

Taking space to dream

The American spirit is alive and well on the streets of Portland

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On the corner of Third and Main Street, a village is being constructed. The organizers and allies of Occupy Portland have begun laying down hay to cover mud, hanging tarps to keep out the rain, and developing internal infrastructure to support their movement. Seven blocks away, members of the Right 2 Dream Too (R2D2), have taken over the lease of an empty lot by the Chinatown gate, and begun constructing a rest area for houseless members of their community. There are very real differences between these two instances, which have recently occurred in Portland: one is an occupation of public land, the other has a lease on private land. The occupation has been given tentative permission by the city, while R2D2's occupancy is being disputed as illegal.

People are virtually abandoning their homes to join the Occupy Portland movement, while members of R2D2 are reacting to the fact they have no place to sleep. Despite these elements, there is a deeper strand of solidarity that exists between these two movements. Both groups are responding to the larger inequality of our social system, the lack of access to political power, and the rights of all of us to dream.

The Spaces: Public and Private

Sylvia darts in and out of the newly constructed communications tent in Chapman Square as the rain begins to pour. As an organizing member of the U.S. Social Forum held in Detroit in 2010, she has been participating in the occupation since the first general assembly held on the waterfront. "This is way more spontaneous," she says while attempting to run power to the tent and set up a public computer station. "At the Social Forum, people had been organizing for months, and knew each other. Most people here are representing themselves, while the Social Forum was more organizations and communities."

Considering these circumstances, the development of Occupy Portland in the past week has been extraordinary. In very tangible ways, a community is being built: the space now boasts a library, a kids camp, a medic tent, an independent media coalition, an engineering squad building bicycle-powered generators, and more — all run by people who recognized a need and stepped up to fill it.

Robert Needham is one of those people. Motivated by his desire to help a man whose sleeping bag was drenched, he realized there were probably more people with that same need. He biked around the city yesterday asking laundromats and hotels to donate the use of a washer and dryer. "This morning I got in touch with an employee of a Laundromat up the road. Her boss wasn't really into it, but he gave her permission. As of tonight, we have access to a 50-pound washer and dryer," he explains with a quiet sense of accomplishment. "When I found the



Above, the Occupy Portland site's information booth. Below left, the general assembly of Occupy Portland, which is governed by democracy. Below right, the R2D2 camp in its first days.

man whose sleeping bag had gotten wet to tell him, a businessman in a suit was taking people two at a time back to his apartment to shower. The man had just got back, and it was the first shower he'd had in a month."

The story is just one of the occupation's daily occurrences where the spirit of collective responsibility and individual initiative is palpable. "The occupation is an opportunity to practice creating a new free society, based on contribution and participation," explains Radz, a carpenter's apprentice who quit his job recently to become involved full-time. "I told my boss I was involved in a revolution, and I was needed here. He told me to 'carry the torch, little brother.'"

A few blocks away, the steady sound of hammers resound against the empty walls of the lot on 4th and Burnside. Unlike the spontaneous combustion on Wall Street and the national reactions that resulted in Occupy Portland, R2D2 has been organizing for the construction of their rest area for over three months. At an organizing meeting a few weeks ago, all the possibilities of response were hashed out: "What about security? I don't want to get hit with negligence," Leo Rhodes explains, a Right 2 Survive member who formerly organized one of the first tent cities in Seattle. "I've dealt with them before — I'm trying to be a butthead like they are," he explains while playing devil's advocate for the city. Discussions are hashed out and a code of conduct is decided upon and posted at the entrance.

Used to getting shafted by society and by city laws like the sit-lie ordinance and the camping ban, Right 2 Survive took multiple steps to ensure that they were not doing anything illegal. They formed a non-profit,

got liability insurance, signed a lease with the lot owners, and drew up schematics to show how the rest space would function. When they opened their doors on Oct. 11, the national day of action for homelessness, city planners came questioning their right to be there. "We stand in solidarity with Occupy Portland," says Trillium Shannon, a member of Right 2 Survive. "But the inequality apparent in the city's operation with regard to the occupiers, who are mostly housed, and ourselves, shows the discrimination against houseless people that we are trying to creatively address."

In a very real sense, these are different situations. Both situations, however, are creative responses to the structural social inequality and broken system of political redress that define this city and nation. They are also both examples of individual freedom and initiative taking action to shape their own destiny, which is one of the most fundamental elements of the American spirit. In practice, they are different lines of attack against a common enemy.

Working Together

The simple act of occupying Portland has put the occupiers in a position of solidarity with the houseless people of Portland. In many senses, actions speak louder than words. "Most of us here have jobs, and families. I realize how much privilege we have here because we're working to make the world a better place, and they are working for survival," explains Imre Ilyes, a member of the communications team for Occupy Portland. "But we are making a sacrifice to make space here so everyone can come to talk — and we're doing it in a geographical

way so that you can't ignore us." At this point, a physical area to congregate is what the group of Occupy Portland can offer to the larger community that wants to change the way society is working.

"What is revolutionary about this space is that it's putting people in the same place to deal with each other. To talk with each other, eat with each other, have conflict with each other, problem solve with each other," Mark Dilly, a union organizer and the Occupation's Wiki guy explains.

"The Internet enabled all of this to happen, but no one's on the Internet here." Indeed, the reality of Occupy Portland is that it is coming into consciousness in a physical location.

"It's a social organism," says Tim Rice, a community organizer who delivers papers for the Oregonian for a living. "The city is making a huge mistake in letting it grow and believe in itself because this challenges all elements of capitalist society, which is why they usually suppress actions like these." What the group is conscious of so far, however, is that they are in a position of privilege with regard to the city, and they are all working to figure out how to use that in solidarity with the 99 percent.

Many people within the Occupy Portland movement support the Right 2 Dream Too rest area. "I feel R2D2 has a responsibility to teach us," Erik Olsen explains. As a member of Right 2 Survive and the Occupy Portland safety team, he is primarily concerned with anti-oppression education and trainings about privilege in order to strengthen how the safety team operates. Right 2 Survive provides a concrete example of breaking down the barriers that many people have in their minds about houseless people. "Their work is our work as well," he says.

For now, the Occupy Portland movement is finding its feet, and the R2D2 rest area is just beginning. Occupy's General Assembly meetings have been primarily concerned with the occupation of Main Street, and the concerns raised about the access of emergency vehicles and TriMet buses. They are also concerned with adhering to a process of consensus, which is important in building group cohesion and trust. While this process requires patience, it is also planting the seeds here in Portland for real people power. "There is no us — this is Portland's camp," explains Silvia. As the occupation continues to manifest in the city of Portland, it is in need of experience and guidance. As Dilly says, "The occupy movement needs experts, but they need to be experts on topic, not experts on top." Ideally, this will enable the dreams of its occupiers to continue coming to life, and it will be done in line with the other concrete demonstrations of people power in Portland, like R2D2's rest area. By working in solidarity, and maintaining the occupation as a space for Portland's collective dream of a better future, it will be possible to ensure that all people, including the houseless, are able to rest peacefully at night and have their dreams, too.

