



Picturing the Homeless, Building International Solidarities

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Abstract

In this conversation, Rob Robinson shares reflections based upon decades of organizing and community building with tenants and homeless residents in New York City, as well as transnationally with groups based in Hungary, Brazil, Miami, Spain, and beyond. While Rob shares insights from his own experience being unhoused, he also focuses upon ongoing work of which he has been a part since then, with groups such as Picture the Homeless that have organized against the criminalization of homelessness. By discussing campaigns and actions in which he has participated, Rob shares organizing tactics and theorizes the importance of civil disobedience and international solidarity. He also reflects upon the importance of learning and education, both regarding his work as a teacher but also as a lifelong student.

Keywords

Homelessness, international solidarity, New York City, organizing, policing

Erin McElroy: *I first met Rob Robinson in Bucharest, Romania, in 2018. I was living there at the time, supporting groups such as the Frontul Comun pentru Dreptul la Locuire (Common Front for Housing Rights / FCDL), when Rob, along with our dear comrade Mary Taylor, visited us at the FCDL from New York City. Both are active supporters of A Város Mindenkié (The City is For All), a grassroots organization*



based in Budapest, Hungary, composed of homeless and formerly homeless residents fighting for housing and social justice. Part of the goal of our Bucharest meeting was to strengthen connections between housing and homeless support groups between Bucharest and Budapest.

Since first meeting Rob in Eastern Europe, I have gotten to spend time with him back in New York City through groups such as the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, in which we are both active participants. Rob has been at the forefront of struggles for just housing and against the criminalization of homelessness for years in New York City, while also forging new international solidarities globally.

As part of the Radical Housing Journal's special issue on the criminalization of homelessness, I met with Rob to interview him about his own encounters with housing precarity and carcerality, as well as on the ongoing international political education work and alliance building in which he has been integral over the last two decades.

EM: Rob, since this special issue of the Radical Housing Journal is about the criminalization of homelessness, I'd love to start with your own experiences. I know that you were unhoused in the past, and that you've been engaged in tons of work since then to support unhoused people.

Rob Robinson: You know, Erin, that I spent two-and-a-half years on the streets of Miami, and ten months in a New York City homeless shelter. My experiences don't necessarily mirror that of others. I often clarify that. I don't know the reasons why, but the policing and criminalization that I've seen lodged against unhoused people here in New York and elsewhere were never pointed at me directly when I was homeless. I often sit back and try to figure out why.

But I've seen a lot. I've seen people be criminalized for doing normal human things like urinating in public when they have no other place to go. You know, I don't think people necessarily want to urinate or relieve themselves in public, but if you don't provide them a public bathroom, what are they left to do? Processes like this launch a criminalization process that prevents unhoused people from eventually becoming housed. If you're unhoused, chances are you're not working and you can't find stable employment. So you can't pay the fines that you get for public urination, and you may get a couple of them. In New York City, where I'm based, if you get three of those types of violations, it could lead to a felony. Once you get a felony on your record, you're excluded from public housing. Public housing was always considered a social safety net in this country for poor people and low income folks, but not if you have a criminal record. We've seen it play out that way. We've seen folks who are just trying to get some rest trying to put their head down and they become criminalized, because all of a sudden, they fell asleep in a public place or public park or in a metro station train station. So it plays out in a number of ways.

And then, I've been privy to being involved in some national legislation here in the US. You know, it's funny, you'd never think, as an unhoused person, that you'd end up in a space like

that— a space of public policy change and legal testimony where people are seeking your opinion. I've been in front of a particular case called *Martin versus Boise*, where we testified in front of Congress. We took it to Geneva, to the United Nations.

EM: Based on what you've witnessed over the last ten or twenty years, do you think that there has been a shift in terms of how criminalization works, or the rates of homeless criminalization in the US?

RR: I think that there has been somewhat of a shift. I want to be real here—as you know it plays out on racial lines in this country. It has always been divided by race and because of the color of your skin. A lot of this stuff happens to you just based on the color of your skin and what you're perceived to be.

Some of that has shifted and it's sad to say that I give credit to somebody being killed, but after George Floyd was killed, I have seen more and more people in this country say “Enough!” And when I say the people, I'm talking about Black people, white people—you know, as somebody who is a proponent of direct action and civil disobedience, I thought it was incredible to see Black folks out in the streets saying “We're not going to take it anymore.” But there were also white allies standing side by side with them saying, “We're not going to take it anymore.” I was always fascinated by the photos that I would see of the white allies getting in between their Black comrades and the police, saying, “Well, if you're going to do the violence, you're going to have to hit me first.” This was a huge shift for me in this country. I mean, that triggered a whole bunch of reactions for some stuff off the ground regarding racialization and criminalization. Going back to the UN, there have been efforts to get a hearing on racial justice and structural racism in the US. So all of this has definitely helped raise awareness.

So yes, things have shifted. That said, I don't think we're yet in a good place because, even today, acts of violence against the homeless and other people continue.

You know, New York is sort of the poster child for this criminalization. Years ago, there was a woman that was hit with a brick in the street during Mayor Giuliani's term as mayor, and everybody pointed the finger at the homeless. And Mayor Giuliani set off a bunch of raids on shelters, to try to find these “criminals,” saying that the culprit was definitely homeless folks living in the shelters. So you know there were these raids overnight, and people and children were woken up in the middle of the night and taken to jail, many of them not even knowing why they were being taken. And then, at the end of the day, the person accused of throwing a brick wasn't a homeless person. But you know, it just says how people think, and how people perceive other people. You know, you would think over the years that there would be change. But you know, Giuliani was Mayor in the 90s and that's not too long ago, right?

It is shifting a little bit. Folks are organizing and educating themselves. I come from a group called Picture the Homeless. Those types of summons that I mentioned earlier—sleeping in the public, drinking in public, open container, and all those little violations that if you didn't pay, it turned into a felony— well people started educating themselves. They realized that in New York, when police write out one of those summons and call it “disorderly conduct,”

the conduct has to be clearly spelled out on the ticket. So Picture the Homeless started a campaign in the early 2000s, where they would take the tickets and write on the back of it, “Disorderly conduct, no illegality alleged.” And they would send them back to the New York City Police Department. And the number of those tickets getting written started to decrease, year by year, in substantial numbers.

EM: That's such an amazing action that Picture the Homeless did. Could you share a little bit more about how the group got started and what they do today?

RR: So Picture the Homeless really began after the cops started raiding the homeless shelters. Two of the founders were in the shelter and they decided, “Enough is enough, we have to organize ourselves.” And they started pushing back and talking about the homeless, and meeting out in public spaces just to have discussions. And then somehow word got back to a social justice church in New York called Judson Memorial Church on the border of Washington Square Park. The church offered them the ability to meet in a dignified space, and the organization was formed with that idea in mind.

You know, because we're homeless doesn't mean we can't think. It doesn't mean we can't organize ourselves and empower ourselves to push back on a system. The group really highlighted the injustice of policies that target specific populations.

So it started in 1999, and just built itself up over the years. One of its major campaigns was the one that I was talking about with the summons notices. That really proved to be an effective strategy.

EM: It really does speak to the importance of direct action.

RR: I think you know me well enough, Erin, that I'm a firm believer that we've never retrieved any social change in this country without a direct action or civil disobedience component attached to it. You know, intentionally breaking an unjust law—that's the way you are going to get change, that's where you get recognition.

That said, despite all that we've learned about this, folks still rightfully have fear of police. We talked about criminalization. It can be scary for folks subject to police violence to engage in direct actions because that can lead to more criminalization. Even as an ally, if you came out and supported Picture the Homeless, it could subject you to criminalization, right? So criminalization really has an effect on our society in a negative way, but you know, I do credit people and homeless folks who are suffering injustice for coming up with ways to combat it all. That's pretty incredible.

EM: It's really incredible especially in New York City, where police can be so violent.

RR: You know, I always struggle with this. I have a reputation as somebody who can hold off the police. But it's a skill set I learned by studying what happened to people in the past. When I got into direct action and civil disobedience, I watched a lot of videos and films on the Black Panthers and the Young Lords. And you know, obviously police violence was a part of all that. They beat people with sticks based upon the color of their skin.

There was a moment for me in 2008 when, as a member of Picture the Homeless, I was attending these meetings for a national alliance called the Right to the City Alliance. And there was a huge conference that was going to take place in New York called the Future of New York. Mayor Bloomberg, JPMorgan Chase, and ConEdison all got together to set up this luncheon which was \$250 a plate to decide on what New York would look like in 2013. We got wind of this and we decided that, you know, “Nothing about us without us is,” as that saying goes. So we organized ourselves. And with a brother by the name of Henry, who was working with Community Voices at the time, we organized a group to go in and bust up the keynote speech, which was going to be made by Mayor Bloomberg. Just as he started to give his keynote speech, we walked into a room with 100 people of color, mostly young folks, chanting, “Show us what democracy looks like, this is what democracy looks like!”

I was one of eight people arrested for that act of civil disobedience. And it encouraged me to start challenging the police. Now I had progressive legal representation who said, “If you want to make a political trial out of it, go for it. You could drag this over three years if you want, I’ve got nothing but time.” And that’s kind of what we did. So I had an open case for my first act of civil disobedience with Picture the Homeless. And after going to Miami and visiting the folks there with Take Back the Land, we moved on to a building on 116th Street and Madison Avenue in East Harlem. And I stepped up, and I said, “I want to be the police negotiator.” And everybody’s jaw dropped and they were like looking at me. I said, “Yeah I want to do this job. I want to confront the police.” You know, I’ve seen these films about police being very violent and I was determined not to let that violence be sprung on me. I don’t know what gave me the courage, but I was ready to challenge them. To this day, people still talk about me standing on Madison Avenue dealing with all types of high-level New York City police, and they’re just like frozen in place nobody’s vamping on me, and folks said that “You are monotone in your approach, you didn’t get agitated, the cops didn’t know how to react to you.” But one of the key things that I say that was a huge difference—I never liked those metal cages that they put us in, so my thought was—I’ve seen this in the Panther films—they come with those metal cages, okay I’ve got to stand in them, we’ve all got to stand in them. So when the police came to that action where there were 300 people marching up, I just had to step into the street. They asked me to go on the sidewalk. I said, “No, I’m going to stand right here. We’re going to shut down Madison Avenue. We’re all going to be in the cage. We’re all monkeys in the cage right now. So whatever you want to do, the whole world’s watching, and you know we’re going to stand here.” And I stood on Madison Avenue and negotiated with them for the better part of twelve hours, I think. It showed people that there is a way to push back on a system. I’m not gonna say that it’s easy to do this when you’re constantly looking at police with their guns on their sides and they’re flapping those sticks in their hands—it’s hard to remain monotone. I don’t know if a lot of people can do it, but you know, for me, it was something for the people to see, that we can make this work, our way.

It’s not going to always work out because—let’s fast forward twelve, fourteen years later—George Floyd. A cop put his knee on his neck while a crowd was there, so it might work. If it works in one city, it doesn’t necessarily work in another. But it did send a message to our movements that we can work through this and figure out something, and we can push back

on the system. But you know, we all had the vivid pictures in our minds of the cop kneeling on George Floyd's neck years later. It's something that we constantly have to fight.

I think homeless folks are at a disadvantage, more so than you and I would be, at an action. I say this because when you are fighting through homelessness and being unhoused, you're carrying a lot of baggage. There's a lot of stuff going through your mind. And the last thing you're thinking about is the police. You're thinking, "Where can I put my head? I need some rest." And then the minute you close my eyes, somebody comes and wakes you up.

I never went through this when I was homeless, but it always made me angry when I would watch the cops wake up someone sleeping on the train. The cops come up with their batons and bang it the metal. What do you think the reaction is going to be, if your monkey ass was laying there, and I approached you and banged on that pole, how would you react, right?

And then, once you overreact because you don't know, you're startled, then they're ready to start hitting you with the baton. You see this violence, and it's endorsed in many ways by state and local governments.

That said, people are getting into elected office, some that come from some of the same places that many of us are coming from, understanding what types of policies need to be ready to change. So you're seeing a shift in some localities and some local places, and it all has to start at the local level. That shift has to be on the local level and filter up. However, we need to get it more widespread, because our country has always been divided. It's still divided along those lines. Political parties are divided, so it's a challenge. But I think, if we keep working and getting like-minded people into political office to make that change, you know we'll start to see that change take root over a period of time.

EM: Yes, there are definitely changes happening on local levels that once may have seemed impossible.

RR: You know, many people said to me, "Why don't you run for an elected office?" I think we need people in those positions to create the types of policies that work for the people. I'm just not the one to do it—I can't stomach electoral politics. But I do believe we have to make political links. And, and by that I mean we have to get folks on the inside.

I'll use structures, because I do believe that electoral politics are structures. If you want to dismantle a structure, you need to know how it was constructed. You have to get inside, and then you can take it apart to then create a new structure.

EM: As you were saying earlier, we also need to be engaging in political education, so that people can learn about how different changes occurred in the past. You were mentioning watching Black Panther footage to better understand how to engage in civil disobedience, for instance.

RR: Yes, it's hard here, in the US. You know because you come from the international community. I do also, and you know, you see this happening in other places around the world and sometimes I get down on social movements here, because I think they suffer from some of the same exceptional attitudes that the government does.

You know, I'm fascinated by what is happening in places like Barcelona, and some other places too like Berlin, where there are these radical voices stepping up and then getting elected, getting into office. I'm always fascinated by the story of the Platform for People Affected by Mortgages (Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca / PAH). You know, I always say, back in 2013, there was Ada Colau holding the other end of a banner with me on Park Avenue in New York City protesting against Blackstone. And now she's the mayor of Barcelona! And I don't want to fantasize about it either. There are challenges there too because when a woman like Ada gets into office, then people try to try to hold her back. So she's facing the establishment. But she got inside, so you know it, it means something right?

EM: Maybe you could talk more just about the importance of these international solidarities, since we first met in Bucharest. I know you've been connected with groups in Hungary and beyond.

RR: In 2013, I was invited by a social movement in Brazil, The Movement of People Affected by Dams (Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens / MAB), to visit São Paulo. On the last day of the trip, they took all their international comrades to downtown São Paulo to see a museum that had been a jail during the dictatorship. And São Paulo is a huge city, you know, there are a lot of houseless folks, folks who are hungry and emaciated living on the street. And I'm walking through downtown and I totally understand what I'm seeing—I've lived that life. And so, I'm sounding off for lack of a better way, to say I'm just vocalizing my disgust with the government. And I had an incredible moment with three Venezuelan oil platform workers who surrounded me. They said to me, "Rob, take it easy. We understand your anger, but you know, you don't have the freedom to be talking anti-government language. You have to be careful here." And it was just this incredible moment for me. I come from a place where I can vocalize my opinion, not as freely as everybody might think, but I have a little more freedom than those folks have there. I started to say "Okay, I do have to be careful because, even if nothing happens to me—what happens to my comrades once I leave?" So I have to be very careful with the language I use.

But what I found is in some of these other movements around the world, is that people believe in a cause. And I think part of our problem here is that a lot of community-based organizing is funded by philanthropy, which I think tends to dictate the work. That's problematic.

But as I've seen in so many places around the world—It's not about getting those philanthropic dollars, it's about things needing to change. And we're organizing ourselves to make change, and that is powerful to me.

I was in Medellin, Colombia, and I was going to a housing open meeting where there were like 25 or 30 people in the room who were barefoot. They had to walk to the meeting without shoes on their feet, but this meeting was important, they had to be there. If I ask somebody here to attend a meeting, there are questions, and I understand—Is there going to be food? Is there going to be transportation? Listen, you know we've got an issue that we need to discuss. It sounds like I'm being petty here, but I lay it out like this to say—what is the level of importance? How people react to you know situations and what's powerful to them?

To be in places like Hungary and Romania and push back on oppressive political leadership there—I'm fascinated by that also. There's a lot of pride in me, as you know, I was involved with a group in Budapest, Hungary, called A Város Mindenkié (The City is For All). And when people talk about a well-organized social justice group, that name always comes up. And there's a part of me that just smiles. Pretty cool right? I know the membership there. You know, I'm always fascinated by that pushing back, especially when you live amongst a prime minister, like Victor Orbán and the way he treats people. But these folks are still fighting in the face of that political oppression, and pushing back. I think there's a lot to be said for that. I've just taken away so much—the wealth of connections, the people that I've met, and the sharing of strategies and tactics.

I would like to see more interest in international struggles here in the US. Just to give you an example. In Spain and with the People Affected by Mortgages (PAH)—some of their membership is coming to the US in a couple of weeks, and you know I'm a comrade of theirs. They reached out and said to me, “We want to discuss strategies and tactics on evictions with folks in the US.” You know, of course, I'm going to connect them with grassroots groups here like the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project and other groups. So I'm trying to set it up. But you know, I feel a little resistance, people telling me that they don't have time. You know, that turns me off. I say, “Alright, I'm not gonna waste your time. I'm sorry if you don't want to learn.” But hopefully I can put the PAH folks in good spaces where those types of exchanges can happen.

You know, evictions lead to homelessness right? And you know, it's a violent process. But we're all going through the same thing around the country and around the world and we need to connect. Some people used to say, “It's too hard. There's an ocean between us.” But today we have the technology to talk to people. You know, we just have to be willing to use that technology for the right purposes.

EM: Yes, it sounds like refusal to engage in transnational connections speaks to what you were saying earlier about US exceptionalism. I know that it can be really demoralizing to encounter that sort of resistance, especially those of us who have been part of movements very much oriented towards international solidarity.

RR: You know, I'm always referred to as a leader. Sometimes I have to bite my tongue when it comes to this. I want to say, “Know you all need to open up your mind a little bit and learn from elsewhere, because people have been through this shit and they've handled it a lot better than you're handling it. And they're not waiting on a check from Ford foundation or some foundation to make the change. They make shit happen.

EM: Speaking of education, there's so much to learn about the history of pacifying revolutionary movements in the US through funding, again going back to various Cold War attempts to subdue the Panthers and other movements.

RR: Right, and I think that's the key—education and how willing you are to receive it right. Sometimes, if you use that term here in the US, “education,” you're almost insulting people: “Oh, so you're going to educate me?” Well, listen, we all can learn something, right? I know my game plan is to keep on learning until I'm six feet under.

EM: Going back to education, you mentioned *Martin versus Boise* earlier, a 2018 decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals in response to a 2009 lawsuit by six unhoused plaintiffs against Boise, Idaho’s anti-camping ordinance. The court ruling held that cities cannot enforce anti-camping ordinances if they lack enough homeless shelter beds.

RR: Yes, the case showed that collaborations with communities, policymakers, and some lawyers can be effective. It really got the attention of the federal government because the federal government was afraid of us going overseas and shaming them. But how do you make that happen with the local government? That's a bit of a challenge. So while you know some good things happen as a result of the *Martin vs Boise* case on the federal level, there’s a lot of work to be done on a local level, because, as you know, as we know—there are sweeps that are happening all over the place now.

And here’s another angle. As an organizer who firmly believes in the right to a home, I do sometimes struggle with the right of somebody to remain on the street. The mantra that I stand on is that everybody deserves a dignified, affordable, clean place to live—a human right to a home. So I think those two things aren’t mutually exclusive, but there are many people that will say, “No, they are.” They are connected in a way, but it's something I struggle with. What am I saying when I say I want that person to be able to sleep on the sidewalk? People will drill down on rights versus what I've always stood on—everybody deserves the right to a clean, affordable place. I struggle with that quite a bit.

And it's put me in a weird spot when you start to think about it—do you fight back against the sweeps? I often think of where the sweeps are happening because, for me, I always reflect on when I was unhoused. I was in the sun in Miami. There are many people who think, “Well, you're on the beach, it's great, it's Miami.” But the sun was kicking my ass, and I knew I had to get out of it. I can't deal with it right? And I think the same thing here in New York. If I'm fighting for people to remain out on the street in the winter, what am I doing? I struggle with a lot of that.

I don't know the perfect answer, but I do know when you do a sweep, you don't need to be violent. I know that you know you need to find a better way. So there are a lot of things going on as this stuff happens. I don't pretend to have all the perfect answers, but I do think the community needs to get together, we need to find humane ways to handle these issues. I think we've gotten away from humanity. Maybe that's the best way to phrase it. We've lacked humanity in some of these solutions, and I think we have to learn to be more humane about what’s happening.

EM: I know that you talked about being a lifelong student earlier. But you’re also a teacher, and you’re doing a ton of work to educate young folks. What are some main points that you try to impart upon your students?

RR: Well, I start off with humanity. You know some of us have been on the earth for x number of years; we've experienced a lot of things. I've been open about sharing my personal life as an African American, and really threading it through structural racism in the US. I've made a package or a toolkit for folks to say, “Here you go, this is what I've lived through. This was the history before I was born. This is what my parents lived through. This is what's happening

now. And it's all problematic. Some things haven't changed, but you now have it all laid out in front of you in a way that I never had it laid out in front of me. So I've given you the toolbox. Go out and make the change.”

I love when I see young folks getting educated and wanting to do public interest work, particularly in the legal community. Because when you're talking about criminalization, you're going to want to interact with progressive political policy people and legal folks. That's what I like to drop on them.

I'm fascinated with the number of young folks that are attempting to go in and understand their role in all of this. They didn't find the world that they were led to believe existed. The reality that they were exposed to is something totally different. You graduate from school, you get a degree, you have loan repayments, and all the shit that is surrounding you. There are some folks that say, “Oh, you came from a place of privilege.” But you know, what fascinates me is when someone says, “Okay, I get it, it might be privileged in your eyes, but what I do know is some of the shit out here is fucked up. Now I'm going to take my degree and make a change.”

I am so fascinated by that, and watching some young folks take that knowledge and put it back into the communities in such productive ways to make change and build a new world. It just fascinates me. So as long as I can keep tools in their toolbox, that's one of the reasons why I do all these interviews with students.

I came up at a time where people were fantasizing over the American dream. And then I lived my life and said, “That's bullshit. Stop drinking that Kool-Aid.” And to be able to back it up with experiences is another way of teaching. It's not necessarily by the book. What I'm teaching wasn't formalizing and curriculum; it's curriculum that I built from working with people like you and others.

EM: There are so many students that are so lucky to be able to work with you. I know everyone at the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project is.

RR: I love being there. You have a collection of young folks sitting at a table with you and just to sit back, and don't misunderstand me—I learned from them also, right? And you know, the willingness to share—they have certain skill sets and technical skills, and I have certain historical contexts. We collaborate, we understand each other, and we work together because we want to make change. Everybody can contribute to that change, and I think that's the fundamental understanding that really works in that space.

EM: Well, as an AEMP member, I'm endlessly grateful, as are so many other people in the project. And hopefully those reading this interview in the *Radical Housing Journal* too will really appreciate you taking the time to share all of this with us.