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Title: The institutionalization of ‘tiny home’ villages in Portland: innovative solution to address homelessness or preclusion of radical housing practices?

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Title: The institutionalization of ‘tiny home’ villages in Portland: innovative solution to address homelessness or preclusion of radical housing practices?

Abstract: Within the context of rising rents and growing unhoused population, public authorities are compelled to adapt their own practices, to create low-cost social policies and sometimes to draw inspiration from informal housing practices. Through the analysis of the institutional adoption of the ‘tiny home’ village model in Portland as a means of sheltering houseless people, this article examines the extent to which these informal practices spread into public policies and reconfigure the governance of homelessness. It points out that, although political struggle and advocacy have been crucial in the regularization of the first homeless villages by public authorities, the way the village model is currently being institutionalized tends both to depoliticize the way they are operated and to reproduce some of the constraints associated with congregate shelters.

Keywords: homelessness, tiny home villages, Portland, informality, housing policies

Introduction

In an overall context of rising rents and growing homeless population in American cities, informal housing practices have arisen over the last years as a way to meet the needs of the poorest part of the population. These informal housing arrangements grew up to such an extent that many local governments tend nowadays to institutionalize some of these practices. In Portland (Oregon), on May 21st of 2021, elected officials, policy makers and public stakeholders gathered to celebrate the opening of *St. Johns Village*, a 19-tiny-home village

funded and developed by the local government as a means of providing housing to homeless individuals. This village is officially inspired by the homeless villages that have informally sprung up throughout the west coast cities in recent years. From Seattle to Oakland, homeless villages have appeared, as a seemingly affordable solution to the housing crisis that hit many cities but also as an alternative to congregate shelters. The opening of St. Johns Village provides evidence of change in the way public authorities conceive what a homeless shelter is, as it emphasizes the progressive institutionalization of an initially informal model of housing. Relying on research I conducted in Portland, this article aims at understanding the ways in which the informal homeless village model has progressively become institutionalized as a means of providing service delivery and housing to people experiencing homelessness. More generally, it argues that housing informality in the Global North is a way of coping with austerity and the increase of rents for homeless people to the extent that it has become part of public policies for addressing the housing crisis.

Firstly, I draw on the literature on urban informality, largely developed from the cities of the Global South, and its potential for explaining changes in urban governance in the Global North, especially within a context of a housing crisis which has resulted in the emergence of informal housing settlements in many American cities. In the second part of the article, the context of Portland is presented to illustrate the evolution of homeless villages in the city and the various steps that led public authorities to shift from evicting the first villagers and removing their villages to including the village model in public policy as a strategy to end homelessness. In the third part, I discuss this evolution and the power relations which led to the institutionalization of the village model, hence highlighting the intertwining of formal and informal practices in the management of homelessness. This article points out that, although political struggle and advocacy have been crucial in the regularization of the first homeless

villages by public authorities, the way the village model is currently being institutionalized tends both to depoliticize the way they are operated and to reproduce some of the constraints associated with congregate shelters.

Informality as a mode of governance of urban spaces?

Informality as part of urban societies in the Global South

Informality has become a key concept for understanding both the modes of urbanization and the governance of urban spaces. For several decades, informality has been associated with the economies of the Global South and ‘considered an attribute of “backward” economies that have not yet adopted the property rights regimes and institutional capacities to provide for and regulate citizens and their activities’ (Boudreau and Davis, 2017, p. 152). Many analyses (De Soto, 2000; Hall and Pfeiffer, 2000) have been based on the study of informal economic practices and most of them rely on the idea of an informal sector arising from poverty and separate from global capitalism (Roy, 2005). This conceptualization, which presupposes formality as the norm and informality as an aberration (Banks *et al.*, 2020: 225), explains the numerous interpretations of the rise of informal practices in cities in the southern hemisphere either as the symbol of a ‘crisis’ or as ‘heroism’ (Roy, 2005). In opposition to this economic perspective, several scholars have favored an understanding of informality as a ‘*mode of urbanization*’ (*ibid*: p. 148), as a ‘system of norms that governs the process of urban transformation itself’ (p. 148). Seen from this perspective, informality is not regarded as a separate sector but as closely related to the formal sector. Relying on the example of informal housing, Roy (2005, p. 149) notes the intertwining of formal and informal sectors, of categories of legality and illegality: ‘Such trends point to a complex continuum of legality and

illegality, where squatter settlements formed through land invasion and self-help housing can exist alongside upscale informal subdivisions formed through legal ownership and market transaction but in violation of land use regulations'. Such an analysis aims at overcoming the formal-informal dualism, for a better understanding of the ways in which informality has become an integral part of urban societies. In this context, informality is no longer perceived as a survival strategy for the poorest parts of the population (De Soto, 2000) but rather as an essential condition of contemporary societies (Boudreau *et al.*, 2016). Informality can now be taken to refer to:

the conditions under which the established rules and regulations of capitalist development and modernization (i.e., markets, laws, property rights, democratic procedures) are in fact violated or transgressed in everyday practice even when they are universally embraced or enshrined in the institutions of modern states and societies (Boudreau and Davis, 2017, p. 155).

Defining informality in this way tends to suggest that it is much more widespread than expected. Far from being reduced to an example of resourcefulness associated with the poorest urban citizens, informality should also be associated with the higher social classes and powerful stakeholders who have the ability to use informality as a strategy for developing their own interests. As formulated by Boudreau *et al.* (2016, p. 5-6), 'informality is an attribute of the structures of power, the expression of a relation of power, economic or political, private or public, the law being perceived as open, flexible, subject to multiple interpretations, inscribed in an evolving relation between what is legal/illegal, legitimate/illegitimate, authorized/not authorized'. This analysis broadens the concept of informality, providing an opportunity to consider the ways in which it can be thought of as a mode of governance. From this perspective, public authorities and local state governments are also involved in informal action, not least by their power to authorize or remove informal

settlements. In his work on informal urban peripheries which have spread around the world, Yiftachel describe them as ‘gray spaces’, which public authorities decide to let grow or to destroy depending on the ways they fit, or not, with public policy objectives:

The understanding of gray space as stretching over the entire spectrum, from powerful developers to landless and homeless ‘invaders’, helps us conceptualize two associated dynamics we may term here ‘whitening’ and ‘blackening’. The former alludes to the tendency of the system to ‘launder’ gray spaces created ‘from above’ by powerful or favorable interests. The latter denotes the process of ‘solving’ the problem of marginalized gray space by destruction, expulsion or elimination. The state’s violent power is put into action, turning gray into black (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 92).

This perspective highlights the highly political dimension of informality, and the importance of power relations in the way informality is defined and structured (MacLeod and Jones, 2011; McFarlane, 2012; Roy, 2009). That helps to take analysis beyond the idea of the ontological association of informality with spaces of the poorest, to better understand that the continuing informality of many urban neighborhoods arises mainly from the ways in which the laws are variably enforced: ‘the fundamental analytical, and indeed political, question is why some instances of informality are designated as illegal and their inhabitants criminalised while other land transformations appear to be protected and formalised to enjoy state sanction or even endorsed as practices of the state’ (MacLeod and Jones, 2011, p. 2452). Such a perspective requires the reader to analyze and take into account the relationships inherent in informality: ‘The state, the law, and the informal sector are repositioned from essentialized objects to relational processes involving various actors, spaces, and temporalities’ (Boudreau and Davis, 2017, p. 158).

The rise of informality in the urban Global North

The evolution of the concept of informality and informalization coincides with the convergence of cities around the world:

after decades of global economic restructuring, in which the shift from manufacturing to services has produced unprecedented levels of inequality affecting employment, public services, and livelihood in cities in the Global North, these locales are seeing an expansion of informal work as a means of coping with declining formal sector employment, and in response to the downsizing of the welfare state that in prior decades provided a safety net to mitigate economic precariousness (Boudreau and Davis, 2017, p. 152).

Within a context of economic crisis, practices that have for decades been associated with informality (flexibility, negotiation, spontaneous practices that run counter to state regulation and the law) in the global South have nowadays spread in the Global North as a way to cope with austerity. That leads scholars to apply the concept of informality not only in the South but also in the North: ‘harnessing the heuristic potential of informality crucially relies on taking informality “out” of the global South and using it as a device to understand the global North and its “high-capacity states”’ (Boudreau, 2019). In this context, Yiftachel (2006, p. 216) argues that knowledge developed in the global South ‘may also become a source of “reverse flows” of theoretical knowledge, as north-western cities increasingly face “south-eastern” phenomena such as urban informality, “deep” identities, open urban conflicts, and mass poverty’.

Regarding a move beyond North-South dualism, Devlin (2011) points out the importance of informality in the regulation of street vendors in New York. Although the law is never

completely absent, the study highlights how acts of harassment and intimidation by private owners and police officers, facilitated by the opaque nature of vending laws, are more efficient in the removal of vendors from BIDs territories than the strict enforcement of the law. Therefore, the ‘variegated landscape of street vending in New York [...] correlates more to the power, resources and influence of BIDs and private property interests than to formal laws’ (2011, p. 60) and is structured ‘in a largely informal manner, with informality itself serving as a mechanism of spatial management and control’ (*ibid*, p. 54). In Philadelphia, Fairbanks (2012) showed how informal practices have emerged in several poor and peripheral neighborhoods that have been abandoned by public authorities. Street-level entrepreneurs started to transform abandoned homes into unlicensed and unregulated recovery houses (2012, p. 2557). Through ‘their persistent efforts to transform down-and-out addicts into “productive members of society”, operators claim to reduce drug addiction, homelessness and crime’ (Fairbanks, 2012, p. 2558). For Fairbanks, this example provides evidence of the informal poverty politics which emerge in the shadow welfare state. This informality arises from the internalization by grassroots organizations of the ‘contradictions of post-welfare urban society, leading to the emergence of a newer realm of urban poverty politics’ (*ibid*, p.2556).

Due to the increase of rents, informal housing has also developed over the last years in the cities of the global North. Unlike informal housing in the global South which is ‘visible, widespread [...] and begins with a de-facto access to marginal land’, informal housing in the global North, ‘manifests as a response to unmet housing need which appears to be mostly *hidden, produced individually* and begins with access (or lack of access) to *rental housing*’ (Shrestha *et al*, 2021, p.159). Informal housing usually refers to housing constructed by poor and low-income individuals with no land titles, architects, engineers, that is not formally regulated and that does not comply with local zoning and building regulations. Although it is

not as visible as in the Global South, informal housing does exist in many parts of the U.S (Durst and Wegmann, 2017; Larson, 2005; Mukhija, 2014). As a means to gain access to residential land and home ownership, low-income households indeed developed alternative practices to get access to housing (Ward and Peters, 2007), and informal housing is becoming common in certain areas, especially in border states and in low-income Latino communities. The so-called *colonias* in Texas¹ are probably the best-known example of informal housing in the U.S. But scholars argue that informal housing is widespread in peri-urban areas of many cities in the U.S and is not limited to the border states (Larson, 2005; Ward and Peters, 2007; Durst and Wegmann, 2017). Some scholars indeed shed light on the many informal subdivisions located in the rural hinterland of major cities and that are composed of mobile home communities and trailer parks (Ward and Peters, 2007; Durst, 2019). In another perspective, Mukhija (2014) and Wegmann (2015) point out how common is unpermitted housing in the suburbs of Los Angeles. Focusing on the most visible side of urban poverty – homelessness in the center of cities – the United Nations recently noticed the rise of informal settlements in the global North and violations of ‘multiple human rights, including the rights to life, housing, health and water and sanitation’ have even been witnessed by the Special Rapporteur in San Francisco and Oakland, California (United Nations Report, 2018, p.12). Thus, informal housing remained hidden for years in American cities but with the current housing crisis, it has become more and more visible.

Due to this rise of (visible) informality in the cities of the global North, local government’s relationship with informality is evolving. According to Jacquot and Morelle (2018), modes of governance tend to be reconfigured under the influence of informality: ‘in order to address informal activities, *de facto* located in urban spaces, alternative regulation mechanisms are conceived by local governments, which in turn, might influence public governance for a

¹ The *colonias* are residential areas along the border that often lack basic infrastructure and that are mostly inhabited by low-income Hispanic individuals.

variable length of time' (Jacquot and Morelle, 2018, p. 14). Building on this idea, this article aims at understanding the ways in which informal housing practices steer the governance of homelessness in the direction of alternative policies.

The 'tiny home' villages in the United States: the rise of informality for addressing the housing crisis

In the United States, the emergence of tiny home villages for the homeless provides evidence of the ways in which informality has spread in the development of the American city. These self-managed villages for homeless people have been increasing for more than a decade in many cities, in particular in the west coast cities, in parallel to the rise of the housing crisis and within a context of austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012). Whether they are perceived as a symbol of the economic crisis (Herring and Lutz, 2015) or as a creative solution to cope with it (Evans, 2020), these villages are nowadays part of the urban landscape in many American cities (Evans, 2020; Fowler, 2017). These homeless villages appear as a more permanent and effective solution than purely temporary assistance (food banks, night shelters, etc.) and are often perceived as a cheaper alternative than the development of housing units². For these reasons, public authorities tend to draw on those villages: '[tiny home villages] have not only been sanctioned, but also publicly supported as tools of social welfare in light of the costs and shortage of existing shelters' (Herring & Lutz, 2015, p. 696). With regard to this development, tiny homes villages have been well studied within the academic research into homelessness, giving rise to different interpretations. On the one hand, some scholars argue that the development of these homeless villages is part of the punitive management of poverty in public spaces (Herring and Lutz, 2015) as a space of containment and seclusion (Herring,

² Although grassroots and self-managed villages could indeed be cost effective, it is important to mention that most of the villages managed by public authorities are usually more expensive than shelters.

2014; Speer, 2018). On the other hand, some scholars note the role of this housing model in providing safe spaces (Sparks, 2017), hence giving the opportunity for homeless people to exercise a level of agency they are often denied in congregate shelters where the many strict rules reduce their own autonomy (Gowan, 2010). Compared to shelters, privacy and security that villagers find in tiny home villages are greatly appreciated (Leikly *et al.*:2022). In that perspective, these villages are also perceived as spaces of resistance and empowerment. The rise of informal housing arrangements as sanctioned and unsanctioned tiny home villages in American cities hence sheds light on the ambivalence of the management of homelessness which is both punitive and compassionate (Speer, 2018; Stuart, 2016).

This debate on American tiny home villages does not address the role of informality in their own development and the ways in which this informality transforms (and diffuses into) the governance of homelessness. Through the analysis of the evolution of homeless villages (and their management) in the city of Portland, this article aims at understanding the ways in which informality cannot be considered as simply an object of public interventions as it also results in the transformation of urban governance. The main research questions that drive the article are: How and to what extent do informal housing practices influence public authorities and reconfigure local policies for ending homelessness? How does informality spread from homeless advocates and grassroots organizations to local government?³

Study context

³ This article is based on three months of fieldwork conducted before and after the Covid-19 pandemic. About thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with public stakeholders (policy makers, managers and employees of city services: Joint Office of Homeless Services / Housing bureau / Police bureau, etc.), outreach workers and managers of non-profit organizations, members of neighborhood associations and homeless people (especially residents of the *Right To Dream Too* village). These interviews were complemented by observations of public meetings and of some of the individuals at work (social workers, police, neighborhood associations).

Tackling the housing crisis in Portland

Renowned for its livability⁴ and its sustainability model (Caleb, 2018), Portland has become an inspiration for many policymakers and planners (Hagerman, 2007). However, the implementation of sustainability and quality of life policies has brought back middle class and capital in the center of the city, henceforth producing spatial inequalities and contributing to Portland's 'uneven development' (Goodling *et al.*, 2015). The city indeed had the highest rent increases in the United States between 2006 and 2015, with the average rent climbing 63% while the tenants' incomes rose only 39%. Consequently, over half of the tenants spend more than 30% of their incomes on rent and one quarter of them is 'extremely rent-burdened'⁵. Combined with federal cuts for housing and a shortage of 25,000 affordable housing units within Multnomah County, this has led to many households ending up on the street. According to the latest Point-In-Time count in Multnomah County, Oregon, more than 4,000 individuals were counted as homeless including 2,000 who were sleeping on the streets each night (City of Portland, 2019). However, a report based on a broader definition of homelessness – aimed at including hidden homeless populations which are usually not captured in the city's Point-In-Time count - found that 38,000 individuals experienced homelessness in 2017 in the Portland tri-county region (Zapata *et al.*, 2019). As a result of the lack of available beds in shelters, encampments have sprung up in public spaces throughout the city. In order to address these deficiencies, the previous mayor declared a *State of Emergency on Housing and Homelessness*, thought of as a means to expand financial capacities and to remove existing barriers to the experiments and the development of alternative models for addressing homelessness. As described by the director of the *Joint*

⁴ In 2020, Portland has been ranked the 9th best place to live in the U.S. News and World Report.

⁵ Spending more than 50% of their incomes on rent.

Office of Homeless Services (JOHS), this state of emergency gave the opportunity to suspend the rules and introduce considerable flexibility:

[...] normally, zoning limits where you can put shelters, it limits how many beds in shelters you have in one location [...] The rules are fine except they cost money, the processes limit your options for where you can go, they limit what you can think of as a shelter and so under the State of Emergency, those rules got suspended and so we were able to go in, for example, in an old furniture store, and even though it never would be qualified as shelter under the existing code, under the state of emergency we were able to just have a [...] building inspector come and say “yes, this is safe”, you know there is not any shower, there is no proper bathroom in the back, you know.. It didn’t meet the standards that codes normally have for mass shelters, but we were able to open it in three weeks

This State of Emergency gave the opportunity to public authorities to develop innovative responses to meet the needs of the growing homeless population. In this context, the perception of homeless villages, that have spread citywide in the last decade, has progressively evolved until they have become an inspiration for developing inventive public policies.

The formalization of informal homeless villages: Dignity Village and Right to Dream Too

As in other cities located on the west coast of the United States, homeless villages have been developing in Portland for two decades. Dignity Village was built in 2000 by homeless advocates as a way to challenge public authorities on the local housing crisis, and as a means

to provide an alternative to the street for the unsheltered. Due to recurring removals of the encampment, the villagers have successively occupied different places in several neighborhoods in the city. After intense political advocacy, *Dignity Village* was officially authorized in 2004 by the Portland City Council as a *tiny house village* whose role is to operate as *transitional housing accommodation*. It refers to a state statute that allows six municipalities to designate up to two sites as ‘campgrounds to be used for transitional housing accommodations for persons who lack permanent shelter and cannot be placed in other low-income housing’ (*Dignity Village*, website)⁶. This official recognition has made it possible to secure the existence of this homeless village on a publicly-owned parcel of land in North Portland. Political advocacy and opposition to public housing policies have been crucial in the development and the perpetuation of Dignity Village which nowadays operates as a self-governed village and provides shelter for 60 homeless people each night.

Figure 1: Dignity Village

Source: Communitecture

Similarly, *Right To Dream Too* (R2DToo) emerged informally as a self-governed village in 2011 on a vacant space downtown near the business district. Its members used this central location and its high visibility as a way to pressure city officials on the lack of affordable housing, but the village also provided a safe place to rest for 70 homeless individuals each night. But, as the village operated in violation of a certain number of municipal laws, it was subject to judicial penalties until the members of R2DToo sued the city on the grounds that this village was also working as ‘*transitional housing accommodation*’ (Przybylinski, 2020)

⁶ This statute indicates that these transitional campgrounds may be operated by private individuals / entities or nonprofit organizations.

and that it needed to be authorized as such. In order to encourage R2DToo to drop the proceedings against the City, public authorities proposed to its leaders that the village be relocated to another site. But due to a series of twists and oppositions from business elites and neighborhood associations, the move did not materialize. A space use agreement with the city (Anderson *et al.*, 2020; Przybylinski, 2020) was finally signed in 2017 to relocate R2DToo to a government-owned property in Northeast Portland.

These two examples illustrate the ways in which local government has responded to the emergence of informal homeless villages. Beyond the agreements relating to the use of public land, public authorities decided to fund some of the operating facilities in Dignity Village and R2DToo and to provide social services for housing support. The resources the city delivers to these villages represent a minimal investment which enables them to operate. But this support does not mean that the city approves the way these villages operate, nor does it indicate any will to include them in public policy. It is mostly aimed at avoiding problems that might be prejudicial to the City:

[...] we rely on them, they keep their space in order and not exploded... I don't know that the culture within city government will be conducive to put in that much trust, in an organization that could defend itself in court I guess... Because if something goes bad, either those spots R2DToo or Dignity, if those places explode, the city will be responsible. [...] But both started as protest camps and so... [...] It is kind of hard to work with a group of folks who intentionally started saying 'fuck you' ... It just makes it more challenging because there is not a lot of trust there (JOHS employee)

Although the village model, based on self-management and autonomy⁷, has been praised by many non-governmental stakeholders, and the R2DToo and Dignity Village leaders have acquired a voice in the public sphere, the visions they support and the solutions they promote to end homelessness are divergent from those of the public authorities. Even though the City Council authorized these villages, suspicion still remains between the city and their members, and their relationship is described as ‘a low-level interdependence and conflict’ (JOHS employee). This highlights how the formalization of informal housing infrastructures cannot be reduced to a technical issue (Roy, 2005). Power relations and negotiations have been (and still are) necessary steps before local government regularizes or authorizes these tiny house villages. This move towards sustainability for these ‘villages’ mostly depends on the ability of their leaders to find levers to position themselves as legitimate negotiators with public authorities. The perpetuation of these homeless villages has been accomplished ‘by mobilizing around specific rights for a place to be’ (Przybylinski, 2020). Hazelnut Grove, a six-year-old homeless village installed on public land, has also been provided by public authorities with services (garbage pick-up, toilets), but it has never received official recognition from the City and has not been regularized as such. Nevertheless, under the State of Emergency, public authorities are enabled not to enforce the usual rules that regulate this kind of informal housing infrastructure (Przybylinski, 2021), hence providing to Hazelnut Grove an implicit but minimal recognition. However, due to the determination of the villagers to preserve their autonomy in the management of the village, combined with the creation by the city of a managed tiny home village in the neighborhood, relations have progressively deteriorated with public authorities. Faced with these demands and the difficulty of creating optimal conditions for discussion, public authorities decided in January 2021 to cancel the existing agreements under the pretext of the environmental vulnerability of the area.

⁷ As summed up by a villager from *Right To Dream Too* (R2DToo), the definition of the village is: ‘homeless people taking care of homeless people’. The village is fully managed by the homeless people living on site.

Interestingly, this decision to close and remove *Hazelnut Grove* occurred at the time when the JOHS developed and built *St. Johns Village* to which it was proposed that the villagers should move.

The 'homeless village' as an institutional arrangement

In view of the rise of informal villages within a context of a housing crisis, public authorities became progressively aware of the effectiveness of the village model as a means of providing shelter to many homeless individuals. Unhoused people who are reluctant to move into congregate shelters (Evans, 2011) because of the associated requirements – such as sobriety or the participation in the shelter’s programs – appear especially to be more inclined to live in a tiny home village. Despite initial suspicion, the views of state bodies concerning this informal infrastructure have significantly evolved and homeless villages, which have for many years been considered as illegal and informal, have become an institutional solution for responding to the housing crisis in Portland. Indeed, public authorities nowadays draw their inspiration from this model to develop official tiny home villages (Vaughan, 2018; Harbager, 2019) such as *Kenton Women's Village* (2016) and *St. Johns Village* (2021). These projects have been supported, funded and developed by the JOHS and are included in public policies on homelessness as part of the *Street to Shelter Continuum*. Derived from a long process, these ‘official’ villages, each composed of a dozen tiny homes and equipped with on-site social services, have emerged as a shelter infrastructure, led by public authorities and operated by nonprofits.

Figure 2: St. Johns Village

Source: Multnomah County website

The institutional use of the village model has been reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic as it appeared to be the most efficient way to observe social distancing rules while providing social services that had been reduced during the lockdown. Grassroots organizations had warned public authorities about the consequences of the lockdown on homeless people, especially since libraries and cafes were closed, drop-in centers' opening hours reduced and food banks overwhelmed by requests. A coalition composed of 16 grassroots organizations (led by the R2DToo collective) emerged to provide the necessary services to people experiencing homelessness during the lockdown. Called *Creating Conscious Communities with People Outside* (C3PO), this mobilization enabled the development of three tiny home villages in a few days, with a capacity to shelter 40 to 60 people in each village. These villages were equipped with resources (which were not otherwise accessible during the lockdown) such as running water, collective kitchen, showers, toilets, electricity and outreach services. The unhoused people lived in the first days in socially-distanced tents located on pallets. Later, tiny homes built by a Washington company, were delivered and built on site making the quality of housing better⁸. Unlike other experiments that have been thought out on a long-term basis, this one arose in an emergency that required immediate action.

Figure 3: One of the C3PO villages, built during the lockdown.

Source: Mark Graves-The Oregonian, 2021 Sep.30

⁸ These are small, 64 square foot, tiny homes, equipped with heating, electrical outlets, light, a door that can be locked, and windows. Costing \$5,600, these units were funded by the federal government's Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES) and the JOHS.

The effectiveness and the speed of operation of this collective project led public authorities to rethink their emergency system and to find strategies to overcome the regulatory rules that prevent public and private stakeholders developing tiny home shelters, giving rise to the *Shelter to Housing Continuum* project. Under the authority of commissioner Dan Ryan, the Bureau of Planning, the Housing Bureau and the Joint Office of Homeless Services got together ‘to review and retool City regulations to better address the homelessness crisis’ (City of Portland website). The *Shelter to Housing Continuum* project led to amendments to the City Code that have improved the regulatory environment in which nonprofits, public sector shelter and housing providers develop their projects. As one of the managers of the team told me, the main goal was to transform the Code in order to be able to build alternative shelters:

The council said [...] what are the things that need to change so that we don’t need to be in a state of emergency but we still can do these shelter projects, what are the barriers that need to be removed? So, a bunch of people from the county and the city [proposed] a Code package to change a lot of things, [...] it allows for shelters to be set up in more zones and it created outdoor shelter as a community service.

The City Council unanimously adopted these amendments to City Code in April 2021. The creation of the *outdoor shelter* category, which includes the village model as a shelter and expands areas where they are allowed to be built, is supposed to make the development of alternative shelter easier. Unlike previous years when ‘informal’ villages had to request the approval of the municipal council to be authorized and institutionally formalized, the new code defines specific criteria determining how (and where) to develop and build a tiny home village according to the municipal rules. Subsequently a guide was published by the City of Portland (2022a), to specify the conditions for opening an outdoor shelter such as the necessary distance between the tiny homes, the ratio of toilets to the number of people, the arrangements for garbage pick-up, etc. It is also mentioned that these *outdoor shelters* must be

operated by a services provider, whether it be a nonprofit, a private entity or a state agency. The formalization of the procedures and the definition of criteria are supposed to encourage nonprofits or private entities (neighborhood associations, churches, etc.) to develop alternative shelters in line with this official category of *outdoor shelters* and within the City regulations.

Besides this evolution in the procedures for opening a shelter, another example highlights the willingness of city officials to promote and accelerate the development of tiny homes villages. Taking the opportunity presented by the federal funds the city received as part of the American Rescue Plan (March 2021) in order to revive the economy after the pandemic, officials decided to build six Safe Rest Villages. Out of an initial 208-million-dollar budget, 16 million dollars have been used to roll out this program throughout the city. Safe Rest Villages are thought of as ‘an improved point of entry for Portlanders on the continuum from living on the streets to finding stability in permanent housing—they may look like a safe park program for people living in RVs or tiny houses’ (City of Portland, 2022b). As the *outdoor shelters* promoted by the city, they are not supposed to be self-managed encampments, and each of these Safe Rest Villages will in fact be managed by a service-provider and include case management with behavioral and mental health services. Despite some difficulties in finding available areas that fit all the criteria for developing these Safe Rest Villages (safety, surface area needed to respect the separation distances from any property lines, vehicle access, water service, etc.) and neighbors’ concerns (Griggs, 2022), they should open in 2022 and each village should be composed of 60 tiny houses. The political will that led to the village model being formalized and included in the City Code highlights the ways in which public authorities have progressively, over the years, adopted this model as a means of tackling the housing crisis.

Discussion

The formalization of informal homeless villages as a result of political struggles

As illustrated by the examples mentioned above, the model of *tiny house villages* has progressively spread across local government policies and nowadays appears, for a significant number of public stakeholders, as part of the solution for ending the housing crisis. This shift, which started slowly in the last decade, was not obvious. The formalization of the first homeless villages (*Dignity Village, R2DToo*) is the result of relations of power with public authorities and business elites that were initially opposed to them. It is through resistance and activism aimed at gaining legitimacy that these villages have ultimately been formalized or regularized. As highlighted above, this activism led to space-use agreements with local government. The delivery of public resources and social services to the sites also illustrates the ways in which these villages have been included in the public response to homelessness, as a public mechanism aimed at helping homeless people to get off the streets. But beyond the formalization of these villages and the securing of the housing infrastructure, their advocates have managed to have a voice in public debates: ‘It does not mean that we are doing the things exactly the way that the leadership of Right To Dream Too would like to see us doing them but... They are definitely influencing how local government thinks [...] Dignity Village and Right to Dream are both on the table when we develop our local policies around alternative shelters and this kind of encampment’ (JOHS employee). Through the politicization of housing issues and homeless villages, the Dignity Village and R2DToo leaders have managed to gain institutional legitimacy and to influence public policies.

Informalization as a mode of managing urban informality

The examples previously mentioned shed light on the ways in which public authorities tackle informality and, more specifically, they emphasize the diversity of public responses to informal homeless villages depending on the circumstances. On the one hand, public authorities might decide on the regularization of a village, which removes it from the category of informality. On the other hand, they might decide to keep it informal as a way of controlling it and to give legitimacy to (potentially) evicting the residents. In this context, state bodies deviate from their rules, and the general law is unevenly enforced: some laws are strictly enforced while others are suspended depending how their operation may or may not fall in line with public strategies. That is particularly true of the way public authorities reacted to the emergence of Hazelnut Grove, which was initially tolerated by the City despite the distrust between the villagers and city officials. In a housing crisis context, public authorities allowed the development of Hazelnut Grove without applying the laws which would have given the opportunity to remove the tiny homes. But as soon as a public and official village, supported and developed by the JOHS, opened its doors in the same neighborhood, the public authorities declared that Hazelnut Grove was going to be demolished and the residents evicted under the pretext that the village did not meet the official standards, that there was a landslide danger and public safety issues, as well as many other points that had already existed long before this decision. The uneven enforcement of the general law highlights the ability of public authorities to suspend the law (Agamben, 2005) and let an informal structure grow when it is a response to a need, while being able to restore and enforce these laws when needed to justify an eviction, as soon as relations are strained or when other institutional solutions are provided. Depending on the circumstances, informality seems to be tolerated and accepted as a way to tackle the housing crisis until official and formal solutions are found and

implemented. That represents the informalization of homelessness management. Public authorities are able to use informality as a strategy, including it or excluding it from public mechanisms: ‘the planning and legal apparatus of the state has the power to determine what is informal and what is not, and to determine which forms of informality will thrive and which will disappear’ (Yiftachel, 2009, p. 149). In other words, the informality of Hazelnut Grove balances between “informality as non-compliance” and “informality-as-non-enforcement regarding land-use and zoning laws” (Durst and Wegmann, 2017). Hazelnut Grove, which entails non-compliance with land-use regulations, is kept upright due to the willingness of public authorities not to enforce the law. But as soon as the non-compliance run counter the public strategies, law is to be enforced and the tiny home village is threatened to be dismantled. This informalization, this flexible approach to the governance of homeless villages within the context of a housing crisis, reflects the complex relationship between the formal and informal sectors and confirms that informality cannot be thought of as being entirely separate from State action and public policies (Roy, 2005). By being able to negotiate its own laws, by giving itself the option of circumventing them, local government enlarges its own toolkit for tackling homelessness and the housing crisis, highlighting the process of informalization of the State (Boudreau, 2017).

Towards institutionalization of the homeless village model

Beyond their case-by-case handling of the informal homeless villages that have appeared in recent years in Portland, public authorities have progressively institutionalized the village model. This institutionalization of an initially informal mechanism has accelerated under the influence of both the growing housing crisis and the COVID-19 crisis which hit the world in 2020. In 2019, the JOHS manager was reluctant to endorse the village model and recalled that

tiny homes were not housing everybody: ‘That model doesn’t work for many people experiencing homelessness, it’s not attractive to many people, many people are not interested to live in village and they don’t feel necessarily welcome in the villages’. In this perspective, homeless villages were not perceived as a long-term solution, especially as they were not meeting the needs of the majority of homeless people. The health crisis clearly modified the way public authorities and the JOHS considered this model, especially as the effectiveness of this model - as a seemingly rapid and low-cost response - was clearly demonstrated during the lockdown. Although villages are supposed to be only an emergency response, urban planning regulations have been modified in order to support the development of villages throughout the city. This move is interesting as it reveals change within public authorities. Grassroots organizations and homeless advocates have been fighting for years for an expansion of the village model, which is perceived by many experts as an efficient solution to provide shelter to the unhoused people who are reluctant to go into congregate shelters (because of the many requirements such as sobriety, separation from pets and partners, reduction of their possessions), especially members of the racial or sexual minorities who are harassed in those places. However, public authorities have long been reluctant to commit themselves to supporting villages, preferring instead to fund more beds in congregate shelters. As I was told by a grassroots organization leader: ‘In 2019, we had a conversation with the mayor about arrests and stuff: “look, you need to create places where people can shelter safely” [villages] and later we were told that that will never happen, that was what Mayor Wheeler’s staff told us’ (manager, Hygiene4All). Similarly, for many years, the first informal villages (*Dignity Village, R2DToo*) had to resist the city’s strategies in order to survive and be recognized. However, recent changes to the situation show that it is now the local government which launches initiatives to encourage the development of this model; indeed, the first villages are paradoxically cited by public authorities as an inspiration: ‘C3PO reflects what we have

learned throughout our emergency response to homelessness. [...] this project is inspired by the Village Model for shelter, created by Dignity Village in 2000, which is collectively self-governed and operated by shelter participants' (City of Portland and Multnomah County, undated)⁹. The pandemic, then, made public authorities willing to develop more villages for addressing the crisis, which was seized upon as an opportunity by grassroots organizations to put forward their own claims and turn them into reality.

Official recognition or redirection of the tiny home village model?

Despite the appropriation of the village model by public authorities, the 'official' villages operate in a way that is unlike the informal ones. The local government develops these villages under the same protocol by which they manage congregate shelters. A call for proposals is launched by the JOHS to nonprofits to operate these villages on a daily basis and provide social services to the people living there. Consequently, some of the people involved in the development of Dignity Village or R2DToo recognize the relevance of these public initiatives but also criticize the way these 'official' villages are operated. According to them, the way nonprofits run these villages is a long way from the self-management and autonomy which was initially promoted in Dignity Village. The autonomy of the individuals would be reduced as a result of the power given to nonprofits and public authorities in the operation of these *outdoor shelters*, leading to misunderstandings between homeless advocates and the JOHS about the way to run a village:

I just have a hard time circling the square to know where all of these folks are coming from, like "don't have nothing to do with it, just give us property and leave us alone"

⁹ Even though they are supposed to be managed by residents, the institutional villages operate differently. Residents need to be referred by public stakeholders (Police officers, Park rangers, JOHS' outreach workers). Many resources are available on site (food, case managers, outreach workers) and residents are expected to commit in programs that are offered on site.

[...]. And you can't do that as a government entity because we're automatically responsible, if something goes bad [...] (JOHS employee).

As mentioned above, C3PO comes from a coalition of grassroots organizations that drove the development of the three villages in the context of the pandemic. As such, they started to operate the newly-built villages, relying on practices aimed at creating social relations, self-management and empowerment, reproducing what happened in *Dignity Village* or *R2DToo*. As a result of their experience, the R2DToo managers were placed at the head of C3PO. Seeing the opportunity to make their beliefs a reality, several of these grassroots organizations funded a part of the process with their own budgets. Although these villages were initially supposed to operate for only three years, the public authorities decided to retain what had been built in response to pressing needs. However, in order for them to benefit from public funds, it was necessary to make these villages fit within the *outdoor shelter* category, in particular by assigning their operation to a professional services provider. The city then launched a call for proposals to which many nonprofits responded, especially those that were used to working with public authorities. The arrival on site of the selected nonprofit was not without tensions with grassroots organizations and homeless advocates whose practices and visions were fundamentally different. The grassroots organizations which were extensively involved in the management of the C3PO villages, often on a volunteering basis, have encountered employees of a professional nonprofit organization imposing various practices and procedures, even though this organization had never run a shelter or a village before. Taking into account their differences of opinion with public authorities with regard to goals and ways of operating these villages, the R2DToo managers promptly withdrew from this project. According to a grassroots organization manager, who was very involved at the beginning of the process and in the development of these villages, their own practices were

rejected in favor of others that were more focused on results instead of on a sense of belonging. There is also a feeling of having been courted by public authorities at the beginning of the process, at the most difficult stage, before being ejected from the management because they held different views to those of the local government: ‘That really depresses me because we put money, we put time, the city did not pay any of us, we paid into that to support it. What is really upsetting is that the city is like [...]: “we don’t want to work with you because, you have things to say that we won’t fix”’ (manager, Hygiene4All). Several of the volunteers who have been part of the development of these C3PO villages were demoralized, feeling that the efforts to promote alternative forms of shelter which respond to the needs of homeless people had been invalidated and erased through this institutionalization (Zielinski, 2021).

The new city rules aim to increase flexibility in the conditions for developing alternative shelters (whether Safe Rest Villages or outdoor shelters). But paradoxically, through the obligation to include a professional service provider approved by public authorities, they tend to dismiss the small grassroots organizations in favor of bigger organizations which are used to working with the city, which are more a part of the poverty industry (Willse, 2015) and which have a more prescriptive, top-down view of the solutions needed to end the housing crisis. From that perspective, it becomes clear that the institutionalization and formalization of the village model could lead to a depoliticization of villages for the homeless. In the long term, this public management could run counter to the initial goal of the first informal villages: the autonomy of the homeless and the opportunity for those who remain away from congregate shelters to find a place to call home. And doing so by reproducing the limits associated with congregate shelters (Evans, 2011).

Moreover, these changes challenge the idea of tiny home villages as low-cost infrastructures. The institutionalization of the village model indeed requires to follow zoning code and city's requirements (professional service provider, outreach workers on site, permits and authorizations) in order to include villages in the *shelter to housing continuum*. All of these requirements make the "official" villages much more expensive than the first informal villages. Public authorities indeed spent \$ 16,8 million for developing the Safe rest Villages and requested an additional \$28,1 million to fund the program until 2024 (City of Portland, 2022c). As mentioned by the City of Portland (*Ibid*), village style alternative costs \$30000 to \$35000 per unit per year (compared to \$20000 to \$25000 per shelter bed per year). According to a recent publication by PSU researchers (Ferry *et al*, 2022), the St-John's Village cost \$1.3 million to develop.

Conclusion

The example of the homeless villages in Portland highlights the ways in which informal housing practices are not limited to the megacities of the Global South but have also entered the governance of the cities of the west coast of the USA. In order to address the emergence of informal homeless villages in the city, public authorities adopt a variable strategy, ranging from the suspension of laws (to give them the space to operate) to recognizing the villages or destroying them. Within the context of the housing crisis, the effectiveness of these villages in providing a safe shelter to people living on the streets led the city to import this model, by drawing on the example of the existing villages and shaping them in a way that responds to the goals of public policies. Although these informal practices have been progressively transforming city regulations and homelessness policies for years, the pandemic accelerated the momentum of this institutionalization of the village model. Even though some informal

villages have been dismantled or displaced, both the importance of the housing crisis that hit Portland and the visibility of homelessness in the inner areas of the city led public authorities to institutionalize informal villages. As it requires to follow some rules to run a tiny home village, this institutionalization ensures the safety of the individuals living in villages and give the opportunity for public authorities to provide outreach services and housing support to help them to get access to housing. In that perspective, the institutionalization of tiny home villages is an innovative solution for including the informal housing practices that arose from grassroots organizations in public policies and for providing shelter to houseless individuals. It is therefore good that the local government includes tiny-home villages in public policies to respond to homelessness. But this institutionalization is not immune of contradictions. On the one hand, the many criteria that define how and where to build a tiny home village does not give the opportunity to the city to act quickly to address the housing crisis. The implementation of the Safe Rest Villages is a good example of the difficulties for public authorities to find locations that fit all the criteria. Out of the six villages that should have opened by the end of 2021, only 2 sites are operational in 2023. On the other hand, the institutionalization transforms the ways in which the informal villages were initially operating. Relying as it does on multiple criteria and rules for developing a village, this institutionalization can run counter to the effectiveness and the qualities originally associated with the informal homeless villages. Due to the desire of public authorities to control the villages and to outsource their operation to professional services providers, this mode of management conflicts to some extent with the principles of autonomy and self-management, considered as a key element in the capacity of the villages to empower the homeless (Sparks, 2017). While the first villages that developed informally several years ago could be “registered in their capacity to configure alternative modes of being and living in the city” (Lancione, 2019, p.4), the way tiny home villages are institutionalized by public authorities

tend to foreclose the radical housing practices (*Ibid*) which underpinned the emergence of informal villages. The regulations and standards set by the local government then appear to be overly restrictive, thus precluding other potentially radical solutions to homelessness. Indeed, the rules that third sector organizations must follow in order to develop and operate tiny-home villages prevent the self-managed village model to grow. However, several stakeholders mentioned that some groups of the unhoused population, especially chronically houseless individuals, are more likely to move into these self-managed villages than in city's managed villages. The focus on institutional villages could thus alienate some houseless individuals.

Furthermore, the institutionalization of the tiny home village model does not address the root causes of homelessness such as the uncontrolled rent increases and lack of affordable housing. Even though tiny-home villages are mentioned by city officials as a solution to the housing crisis, it remains an emergency response that only provides temporary shelter to unhoused people. But it is not housing and civil society has to continue to pressure public authorities for building more affordable housing. Overall, the situation illustrates how public authorities cope with the rise of austerity urbanism (Peck, 2012) and informal housing practices in the cities of the Global North; between permissiveness and control, between *laissez-faire* and regulation. In this gap, post-crisis urbanism is evolving, between politicization from below and making use of the grassroots movements.

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