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Introduction

Inhabiting the Uninhabitable at Oakland's Wood Street Encampment

Ben Jameson-Ellsmore and Taylor Van Doorne

From 2013 to 2023, the unhoused residents of West Oakland's Wood Street encampment constructed a sprawling informal neighborhood from the city's vast material and spatial excess. They built and furnished myriad shanties, tiny homes, and shacks from items cast off by Oakland's middle and upper classes and by the industries surrounding the city's massive port. It was common to see tarps and banners used as shading materials, fastened to utility poles and chain link fences. Forklift pallets became picket fences demarcating yards. Structures made from plywood and discarded furniture populated the shade beneath freeway overpasses (fig. 1).¹ At its height, this encampment grew to 300 people, as police and city officials repeatedly sent unhoused communities evicted elsewhere to Wood Street.² There, at least, the displaced benefited from improvised social infrastructures, including a flea market, clinic, kitchen, post box, "free store" stocking donated items, and space for

¹ See the labor photojournalist David Bacon's work on the Wood Street encampment and its residents: David Bacon, "The Second Demolition of Wood Street," *Contexts* 23, no. 1 (2024): 36-45.

² Evicted on Wood Street: California's Housing Crisis," *Wall Street Journal Podcasts* (May 26, 2023): <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/evicted-on-wood-street-california-housing-crisis/5083e85f-7ba0-4a1e-bdc7-35baebeaa8c4>.



Figure 1: Artists Building Communities constructed these tiny homes for the Wood Street encampment beneath the I-880. Oakland, California, 2022. Courtesy of Artists Building Communities.

newcomers between the existing homesteads.³ The encampment welcomed those who had nowhere else to go in Oakland's prohibitively expensive residential landscape.

While the Wood Street encampment provided a crucial service by accommodating the Bay Area's evictees, it also subverted the dominant urban order. Without the legal right to the land (and without much choice), Wood Street's unhoused settled

the empty industrial and commercial land around and beneath the snaking overpasses of Interstate 880 (fig. 2). In doing so, they threw the Bay Area housing crisis and Oakland's vast expanses of unused space into stark relief. Repurposing industrial and commercial land owned by Caltrans, the City of Oakland, private developers, and various railways, the encampment served as a loud critique of the private and public institutions that shape Oakland's formal housing landscape. As the encampment's size and visibility grew, it became increasingly damning that on Wood Street it was the unhoused themselves addressing the homelessness crisis.

The Wood Street encampment also drew attention to Oakland's racist planning history. As with many US cities, Oakland's mid-century freeways were designed to connect white suburban wealth to the city. Meanwhile, space was created for these freeways by demolishing ethnic, immigrant, and working class neighborhoods.⁴ West Oakland, where Wood Street is located, is entirely circumscribed by the I-880, I-980, and I-580. When "white men's roads go through Black men's homes," as the saying

³ Gabrielle Canon, "Homeless Oaklanders were tired of the housing crisis. So they built a 'miracle' village," *The Guardian* (May 11, 2021): <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/may/11/oakland-homeless-cob-on-wood-village>;

Clancy Wilmott, "Shelter – Proposal to the City of Oakland," in *Shelter: An Atlas*, ed. Alicia Cowart et al. (Emeryville: Bacchus Press, 2022), 58.

⁴ Mitchell Schwarzer, "Oakland City Center: The Plan to Reposition Downtown within the Bay Region," *Journal of Planning History* 14, no. 2 (2014): 88-111, 89.



Figure 2: Before their incremental eviction in 2022-2023, the Wood Street encampment settled the vast vacant land beneath the I-880 overpasses in West Oakland, California. Photo by Ben Jameson-Ellsmore, 2023.

goes, Oakland’s unhoused—who are disproportionately Black—demonstrate the persistence of these racialized expulsions.⁵ Until their eviction in 2022 and 2023, the Wood Street encampment temporarily reversed this history, with residents settling the Interstate 880. Before their presence drew public attention as the largest encampment in Northern California, they transmuted what was planned as a void of the local into a community.

On July 11, 2022, a fire broke out underneath the Interstate 880 overpass. While no one was killed, the fire destroyed numerous dwellings. Fire afflicts informal settlements, setting residents back to square one by destroying their homes and crucial documents, like IDs, and also by drawing unwanted public scrutiny. Whether they result from arson or the candles and camping stoves of those who live without electricity,

⁵ Deborah Archer, “White Men’s Roads Through Black Men’s Homes’: Advancing Racial Equity Through Highway Construction,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 73, no. 5 (2020): 1259-1330, 1259.

encampment fires are often catastrophic because they occur on land that is difficult for fire departments to reach, with few nearby fire hydrants. The billowing smoke led to the Interstate's closure, noticeably affected regional air quality, and drew public attention to the encampment.⁶ According to Neferti XM Tadiar, fire is an agent of state change, bringing matter of all kinds across material, bodily, and social thresholds. Flammability marks a city's disparities and is often used as proof by municipal actors that certain dwellings and communities must be removed on humanitarian grounds.⁷ It is difficult to say whether it was humanitarian concerns over fire that led to the encampment's eviction, or rather the way that fires illuminated some uncomfortable realities of the city.

All capitalist cityscapes burn. The cyclical accumulation, expenditure, and reaccumulation of capital both define the city and set it ablaze.⁸ According to David Harvey, the city and its infrastructure are immobilized excess capital designed to accommodate intensified cycles of wealth accumulation. However, the durability of buildings and infrastructure can also impede capital accumulation and the demand for liquidity and constant circulation of value.⁹ It is more expensive and time-intensive to alter built infrastructure than it is to reposition unfixed assets and capital like human labor and machinery. Enter obsolescence as an agent of constant state change. Modern buildings, especially postwar, are designed to cross thresholds of planned obsolescence quickly, through what Daniel Abramson calls "rapid supersession and discard."¹⁰ Obsolescence may have nothing to do with a building's inhabitability, age, or its state of decay. Under capitalism, a building is obsolete when it no longer facilitates wealth accumulation.

While the functional capitalist city is conceptually ablaze in Harvey and Abramson's terms, encampments often literally burn quicker and more dangerously than other structures, imbuing their vulnerable neighborhoods with the confrontational power of a *memento mori*. But the plumes of smoke did not only draw public attention to the alarming combustibility of the Wood Street encampment. They also highlighted a space where the immutable order of property, which stabilizes the way the city

⁶ Darwin BondGraham and Natalie Orenstein, "West Oakland fire spews smoke over the East Bay," *The Oaklandside* (July 11, 2022): <https://oaklandside.org/2022/07/11/west-oakland-fire-spews-smoke-over-the-east-bay-wood-street/>.

⁷ Neferti MX Tadiar, "Thresholds," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 39, no 6 (2021): 1111-1128, 1112.

⁸ Daniel Abramson, *Obsolescence: An Architectural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 5.

⁹ David Harvey, *The Urban Experience* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 74.

¹⁰ Daniel Abramson, *Obsolescence: An Architectural History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 6.

consumes itself, breaks down. To parse the paradoxical need under capitalism for perpetual change, Swati Chattopadhyay differentiates between durability and permanence in the built environment. Durability refers to the strength and endurance of materials over time, and permanence refers to the legal structures that sustain the modern capitalist city as fertile ground for capital accumulation. The regime of property rights is permanent because it provides a stable armature amidst constant material changes.¹¹ The legal systems that qualify a lot or parcel remain in place while structures materialize and decay over the decades. In illegally settling lots owned by private and public institutions under the I-880, the Wood Street encampment (like all such informal settlements) temporarily subverted the permanent underlying order that stabilizes urban immolations.

State and municipal institutions are charged with ensuring controlled urban burns. This duty entails eliminating challenges to the immutable regime of property. Before, during, and after the Wood Street encampment's eviction, pink municipal notices appeared on nearby sign poles designating the surrounding site "uninhabitable" and demanding inhabitants vacate before a specified date (fig. 3). That the encampment grounds were "uninhabitable" was an assertion, not a material fact, as the area was indisputably inhabited. The term is often wielded against communities that emerge against all odds from the rubble of the modern city. AbdouMaliq Simone wonders if "the so-called uninhabitable does not necessarily point to a depleted form of urban life but simply to a different form - one that constantly lives



Figure 3: Pink notices declare inhabited sites "uninhabitable" before encampment clearance begins. Photo by Ben Jameson-Ellsmore, 2023.

¹¹ Swati Chattopadhyay, "Hacking the Urban Code: Notes on the Durational Imagination in City-Making," in *Global Urbanism: Knowledge, Power, and the City*, eds. Colin McFarlane and Michele Lancione (London: Routledge, 2021), 236-237.

under specific threats and incompleteness.”¹² Evicting encampments, even with humanitarian motives, can also hinder our understanding of such divergent forms of urban life and how people create physical and social infrastructures in uninhabitable spaces. Wood Street’s residents created an alternative neighborhood in a city where they were otherwise priced out of housing. Encampments like Wood Street demonstrate how marginalized people inhabit or “ride the uninhabitable,” as Simone puts it.¹³ These are *subversion zones*, where communities form on tenuous edges and thresholds become spaces of dwelling.

The Wood Street encampment is only one of many examples of spaces that are auxiliary to the city’s delineated zones and legal regimes. According to Simone, cities are filled with passages that transport us to different times and spaces, and in and out of actual or perceived danger.¹⁴ Walter Benjamin identifies such threshold spaces in his preparatory notes and archives for his *Arcades Project*, acknowledging that urban homogeneity and continuity is an illusion.¹⁵ Within the city, myriad boundaries delineate public space from private, as well as articulating officially recognized districts, each of which has its own character and residents with their own habits. Yet, in between clearly defined zones are a constellation of urban thresholds, some with relatively more structural longevity than others: doors, gateways, streets, subterranean passages, public transit infrastructure, and demolition sites upon which the skeletons of the urban past stand.¹⁶ Lingering too long in any one of these threshold sites—say, in tents under an Oakland overpass, on a subway platform after hours, or behind a wooden barricade erected on a street—is uncomfortable, unstable, or illegal.

According to Georges Bataille’s *Critical Dictionary*, thresholds are also socially precarious. Thresholds are “where invisible but real battles are fought” as they negotiate social hierarchies and differences.¹⁷ For example, he complicates the ostensible utilitarianism of the doormat, writing that the simple act of a host assuring a respected guest that they do not need to wipe their shoes on a doormat on a rainy day suggests the former’s reverence for the latter. The host’s labor to clean the house’s

¹² AbdouMaliq Simone, “The Uninhabitable? In between Collapsed Yet Still Rigid Distinctions,” *Cultural Politics* 12, no. 2 (2016): 136-137.

¹³ Simone, “The Uninhabitable?” 139, 142.

¹⁴ AbdouMaliq Simone, *The Surrounds: Urban Life Within and Beyond Capture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 22.

¹⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Convolute C,” in *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1999), 88.

¹⁶ For Walter Benjamin’s threshold contemplations, see convolutes C2,1, C3,2, C3,3, C3,6, C3a,1, C5a,2. *Ibid.*, 85-93.

¹⁷ Georges Bataille and Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg eds., *Encyclopædia Acephalica, Comprising the Critical Dictionary and Related Texts* (London: Atlas Press, 1995), 83-4.

floor carries less social capital than the guest's labor to clean off their own muddy shoes. Furthermore, "the threshold... is indeed a thing of dread... because there it is necessary to register, forcibly or with levity, the rank one occupies in society."¹⁸ If a mere crossing elicits such discomfort, what are the social implications of communities that develop in such spaces? Occupied thresholds or subversion zones are where alternative ways of living similarly rub against the edge of the modern city and its legal/spatial order. For a decade, the Wood Street encampment was left in place at the whim of the series of landlords who tolerated the ambiguity of this occupied threshold. The eventual official assertion of the Wood Street encampment's uninhabitability, and its subsequent eviction, thus forcibly restored the unambiguous supremacy of property in the capitalist city.

But on the other side of the same coin, encampments serve as reminders that even those who function within permanent regimes of property are vulnerable to the ever-present threats of climate change and capitalist temporality. The precarity of encampment dwellings shatters the illusion of the city's stability as clearly defined by a governmental authority. Likewise, infrastructures of normative inhabitation produce casualties and truly uninhabitable spaces. The vast and extractive industries that support urban growth render much of the surrounding world unlivable. Meanwhile, endless demolition, growth, and speculation make a traditional home unaffordable and force life into threshold spaces.¹⁹ The Bay Area housing market is a calamity in and of itself, its tides rendering all but the wealthiest participants vulnerable to displacement.²⁰

In this volume of *react/review*, authors consider various types of subversion zones, from the architectural to the corporeal, that confront and challenge normative boundaries, epistemes, and authorities. In "Skating the Surrounds: Chemi Rosado Seijo and El Bowl in La Perla, Puerto Rico," Alida Jekabson examines a curious community landmark that serves as a swimming pool, skating bowl, and impromptu art gallery for both locals and outsiders of its impoverished neighborhood. Yet its image has been simultaneously appropriated in global popular media for the privileged gaze of the outsider. El Bowl as a subversion zone shows how an informal community resource can be implicated in a broader network of the colonial gaze, postcolonial statehood, and independence. In his response, Alexander Luckmann engages with the ways the Hajj Terminal by SOM and the Church of Victory by Gottfried Böhm emulate tent designs.

¹⁸ Ibid., 84.

¹⁹ Michele Lancione, *For a Liberatory Politics of Home* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2023), 72; AbdouMalik Simone, "The Uninhabitable? In between Collapsed Yet Still Rigid Distinctions," 139, 141.

²⁰ Connor Dougherty, *Golden Gate: The Housing Crisis and a Reckoning for the American Dream* (New York: Penguin Press, 2020), 214.

He explores how these structures render the temporary permanent and the local global. They embody the tensions held within religious pilgrimages like the *hajj* - the experience of which is fleeting, while the institutions that enable it are made to last.

If an informal site like El Bowl lies at the fraught intersection of local, national, and global politics, is it possible for authorities to embrace and plan for contingency? Can cities ethically make plans for all their inhabitants—local and outsider, human and nonhuman? Vanessa Lee, Karen Verpeet, and Jennifer Symonds, city planners working for the San Francisco Estuary Institute, grapple with this problem through an ecological lens. Their research spotlight article “Insights from Ecology for Health: Design Guide for Fostering Human Health and Biodiversity in Cities” reviews the institute’s recent Ecology for Health salon and design guide. They recommend establishing interconnected networks of parks to simultaneously create urban wildlife corridors and increase human access to public greenspace. Conceptual drawings by Vanessa Lee articulate braided thresholds that separate and connect human and nonhuman life, with neither subverting the other.

Corey Ratch also considers the human/non-human binary in his article “Pineal/Perineal: The Anthropological Divide at Monkey Hill.” Despite clear spatial divisions between monkey enclosure and human spectators, relational encounters between both groups of primates challenged 1920s visitors’ anthropocentrism. Thus, in Ratch’s study, relationality itself is also a subversion zone through which the constitution of human—and, in particular, white British imperialist—supremacy is contested. In his response, Ben Jameson-Ellsmore contemplates the ways that Lake Merritt in Oakland, California is defined by perpetual threshold crossings. Here, anthropomorphic divides are breached by the numerous waterfowl that overflow their sanctuary spaces into the paths of joggers and by the odorous cycles of aquatic algae and bacteria that offend bourgeois sensibilities. The Lake is also defined by human disagreement about proper use. The unhoused use its City Beautiful-style pergola as a bedroom; its shores are used as an automotive cruising ground, backing up traffic for miles; and the beats of lakeside Afro-diasporic drum circles permeate the walls of even the loftiest nearby penthouses.²¹

Just as relationality can be a subversion zone, so too can the non-normative body. In “Inefficient, Unsustainable, and Fragmentary: The Rauschenberg Combines as Disabled Bodies,” Cole Graham argues that disability has been socially constructed as a deviant category, suspended in the threshold between public and private. Applying a method the author has termed *sitpoint theory* to Rauschenberg’s Combines, Graham proposes that these objects reframe the viewing experience by repositioning canvases

²¹ Alex Werth, “Before BBQ Becky: Racial Reverberations at Oakland’s Lake Merritt,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 33, no. 4 (2021): 78-103, 85.

on the ground, within a different visual plane more accessible to those who cannot stand in a gallery, museum, or other public spaces. The Combines subvert thresholds of acceptable presence not unlike the involuntary collapsing of bodily thresholds that can define certain disabilities and remind onlookers of their own fragility and mortality. Sophia Gimenez employs Graham's sitpoint theory in her response to consider how artists with aphantasia challenge the paradigm of the "inner eye" and other internalized methods of artistic production that are privileged in Western art theory.

In considering how objects themselves may be subversion zones between autonomous and socially-engaged art, Elizabeth Anderson-Cleary argues that the Spanish Civil War-era oeuvre of the photographer and photomontagist Kati Horna has the characteristics of both avant-garde art and anarchist propaganda. Yet, neither function subsumes the other. Horna's empathetic depictions of everyday people constitute a connective threshold between autonomy and social engagement, despite their political deployment by anarchist organizations. Pivoting back to the issue of subversive city spaces, Megan Sheard responds to Anderson-Cleary with a reflection on the collective agency of *milicianas* and international political actors like Eileen O'Shaughnessy in the Spanish Civil War, their traces and absences in present-day Barcelona, and the female academic-tourist's embodied experiences at such sites in light of this history.

Finally, Leander Gussman's review of the temporary installation *Chará* in Vienna's luxurious Graben district by artist Kris Lemsalu considers how public art can create a disruptive threshold in city space. The massive candy pink sculpture invites comparison with exposed gums with teeth or a *vagina dentata*, while its form creates a metaphorical portal through which the historical street is framed. Thus, Gussman identifies in Lemsalu's work how the bold expression of female sexuality subverts and challenges the site context.

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