



Tent city, Seattle: Refusing homelessness and making a home, by Tony Sparks

Seattle, Washington, University of Washington Press, 2024

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BOOK REVIEW

Tent city, Seattle: Refusing homelessness and making a home, by Tony Sparks, Seattle, Washington, University of Washington Press, 2024

Homelessness emerged as a major contemporary national housing issue in the 1980s. It continues to present a serious challenge, exacerbated by the need for housing for an influx of asylum seekers along the southern border and in major cities like New York. A December 2023 Point in Time count report by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development found that 653,100 were experiencing homelessness in the United States (Connolly, 2024). In many cities on the West Coast, the homeless outnumber available places in shelters, leading to encampments in public spaces. This is true in Seattle and surrounding King County, where both of their governments have announced plans to try to end homelessness through shelters and permanent low-income supportive housing. Meanwhile, many homeless have sought shelter in these encampments. *Tent City, Seattle* tells the tale of an unusual encampment.

Concern over the proliferation of these encampments escalated with a ruling in 2018 by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in *Martin v. Boise* that governments could not enforce camping bans in the absence of sufficient shelter space. This was based on an interpretation of the Eighth Amendment's clause protecting against cruel and unusual punishment. That circuit revisited the issue in a case brought by a resident of Grants Pass, Oregon, in which it was removing homeless campers and fining them for camping on public property without providing any shelter at all for the homeless. The Ninth Circuit again ruled that this was a violation of the Eighth Amendment. On June 28, 2024, a 6–3 conservative majority of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Grants Pass v. Johnson* overruled the Ninth Circuit and found that the Eighth Amendment did not prevent localities from determining how to handle homeless encampments (Connolly, 2024). Reaction to the Supreme Court's ruling included California governor Gavin Newsom issuing a July 25, 2024, executive order requiring state agencies to remove homeless encampments in their jurisdictions and urging California cities to do the same (Smith et al., 2024).

Just 2 months before the U.S. Supreme Court decision, Tony Sparks, an associate professor of urban studies at San Francisco State University, published his study of the Tent City 3 homeless encampment in Seattle. Tent City 3 was founded in 2003 under a 2002 court order which allowed it to be located on private property on the condition that it moves every 90 days. It is organized as a very small city. With up to 100 resident adults, churches, colleges (including the University of Washington) and other receptive organizations have hosted sites. From September 7 through December 21, 2024, it is located at the University Congregational United Church of Christ. It is a project of SHARE/WHEEL (Seattle Housing and Resource Effort/Women's Housing Equality and Enhancement League). In 2015, Seattle declared a state of homeless emergency. Seattle has a One Seattle Homelessness Action Plan, which includes a Unified Care Team involved in the care of homeless encampments on public property. For the second quarter of 2024, it reported a tent count of 288 in June 2024 (Craighead, 2024).

While the city's Republican city attorney praised the Supreme Court opinion, its Democratic mayor stated that it would not change the city's policy, which now allows encampments without periodic movement orders, as well as clearing public streets when necessary. As of 2023, there were nine homeless "villages" in Seattle, a combination of tents and tiny houses, supported by the Low Income Housing Institute.

Sparks became involved with Tent City 3 as a graduate student at the University of Washington when he became aware of it at Seattle University, near where he was living. As a graduate student, he decided to conduct an ethnographic study and lived in Tent City 3 after his acceptance as a researcher by the residents for 7 months in 2005–2006. Sparks explained his interest in the workings of this encampment in an interview with the Seattle newspaper *The Stranger* (Willems,

2024). In his introduction to the book, Sparks cited two main themes in understanding the encampment and its operation as “home” for residents: first, their feeling of being dehumanized on the streets and in shelters and second, the tent city as a place where they could reclaim dignity, freedom and respect (p. 14). Before addressing this unique encampment situation, he recounts the past Seattle history of the displacing of natives, the homeless, and victims of the Great Depression by what he terms the “settler colonial” history and a “propertied white supremacy” class, which excludes the homeless.

Sparks describes the participatory, self-governing structure of the Tent City 3 encampment, both its success and its problems. Much of his research through interviews with the regularly changing composition of residents is recounted throughout the book, including his own experience with the regular duties (e.g., conducting safety patrols, collecting and stocking supplies, seeking host sites, helping in the periodic required site relocations) required of residents and contained in their code of conduct. Failure to comply can lead to at least temporary expulsion from the encampment as ordered by its elected executive committee. Throughout the book, Sparks praises the performance of the good campers in “caring, commoning, and collectivity” (p. 92).

Yet, Sparks also reveals the feelings of some residents who feel shunned or not treated as equals by outsiders, including even those such as members of the churches that have provided sites for the encampments. And not all support the strict rules of conduct and their enforcement.

In his interview with *The Stranger* (Willems, 2024), Sparks said:

From a policy perspective, opening ourselves up to understanding the various ways in which people can be at home, when, in homeless policy, there is no concept of home and there’s no concept of being together. And so I think policies could be formulated that foreground the idea of home.


With many cities, both in the past and after the U.S. Supreme Court decision in July 2024, clearing homeless encampments, Sparks provides insight into how these encampments can actually provide a better alternative to shelters for the homeless. Of course, Tent City 3, with support from its many hosts, is not a typical homeless encampment. Absent programs which could actually provide adequately supportive housing for the homeless (as in the Housing First programs), Sparks makes an impressive argument for creating situations where those living outside public shelters can make a decent home. Forcing the homeless into those shelters, if available, when encampments are cleared by cities when many find them unlivable is hardly a permanent solution to this problem, as voiced by some of Sparks’s interviewees. Even the city of Seattle, which has done more than most cities in trying to provide supportive housing and has received financial assistance from Amazon’s Housing Equity Fund but only has 1,535 shelter units (Sundberg, 2024), has not managed to solve this problem.

Sparks presents the views of the homeless themselves in this portrait of this continuing housing crisis, which is a needed component in addressing this issue. While many do have behavioral problems attributable to mental and addiction issues, Sparks shows that increasingly the homeless are more those displaced by social and economic factors but are unable to secure adequate housing, particularly in cities with high housing costs such as Seattle. Other cities can benefit from this Seattle experience in trying to cope with homeless encampments.

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