



## ASHES TO ASHES DUST TO DUST: DESTRUCTION & RESISTANCE IN NW PORTLAND

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On May 23rd 1989, in NorthWest Portland, Oregon, four houses were demolished. "Metropolitan Homes" and its owner Phil Morford, ignored previous promises and one day before a Historic Landmarks Commission hearing, ripped through a neighborhood.

The war on history, memory and life goes on ceaselessly in Bolivian shantytowns, the devastated Kurdish countryside, the inner cities of Turtle Island, and the Amazonian rain forests. Many people manage to ignore the death march of the beast with a thousand heads until its poisonous tentacles reach into the deceptive calm of our lives. This is a record of this war. It is also a reflection on the resistance to Leviathan and Mamon, and on the building of a community.

No attempt has been made to be "objective" and names have been kept, as I wish to indict the guilty. These words are written with rage, sorrow and amazement. They are brought forth with a fervent desire for a world without "developers," priests, landlords and sufferers from gout. They are written with a yearning for a world where a culture of death is replaced with one of life and love.

On a rainy January afternoon, thirty souls brave the elements and visit Lake Oswego, paying respect at Morford's home. Like a riverboat journey through Disneyland, we charted the rapids. In Disney's synthetic African environment the plastic natives are brandishing spears, aiming at the tourists and the march of Western civilization. And out here in Rich Folk Land a neighbor darts out of her castle just as we arrive. "Go home," she yells. "You don't belong here." Two cops appear, but we continue to march and sing. Round and round the block. It took seven rounds to topple the walls of Jericho. We marched at least twenty times. The walls of greed did not crumble. Yet.

Today the bulldozer is roaring. Clawing. Crunching. Devouring. Murdering.

A Zen student was asked what is the sound of one hand clapping, and meditated over the enigma for four months. What is the sound of one bulldozer chewing?

Sitting by the dock of the bay, and sitting in front of a bulldozer. On May 23, people took time for some sitting meditation. Trying to block "progress," they were overwhelmed by the force of state sanctioned power.

There were other acts of defiance. Squatting in the condemned houses. Climbing to the top of the buildings, in Portland's equivalent of Chagall's heaven-bound fiddlers. Spraypainting "Bad Karma" and other writings on row-houses.

"Vandalizing" destruction equipment. Witnessing and remembering our fight. But more radical actions are needed.

"Wherever you find injustice, the proper form of politeness is attack," wrote T-Bone Slim (and Malcom X) many years ago. With or without "Miss Manners," may this form of politeness grow until our neighborhoods are safe from the muggers masquerading as business people and the thieves posing as developers.

People protesting. Bulldozers gnashing. Reporters scribbling. But mostly I notice the living creatures whose voices we are too deaf to hear.

As the yellow mechanical monster moves in its path of terror, crouching low on the ground, I follow the path of a lizard and three spiders, fleeing the march of corporate progress. This too was their home — the cracks and crannies, the garden trails, the rocks.

But their voices were not counselled, their hearts ignored. Mercury death in the Pacific, oil spills in Alaska, row-house death in Portland.

Community is a funny concept. One of those words that have been expropriated, stripped of their original meaning and used to serve the masters of the Big Lie — and the countless small lies. Even Right to (other people's) Lifers have taken time off from invading wombs and found "community" useful in glorifying a golden age of antiseptic suburban living where father knows best and where people of color are unseen and unheard. But real human communities have always existed.

Among the Pygmy, every child refers to every adult as "father" or "mother." What an incredible concept, and what a miraculous way of being! For truly, we are all part of the same family, and our blood has its shared origin and future.

Most days of my life this sense of community is dispersed. Shared meals with friends, a ritualized space at a collective bookstore, common actions in defense of the planet — but mostly moments. Too few moments.

On May 23 and the days that followed I felt the emergence of a community spirit that was vibrant and alive. Fears and inhibitions seemed to have melted. Patterns of domination and submission have been chipped at.

During our daily lives helplessness and resignation are felt, and they are carried and duplicated within our own souls. They help keep us alienated from ourselves and from each other. But at rare moments a process of liberation begins. At the houses people began

to share the experiences of pain, but also of strength. "Naming the power" dynamics brought invisible realities to the surface. And after facing off cops and bulldozers a sense of our shared power was realized, and it became contagious. New perceptions arose, and new trust in ourselves and each other developed. A generosity of spirit was reborn as people came forth with food, ideas and love. The feeling that everyone was important was reflected in our consensus based meetings and in tasks completed without "leaders." We were all leaders. And smiles and laughter replaced the common grimaces — the quiet desperation that has been sold to us as the normal state of living gave way to a festive joyous feeling.

After awhile, however, anxiety arose in some, as it is difficult to change the deeply ingrained notions of obeying external powers. Conflicting agendas and beliefs emerged, and some strife. The challenge now is to create contexts where we can support each other and help each other to change. As Margo Adair has written, "By reclaiming our heritage and integrity, and by placing principles at the center of our relationships, we can build new ties and new ways of being together that heal us and re-establish communities that are once again sustained by the sanctity of life."

At the old houses a revolution did not happen, and in the city the relations of money, control and fear have been maintained. But for a short time we have "touched our strength" and liked what we felt.

On one of his travels the Little Prince meets a businessman who was counting the stars and proclaiming them his property. "I own the stars because nobody else but me thought of owning them. I administer them. I count and recount them."

There are people who see stars and marvel. There are others who see stars and wish to turn them into shopping malls. These masters

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