they too are under equipped and over-capacity. More on these institutions will be presented in later sections in particular as they relate to the lower-class youth.

Desire becomes the "blind spot" of conflict around which injurious acts are constituted and carried out. This suggests that a whole "community of unconsciousness" is built not only, as Bourdieu has suggested, upon repressed memories but also on shared denials and discursive projections of disavowal; that hatred is constituted not only around demands for land, autonomy, or freedom but also as a necessary part of national ideology, which conceals unconscious signifiers of dependency and desire, circulating a power politics of disavowal.<sup>325</sup>

### **Leisure Time**

Cultural strategies of redevelopment are complicated representations of change and desire. Their common element is to create a 'cultural' space connecting tourism, consumption, and style of life. They appreciate archaic living and working sites, but push them deeper into the past. They incorporate these sites into an image of local identity by defusing their contentiousness. Regardless of their bloody past or current social tensions, the sites become 'a happy face.' Cultural strategies, moreover, are often consensual strategies of change. They preserve rather than tear down; they rely on alliances between unlikely groups.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> Resnick, Spencer and Jonathan Bix, "Gramsci Comes Home" Jacobin Magazine 8/19/13

<sup>326</sup> Zukin, Sharon. "The Cultures of Cities," Blackwell (1996). p. 83.

Leisure time in Omaha began stereotypical of any frontier town, namely brothels<sup>327</sup> and gambling.<sup>328</sup> Thirty years after the founding Omaha had 17 brothels, and within ten years of that, there was forty-three. By 1910, the number of brothels numbered over 100 with over 2,500 prostitutes.<sup>329</sup> In the late 1800s, it was nearly impossible to navigate downtown Omaha along Farnam St between 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> without multiple chances to engage in a game of cards.<sup>330</sup> Omaha's vice scene continued to flourish under the mayor James Dahlman, whose career ironically began through friendship with William Jennings Bryan.<sup>331</sup> By the Mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century, Omaha had more illicit gambling than any city in the US.<sup>332</sup>

Over time, however, Omaha developed a stronger cultural scene that lead to a greater variety in leisure activities. Today, the brothels are gone from Omaha, and prostitution has disappeared from the majority public view. Gambling has been long institutionalized. In part, this was through the development of Ak-Sar-Ben. According to Aksarben.org, Aksarben was developed in order to "Provide entertainment other than saloons, gambling houses and honkeytonks for the 1895 fair or lose it to a competitively

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<sup>327</sup> Bristow, D. A Dirty, Wicked Town: Tales of 19th Century Omaha. Caxton Press. 1997. P. 208

<sup>328</sup> *ibid.* P. 108-113

<sup>329</sup> Folsom, Burton W. No more Free Markets or Free Beer: The Progressive Era in Nebraska, 1900-1924. 1999. P.60

<sup>330</sup> Bristow, D. A Dirty, Wicked Town: Tales of 19th Century Omaha. Caxton Press. 1997. P. 108-113

<sup>331</sup> Folsom, Burton W. No more Free Markets or Free Beer: The Progressive Era in Nebraska, 1900-1924. 1999. P. 60-70

<sup>332</sup> NETV.org. Omaha's Gambling History. Transcript. 2004.  
<http://www.netnebraska.org/extras/statewide/pers/transcripts/Omaha%20Gambling%20History.pdf>



alert Lincoln."<sup>333</sup> However, in 1921 the organization implemented Horse Racing, which continued apart from a few broken years until 1996.<sup>334</sup> A second, and probably more important part was the control of illicit gambling by Italian Mafioso during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century,<sup>335</sup> which was greatly weakened when Council Bluffs liberalized their gaming laws allowing more legal casinos to open up immediately across the river.<sup>336</sup> Today, Gambling is limited to Keno after a 2004 bill sponsored by Tom Osborne and Ernie Chambers.<sup>337</sup>

During the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as Omaha grew, it also settled; the rough frontier town became a fully urbanized industrial center and that demanded certain leisure activities. Exactly how this all developed remains unclear, and I have heard numerous versions of this story, however, the first landmarks of Omaha's culture and leisure scene were planned in the 1920s with Joslyn Art Museum and the Omaha Community Playhouse. The Joslyn Art Museum was planned by Sarah H. Joslyn after her husband's death in 1916, but was finished in 1931.<sup>338</sup> Around the same time Omahans joined others across America in the Little Theater Movement and opened the Omaha Community Playhouse

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<sup>333</sup> History. <http://www.aksarben.org/about/history>

<sup>334</sup> Timeline. <http://www.aksarben.org/about/history/timeline>

<sup>335</sup> United States Congress Senate Committee on the Judiciary Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights. (1974) Criminal Justice Data Banks 1974: Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights of the Committee on the Judiciary. Government Printing Office. P. 411.

<sup>336</sup> NETV.org. Omaha's Gambling History. Transcript. 2004.

<http://www.netnebraska.org/extras/statewide/pers/transcripts/Omaha%20Gambling%20History.pdf>.

<sup>337</sup> Chambers, Ernie and Tom Osborne. "Damage from casinos would be long lasting" 6/1/2004.

<sup>338</sup> Nebraska's Largest Museum. <http://www.joslyn.org/about/history/>

in 1924.<sup>339</sup> The Omaha Community Playhouse saw the debut of Henry Fonda and Marlon Brando and remains a solid part of Omaha's leisure and cultural scene today.<sup>340</sup> The 1920s saw the development of other theaters, such as the Riviera in 1926<sup>341</sup> Theater (now the Rose Theater) and the Orpheum in 1927.<sup>342</sup> As Sharon Zukin noted:

Many places that we think of as great public spaces have become so only over time. Some, like city halls, Grand Central Terminal, or the Metropolitan Museum of Art, were built as representations of centralized power. Others, like Times Square, are places of commercial rather than political culture (Taylor 1992). Public spaces like the Mall in Washington D.C., may eventually become civic spaces, evoking a sense of citizenship and the memory of sacrifice or heroism that citizenship often requires. Or a public space can be rebuilt or reconfigured to repress the memory or citizens hip. The Basilica of Sacre Coeur was built on Montmartre, site of the slaughter of Communards in 1871 (Harvey 1985b).<sup>343</sup>

Wealthy natives looking for lasting legacy created some of these developments, but others were grassroots actions by Omaha's citizens to develop a "civilized" entertainment against the backdrop of prostitution and gambling. Another cultural venue developing at this time was the Sokol Auditorium. Built in 1926 by Dr. Miroslaw Tyrs for the promotion of harmony, equality and fraternity, through a variety of intellectual, physical and cultural activities.<sup>344</sup> The Sokol Auditorium still exists today and plays an important role in Omaha's cultural scene, especially in regards to music (more later).

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<sup>339</sup> Omaha Community Playhouse. History.

<http://www.omahaplayhouse.com/history.aspx>

<sup>340</sup> Bain, David Haward. *The Old Iron Road: An Epic of Rails, Roads, and the Urge to Go West*. New York City, New York: Penguin Books. 2004. p. 60–1

<sup>341</sup> Pittenger, Richard. Rose Blumkin Performing Arts Center.  
<http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/906>

<sup>342</sup> Omaha Performing Arts. History of the Orpheum.  
<http://www.omahaperformingarts.org/orpheum/history/>

<sup>343</sup> Zukin, Sharon. "The Cultures of Cities," Blackwell (1996). p. 44.

<sup>344</sup> Sokol South Omaha. <http://www.sokolsouthomaha.com/>

Another important leisure site developing during the 1920s was Peony Park. Peony Park, now a grocery store, began in 1919 as a gas station and restaurant along the Lincoln highway.<sup>345</sup> It became a tourist stop due to a neighboring peony farm, and began to add more attractions. The first major attractions were a beer garden and ballroom; then in 1926 a 4.5 acre swimming pool was put in.<sup>346</sup> During the 1930s, Peony Park received another boost when the Lawrence Welk Band made it their official headquarters.<sup>347</sup> During the 1970s a rollercoaster and other 'rides' were added to the parks attractions.<sup>348</sup> The park hosted numerous musical acts throughout its history, with Jazz being a focus early on, it's final years hosted acts such as Smashing Pumpkins, Nirvana and Pearl Jam.<sup>349</sup>

Music has long held an important presence in Omaha's cultural scene. In 1921 the Omaha Symphony was established.<sup>350</sup> In 1923, Dreamland Ballroom opened, and became an important venue for North Omaha and Black American Musicians in Omaha.<sup>351</sup> "North Omaha used to be a hub for black jazz musicians, 'the triple-A league' where national bands would go to find a player to fill out their ensemble."<sup>352</sup> From the 20s onward, Omaha produced several musicians that gained national notoriety. However, beginning in the mid-1990s, thanks to a variety of venues in Omaha, such as Sokol, Cog

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<sup>345</sup> Jennings, C.D. (2001) Omaha's Peony Park: An American Legend. Arcadia Publishing.

<sup>346</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> Omaha Symphony. History of the Symphony.

<http://www.omahasymphony.org/history.asp>

<sup>351</sup> Love's Jazz Center. Jazz History in Omaha. <http://lovesjazzartcenter.org/history/>

<sup>352</sup> *ibid.*

Factory (now an auto repair depot), and Ranch Bowl (now a Walmart), Omaha saw a whole series of homegrown talent become national acts. These acts included Bright Eyes, The Faint, Cursive and Rilo Kiley, who collectively became known as the "Omaha sound."<sup>353</sup>

Parks and outdoors activities have held a long tradition in Omaha, Nebraska. Many are built into the fabric of the city and are iconic to residents of the neighborhoods, or even the greater metropolitan area, such as Memorial Park, or the Eugene Leahy Mall. Other parks have developed, over time, an engaged practice in the community such as the Henry Doorly Zoo. Omaha's zoo opened in 1894 as the Riverview Park. By 1898 the park housed over 120 animals of varying sorts ("deer, grizzly bear, two bison on loan from Colonel William F. Cody"). During the 1920s and 30s, the cat and bear cages were built up and during the 1950s the Omaha Zoological Society was formed which helped the park to grow. In 1965 the park received its new name after a donation from Margaret Hitchcock Doorly in memory of her husband, Henry. Since the late 1970s the Zoo has transformed into a nationally recognized facility.<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>353</sup> Harrington, Richard. A Musical Vision Comes Into Focus. Washington Post. November 18, 2005

<http://pqasb.pqarchiver.com/washingtonpost/access/928280971.html?FMT=ABS&FMTS=ABS:FT&date=Nov+18%2C+2005&author=Richard+Harrington&pub=The+Washington+Post&edition=&startpage=T.11&desc=A+Musical+Vision+Comes+Into+Focus>

<sup>354</sup> Omaha Henry Doorly Zoo and Aquarium. Mission and History of the Omaha Zoological Society. <http://www.omahazoo.com/about/history/>

While not home to any major league sports teams, Omaha has hosted the College World Series for more than 60 years.<sup>355</sup> This baseball tournament draws visitors from across the country to Omaha and was the source of a citywide conflict when a new downtown baseball park was built as the new home of the tournament, as opposed to the historic South Omaha field.<sup>356</sup> While this conflict, from a practical point of view seemed petty, "the issue of defining the 'cultural significance' of a building is crucial to constructing narratives of political history."<sup>357</sup> The 1980s in Omaha saw another push for public leisure. In 1981 the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts was "created by artists, for artists." The Bemis mission is to living/working space for a community of artists in Omaha as well as monthly stipend in order to encourage experimentation and creative growth.<sup>358</sup> The following year, in 1982, the River City Rodeo and Stock Show was created as a free event to showcase, celebrate and educate about the history and culture of the west that built Omaha.<sup>359</sup> The production of this 1982 stock show and rodeo is no doubt far tamer and civilized than it would have been a century prior. The most recent push for non-commercial public leisure was during the mid 1990s, when Omaha's Botanical Gardens opened (1995); the same year the Durham Western Heritage Museum

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<sup>355</sup> College World Series, Inc. CWS History.  
[http://www.cwsomaha.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=58264&Itemid=247](http://www.cwsomaha.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=58264&Itemid=247)

<sup>356</sup> Dodd, Denis. When Rosenblatt falls, CWS' special atmosphere will be tough to duplicate. CBS Sports. <http://www.cbssports.com/mlb/story/13577276/when-rosenblatt-falls-cws-special-atmosphere-will-be-tough-to-duplicate>

<sup>357</sup> Zukin, Sharon. *"The Cultures of Cities."* p. 128.

<sup>358</sup> Alliance of Artists and Communities. Mission & History.  
[http://www.bemiscenter.org/about\\_us/](http://www.bemiscenter.org/about_us/)

<sup>359</sup> Ak-Sar-Ben's River City Rodeo and Stock Show. Mission and History.  
<http://www.rivercityrodeo.com/more-info/mission-a-history>

underwent major renovations (\$22 million), the museum highlights Omaha's train history;<sup>360</sup> finally, in 1999, the Hot Shops artist coop opened in the Near North side of Omaha as "A place where artists can work and interact establishes an atmosphere for creative art discourse."<sup>361</sup>

Omaha continues to change. Areas grow and decline and new leisure ventures are built to replace, cover-over, or jockey against older ones. The Burnt District, Omaha's historic red light district is no longer, part of it is now a convention center and hotel, and the Holland Performing Arts Center. More importantly, it sits between two of Omaha's downtown entertainment districts, the Old Market and NoDo (North Downtown). The Old Market is a long standing collection of restaurants, shops and bars, while NoDo (which stands for North Downtown) is a more recent development which most notably hosts the convention center, the baseball park (home to the college world series) and the Slowdown (a venue opened by a record label that spawned the "Omaha Sound"). This area early in Omaha's history was known as Squatters Row and Scriptown, "a once unsettled or at least less settled, territory now overrun by a conquering army of cops and developers, [...] behind the street-sweeping phalanx of law, enforcement, and development. This occupied territory, this political and economic appropriation of the contemporary city, couldn't be more obvious is a Nazi battle flag fluttered from atop the Eiffel Tower."<sup>362</sup> Omaha's two other entertainment districts exist west of these. Midtown

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<sup>360</sup> Durham Museum. History. <http://durhammuseum.org/about/history/default.aspx>

<sup>361</sup> Hot Shops Art Center. General Information.  
<http://www.hotshopsartcenter.com/info/index.html>

<sup>362</sup> Ferrell, Jeff. "Tearing Down the Street: Adventures in Urban Anarchy" Palgrave (2001) p 225.

Crossing, the newest of the four sits between the headquarters of Mutual of Omaha, Berkshire Hathaway, Peter Kiewit and the University of Nebraska's Medical School. Creighton University plans to build a new hospital, dental school and law school nearby as well.<sup>363</sup> As well as being the scenic landing to Mutual of Omaha's corporate headquarters, the park connected with this development used to be thought of as a public space and made home to a number of homeless, little public commotion was made regarding what will happen to the homeless.

All of these identities, all of these conflicts over public space and public meaning are in turn undergirded by deeper oppositions, as fundamental as they are complex: inclusion versus privilege, anarchy versus authority, emergence versus order. As the latest arrangements of spatial authority are made, as ever more exclusionary patterns of privilege are encoded and enforce in the spaces o the city, street denizens and street activists regularly move to unravel this emerging spatial order.<sup>364</sup>

Farther west still in the Suburbs of Omaha sits the final entertainment district, Village Point. Village Point is an outdoor walking mall with some restaurants and a movie theater.

The development of leisure spaces in the city is usually regarded as progress and development good for the community and the city as a whole. However, it's clear that conflict is often an outcome of this; "Conflicts in the living space are, we can conclude,

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<sup>363</sup> Midtown Crossing. Overview. <http://www.midtowncrossing.com/about/default.aspx>

<sup>364</sup> Ferrell, Jeff. *"Tearing Down the Street: Adventures in Urban Anarchy."* p. 222.

reflections of the underlying tension between capital and labor."<sup>365</sup> In the sections that follows this history, I will explore the effects that development has had on the urban landscape, and explore what 'revitalization' means for the city and local residents and dig into the tensions that develop, the latitude of agency actors have, politics, and the fora for voice.

Collective affirmation through techniques such as storytelling and call-and-response are continuously present at meetings and actions. Through these and other routine practices of struggle and group formation, City Life creates its own social universe where dominant culture is turned upside down -- where collective struggle and continuously fighting for others often becomes more important than one's own home.<sup>366</sup>

Collective affirmation, storytelling and call-and-response stem from many of America's religious traditions. Within Omaha, as elsewhere, these identities have been formed through struggle and resistance, but are also a force of change upon the city.

### **Religious Activities**

There appears to be limited data on how exactly the religious makeup of the modern Omaha came to be. However, we do know several histories of particular sects within Omaha's community, including the Latter Day Saints, Catholics, Jews and Unitarians.

Prior to the official founding of Omaha, Cutler's Park was established in 1846 as a Latter-Day Saints (LDS) outpost as the refugees fled westward across the US. This

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<sup>365</sup> Logan, John and Harvey Molotch, *"Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place,"* p. 11.

<sup>366</sup> Resnick, Spencer and Jonathan Bix, "Gramsci Comes Home" Jacobin Magazine 8/19/13



outpost was short lived, less than one year. The LDS were asked by the Natives of Nebraska, the Oto and Omaha, to either pay rent for the use of the land, or move on. The LDS moved on, but their legacy remains.<sup>367</sup> Today, Cutler's Park is site of the modern day neighborhood of Florence, which was built around the LDS' winter quarter's.<sup>368</sup> In the 1950's the Mormon Bridge was constructed west of here and 2001, the 104<sup>th</sup> LDS Temple was finished and dedicated.<sup>369</sup>

The first "officially established" religion in Omaha was the Methodist Church, when the Omaha Claim Club donated two lots for a church.<sup>370</sup> Not to be outdone, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Episcopalians and Roman Catholics quickly established their own churches in the city. Next, the Lutheran's established the first church west of the Missouri in Omaha. While the Methodists were first in Omaha, the Episcopalians were the most politically influential group during Omaha's first fifty years.<sup>371</sup> In 1867 the first African America church was established, St. John's African Methodist Episcopal Church.<sup>372</sup> In 1869, the First Unitarian Universalist Church began

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<sup>367</sup> Holmes, Gail. Oto Indians Forced LDS to Leave Cutler's Park, Nebraska's First Civically Organized Community. [http://earlylds.com/settlement\\_culters\\_park.html](http://earlylds.com/settlement_culters_park.html)

<sup>368</sup> Florence Futures Foundation. Historic. <http://www.historicflorence.org/history.php>

<sup>369</sup> Florence Futures Foundation. "Mormon Temple."  
<http://www.historicflorence.org/Attractions/temple.php>

<sup>370</sup> Larsen and Cottrell. The Gate City: A history of Omaha. University of Nebraska Press. 1997. p 51.

<sup>371</sup> *ibid.* p 53.

<sup>372</sup> Pam Rietsch. The Negroes of Nebraska: The Negro Goes to Church. Memorial Library. 2003.

meeting and in 1871 built a small building in the heart of the city. The Unitarian Church of Omaha was the first church to officially promote the philosophy of evolution.<sup>373</sup>

Churches were influential in the early establishment of Omaha Neighborhoods, but continued to remain influential throughout the cities growth. During the 1960s and 70s, the several Omaha churches were important spots for progressive action. Mondo we Langa, a Black Panther from Omaha targeted by the COINTELPRO in the controversial rice/poindexter case,<sup>374</sup> was an active Catholic of Holy Family Catholic Church.<sup>375</sup> Since the 1960s Holy Family Catholic Church has been committed to social justice.<sup>376</sup>

A 1966 film about an Omaha Lutheran Church, "A Time for Burning" was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature.<sup>377</sup> This film follows the story a Lutheran Minister who proposes intrafaith dialogue between races in Omaha Nebraska. It was a controversial idea at the time that ends with the resignation of the Lutheran Pastor.<sup>378</sup>

Until recently, conflicts regarding religious institutions and the city were contained within the group (congregation, parish, members, etc., etc.). However, in 2007,

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<sup>373</sup> Helms, Marie. History of the First Unitarian Church of Omaha.

<http://www.firstuomaha.org/visitors/about-us-1>

<sup>374</sup> Richardson, Michael. Anti-COINTELPRO Demonstration at Nebraska State Capitol for the Omaha Two. 3/15/2012 <http://www.examiner.com/article/anti-cointelpro-demonstration-at-nebraska-state-capitol-for-the-omaha-two>.

<sup>375</sup> Richardson, Michael. George Wallace Rally in Omaha Triggered Riot After Demonstrators Were Beaten. 3/4/1968 <http://www.examiner.com/article/george-wallace-rally-omaha-triggered-riot-after-demonstrators-were-beaten>.

<sup>376</sup> Holy Family Catholic Church. About Us.

<http://www.holyfamilyomaha.org/about.html>

<sup>377</sup> All Media Guide. A Time for Burning. 2010.

<http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/192244/A-Time-For-Burning/details>

<sup>378</sup> IMDb. Plot Summary for A Time for Burning.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0062372/plotsummary>

a coalition of socially conservative churches protested Anne Lamott, a popular Presbyterian author's speech at Creighton University (a Catholic Jesuit Institution). This protest ended with the event being cancelled.<sup>379</sup>

Perhaps the most actively engaged Religious group currently in Omaha is the Roman Catholic Church. Father Kenneth Vavrina is currently working with the refugee population from South Sudan in Omaha. Vavrina has been an outspoken advocate for justice issues since the 1960s, when he was providing religious and medical aid to the Oglala during the incident at Wounded Knee.<sup>380</sup> He has since worked around the world in many conflict zones and brings his concern for justice and compassion back to Omaha for issues regarding racial tension, ending American wars, and respect and openness towards homosexuals.<sup>381</sup>

Omaha has other religious communities as well, such as a fairly prominent Jewish community that arrived from Eastern Europe early in the cities history.<sup>382</sup> However, the other religious traditions have largely had affects on Omaha as individuals of a faith, and not communities of faith shaping the city. For the most part, religions do not have a history of direct conflict with one another over belief, rather a person, or communities faith, has lead differing political choices with an overall civil coexistence between

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<sup>379</sup> Mehegan, David. Different Thoughts on Faith. Boston Globe. 9/4/07  
[http://www.boston.com/ae/books/blog/2007/09/different\\_thoug.html](http://www.boston.com/ae/books/blog/2007/09/different_thoug.html)

<sup>380</sup> Twidwell, Jaclyn. Jesuits Making a Difference in the Parish. Jesuit Journeys. Winter 2008, p. 16.

<sup>381</sup> Grace, Erin. Priest: I'm Being Forced to Retire. Omaha World Herald. 4/5/11  
<http://www.omaha.com/article/20110405/NEWS01/704059893/-1>

<sup>382</sup> Larson, Lawrence and Barbara Cottrell. The Gate City: A history of Omaha. University of Nebraska Press. 1997. p 115.

communities. Today there is over 422 congregations, and more than 16 faith traditions, with the largest being Christians of various traditions.<sup>383</sup>

Despite no overt, or large-scale anti-particular religion movements in Omaha, Nebraska, the effects of religion on the city have waned. In particular, the churches power to affect a more peaceful or just world, which have been the primary focus of religious movements within the city. The waning influence of religion is an issue touched upon by several of those interviewed and will be explored in later segments, however there does appear to be a tension between recent immigrants and the historic members of a church who no longer live within it's neighborhood, as well as some minor isolation of Muslims due to geopolitics.

Further, there has been little active restraint by the government to limit the power of churches and religious organizations within the city, regardless of their religious affiliation. As we shall see in the next segment, the government of Omaha is technically a strong mayoral government. However, the lived reality of urban life tells a more nuanced story than official documents. What follows is primarily an official accounting of the government and community institutions of Omaha.

### **Government and Community**

The government of the city is a strong mayoral government with a seven-member city council. The mayor is not a member of the city council, and it is the mayor who appoints commissioners and officials to the various city departments. The mayor and the clerk are the only city wide elected positions in Omaha. Many other elected positions are

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<sup>383</sup> Association of Religious Data Archives. Douglas County, Nebraska. 2010.  
[http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/31/rcms2010\\_31055\\_county\\_tradition\\_2010.asp](http://www.thearda.com/rcms2010/r/c/31/rcms2010_31055_county_tradition_2010.asp)

county level government offices.<sup>384</sup> The council members are elected from the seven electoral districts. The mayor, the clerk and council members are elected to four-year terms.<sup>385</sup> It is the job of the clerk to maintain the records in regard to liquor and gaming licenses with the City. Furthermore, the clerk maintains records of public notifications, oaths, claims, improvements and lobbyists.<sup>386</sup> The City Council is Omaha's legislative branch and enacts ordinances and passes the annual budget. Legislation must pass the council by a four-person majority. That majority may be vetoed by the mayor, in which case, a new vote with a five-person majority is needed to override the mayor's veto. Additionally, the council must hold public meetings at least twice per month.<sup>387</sup> Meetings are held most Tuesday's during the year and always at 2:00 pm.<sup>388</sup>

Early mayors of Omaha seemed to have unsteady careers during the cities first 50 years or so, with many of the mayors serving only a couple of years, either retiring, or being removed from office. The first long-term mayor was James Dahlman, who also liberated Omaha from control of the State, elevating it to a "strong city." Dahlman served the city for eight terms. In his time Dahlman was well known for his friendly attitude

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<sup>384</sup> Douglas County. Elected Officials. <http://www.douglascounty-ne.gov/departments>

<sup>385</sup> City of Omaha. City of Omaha. <http://www.ci.omaha.ne.us/>

<sup>386</sup> City of Omaha. About the Clerk's Office.  
<http://www.cityofomaha.org/cityclerk/about-us>

<sup>387</sup> City of Omaha. About City Council Government.  
<http://www.cityofomaha.org/citycouncil/about-our-government>.

<sup>388</sup> City Council. City Council Meetings. <http://www.cityofomaha.org/cityclerk/city-council/>

towards the city's vice elements.<sup>389</sup> After Dahlman, most of Omaha's mayors served full or multiple terms, though none so long as Dahlman.

Further, according to many of the informal histories of the city, when the political machine headed by Dahlman was no longer operating, there was a power vacuum that lead to the rise of the corporations and business class.<sup>390</sup> This influx of corporate and business power and control has had lasting effects on the discourse of the city, it's problems, and what is to be done. There will be a greater examination of this in subsequent sections.

The current Mayor of Omaha is Jim Suttle. He is the 50<sup>th</sup> mayor of the city, and has held this office since 2009. Suttle has been an elected official since 2005, but was involved in the Omaha community for many years before this. He is also a former executive vice president and director of corporate development for HDR.<sup>391</sup>

The first city council was convened soon after the founding of city. The city council is composed of elected officials from legislative districts, of which there are currently seven. The current makeup is four democrats and three republicans.<sup>392</sup>

In addition to formal government, the city also has numerous civil society organizations, such as neighborhood organizations,<sup>393</sup> community non-profit organizations,<sup>394</sup> and immigrant networks.<sup>395</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Folsom, B.W. No More Free Markets Or Free Beer: The Progressive Era in Nebraska, 1900-1924. Lexington Books. 1999.

<sup>390</sup> Interviews with citizens of Omaha conducted between May 2013 and August 2013.

<sup>391</sup> Suttle, Jim. Jim Suttle Online Biography.

<http://www.cityofomaha.org/mayor/component/wordpress/administration/jim-suttle/>

<sup>392</sup> City of Omaha. About City Council Government.

<http://www.cityofomaha.org/citycouncil/about-our-government>

As we will see in the next sections, the city government has a definite way it facilitates and promotes the resolution of certain conflicts; there are certain conflicts that it perpetuates, and does not find them problematic; and particular conflicts it chooses not to adequately engage. Within this clear government function and design, there is then a hierarchy of civil institutions that rise to bridge gaps, or also engage in the process of addressing conflicts in the city. Noticeably, a common element is to create a 'cultural' space connecting tourism, consumption, and style of life. They appreciate archaic living and working sites, but push them deeper into the past. They incorporate these sites into an image of local identity by defusing their contentiousness. Regardless of their bloody past or current social tensions, the sites become 'a happy face.'<sup>396</sup>

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<sup>393</sup> City of Omaha. Neighborhoods.

<http://www.cityofomaha.org/mayor/component/wordpress/neighborhoods>

<sup>394</sup> Creighton University. Largest Omaha Non-Profit Organizations.

<http://www.creighton.edu/careercenter/students/internships/nonprofitvolunteeropportunities/largestomahanonprofitorganizations/index.php>

<sup>395</sup> Wilson Center. Mexico Institute. Omaha Site: Migrant Civil Society Under Construction. <http://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/the-omaha-site-migrant-civil-society-under-construction> Dey, Komach Deng. SUDANESE CIVIL SOCIETY COORDINATED BY SUDANESE COUNCIL OF CHURCHES.

<http://www.sudanese civil societyne.com/>

<sup>396</sup> . Zukin, Sharon. *"The Cultures of Cities,"* p. 83.

## APPENDIX C: ARCHETYPAL ANALYSIS OF ACTORS TRANSFORMING MIDTOWN FROM ABOVE

Oh, who are the people in your  
neighborhood?  
In your neighborhood?  
In your neighborhood?  
Say, who are the people in your  
neighborhood?  
The people that you meet each day  
[...]  
Well, they're the people that you  
meet  
When you're walking down the street  
They're the people that you meet  
each day<sup>397</sup>

### **Corporate Capitalists**

The first and most powerful player in the transformation of Omaha's urban core are the Fortune 500 companies, and other corporations based in Midtown, with Mutual of Omaha as the largest and most visible driver of urban transformation. In John Logan and Harvey Molotch's book "Urban Fortunes: The Political Economy of Place," they state that for capitalists the "primary attachment to place is for use values" and are in the

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<sup>397</sup> Moss, Jeffrey A. "People in Your Neighborhood" Universal Music Publishing Group, Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC



business "to gain profits, not rents." Typically, this means that they will remain aloof from local policy, providing the local government continues to make "the 'right' policy decisions," choosing instead to focus on national and international policy. While the local corporations are not frequently drafting policy, the general consensus is that in Omaha, corporations are more hands on with creation of the city's culture, presentation, and growth. Molotch and Logan explain that this may be related to corporate interests in being respected people in the community. "Their social worth is often defined in terms of "size of payroll," and their payroll in turn helps them set land-use and budget policies consistent with corporate needs." Further, Molotch and Logan suggest that the fact that the corporations are not directly writing policy "is not a sign of their lack of power. It can instead be evidence that the local agenda is so pervasively shaped by their interests that they have no need to participate. Like good managers generally, they work others, leaving their relative invisibility as a sign of their effectiveness."<sup>398</sup>

The development of Midtown Crossing was a shift in profit to rent. This shift may explain the extreme movements made in the development following a particular corporate ideology, function, and design. The development was further an attempt to repurpose, and capitalize on the use value of already existing property, and transform the corporate headquarters neighborhood into a more pleasant and 'civil' experience for those who work for, or visit the headquarters. The move was billed as altruistic and giving back to the community, but as BL\_\_\_\_\_ pointed out, it was merely them fixing something they broke decades prior, and capitalizing on it through a well-crafted marketing scheme.

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<sup>398</sup> Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, pp. 84-85.

Further regardless of the (lack of) success of the undertaking, it is important for the corporate actors involved to maintain that everything is wonderful, and this is the best of all possible worlds right there for everyone.

## **Developers**

Developers are another influential group within Midtown. While they were not responsible for the spectacle that drew attention back to the area, it is likely that they bear greater responsibility for the transformation in public opinion on Midtown, as without them, Midtown Crossing would be solely a clunky oasis in the midst of an otherwise derelict portion of the city. Whereas corporations are primarily concerned with place in regards to "use value" the developer is sees place in terms of both rent and profit. Further, while the corporations may remain largely aloof from local policy, it is the developers who are the agents on the ground actively pushing for change in order to maximize their business and growth opportunities.<sup>399</sup>

Developers tend to be males in their 30s or 40s, if they have families this is not the focus of their lives, rather they focus on the product and income. Further, the developer tends to espouse fairly libertarian values about government and the role of the private sector: government ought to stand out of the way, or at least relax criteria, in order for the developer to improve the neighborhood as is his responsibility. The developer sees himself as the soldier in the trenches, and the one really working to fix things up. The developers are fully open about their primary concern resting in profit, but also allude to the social good they create in doing so--they build high end goods in low income areas,

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

which improves property values and also allows the poor to network in with a moneyed class; this in turn will improve the neighborhood and the lives of those who live there, or so their thinking goes. Further in candid moments they will also mention they are not concerned about displacement of poor people, or what happens to those who are cast aside by their drive for profit.

### **City/State Government**

The local government is bureaucratic and reactive. It would be fair to say that even under the old regime, which was considered 'progressive' it was still responding to and reacting to the crises and conflicts within the city. The regimes tend to flip between those open to spending money on experiments to address structural issues and reacting to the latest community concern, and one who views those experiments as failed wastes of money on a population that is incapable of utilizing those funds to increase GDP.

While the elected mayors set the tone between the two poles of civic reaction, the structure of the government is heavily bureaucratized. The trajectory of the mayor's intent filters down, but departmental initiatives are not always able to flow upward, particularly when there is no head of department, or no political will to fully staff departments working on issues. Or, in particular reactive phases, a certain regime may cut an entire department all together as what happened with the office of sustainability after the most recent election. The bureaucracy not only affects the government's ability to adequately address issues of the city, but also frustrates those who view themselves as champions of a cause with solutions to 'fix' an issue.

### **Universities: Auxiliary Players**

While the local universities are perhaps not directly concerned about the growth of a city, they are benefactors of it, and have their roles to play within this matrix. As a cultural institution, they present a particular image of an area and city. Within Midtown, there are multiple universities with major development plans and initiatives that are impacting GDP, and are used in the marketing of Midtown Crossing and the local developers. Molotch and Logan discuss in their book how the "construction and expansion of university campuses can stimulate development in otherwise rural landscapes" citing UCLA as an example, however they can do the same thing for inner city land similarly increasing "the value of the surrounding real estate."<sup>400</sup>

To a certain extent the universities have been pushed into a competitive growth model, each trying to out compete the other for students and funding, as if they were corporations, while this may be an interesting line of exploration it is neither new or within the scope of the project. However, this corporate affect has begun to dictate the way in which the directors of development think about growth of the University (e.g. Expanding the Med Centers contributes to the GDP and value of the city and neighborhood, whereas a larger English Department and building is less likely to directly do so and is therefore a lower priority). Further, the universities in this area, in particular Creighton University, are concerned with the conflicts within the surrounding neighborhoods as these conflicts impact their presence to perspective students (and families) similarly to how the drugs and prostitutes on the front stoop of Mutual of Omaha adversely impacted their presence. Therefore, local development becomes

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., p.79

important as a means of survival against anti-tax political interests and for perspective students looking to invest in education.

### **Self-employed Professionals and Small Retailers**

The collection of self-employed and small retailers within the Midtown Crossing and greater Midtown development are largely local and non-chain. Not even local chains, with the exceptions of brix and the Afternoon. As Logan and Molotch state, these "retailers need customers and this often leads them to equate aggregate growth in a locality with an increase in sales and profits for themselves."<sup>401</sup> Which suggests they will be in favor of the continued economic development in the area.

In general, this is true of the storeowners. There was limited regard for the dynamics within the neighborhood outside what would attract more customers, and a steadier revenue stream. While certain retailers had expressed social goals that conjoined with their desire for profits--helping out people in poorer neighborhoods they grew up in, or increasing the presence, and brand of locally produced, farm-to-table foods and environmental concerns through high-end dining. The majority, however, were primarily interested in capturing a specialized market, being their own boss, and make profit 'sharing' a passion of he/she had.

### **Slumlord**

In certain respects, the slumlord is a variation of the self-employed professional or small retailer. However, for the slumlord, the "aggregate growth in a locality" does not

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid., p.83.

necessarily impact the "sales and profits for themselves."<sup>402</sup> At least not in the same way that it does for the other small businesses in the area, who by-and-large are looking to increase the spending power of those coming into the region as a means of making greater profits. The slumlord prefers a saturated market of those without great spending power--the merely surviving families and individuals living in a region; further the "aggregate growth" may actually impact their ability to maintain income/profit.

For now, the slumlords of midtown have sufficient monopoly on land usage that there is not yet concern for decrease in rents as they have become the first wave of resistance against gentrification; not for any greater social reason, but for fiscal self-interest in maintaining the status quo. The slumlord can be seen in the classic archetype of an individual looking for the greatest return with the least investment possible.

It has not been my intention to show gentrification as a process happening to a space by a "bunch of well intentioned actors working on a free market to "transform" an urban space into a better and new space."<sup>403</sup> It is far more complex than this, and as issues with city bureaucracy and absentee landlords, and local slumlords suggest here the 'free market' does not always reign. Further, the next section will explore more in depth the lives of the unpropertied residents, and other agents actively working against the process of gentrification and the 'free market'. Further, as BL\_\_\_\_\_'s ironic comment about Mutual of Omaha, or Jim's history of the neighborhood point out, an urban neighborhood "is constantly changing and perceives itself to be perpetually under siege from invaders

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<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Abu-Lughod, *From Urban Village to East Village*, p. 189.

of one kind or another."<sup>404</sup> Another way of putting it is that contestation over identity is an intrinsic property of a (particularly urban) neighborhood. "Neighborhoods are not usually developed by one continuously homogenous group of people throughout time."<sup>405</sup>

Poor people's neighborhoods probably will not disappear from even the thriving metropolises. Instead, as in the primate cities of the Third World, wealth and poverty are increasingly found side-by-side but functionally isolated from one another (Ross and Trachte, 1983). Because these cities are not defined by their ability to produce for and service a large internal market (but instead by their locus as a center of control and coordination), they can thrive even if a majority of the surrounding population lives in deprivation. They become "bipolar" places of the rich and poor (Sternlieb and Hughes, 1983b:462). By 1984, the proportion of city residents below the poverty line had reached 20 percent in Los Angeles, and nearly 25 percent in New York City (Purnick, 1984).<sup>406</sup>

"Zygmunt Bauman (1987) argues that modernity created pervasive asymmetries of knowledge and power and used them in recasting growing social inequality, which was being exacerbated by the emergent capitalist economy, as the product of individual differences." Thus<sup>407</sup> far it appears as though not only has social inequality been created and exacerbated under capitalism, but also become a structural and physical product in the transition to a post-industrial economy. Inequality is entrenched and elite attempts to

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<sup>404</sup> Ibid., p. 229.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid.

<sup>406</sup> Logan and Molotch, *Urban Fortunes*, p. 287.

<sup>407</sup> Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein, *Postmodern Interviewing* (SAGE, 2003), p. 224.

alleviate, adjust, or otherwise change the dynamics of inequality have no choice but to continue to exacerbate and further entrench this growing inequality.

Professor of economics, Richard D. Wolff has written in an essay "Capitalism Becomes Questionable," that "capitalism often rewards enterprises that maximize profit, growth and/or market share and often punishes those that do not." In this scenario, favoring the developers and even slumlords over the regular working poor that are the predominant residents of the space. Further, Wolff writes that "capitalism mostly enables private capitalists enterprises to keep the profits" and the costs are "socialized and dumped on the US public sector" and when taxpayers resist cities are devastated: "capitalism's mobility of capital often delivers shock and awe; it terrorizes whole populations." Wolff goes on to state that average citizens are increasingly beginning to question whether there is a deeper flaw than just aberrant business cycles as they struggle to maintain capital mobility and control over changes in technology or production that largely happen to them. Is it possible for them an average worker to realize an equitable share of profits, when it seems that the system does not work this way? Finally, Wolff speculates that since "the threats and risks of capitalist-driven decline and severe capitalist cycles in western Europe and the US put the system into question in ways not seen for many decades" we are likely to see a resurgence of the "bitter clashes" and labor struggles witnessed during the rapid growth of the industrial age.<sup>408</sup>

Is this really the case, as Wolff suggests, that the regular worker is becoming more aware of the failings in the system? How is the average working poor reacting to

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<sup>408</sup> "Richard D. Wolff, 'Capitalism Becomes Questionable,'" accessed February 19, 2013, <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2013/wolff190213.html>.



the changes within their space related to growth, investment, and capitalist interventions into poverty and conflict? The following pages will explore the stories and experiences of individuals in the midst of transition and continuing their struggle.

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