



Blueprint for the future: Unhoused Tenant Organizing in Los Angeles

After Echo Park Lake Research Collective

The After Echo Park Lake Research Collective is based at the UCLA Luskin Institute on Inequality and Democracy and brings together university and movement-based scholars with unhoused comrades to study displacement in Los Angeles. We analyze and challenge systems of housing insecurity and scrutinize the investment of public resources in the criminalization of poverty and in carceral housing. Our research is a counterpoint to racial banishment and seeks to advance housing justice in Los Angeles and worldwide. Collective members include Ashley Bennett, Jennifer Blake, Jonny Coleman, Hannah Cornfield, La Donna Harrell, Terrie Klein, Sam Lutzker, Hilary Malson, Jessica Mendez, Carla Orendorff, Gustavo Otzoy, Annie Powers, Chloe Rosenstock, Ananya Roy, Rayne Laborde Ruiz, and William Sens, Jr. **Contact:** anniebpowers@gmail.com

Abstract

During the Covid-19 pandemic, an organized encampment at Echo Park Lake in Los Angeles built community infrastructure that articulated a clear vision of a world built on class solidarity. But the success of the community also represented a threat to the racial capitalist order, and in March of 2021, the city deployed hundreds of riot police to mass evict the encampment and fence the park. This strategy became a blueprint for displacement replicated across the city, one in which services were conjoined to enforcement. But those who organized at Echo Park Lake continued the fight, creating their own blueprint for the ongoing fight for housing liberation.

Keywords

Organized encampment, eviction, homelessness, unhoused tenants, state repression.

Imagine a world where there was no 'bottom.' One where your neighbor was your neighbor because they're your neighbor not because of tax brackets or real estate. A world where good is done for the sake of good not gain. In the past few months, we, the unhoused community at Echo Park Lake, have been creating the groundwork for this world. Amidst all the drama of LAPD and city harassment, we've been able to come together as one community, housed and unhoused.

—Ayman Ahmed, unhoused Echo Park Lake tenant.





Figure 1

Sweep blockade at Echo Park Lake, January 24, 2020

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During the Covid-19 pandemic, an organized encampment at Echo Park Lake built a social economy and community infrastructure that both imagined and began to produce, in microcosm, a more just world. As one of its leaders, Ayman Ahmed, characterized it, this world was one with ‘no class divisions and no power structures,’ housed and unhoused fighting together in solidarity. The encampment offered a model for a transitional housing environment outside of the punitive homeless management system, one that provided services without policing. But the success of this community existing outside of the status quo made it a dire threat to the city of Los Angeles. Responding in force, the city’s mass eviction of Echo Park Lake generated a blueprint for displacement that offered services only at the point of enforcement. But those who organized at, and learned from, Echo Park Lake continued the fight for a better world, offering a roadmap for the ongoing struggle for housing liberation.

Blueprint for a Better World

In early 2020, the Echo Park Lake encampment became targeted for eviction by LA Recreation and Parks (RAP), largely due to the visibility of Black unhoused people in a park that remains the crux of gentrification in the neighborhood. With the support of housing justice organizations, Street Watch LA and Ground Game LA, the encampment organized sweep blockades and collective actions to demand their right to stay in the park as long as there was no available housing. At one of these blockades, pictured above, community

members led by Ashley Bennett put their bodies on the line, sitting in front of LA Sanitation trucks to prevent them from clearing the encampment. Bennett was an outreach worker at the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), and in response to her leadership at the blockade, police and city officials colluded to have her fired. But as Bennett put it in an open letter, you can't fire a movement. These direct actions drew dozens of housed tenants into the fight, and housed and unhoused community members built camaraderie and trust together in the crucible of eviction defense and repression.

When the Covid-19 pandemic hit, the city switched from heavily scrutinizing the park to abandoning it entirely. Water fountains were turned off, bathrooms were locked, showers disappeared, and regular food supplies dried up. But the unhoused tenants living in the camp—and the housed tenants supporting in solidarity—built upon the trust and organizing from the sweep blockades to create life-saving infrastructure. Collectively, the park community organized a crowd-funded jobs program, built showers, planted a garden, assembled a community kitchen, and ran a mutual aid table that included a phone-charging station and political education alongside life-saving supplies like Narcan, warm clothes, and tents. Moreover, the community developed a set of agreements that included rules: keep drug use inside tents, don't steal from the community, and keep the park clean. Conflict is a normal part of communal life and Echo Park Lake was no exception—but conflicts were handled largely by community members and without the intervention of police, a practice of abolition in microcosm. Through discussions at the mutual aid table and community meetings, members of the encampment continued to see this social economy as a peek into the world that movements for housing justice are trying to create together: one of class solidarity between the unhoused and renters that abolishes the borders between them. Driven by community self-determination, the Echo Park Lake community stood as a model for a transitional housing environment outside of the carceral homeless management system. Instead of endlessly churning through prison-like temporary shelters, with no actual housing in sight, the Echo Park Lake community worked collectively not just to survive, but to thrive.

Amidst the creation of this rich and vibrant social economy, the unhoused community continued to fight for housing. In April 2020, the state of California announced the emergency shelter program Project Roomkey (PRK) to support unhoused people particularly vulnerable to Covid-19. There were never enough PRK rooms available in proportion to need, and unhoused Echo Park Lake tenants fought for access to those PRK spots, running a campaign to trade tents for hotel rooms—even occupying a room at the Ritz Carlton to demand luxury hotels be used for housing. But even as members of the encampment organized for PRK placements, those hotel rooms began to be used as a weapon for displacement.

Blueprint for Displacement

The Covid-19 pandemic did not change the city's perspective on Echo Park Lake. Eviction remained the goal. Indeed, the camp's organized autonomy—and its creation in microcosm of a world outside of racial capitalism—made it an even bigger target. Housed and

unhoused organizers building power together deeply threatened the regime of private property relations in Los Angeles—one that dehumanizes people living outside in order to cow tenants into submission to uninhabitable conditions and ever-higher rents. Solidarity also meant that the encampment could defend itself. Recognizing these conditions, the City of Los Angeles initiated a counter-insurgent strategy in order to evict the unhoused community of Echo Park Lake—a procedure that has now become a blueprint for displacement across the city.

City Council District 13 (CD-13), representing Echo Park, contracted the non-profit organization Urban Alchemy to offer so-called ‘homeless services’ to the encampment in the months leading up to the eviction. Urban Alchemy purports to be a jobs’ program for formerly incarcerated people, particularly Black men. In truth, many of its workers are themselves housing insecure or unhoused, sinisterly deployed as mercenaries to facilitate encampment evictions. Early in 2021, Urban Alchemy began showing up at the park—first picking up trash, then claiming to offer shelter beds or PRK slots despite lacking the back-end access to do so. In the weeks leading up to the displacement, service providers, including the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA), joined Urban Alchemy at the park to offer PRK rooms that suddenly became available. Many in the camp who had been demanding PRK placements eagerly accepted, while others grew suspicious of the timing of the offers.

By March 2021, it had become clear that the intention of the PRK offers was to undermine the Echo Park Lake community’s numerical strength. Over the course of March 24 and 25, LA deployed a militarized force of hundreds of police officers in riot gear to systematically displace the remaining residents and fence off the encampment for alleged ‘repairs.’ The brutal police raid, resulting in the eviction and ultimate displacement of the encampment community, was publicly justified by offers for placement in PRK. Indeed, Los Angeles politicians celebrated the mass eviction as the most successful housing operation in the city’s history. That this claim is far from the truth mattered little; it functioned as a liberal patina of legitimacy for violently expelling the community from their home, and separating them from their community.

On top of the scarcity of PRK placements, those that did manage to obtain a room in PRK or similar programs, like the Tiny Home Villages, found them a far cry from their promise. Offered as a pathway to eventual permanent housing, unhoused members of the Echo Park Lake encampment found conditions carceral, isolating, and systematically demeaning. Forced upon entry to sign a contract declaring that ‘NO TENANCY IS CREATED’ by staying in the PRK program, the program functions as a stripping away of not just tenants’ rights—but civil and human rights. Moreover, PRK suspends its residents in a purgatory: with no real permanent housing at the end, many are locked in an interminable state of waiting, in many cases for years, with no end in sight. Residents in these programs have described their experiences as a form of consistent psychological torture.

Blueprint for Resistance

Out of the carceral conditions of Project Roomkey, however, has emerged organizing that offers a roadmap for resistance to the blueprint for displacement. Unhoused Tenants Against Carceral Housing (UTACH), was formed after many displaced Echo Park Lake residents found themselves in the same PRK hotel. Building on their existing community bonds, they began to organize for just conditions in PRK. Succeeding at extending the curfew from 7pm to 10pm, providing life-saving Narcan, and fighting evictions, UTACH offers a key provocation: that the unhoused be considered tenants, afforded the same rights and protections as housed tenants. This analysis extends directly from the experience at Echo Park Lake, where housed and unhoused tenants built together a glimpse of a future without class divisions or police.

Unhoused tenants are not just those that live in PRK or other carceral temporary programs—UTACH includes those living in tents, whose landlord is functionally the City of Los Angeles. Replicating their blueprint for displacement on a city-wide level, the city council passed an updated version of LA Municipal Code 41.18, which bans sitting, sleeping, and lying in zones across the city—perversely justified by inadequate and often unavailable offers of temporary shelter, which nevertheless enable the City of Los Angeles to characterize the law as ‘much more about housing than enforcement.’

UTACH has collectivized the knowledge of this blueprint for displacement from unhoused struggles across the city, equipping unhoused communities with the tools to collectively fight back. Sweep blockades continue at camps across the city, even as resistance is criminalized by 41.18. Organizers run jail support for comrades who face targeting, harassment, and incarceration for fighting to stay in their communities, underscoring that police abolition and housing liberation must be the same fight. Countering the liberal lie that people living on the street are housing resistant, unhoused tenants demonstrate that the *system* is housing resistant—as it fails to offer anything but dehumanizing, prison-like conditions for those experiencing poverty. The struggle on the streets continues, fighting the blueprint for displacement—and reaching toward the liberatory world envisioned at Echo Park Lake.