Creating community: housing insecurity & the tiny-house village model

Lyndsey Deaton[1]

[1]University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon

ABSTRACT: This paper describes resident's perspectives on social capital in the context of tiny-house villages intended to mitigate housing insecurity. Three development models (one grassroots, one hybrid, and one traditional) are compared to understand how the architecture supports each village's resocialization goal. Using an inductive framework, this study is founded on 21 interviews with residents and staff at each community as well as my observations as an Architect. I found common themes of stability, cleanliness, belonging, leadership, and community politics across all communities, which highlight key social dynamics that inform the resocialization process.

KEYWORDS: tiny-house villages, total institutions, cohesion, urban morphology, and sustainability

INTRODUCTION

Once a design statement advocating minimalist living, tiny-houses are now the building blocks of villages for people with nowhere else to go. Yet, little is known about the village model that advocates for social cohesion through micro-dwellings, shared amenities, and sweat-equity. A few of these villages are stark representations of the development spectrum that advocates are replicating across the United States. Dignity Village in Portland, Oregon was once a tent city that rose to legitimacy and land rights through purely organic means. Opportunity Village in Eugene, Oregon is a hybrid model of grassroots management with municipal intervention that evolved following the Occupy Movement. Community First! Village in Austin, Texas is a private development founded through a religious organization. These villages represent the spectrum of bottoms-up to top-down development methods, which influence the perceived identity and community formations within each village.

All three villages respond to the American social crises of escalating rent and lower employment, which is frequently cited as a trigger for rising housing insecurity. Dominated by a temporal nature, the built environment for those facing chronic housing insecurity flickers between fleeting moments of relief followed by long stretches of instability. In response, all three villages are built on the promise of stability through social capital. Amenities ranging from common kitchens to gardens to training centers are prescribed as architecture that will support social cohesion in a way that evokes Erving Goffman's *total institution* - imbibing villagers with a new, common identity. How do the three development models shape the village identity? Do the villages resocialize residents? And, how does the architecture and urban design support these goals? These questions emphasize the originality and friction of the tiny house village model – where residents are encouraged to reinvest their notions of independence, autonomy, and freedom for the new values of agency, security, and social capital.

1.0 HOUSING INSECURITY IN AMERICA

The spectrum of housing insecurity is wide covering those without shelter to those occupying informal shelters to those residing in temporary shelters to those with unreliable shelter. The description for individuals struggling with housing insecurity as *homeless* is subjective (and derogatory) capturing a narrow but shifting slice of their daily experience. Thus, I will not use the term *homeless* unless speaking to a reference and I will use the phrase *people with housing insecurity*. For the purposes of this paper, tracking the scale at which people with housing insecurity are present in America and the nationally recognized categorizations of homelessness will support a better understanding of the tiny-house village mission and the potential of this morphology to mitigate housing insecurity.

Controversy surrounds the actual number of homeless people in America on a given day but the most accepted estimate is the national Point-in-Time (PIT) count conducted by the United States Housing and Urbanization Department (HUD). Each year, one-night counts are conducted during the last 10 days in

January across the nation through 399 Continuums of Care (CoC). In January 2017, 553,742 people were homeless on the given night in the United States; from last year, this is a 1% increase in the total number of homeless people but an 8.5% increase in the number of unsheltered people (Henry 2017). In contrast, the National Law Center for Homeless People (NLCHP) criticizes HUD's methodology citing inconsistent methods and training used across CoCs, narrow definitions in types of homelessness, failure to account for the transitory nature of homelessness, and severe structural issues (Stanley 2017).[1] Using annual data, NLCHP endorses a study which found that the "actual number of homeless individuals is 2.5 to 10.2 times greater than those obtained using a point in time count" (Metraux 2001, 334). Both HUD and the NLCHP agree that the population of homeless people is on the rise in the United States.

The increase in housing insecurity in America is attributed to a recent decline in wages and a shortage of affordable housing. However, drastic cuts to the federal affordable housing program combined with political foot-dragging, municipal agency delays, and the painstaking process of raising money means that building affordable housing takes too long. Socially, housing insecurity is not a priority in America because it competes with cultural norms regarding property rights and the neoliberal ideology fortified by class reproduction. Ultimately, housing insecurity is a socially reproduced inequality relying on forms of capital transfer to fortify class disparities.[2] The modern capitalist concept of individual property rights is founded on property as capital transfer; property is owned and inherited. In today's neoliberal context even public space is literally and culturally privatized.[3] Support for housing security is thus relegated to the periphery of the social agenda as a *local issue* with decreasing national interest.

As America shifts the responsibility to local organizations, Putnam's (2000) research shows that social institutions are nationally in decline and thus weaken the traditional forms of relationships (face-to-face encounters) that fortify community cohesion. These tiny-house villages attempt to use architecture to create a cohesive community through interactions as a form of total institution. Total institutions are places with high levels of control such that residents drastically change their values, beliefs, and behavior and are considered *resocialized*. Generally, these places have considerable control over resident's lives. Goffman (1961) first revealed this social phenomenon through his work on mental asylums but other researchers have extended the theory to concentration camps, military boot camps, convents, cults, and tangentially to non-residential places such as Alcoholics Anonymous. Total institutions have both positive and negative social consequences but all feature important characteristics: control over resident's lives, intention to weaken resident's former self-identity, and strict treatment (Barkan 2011).

2.0 METHODOLOGY

Community is a personal experience unique to each member. Therefore, I sought to form my understanding on resident's voices - their opinions and perceptions of community - rather than on observations of how the community may actually function. In addition to reviewing site plans, field notes, and spending time working in each community, I interviewed residents and staff to ascertain their views on how residents identify, participate, and belong in their community. These villages were selected to represent the spectrum of bottoms-up to top-down development methods once the basic criteria was met. The basic criteria included a minimum duration of occupancy (>1 year); the colocation of support services, similar populations, and a high diversity of dwelling typologies. At the time of the interviews, the three communities were considered mid-sized with approximately 27 to 60 residents each albeit Community First Village has ambitions to expand to over 200 residents.

I conducted each interview at the participant's village in a common space with auditory but not visual privacy using a semi-structured interview as described by Weiss (1994). I interviewed a total of 21 participants – 5 residents and 1 staff in Dignity Village, 6 residents and 2 staff in Community First, and 6 residents and 1 staff in Opportunity Village – about their use of the village environment in social activities. To increase the credibility of the interview data, I member checked significant themes, triangulated findings by reviewing secondary sources (such as former media interviews and community governing documents), and used thick descriptions in the findings section. While participants were not demographically controlled, I sought multiple perspectives across ethnicity, gender, and cohabitation status as my previous work with tiny-house villages revealed these factors to be especially important in representing the spectrum of resident experiences. Each interview lasted 20 to 80 minutes and was audio-recorded and transcribed. I took field notes after working at each village as well as after each interview to document important visual and sensory cues not captured by the audiotape. The focus is on the resident's daily experiences and on their personal perspective of how the community cleaves and coalesces within the village environment.

I carried out the analysis in several iterative stages based on recognized qualitative data analysis steps with a grounded theory perspective. Using a constant comparative method, I moved between the interviews, transcripts, and field notes early in the analytical process to identify categories. My categories were

community relations, architecture, and resident values. Further distillation of key themes resulted in a second level of analysis using axial codes (ex: belonging, participation, sources of conflict, sources of cohesion) and memos. I assigned the interviews demographic characteristics (gender, ethnicity, and cohabitant status) as well as attributed them to their village and the village location (industrial or rural). Finally, I established theoretical codes and transferrable themes based on a systematic, empirical-based analysis of the transcripts and field notes by reading and re-reading the text and then looking for regularities (Bryant & Charmaz 2007). I also identified and attached the theoretical codes to existing theory (Goffman's total institution) as a foundation for understanding and describing my interpretation of the results. I used computer software (Dedoose) to synthesize my codes and then to analyze the data. I looked for anomalies and trends in the frequency of codes combined with demographic and locational factors. To analyze the data, I normalized the results and attributed a percentage (out of 100). I only focused on codes that had a disparity of more than 50% and appear more than 30 times (I consider this high frequency). This analytic information was used only as a lead to investigate themes; the real findings came from a close reading of the data and my experiences.

3.0 URBAN MORPHOLOGY

All village plans show a clear delineation, within the community, of public and private. There is a strong need in the communities for territorial security which is expressed through the construction of a perimeter fence and at Dignity Village and Opportunity Village there is also a guard shack. All communities are located on low-value property; Opportunity Village is located on an excess lot adjacent to the railroad in an industrial complex, Dignity Village is located on a paved lot adjacent to the city's leaf-composting yard and the Portland International Airport, Community First is located on the urban periphery in a rural area. The remote location was a strong theme across villages. The residents are challenged with varying degrees of noise pollution, air pollution, and accessibility to services. Dignity Village and Opportunity Village, per city lease, are not allowed to dig on-site and all utility services (such as water) are placed in aboveground pipes. Community First Village has traditional belowground services.

All villages have allocated public space for gardening, but feature degrees of residential investment; at Dignity Village and Opportunity Village these activities are seasonal and engage only a few residents while at Community First financial incentives for participating in gardening combine with professional leadership equate to year-round crops and consistent participation. All communities also value DIY (do it yourself) maintenance practices and include a separate structure to house home-maintenance equipment. Again, their development model exposes slight variation. At Dignity Village and Opportunity Village the DIY aspect is used mostly for small home and bike repairs by those residents who know how to use the tools while at Community First Village professional volunteers hold journeyman training, showing residents how to service the infrastructure. The largest indoor space in both communities is the community-gathering hall, which signifies the importance of social capital. This space is used to foster in-person interactions and strengthen community cohesion. Amenities of the community-gathering hall typically include Internet access, climate control, lounge furniture, and a notification board for local events. These spaces are also used to hold village meetings. Each community features a form of food storage/access. At Dignity Village and Opportunity Village this is a single building functioning as the receptacle of centralized donations while at Community First Village there are multiple locations for food access: a mini-mart, a free farmer's market, and pop-up food trucks.

All villages have arranged their houses in smaller clusters around green space, either a quad or a raised garden bed. These clusters, according to residents, give the villages a neighborhood-like feel and support resident interaction. Architecturally, the houses range in size and form: Dignity Village houses are 60-120sf and single-story with some lofts, Opportunity Village houses are >60sf and single-story, Community First 120-350sf and single-story. The effect of a range of typologies is a perception of diversity and personal expression as revealed in the interviews – no house is identical and each has the opportunity to represent the resident's personality and display ownership. Overall, all communities prioritize security, have similar urban planning priorities, and represent community through orientation, typology, and construction methodology.

Yet, the communities have evolved diverging narratives based on external pressures and internal dynamics. While their spatial forms and architecture feature strong similarities, mitigating housing insecurity is about more than shelter. How do these villages mitigate the social patterns of chronic housing insecurity, which is heavily reliant on personal outlook, habits, and agency? The spatial arrangement of these villages – small personal spaces and large social spaces are part of a type of re-socialization process.

4.0 SOCIAL THEMES

> It is such a blessing to wake up - to go to sleep every night not having to worry if the cops are going to walk-up or some random drug addict is going to come up and be, like, trying to take your stuff or anything like that. I mean you just rest better. -Charlotte, Opportunity Village resident[4]

Stability entails both security and reliability; it is a critical issue for people with housing insecurity. The village model intends to provide residents with more stability through increased social capital than they would typically receive through municipal and charity programs. Many residents had utilized the charity programs but were expelled or felt it was a burden to their identity (ex. no pets allowed) and thus it was not a stable alternative to residing on the street.

> I just started staying away because when you're there, you're basically a prisoner from 7 p.m. to 7 a.m. and then you get kicked out for whatever. -Chuck, Community First Village resident

Yet, a main concern with all residents was the instability of the street lifestyle because possessions were at risk and municipal codes required constant relocation. One resident from Opportunity Village, Ike, rented a storage stall for approximately $85 a month plus $15 insurance for stability. Ike maintained a high concern that when camping on "the street, his possessions (and himself) were always under threat of seizure by either the police or others. Maintaining his identity was another reason as he was a trade welder. By retaining a storage unit, his possessions (and hope to revitalize his identity as a trade welder) were secure, he was more mobile, and he felt he had more locational freedom. For some residents, a stable place provided the opportunity for personalization and identity, which improved their quality of life.

To expand upon the high frequency of cleanliness voiced, residents specifically described behaviors of disorderliness, hording, and hygiene in Opportunity Village and Dignity Village while at Community First Village a resident noted that the "cleanliness" made the village seem "pleasant" and ultimately attracted him to apply for residency (Matthew). The main concern for uncleanliness was the sanitation of the restrooms and kitchen.

> Yeah, people just go into the kitchen and make oatmeal and just leave the pan on the stove to rot forever. It's disgusting. -Doug, Dignity Village resident

Beyond the kitchen, residents of both Opportunity Village and Dignity Village believed that about a tenth of residents hoarded materials and possessions in a way that was detrimental to the community's health. Many residents expressed frustration at how many residents lack personal responsibility and hygiene. Additionally, Ike described how he was concerned that disorderliness and hording would affect the greater community's perception of the village model as a solution for housing insecurity.

> People just don't know how to clean up after themselves at all. So, you basically have to babysit them - you have to go around and get rid of their crap… It looks bad and if you try and get donations it messes with the look of our community. Ugh, it's like walking around looking at a bunch of trash. -Ike, Opportunity Village resident.

I found that cleanliness could be attributed to three factors: how the village manages cleaning programs, the age of the village, and the resident's hygiene habits. While Community First Village pays residents to perform janitorial services (which not only keeps the village clean but also trains residents on how to clean), it is also the newest community (one year in service). At Dignity Village and Opportunity Village residents are required to clean in shifts as part of their community service and these communities have been in service for 17 and 5 years respectively.

> That [cleaning] is not something I'm typically good at and I think that is probably a common problem here, most people – I mean you have to be really meticulous in order to live in a small environment like that and a tiny house and have it feel like there is some order to it you know and because every time I walk in I'm just like it's – you know what I mean? It's kind of – it's not like oh I'm home, I can relax now. It's like damn I still got to deal with this. -Peter, Opportunity Village resident.

Residents voiced concerns that larger units would support habits of hording and uncleanliness. From this perspective, most residents preferred the tiny-homes to the possibility of larger units. By having smaller houses without kitchens, begrudgingly, neighbors were willing to keep the main facilities picked up – sort of. In this way, the tiny home becomes a vehicle for resocialization to discourage hording and make it easier for residents to clean up after themselves.

> To live here you have to detach yourself from stuff because if you are about to go into a small space you can't bring a whole bunch of stuff [with you]. -Anna, Community First resident

Another theme that was strong throughout the interviews was the sense of belonging stemming from the village model. When asked, "what makes this community unique" one villager responded:

> Personally, I think it's more of a connection. Because, on the streets, there are a lot of people – so many homeless people don't want help. You know, so many people want to stick in their ways… and they just want to be able to pass out where they want and they don't really care. But when you come and you actually have to apply to a community like this… like, a mission you can just walk in and stay the night. Here, you apply, you go thru an interview, and there are rules. So, the people that come here really want to do something. Whether its to have an established place to stay or /and to get on their feet. And, so, I think it does kind of bring us more together. We don't argue like people would on the street... And, we talk so that we can get things accomplished more… Yeah, people take pride in it and we talk a lot about cleaning the bathrooms and cleaning the kitchen and I was just talking yesterday to some people about doing a gardening committee. -Charlotte, Opportunity Village resident

Community cohesion involves interdependence and shared loyalties between members of a community. Holdsworth and Hartman found that "a sense of belonging has a reciprocal relationship to engagement: engagement helps to foster a sense of belonging, whilst belonging motivates engagement behaviors" (2009, 12). Many residents used the metaphor that their village was a large (and sometimes dysfunctional) family because while residents bicker and argue they also unconditionally support each other in crucial moments. One resident of Dignity Village, Doug, described the unofficial tradition of answering the community phone as if the village were your house and not disclosing any information about residents. According to Doug, if an employer finds out that you are living in the village it is usually grounds for termination, thus whoever answers the phone pretends to be family. He went on to add that "if someone needs help, they get it here" giving examples of residents supporting each other through rides to the hospital and meals when crucial. Further, when asked about the factors that led to a sense of belonging all residents referenced the community spaces and interactions in those spaces with their neighbors. They catch up on good deals at the smoking tent, they find out about a residents social security status while waiting for the bathroom, they argue about the upcoming election during the weekly meetings and they gossip about the latest 'guest' at the guard shack. The urban plan of the village contains nodes (such as the clusters) and dominant public spaces (such as the yurt at Opportunity Village) that both encourage interactions. Further, the limited amenities within the tiny houses motivate residents to utilize these public spaces. The balance of public-private space works in tandem to offer opportunities for community interaction while respecting their need for privacy and seclusion as desired. Interactions alone do not create belonging; interactions between people that are motivated, with similar life-opportunities and socially invested *do* manifest a familial sentiment. This is another way in which the village model re-socializes residents to positively view social relations through belonging and participation.

CONCLUSION

Tiny-house villages are places with high levels of social control and require, to varying degrees, that residents to change their former values, beliefs, and behavior to match the village values. Each village in this study promotes a different set of values reflected in their ideology.[5] Dignity Village promotes security, resilience, and self-sufficiency. Opportunity Village promotes self-governance, village cohesion, and stability. Community First promotes self-esteem, work-ethic, and community empowerment. Yet, they all use similar means to indoctrinate residents. Strict treatment starts with the exclusivity of the communities. Each potential resident must apply, be screened (mostly through background checks), and be interviewed before being added to the wait list. All communities have wait lists. This process is significant because it describes the exclusivity and privilege of participating in the community. Further, the process is an implied warning that the supply for new residents is high. During interviews, some residents expressed anxiety knowing they could be so easily replaced and this has manifested as a reluctance to socially engage in the community. Exclusivity alone motivates new residents to follow rules and attempt behaviors and habits contrary to their former identity.

All villages use a governance system of rules to prescribe appropriate village behavior. After reviewing the bi-laws for each community, I found the rules for all communities to be relatively standard to social organizations. However, the idea of compliance was contrary to many resident's personal values and they voiced frustration with *having* to comply. Further, many residents felt that their peers used the rules to threaten and criticize; the rules became a source of soft power with an implied threat of tattling. Whether explicit or implied, rules are part of every society. What is interesting with this population is the aversion to explicit rules as an ideological principle. Almost every resident voiced some degree of discomfort with what was perceived to be an acquiescence of the transient lifestyle by complying with rules. The second piece to control is surveillance and privacy. Dignity Village uses peer surveillance in which issues are raised to an elected board of residents for consideration. Opportunity Village uses peer surveillance and staff intervention

to raise issues to a composite board (elected residents and non-resident staff) for consideration. Community First uses peer and volunteer surveillance (middle class residents that volunteer to uphold community values) as well as numerous security cameras to raise issues to the staff for consideration. As most tiny-houses are single rooms tightly spaced next to one another, privacy was limited in all communities. Most residents expressed frustration due to a lack of privacy (both visual and auditory). I want to specify the type of privacy described by residents in the interviews: privacy from people that knew you, that could hold you accountable, that were aware of your habits. This is distinct from privacy from all people. Most people living with chronic housing insecurity are subjected to very public lives (camping in public parks, sleeping in dormitories, daily life on busy streets) and come to define privacy as an intimacy with personal habits and attribution. Thus, discomfort was not with being in the social situations but being in social situations in which people knew your habits and could attribute your actions to negative consequences. Yet, reflecting on the ideologies of each community these types of control are part of the resocialization processes used to make residents comfortable with rules and improve community cohesion while navigating away from their former "I'm on my own/no one cares" identity. Staff describe this system as the social reintegration process.

Certainly there is much to be learned from the tiny-house village model as a response to housing insecurity. However, the common themes of stability, cleanliness, belonging, leadership, and community politics begin to unravel the complex social dynamics at work. These themes have a mutual current of self-empowerment that unites villagers, increasing community cohesion and social capital. Each village resocializes residents, echoing Goffman's total institution, but in different ways that reflect their development models. Community First Village, a traditional development model promotes self-esteem, work ethic, and community empowerment through top-down leadership and integration with middle and upper classes. Opportunity Village, a hybrid development model promotes self-governance, village cohesion, and stability through mentorship and integration of community resources. Dignity Village, a grassroots development model, promotes security, resilience, and self-sufficiency through an organic process of internal leadership. All residents expressed pride in the village model and their communities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the time and attention of the village residents that voluntarily participated in this study. Additionally, this would not have been possible without the support of village staff: Alan Graham, Tricia Graham, and Brigette Moore at Community First in Austin, Texas; Katie Mays at Dignity Village in Portland Oregon; and, Dan Bryant and Andrew Heben at Opportunity Village in Eugene, Oregon.

REFERENCES

Barkan, S. 2011. *Sociology: Understanding and Changing the Social World*. Boston: Flat World Knowldege, LLC.

Bryant, A. and Charmaz, K, eds. 2007. *The SAGE Handbook of Grounded Theory*. London: Sage Publicaions.

Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage Publication.

Gladwell, M. 2006. "Million-Dollar Murray: Why Problems like Homelessness May be Easier to Solve than to Manage," *The New Yorker*. FEB 13 2006.

Goffman, E. 1961. *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and other Inmates*. Garden City: Anchor Books.

Henry, M. et al. 2017. *The 2017 Annual Homeless Assessment Report (AHAR) to Congress*. Washington: The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Holdsworth, L. and Hartman, Y. 2009. "Indicators of Community Cohesion in an Australian Country Town." *Commonwealth Journal of Local Governance*, Vol 2, pp. 1-22.

Metraux, S. et al. 2001. Assessing Homeless Population Size Through the Use of Emergency and Transitional Shelter Services in 1998: Results from the Analysis of Administrative Data from Nine US Jurisdictions, 116 Pub. Health Rep. 334.

Putnam, R. 2000. *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community.* New York: Simon & Schuster.

Stanley, D. 2017. *Don't Count on It: How the HUD Point-in-Time Count Underestimates the Homelessness Crisis in America*. Washington: National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty.

Visweswaran, K. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Weiss, Robert. 1994. *Learning From Strangers: The Art and Method of Qualitative Interview Studies*. New York: The Free Press.

ENDNOTES

[1] PIC counts mobilize volunteers to count the number of homeless people seen in public, yet most municipalities criminalize the activities of homelessness encouraging homeless people to hide from authorities.

[2] See Karl Marx, reproduction; Pierre Bourdieu, four types of capital for social reproduction in society.

[3] Cultural privatization describes the social restrictions placed on public spaces – hours of use, occupancy limitations, rules and regulations – that typically interpret them as middle class spaces.

[4] All names have been changed for the protection of the residents in accordance with the University of Oregon Institutional Review Board.

[5] "Village values" refer to values promoted by each village through signage, by-laws, and/or cultural significance. However, they may have been established through democratic means, taken from a parent organization, or included for another reason altogether.