
RESURRECTION CITY: WASHINGTON DC, 1968

Author(s): Tunney Lee and Lawrence Vale

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All images courtesy of Tunney Lee.

Figure 1 Tunney Lee, John Wiebenson, James Goodell, Kenneth Jadin, Resurrection City, 1968, view from Washington Monument.

RESURRECTION CITY: WASHINGTON DC, 1968

The following conversation between Tunney Lee, one of the designers of Resurrection City (Figure 1), and Lawrence Vale took place on 17 December, 2011.

Lawrence Vale *So when and how did you first get involved in the design and planning of Resurrection City?*

Tunney Lee I had an office in the Art and Architecture Center called The New Thing, which was being run by Topper Carew who was a Howard University student, but deeply engaged in the movement—this is 1967. And, he had all the connections to the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). They were organizing the Poor People's March, in Washington. So he was the connection.

LV *So as this started to grow in early 1968, there was a team that came together to think about where in Washington the Poor People's March might go?*

TL The SCLC told us that they were on the way, and that they would need a place to land. They said people were coming from all over the country, caravans and so on, and they would need to house several hundred people.

LV *Did they give you an estimate right from the start?*

TL They gave us a very broad range, because nobody actually knew how big it was going to be. The number was more precise as the date got nearer, because people had signed up, and some were already on their way. And there were local people who were going to stay in DC and were coming for the day.

LV *But you were charged with finding a site?*

TL Well we were charged with all the things that have to do with planning, do a site search, and come up with a list of sites that would have to be negotiated.

LV *And what were the most important criteria for picking the sites?*

TL We had a bunch of them. One obviously was the size, the main calculation was how big a tent city would have to be, as initially we thought we'd get tents. Once that was estimated, we added support services, places for food, a daycare center, an administrative center, security, toilets. The second criterion was access. So we looked for sites within distance of public transportation, highway, utilities. And then the other important criterion was who owns it. So we listed those: the criteria were size and location, and visibility.

LV *Visibility seems pretty crucial in a march, to have a poor people's campaign that arrives in Washington—there has to be a priority to being seen once you're there.*

TL We did a very technical job—we prepared a map that showed some of the possible sites (Figure 2). Here: size, access, topography, symbolism, visibility, security, sanitation, utilities.

LV *To me the choice to end up adjacent to the Mall and in the monumental core of Washington seems one of the most important decisions, was that always the first aspiration?*

TL Yes, obviously the first choice was somewhere in the monumental core—the Mall, or other locations. But we were just showing all the possibilities. This map is already cleaned up, because we had also Rock Creek Park, and the National Airport. In fact one of our favorites was the National Airport, because it had asphalt, and toilets, and restaurants, and terrific access. In fact, part of the interesting thing is that we were continuously monitored by the FBI. We knew that because we had our offices in The New Thing. We would leave our notes up along with working maps. One of those included Rock Creek Park and the National Airport. One of the newspapers, I think it was the Star, published our map. It was redrawn, but it said, "Marchers contemplate..."

The panic that resulted from that was interesting. And then we obviously took those out, because Rock Creek Park was not topographically workable. But part of it is, we needed to give the best professional advice to the SCLC people who were doing the negotiating with the federal government. They wanted to come in as rational and reasonable, and say we've looked at all possible sites. For example, we've looked at Gallaudet College, but it's too far away, and we should be on the Mall. But nothing happened until King was assassinated, I don't know where would we have gotten if that had not happened. Because there was a lot of feet dragging, and talking, and after King was assassinated, we got the site.

LV *I could imagine that going either way, that at a time when there was rampant unrest across the country, one could imagine the federal officials deciding that the last thing the country needed was to put that unrest on display. So what is it and who is it that stepped forward to say this should go front and center, just off the main axis of power?*

TL I'm sure that was a debate within the federal government, but Washington DC was a tinderbox, that moment, this is '68, and there had already been riots in Detroit in '67, and DC was hot. If they had said no, they were afraid the city would erupt, and of course DC was majority black at that time.

LV *And there had been those confrontations in many other cities after King's assassination.*

TL King's assassination really erupted all over the country, yes, including DC.

LV *So, this was seen as a way of diffusing tension by saying 'Come in an organized way into the very center of power'?*

TL Right. Well also some symbolism because King had given his speech at the Lincoln Memorial. But I think it was like, partly it was isolated a bit, very few people actually go to that side of the Mall.

LV *And then, once the site is decided, your team attempts to design a community with a Main Street and some ideas about compound sizes and things like that. I'm wondering whether you see that spatial*

organization as meant to mirror or reinforce or inspire a kind of social and political order. What kinds of things were on your minds when thinking about the nature and form of a settlement that ought to take place on that prized site?

TL Our approach was classic modernist city planning. Because the site was long and narrow, we organized the residential areas into clusters like neighborhoods and communal services along a spine so that they were accessible to all.

LV *But there was a main axis down the middle that was intended to be more of a public nature and then increased domains of privacy possible within that.*

TL Right, just like a Main Street idea.

LV *But, what was most important to convey with the Main Street itself, in terms of what public message it should have? I mean, why should there be a public realm in Resurrection City?*

TL I think we were a bunch of functionalists. I think the symbolism came from the political side. You know, they asked us to locate a City Hall and we said, terrific, we'll put it right at the—

LV *But where would you want to put a city hall, if there was a place that was supposed to be for the Mayor of Resurrection City, is that the way normally—*

TL It was more than symbolic. We put the City Hall in the middle of the Main Street so that it was as accessible to as many residents as possible since it had telephones, welfare services, security etc. Near the head of the main pedestrian entrance, which is from the Lincoln Memorial side, we put the registration and information center.

LV *So it would be the same principle that would have applied in the design of Chandigarh and Brasília, with a kind of head for the leadership, as opposed to an alternative spatial design for a different kind of organization.*

TL Not really... Our team had Jim Goodell from Penn, who was influenced by David Crane and I had worked for David Crane, [John] Wiebenson was a GSD graduate, Ken Jadin was a Penn graduate too. So we were very much influenced by Crane (who

had proposed an alternative to Corbu's Chandigarh) and his ideas of the linear city which grew incrementally through the work of a thousand designers.² Also essential was the Capital Web where public facilities were organized, so it gives order and then other things could be more flexible. But, symbolism, I have to say I don't think we thought much about it—we were really functionalists.

LV *And what about the implementation of this? You mention 'City of a Thousand Designers.' How much of your organizational vision for what the place could be was actually buildable and implementable, and how much of it was altered by either self-built processes or other kinds of things that you didn't anticipate as designers?*

TL We had a basic layout that we assumed would be altered as people built on it. But the extent of how people altered surprised us. You see in some of the early photographs, the first batch that was done before people came. It was built by a bunch of volunteers, who just lined up the structure. The first group came and immediately re-organized it (Figure 3).

LV *And what were the surprising changes that people brought to it that you didn't anticipate?*

TL Well they made more and different clusters. They organized courtyards. In the slide show you can see that depended on the size of the group (Figure 4). The nice thing about these structures was that two people could just move them. So they would take the structures and organize them in the way they wanted to. There were a couple of families that took two or three of them and put a group of families together. There was a group from Detroit that came, and a group from New York who were one of the most organized, they made a bigger compound than most. But the most surprising thing was how they made multi-level structures. We never anticipated that. We expected people would shift these things around—that's why the central spine was so important, we didn't want anything there, just daycare centers, food, all along the center, and then people could sort of organize around it, which

they did. But the multiple-level structures people made were amazing (Figure 5).

LV *Some of this probably results from the initial expectation that this would be built of tents. I gather the tents were not donated which is what led to all of the use of wood-frame construction. How do you think it would have been different as a tent-based city rather than a 2x4-based city?*

TL Well I think you saw that at Occupy Boston and Zuccotti park. Tents would tend to be more anarchistic, because they have no particular shape to them, so people would just fit them into random spaces. The reason the tent-shape came up, was that we were looking for a very simple thing to build, we wanted 4x8 pieces of plywood cut at best once, and 2x4s, and so the tent structure, the A-frame, was certainly the simplest.

LV *Right. So you had some of the profile of the tent without actually having the free organization of a tent city.*

TL Right.

LV *I assume you can handle the increase of people by having a module that's repeatable as you get larger groups, but what about the types of people, the assumptions about single people coming versus families? The assumption is that most people were coming from a great distance and would have no other place to stay. Did you assume that this was singles versus people coming as families?*

TL We were told there were families coming, so several daycare centers were built. In fact we didn't build them. What happened was the volunteer groups from DC who organized the daycare centers worked with the people who came, they took the structures and organized them, to make some of the daycare centers and several structures. So we made the assumption that there were going to be all kinds of people, and that there were going to be children.

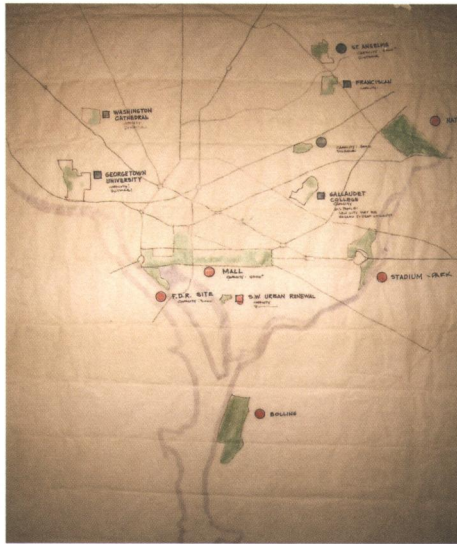
LV *And did you plan to separate out the zones where families with children would live, or could people just choose? For instance, in the settlement that you made first, before people arrived, what did you assume about families versus singles for that first phase?*

Figure 2 Resurrection City, 1968, Map showing possible sites.

Figure 3 Resurrection City, 1968, interior, painted and furnished .

Figure 4 Resurrection City, 1968, general view, lean-to compound.

Figure 5 Resurrection City, 1968, lean-to with A-frame creating second floor.



TL It was open for use, that is, whoever arrived first, occupied that first part. Families generally stayed with their groups, where they came from. Although there was some movement where several families clustered for the kids sake, I think around the daycare center. But all original settlements were by geography.

LV *So that's my next question. How did people self-select socially, and what is your estimate of the racial and ethnic breakdown of the people that were there? Did the separation by point of origin also lend itself to separation on racial and ethnic lines, or was Resurrection City more of a mixed community than people had come from?*

TL I think almost everybody arrived in groups—my guess would be about 80 to 90% black, there was a Chicano group coming from California, there were some white Appalachian groups, but they were small—they were visible, but they were small and they were segregated not by race but by geography. And there was more mixing than you would have seen elsewhere in 1968. They were there because of King, it was all inspired by him. And people did behave—now, if we were in existence longer, I don't know.

LV *What about your own role during the six weeks when this was operative? Where were you and how much of the daily life of this place did you experience?*

TL Well there were four of us—the planning group, it was run by Wiebenson, he was the senior member, and we had all tasks within it to plan different things. We were all involved in the early prefabrication and organizing materials which took place in Maryland. We didn't have the exact site until very late, and Wiebenson went out to mark the site for the different uses with one of those things that you use for marking football fields. He did it and then they came and cut the grass [laughs].

LV *And, do you feel that that was just a coincidence, the day to cut the grass, or do you feel that was somebody deliberately trying to undermine...*

TL No, no. I don't think any of us felt that. I think the Park Service was very helpful, they really were,

it just wasn't coordinated. So he just had to come over and do it over again. But he was the guy who did it, because he had the distances in mind. Then we took turns being there. We were all there at the beginning, with the first of the trucks bringing in the supplies, laying out and telling people where to put stuff, and then volunteers helping to construct the first set of structures. So we were kind of site supervisors, essentially people asking us, "What do we do with this?" "What do we do with that?" And once it was set up, then we took turns, it was one of us every day on that site, none of us spent the night there, but there was always one construction committee member to answer questions, there being a lot more work at the beginning than at the end.

LV *So it ended up with something like 2,500 or 3,000 people living on site?*

TL I think that was it.

LV *I'm curious how much of the site is actually built out with that population? Was that beyond what was intended or was there a limit caused by the site for the number of people that assembled there?*

TL No, in fact, there's an as built drawing done by Wiebenson. There was room for more (Figure 6).

LV *There was not a question of having reached the limits of your allocated site on the Mall?*

TL No, if more people came, we could have extended the spine and the facilities - toilets, daycare centers, food and so on.

LV *So it was moving linearly away from the Lincoln Memorial?*

TL Yes, it started in the Lincoln Memorial and moved towards the Washington Monument.

LV *And from the beginning, did you anticipate how long the settlement would last?*

TL We had no idea. We assumed it would go on until the legislation passed. They were there to lobby: that was the intention. Groups during the day would go down to the Capitol and lobby. The whole point was aimed at passing legislation, for work, employment, gender equality etc.

LV *Would it have been tied to the calendar of the congressional session lasting into the Summer?*

TL I think we anticipated it would last through the Summer, I don't think we ever thought that it was going to go beyond the Summer, the structures were not built for cold weather—the assumption was that there would be a legislative push.

LV *And in terms of the expectations for seasonal viability, this was prepared to withstand Spring rains and the heat of a Washington Summer as you thought forward?*

TL Yes. The soggy ground was not anticipated, obviously. But we had anticipated the rain, between the plywood and the plastic. The tent structures were pretty good, they were a natural kind of rain shelter. The problem was the ground, it became completely soggy, even though we started using some of the plywood to make boardwalks. By the end most people had left. It got pretty miserable.

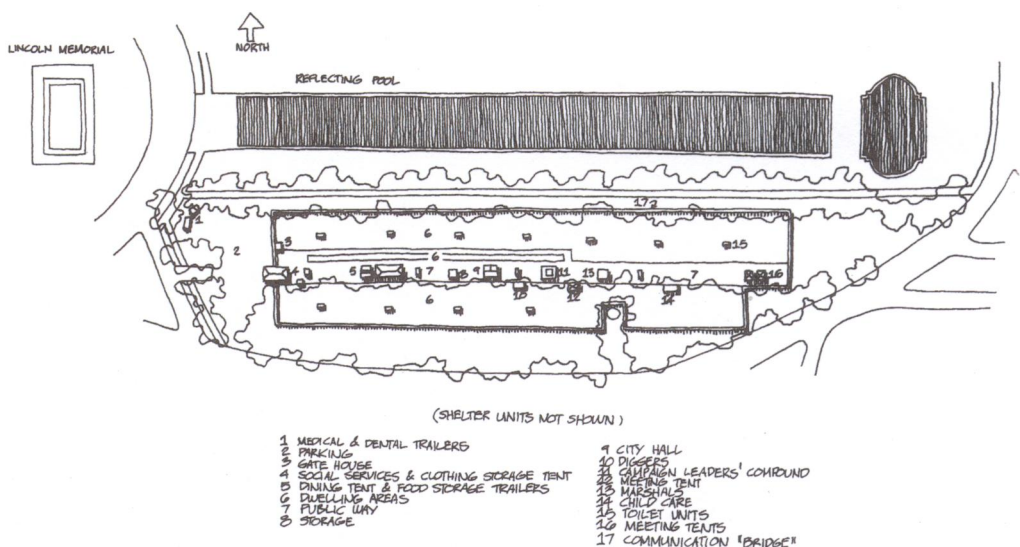
LV *Yes. So I guess my question is whether the role of the design had anything to do with the timing and longevity of the event. Was there anything about the low-lying conditions of the site, had they been able to maintain it at a higher level, that might have prolonged the occupation, or was the end of Resurrection City more of a political gesture?*

TL No, there was nothing in the design. We could

have gone easily through the Summer. It was clearly the politics, because by that time, King's legacy was really vanishing in a sense, both because he was against the Vietnam war, and the increasing militancy of emerging young Black leaders. Among Topper's friends, the group that was around Howard University and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), was very much Black Power oriented. That was when the Black Panthers were emerging Really charismatic people like H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael. Whereas the SCLC, they were really the last generation. Now if King had lived, who knows, he could have held it together. Nobody, not even the young hotheads, would challenge King, but when King was assassinated, everything changed. For example the chair of SCLC, [Ralph] Abernathy, didn't live on the site but in a motel. That's when Jesse Jackson emerged, because he lived on the site.

LV *And he became mayor, correct?*

TL That's right for a short time, before he got exiled, because he was too successful. I remember his speeches. I said wow! He was an orator, young and vigorous, and had ideas.



Drawing by John Wiebenson.

Figure 6 Resurrection City, 1968, as built plan, shelter units not shown.

LV *Did this success made him in demand elsewhere, or is it that he threatened people?*

TL No, they exiled him. It threatened Abernathy and the old leadership of SCLC and they sent him back to Chicago.

LV *So we have the internal politics of SCLC, we have the radicalizing Black Power movement, and we have the Washington establishment, and we have the Spring rains and we have the soggy site. If we put all that together, why did the Resurrection City occupation end when it did and how it did?*

TL Well the rains I think were the biggest factor. People had already started to leave because it just wasn't livable. Families with kids left. What you're left with is some of the criminal elements. They had been always there but they were very well behaved when the thing was going fine. But when things began to fall apart, it gave an excuse for the federal government to move in.

LV *If it peaked at say 2,800 people, how many were left at the time the settlement was shut down?*

TL I don't know. A few hundred, I would say. Not many.

LV *Was this really the last blow to a movement that was already under stress and in retreat by June when this happened?*

TL Yes, because the country was already in turmoil, and there had been the riots after King's assassination all over the country. That was still reverberating in the air. There have been many theories about the multiple failures of the movement; the conspiracy theory that once King went against the Vietnam War and organizing multi-racially against poverty, he had to be eliminated I have no idea. But Resurrection City certainly did mark the end of an era. The civil rights movement up to then had many successes. There was the Civil Rights Act in 1964, after Kennedy's assassination. Lyndon Johnson knew that the Democrats would lose the South, once that was passed. The polarization in American society at that point was pretty stark. The white middle class, the silent majority of white ethnics, were pulling away from the Democrats. It accelerated the retreat

from the cities—white flight had begun long before that. So all of these things were happening in the country, and King was ready to move on to a next step, which was, "OK, we won the racial issue, we now want to deal with poverty, and the Vietnam war is part of the problem—poor people are fighting that war; resources are being diverted." And that was nipped because both the white left and the radical blacks just viewed it as not enough, that they had to do something more drastic. For the next several years, the movement moved to sporadic violence and anti-war organizing.

LV *And so, was there any attempt to prolong the existence of Resurrection City by its leadership, or was the closing an expected event?*

TL It wasn't expected but it certainly marked definitively the end of that era.

LV *But was there any kind of effort either through court action or political lobbying to stave off the forced shut-down of the encampment?*

TL No, I think at that point the SCLC were ready to throw in the towel, anyway, and the people who were staying were the more radical younger people, determined to fight it out. It was the end of SCLC, the end of the Civil Rights Movement, in essence.

LV *When you look back on this, do you think there was any role for the design and planning of physical space to support this kind of a movement?*

TL I don't think that—I think planning and design are adjuncts to political movements. Political movements are created by many people and as citizens, we participate. As planners and designers, we also can use our skills and expertise to further the goals of the cause.

LV *And yet, if you think about the 1963 March on Washington, and the power of the setting for King's speech that year, and the reinforcement of the axis leading to the Lincoln Memorial, and the symbolism of things associated with Lincoln, and the history of events from Marian Anderson³ onward to '63, it seems to me that physical design is much more than the backdrop for politics, that it really is something that gives politics much of its power.*

TL Yes, but, the history of the Lincoln Memorial and the history of the Mall is Neoclassical Baroque, coming out of Counter Reformation Rome and Monarchical France, and it could be put to any number of uses. The setting was important—I don't disagree with that. But it was the contrast of an encampment of poor people versus the expression of power that gave it resonance. Lincoln would cringe if he saw what they did to him. I mean, I love all this stuff, but on the other hand, if we think politically, the idea of putting him in a Greek temple, as an oversized statue on a pedestal, that's like Sixtus V or Louis XIV.

LV *At least they built it on a drained swamp.*

TL [Laughs] Well, it was beautifully done, and it can be used by this event which is hugely symbolic for the unfinished business that Lincoln started. And the location for this is obviously very important, and I think that finding the right setting was a good thing. But I don't want to overlay our work here. I think what SCLC wanted was to demonstrate that a bunch of poor people could run a place like this well. And they did, until the rains. And people came, a lot of people came on weekends, out into the Mall, and they would talk to the people at the site about the issues. For example, Tiananmen Square. It's built at the gateway to the Forbidden City—the heart of Imperial China [transformed] into a monumental Communist Square to symbolize the overthrow of the emperors. In turn, the square becomes the locus of a popular uprising. It bears some further thinking, how spaces get appropriated for purposes which are not intended. It's not that we were established designers working with Martin Luther King to create the ideal space for his project. When the situation arises in any country, people will find a prominent space, appropriate it, and use it to advance their cause—Tahrir Square and many others.

LV *Well this has lots of parallels. It's the Russian revolutionaries returning to take the Kremlin back as the backdrop for the Soviet Union and its base of*

operations. It's the Post-British Empire, independent India, reusing the spaces of [Edwin] Lutyens for parading. In Australia, it's the symbolic claim made on the [Walter] Burley Griffin land axis in Canberra by the aboriginal 'tent embassy', which is the only other long-term occupation of a capital city core space that I know. For more than 30 years, an eternal flame and a set of protest tents have been on the main axis or just off it, and aboriginals marked the pavement the words "Sacred Ground." These struggles have been very important in the spaces where they have occurred...

TL I think appropriation is the right word.

LV *...by taking and appropriating the place, the more that place had been associated with the strength of the regime that preceded the protest, the more its appropriation, even on a temporary basis, gains visibility as a credible threat.*

TL And very resonant.

LV *So looking back, what are you most proud about from your involvement in the Resurrection City venture?*

TL Well that we did something that worked, served the movement that we supported. And we participated in something really meaningful. It was a privilege to be able to do something like that, and to work with the kind of people that we encountered. The spirit was fantastic, until it fizzled out. You don't get many chances like that. It's also the shortest and fastest planned, built and demolished project that I ever worked on, I think 60 days. Maybe 70 days. We had no time to think about it.

LV *Is there advice that you would give to the people designing the next space of protest encampment, based on your experience with Resurrection City?*

TL Be professional. That's our responsibility, that's what we can do best.

¹ The official affiliations were James Goodell (then at Urban America), Kenneth Jadin (Department of Architecture, Howard University), Tunney Lee (architect and planner from Washington, DC), and John Wiebenson (School of Architecture, University of Maryland). See John Wiebenson, "Planning and Using Resurrection City," in *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 35:6 (1969), 405-411.

² David Crane used the phrase 'city of a thousand designers' to describe the accumulation of multiple individual acts involved in the making of a city. See David A. Crane, "The Public Art of City Building," in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 352, (March, 1964), 84-94, and Crane, "Alternative to Futility," in *Journal of Architectural Education* 17, no. 3 (December, 1962), 94-96.

³ Marian Anderson (1897-1993) was an celebrated African-American singer. She performed an acclaimed open-air concert on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939 after being refused permission to perform to an integrated audience in Constitution Hall.