# Slumming in Utopia:
# Protest Construction and the Iconography of Urban America

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LANCE HOSEY

Charlottesville, VA

In the summer of 1932, 25,000 World War I veterans and their families marched into Washington, D.C., to petition the government for relief from the Depression. They called themselves the "Bonus Army" and demanded the early release of payments promised to veterans. Throughout the city, they built crude shelters out of scrap material and camped for eight weeks. The shacks had a conspicuous presence in the city, and the Hoover administration called them a humiliation. The president vowed to end "defiance of civil authority" and sent in the military, which forcibly removed the squatters and set fire to the camps. [FIGURE 1] Four people died in the process. MacArthur, who led the troops, called the veterans "insurrectionists" who had "severely threatened" the institutions of government.
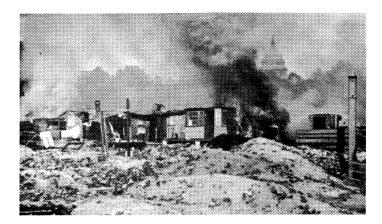


*Fig. 1: Bonus Army Camp. Washington, D.C.. 1932.*

John Henry Bartlett, a former state governor, witnessed the event and described it as "the most powerful government in the world shooting its starving veterans out of worthless huts." Unarmed, the Bonus Army presented no physical threat, for they merely sat and waited. Their real effect was psychological; they were an embarrassment to the city and to the administration. Bartlett attributed the incident to a conflict of aesthetics. The visible contrast of poverty and wealth which the shelters created in Washington symbolized a distressing national problem, namely the widespread poverty exacerbated by Hoover's policies. The banishment of the veterans was not about public safety but about politics. In the nation's

pristine capital, a city on the verge of a massive building campaign, the disorderly camps were a blunt reminder of the administration's failures.

The Bonus Army account raises issues related to American urbanism, specifically the problem of representation. Architecture illustrates values; how cities are shaped and maintained inevitably reflects the beliefs of their makers. Urban form provides a symbolic narrative that serves the governing ideology by promoting a desired image of soceity. Yet, traditionally this image is confined to the showpiece spaces of official America, and it disclaims the actual socioeconomic conditions of the community as a whole in favor of an idealized representation. American cities are segmented demographically as the result of a fundamental class conflict, in which democracy's claims of equal opportunity battle with capitalism's unequal financial distribution. Cities reveal this conflict visually through the split between images of wealth and power in civic space and images of poverty and neglect in ghettos and slums. These images constitute an urban iconography which has been exploited dramatically both by official America and by protest groups, who usurp public space to broadcast a polemical message.

This article examines two projects that used construction as a means of protest. One was in New Haven, Connecticut, and the other in Washington, D.C., Each of these projects brought together images of the extremes of urban conditions in order to dramatize their differences and underscore a problem which contributes to those differences. They were built not by professional architects but by activists who co-opted architecture as a tool for political demonstration. While the constructions were intended to protest specific social issues, they may also be viewed more generally as indictments of conventional urbanism and architectural representation. They challenge the symbolic imagery of official space.

## IDEALS

Idealism is a fundamental aspect of American culture. As one historian has put it, "The vision of America as a place of rebirth, a New Eden freed from the historic sins of the Old World, still colors the self-image of the American people." Civic architecture and urbanism reflects America's aspirations as if they were a single set

of universally shared values. One example of this reductivism is the prevalent influence of utopian city plans, which suggest social unity through a simple, often symmetrical shape with a dominant center. The plan of New Haven, Connecticut, illustrates this. In the original plan of 1641, a simple square is subdivided into nine, with the central square reserved as an open green space. [FIGURE 2] Encircling the central green are the built representatives of all the institutions which make up society. Along the southern side of the green are mercantile buildings, and to the east is the city government. The north edge was at first exclusively residential, lined with white clapboard Colonial houses. To the west is Yale University. The churches are on the green, which is the place of congregation, at once the physical and social center of the community. This layout relates less to pragmatic organization than it does to the desire for symbolic order and unity: the individual components of society and the city were balanced around the common space.
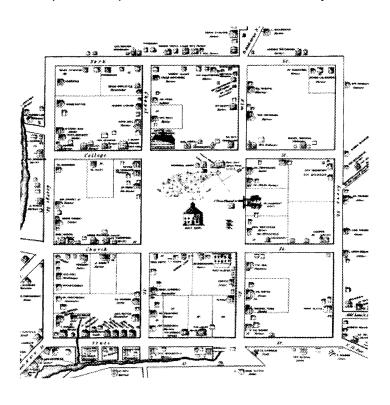


*Fig. 2: 1641 Plan of New Haven, CT.*

Utopia's image of unity is a fiction, and the word itself reflects this. Thomas More intended the term as a pun, a combination of words meaning "good place" and "no place." Perfection exists nowhere. The pure outline of the New Haven plan eventually clashed with the community's changing demographics. As the community became more ethnically diverse, it was divided into radically different economic spheres, and the city became torn by material and racial differences. Yale's campus plan began to reflect this division. Following riots during the 1850's, the university's open plan began to turn inward. What had been an airy yard with barn-like dormitories became a series of private cloisters behind stone ramparts. Yale began to emulate the monastic organization of Oxford and Cambridge, and despite the original city plan's image of unity,

the university presents itself as a refuge, an ostensibly sacred place removed from the common space around it. As the surrounding community became more fractured, the idealism once expressed by the city at large became confined within the university's walls.

## PROTEST

In the late 1980's, a series of protests at Yale underscored its distance from the community. During that time, the university, like many other institutions, had extensive financial investments in South Africa, which still practiced apartheid. The divestment campaigns waged on university campuses attracted much attention from the media. A popular form of student protest was the construction of shantytowns as a symbolic reminder of living conditions common to blacks in South Africa. In 1986, a group at Yale built a controversial collection of shanties on Beinecke plaza, in front of the main administration building. [FIGURE 3] Assembled from discarded sheets of plywood and fabric, the sheds were said to be inspired by a South African squatter village called "Crossroads," and they reproduced in miniature the environmental consequences of South Africa's discrimination. The word *apartheid* itself is a spatial reference, a combination of *apart* - ("separate") and *-heid* ("hood," condition or state). Understood in contrast to *neighborhood* (roughly "near dwelling"), apartheid is the condition of dwelling apart.
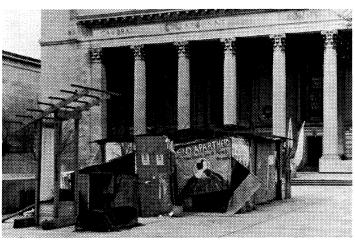


*Fig. 3: Anti-Apartheid Shanties, Yale University, 1988.*

The Yale shantytown imitated this space of segregation both politically and aesthetically, through guerrilla construction and through a visual clash with the surrounding campus. The rough hovels fashioned from garbage could not have stood out more clearly against their ornate background. Disapproving alumni called the constructions "an architectural outrage on a beautiful campus" and "an aesthetic disgrace to one of the most fabulous combinations of buildings anywhere in the world." Eventually they were burned down by an angry alumnus. The controversy emphasized the shantytown's meaning. The contrast of iconography symbolized a contrast of ideology. The shanties' aesthetic dissonance with their

site expressed the moral irony which the protestors saw in the university's investments.

Academia portrays its cultural position as the sanctuary of enlightenment. Former Yale president Benno Schmidt has cited "reason and order" as "the essence of a university or any civilized community." Robert Stern, the current dean of the Yale school of architecture, has written of American college campuses as "ideal, independent villages," "among the greatest dream places of our civilization." The university is perceived as an intellectual utopia, a stronghold of progressive ideas and free expression. Beinecke plaza is a typical reflection of the university's virtuous image. It resonates with historical allusions to progressive ideals: the plaza's classical colonnade suggests the place as a latter-day agora or forum, a site for open communal exchange. In actuality, universities are ideological constructs like any other institution and as such are driven by prejudices. Yale is operated by a private corporation which, through such ventures as South African investments, may choose profit over ethics, financial over social consequences. The shanties attacked the suggested hypocrisy of the university, which through its rhetoric celebrates "civilized community" and through its financial investments supported racism. The constructions revealed a side of the university unseen in its architectural representations.

## URBAN MYTHS

As the Yale case illustrates, protest challenges the myths of official culture. If the city is a narrative affirmation of values, it is in a sense a type of political myth. Henry Tudor describes the political myth as a story told to promote an ideology. A myth is a view of the world, a way of making sense of the current state of things by interpreting the past. Political myths dramatize historical events for political purposes, namely to strengthen the authority of the status quo. The city as political myth capitalizes on interpretative history as a persuasive tool, and this is exemplified by Washington, D.C. The iconography of Washington conveys an image of stability and order through references both to powerful civilizations of the past and to classic utopian principles.

L'Enfant's baroque plan conjures up imperial associations. [FIGURE 4] The overblown scale of Washington's public places and avenues is spatial fanfare. The dome of the Capitol, the obelisk of the Washington Monument, the Palladian White House, and the temple memorials to Jefferson and Lincoln enshrine the institutions and historical figures of American society. This collection of civic idols presents American values in an epic tableau of political ambition. While the use of historical imagery is meant to suggest authority, it also has an idealized, edenic quality, conjuring up what James Howard Kunstler calls "the dream of Arcadia." The neoclassical style proliferated "as though Americans explicitly believed that the new nation would become this fabled land of peace and plenty."
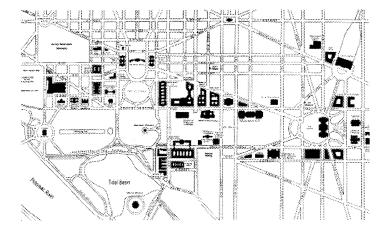


Fig. 4: Plan of Washington. D.C.

The historian Mel Scott describes Washington as the "supreme paradox among cities" because of the conflict between its political system and its aesthetic agenda, which expressed American ideals through the "legacies of autocrats and nobles, from all these seemingly timeless survivals of departed or decayed societies." The apparent irony stems from two simultaneous strains in American architecture and urbanism — idealism and authoritarianism — which represent the ambivalence of a new culture caught between looking ahead and looking backward. The capital of the American democracy simulates the capitals of European absolutism in order to evoke the cultural strength and political power associated with those models.

The historical traditions which inform Washington's overall plan reappear in the design of the National Mall, which in itself is a political allegory. The buildings along the perimeter of the Mall are monuments to government (the Capitol, the White House, etc.), the arts and sciences (the museums and libraries), and great leaders and momentous events (the memorials). In the middle is the long lawn, which suggests both the breadth of America's natural resource and the harmony of nature and culture. The philosopher Charles Griswold writes, "On the Mall...matter is put to rhetorical use....[T]he Mall says a great deal, in what it portrays and in what it omits to portray, about how Americans wish to think of themselves....[T]he Mall is a sort of political mandala expressing our communal aspirations toward wholeness."

In other words, the Mall is political myth, glamorizing past events to strengthen current authority. Place becomes an apology for the order of things. Yet, in reality, the overwhelming scale of the Mall, rather than reinforcing a connection between the individual and society, is simply alienating. Charles Dickens found the capital to be a psychologically empty space, a city of "public buildings that need only a public to be complete." The condition of these civic places suggests that the symbolism outweighs any need for actual inhabitation, as if society's population were irrelevant to society's dreams.

## PROTEST

As the nation's capital, its preeminent civic place and the spatial center of the American political myth, Washington has been the site of innumerable protests and demonstrations. One project in particular, built temporarily on the Mall in 1968, was an especially clear challenge to Washington's urban iconography. In the spring of that year, the Poor People's Campaign was organized to denounce the diversion of funding for poverty-relief programs to the Vietnam War. Martin Luther King, who was assassinated that April, had intended to shift the focus of activism from civil rights to economic issues, specifically the distribution of wealth and power in America. At mid-century, the living conditions of minorities in urban areas were bleak. Poverty, racial discrimination, and the policies of the Federal Housing Administration confined the majority of blacks to slum areas.

In 1960, nearly half of all black families lived below the poverty line, and the employment rate for blacks was half that of whites. At that time, however, the national economy was exceptionally good. Cut off from that wealth, the ghettos were marginalized space, referred to as the "Other America." The critic Camilo José Vergara recently wrote, "Ghettos, as intrinsic to the identity of the United States as New England villages, vast national parks, and leafy suburbs, nevertheless remain unique in their social and physical isolations from the nation's mainstream." Though integral to the American urban condition, the image of the ghetto could not be more removed from the idealized symbolic language of civic architecture and urbanism.

As a means of highlighting this disparity, the central initiative of the Poor People's Campaign was the construction of a large shantytown in Washington. The encampment was built directly on the Mall, between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument. "Resurrection City," as it was called, consisted of many dozens of A-frame and lean-to shacks which for six weeks housed a multi-ethnic population of hundreds. [FIGURE 5] The residents considered this an alternative community, a makeshift city. They bivouacked from mid-May until late June, conducting rallies and demonstrations outside government buildings. President Johnson was appalled. At the end of June, two thousand police officers in riot gear, armed with shotguns and tear gas, surrounded the camp and emptied it out, arresting 100 protestors in the process.

Resurrection City presented a graphic illustration of the squalor that pervaded American cities. It temporarily relocated slum conditions from the wings of urban America to its center stage. It transformed the Mall into a ghetto itself. In *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, Jane Jacobs discusses the concept of "unslumming," the process of revitalizing deteriorated neighborhoods. Resurrection City reversed that process as a "slumming" of the Mall.

The overty that defined urban space across the country became an exhibition in this space. As Resurrection City attracted curious spectators, it became a tourist destination. Sightseers were said to be "slumming on the Mall." In this second sense of the word, "slumming" means to visit an impoverished area for amusement."

This idea characterizes protest construction as display: viewers become voyeurs. In the context of the Mall, the symbolic center of American idealism, the image of destitution and decay which the shanties present is utterly foreign. What is a common condition elsewhere, even a mile away in Washington itself, becomes a novelty here.



*Fig. 5: "Resurrection City," Washington, D.C., 1968.*

For most onlookers, tourists, those conditions were in fact unfamiliar. In 1968, the same year Resurrection City was built, a study by the Kerner Commission described a divided nation: "What white Americans have never fully understood...is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions, maintain it, and white society condones it." The report's famous summation was, "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white — separate and unequal." In Resurrection City, the urban manifestations of these two societies came together. Iconographically, Washington continues the legacy of the 1892 Chicago Exposition as a permanent "White City." It is the embodiment of the institutions which the Kerner commission blamed for the ghetto. If Washington is the exemplary City Beautiful, the ghetto is an invisible city, neglected by mainstream society. The shantytown on the Mall made the invisible briefly visible. The failures of urban America momentarily coexisted in one space with the monuments of national pride.

## THE STRUCTURE OF PROTEST

The first aim of protest is to draw attention, which it does through provocative action. The shantytowns of Resurrection City, Yale, and the Bonus March are provocative chiefly because of their discordant relation to their context: physical opposition signals political opposition. They command attention through contrast to their surroundings, through disparities of scale, form, function, material, craftsmanship, monetary value, and construction methods. They exploit the iconography of cities by superimposing images of poverty and wealth, highlighting the class-defined divisions of urban space.

This effect is analogous to a series of photographic montages produced by the artist Martha Rosler in the late 1960's, in which *House Beautiful* illustrations of modern domesticity are combined with scenes of the Vietnam War. [FIGURE 6] The coexistence of the two seemingly irreconcilable environments creates an eerie imbalance. Like the photographs, the protest constructions are spatial montage, a combination of two incongruous scenes. Architecturally, what occurs is a kind of typological dislocation, and the physical representative of an otherwise absent social condition appears: the ghetto signifies poverty, the shantytown racism. Transplanted from their normal context, these images become purely symbolic. The city's celebration of material wealth is foiled by unavoidable reminders of society's negligence. This tactic centralizes a marginal place, narrowing the psychological distance by apparently eliminating the physical or visible distance.

In this sense, demonstration sites become what Michel Foucault called "heterotopias." Traditional civic spaces, represented in these cases by the institutions of government and the university, are utopian, as Foucault described: "They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces." Protest constructions convert these places into "counter-sites" or "heterotopias," which are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible." Protest foils society's perfect image of itself by exposing it to its actual, imperfect conditions. With the shanties, Foucault's "counter-site" is not simply a figurative condition but a physical construct. In them, political divisions become tangible, and material opposites vie for a single space.

## PARADIGMS

The protest constructions discussed here present a particular challenge to architectural authority in that they turn architectural language against itself. If the urban environment is the materialization of official value, then to *build* protest is to oppose that representation on its own terms, namely through the medium of construction. Yet, while adopting the forms of architecture, the shanties defy its conventional functions. Under the guise of building, protest questions the definitions of architecture by frustrating orthodox standards of critical evaluation. Comparing the protest constructions to certain classic, even canonical, ideas from architectural theory illustrates this resistance. The three paradigms below are attempts to classify or define architecture according to aesthetics, symbolic program and clarity of construction, respectively.

## CATHEDRALS AND SHEDS

Architecture is customarily defined by an aesthetic standard. Nicholas Pevsner begins his *Outline of European Architecture* with the statement, "A bicycle shed is a building; Lincoln Cathedral is a piece of architecture. Nearly everything that encloses space on a scale sufficient for a human being to move in is a building; the term

architecture applies only to buildings designed with a view to aesthetic appeal." The distinction between buildings and architecture creates a problem of categorization. By Pevsner's definition, the shanties are clearly not architecture. While they incidentally may or may not offer "aesthetic appeal," they are not "designed" with this purpose, but this is part of their effectiveness. The aim of protest constructions is not aesthetics but meaning, and hence they challenge architecture's traditional emphasis on form. Formally, the shanties are no more than Pevsner's bicycle shed, but symbolically they are memorable. They co-opt architectural form in order to achieve something quite non-architectural, namely a sense of political immediacy.

The economic, bureaucratic and sociopolitical practices which allow conventional, permanent buildings to come into being, such as land acquisition, programmatic use, code compliance and communal review, virtually eliminate the likelihood of broadcasting an overt political message which counters official ideology. Temporary and especially unauthorized installations may circumvent these institutional processes as well as the complexity of functions which conventional buildings serve. Further, by reducing architecture to rudimentary construction yet still investing it with social relevance, the shanties effect an unusually concise language. While language in architecture often consists of complex, codified representations, the shacks break down this grammar in order to assert a clear message. In the debate over the Yale shanties, the constructions often were characterized as "free speech" (and thereby legally protected). The idea of construction as "speech" suggests a direct, unmediated communication — building as declaration.

## DUCKS AND SHEDS

In their famous study of urban iconography, *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour divide buildings into two types of symbolic imagery: the so-called "duck" and the "decorated shed." In a "duck," named for a roadside drive-in shaped like a duck, space, structure and program conform to an overall symbolic shape, a "building-becoming-sculpture." In a "decorated shed," space and structure serve the program, and ornament is applied separately. The distinction between the two is in the relationship between form and symbol. "The duck is the special building that *is* a symbol; the decorated shed is the conventional shelter that *applies* symbols." The protest shanty eludes these classifications, or rather it combines them: it is a conventional shelter that *is* a symbol. It is "decorated shed" without the decoration, a *symbolic* shed, meaningful just by virtue of its being a shed.

The shack as a form is not necessarily symbolic in a political sense; its meaning derives from context rather than form. The Yale shanties may mimic the appearance of "Crossroads," the South African shantytown after which they were patterned, but their intent is very different. The original shanties, while dramatic in their tragic conditions, are used first as shelter, not as a symbolic statement. The significance of the shanty as a building type depends on its circumstance. Inserted in the environment of the university, it con-

jures up its original setting in a unexpected place. Both the protest constructions and their official surroundings manipulate the emotional associations of architecture in order to persuade viewers. Through viewers' past experience with the iconography of buildings, the image of the shanty connotes poverty and deprivation, just as the images of historicized monuments suggest prosperity and power.

## PRIMITIVE HUTS

The image of the shanty as an elementary shelter recalls the historical theory of the primitive hut, which speculates on the nature of the first human construction. For Laugier the simple shed built of four posts and a gable represented all that was essential in architecture, everything else having developed from these components. "The little hut...is the type on which all the magnificences of architecture are elaborated." For him the hut represented "true perfection," the standard against which all buildings should be gauged. The primitive hut became a model for formal simplicity, structural logic and economy of means.

The protest shanties, as actual huts, confront the canonical hut with its literal image. The real huts make the metaphoric hut appear an absurd model for monumental buildings, and the paradigm seems an affectation. Hence, the mythic representation of architecture's origins is appropriated in the criticism of architecture's institutional image. The candor of the shanty undercuts the esoteric languages of official architecture.

Although Laugier considered the archaic hut only for its architectural lessons, many theorists examined it for its social implications, as an allegory of cultural progress. The mythic first construction glamorizes mankind's first attempt to shape the environment and assert human will onto the land. The shanties, while echoing the primitive hut as simple shelter, contrast its meaning. They are constituted of sheets of plywood leaned together in a precarious or cursory way. Their makeshift assembly from crude material is the opposite of the philosophical hut's structural clarity. The shanties are more like a house of cards than like Laugier's four-post temple, and this fragile appearance contributes to their association with poverty or neglect. The protest shanties symbolize not determination but deprivation, presenting the hut not as a tribute to primitive ingenuity but as an attack on primitive living conditions in a technologically advanced society.

If the paradigm of the hut represents man's confident occupation of the land, the shanties' tenuous construction suggests an ambivalence toward their space; they have an uncertain, tentative presence which bespeaks a lack of belonging in that setting. While the archetypal primitive hut harmonizes with nature, the shanties are invaders. The source of their materials further implies an antago-

nistic role. A recurrent practice with protest constructions is the use of second-hand material, scraps from factories, construction sites, and demolished buildings. In both the Bonus Army shacks and the Yale shanties, discarded doors became walls and ceilings. The theoretical hut draws natural material from the land around it, but the protest shanties are assembled parasitically from pieces of the surrounding city. This use is reminiscent of what John Fitchen calls "architectural cannibalism," the ancient habit of removing materials from older buildings for use in new construction. Usually this was perpetrated by one civilization on an extinct one: for instance, the use of ancient Roman bricks in medieval cathedrals, or the Arabs' use of limestone from the pyramids in their citadel in Cairo. In this historical context, the scavenging of material for protest constructions implies cultural obsolescence, as if society's present incarnation were seen to be ineffectual. Demonstration built from debris suggests the reformation of society from its ruins. The city's waste is recycled in its critique.

As a social metaphor, the primitive hut is ambiguous. For the philosopher Rousseau, the hut was the prehistoric shelter of the family, and therefore it housed the origins of society as the first locus of human interaction. In this argument, the primitive hut implies the most fundamental social bond. Seen in this light, the protest shanties return the scale of the individual to monumental civic space in the image of the proto-house, the archetypal communal dwelling. As contemporary primitive huts, they illustrate a most basic human need, shelter, and therefore they remind us of the most basic task of society, to provide for the needs of its constituents. On the other hand, Rousseau also saw the building of huts as the origin of property and entitlement, from which disputes and warfare arise. So, with the primitive hut comes the best and worst of society: fraternity and the struggle for domination. The protest constructions suggest this friction, questioning the inequities of land division and society's inability to reconcile ideological and material differences. As ersatz cities, the shantytowns do not glorify the origins of community, they protest the breakdown of community, the failure to provide a humane environment.

## CONCLUSION

The story of the primitive hut is a nostalgic one, a longing for some mythic eden. As a model for building, it represents the desire to imbue the contemporary environment with the character of that lost paradise. In this image, public space is portrayed as idyllic, frozen in time. It memorializes this prehistoric model or any number of historic images through architectural references, always valorizing the past.

While official space is timeless, protest construction is timely. Its ephemerality allows it to address contemporary social and political

problems and present itself with an urgency which most architecture does not. At the same time, by appropriating architectural imagery, the demonstrators give their message a form which rivals the symbolic language of civic institutions. Protest briefly adopts the timeless image of architecture in order to suggest the gravity of its message. Protest constructions are not monuments and cannot compete with the material longevity of the surroundings they challenge. Like all political demonstration, they are simply a critical tool, but one which may instigate social if not physical change. They are meant to temper the unchecked idealism of official space by dramatizing the conflict between ambition and obligation, between society's possibilities and its basic responsibilities.