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Melissa Morrone

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## Who Does Your Data?

As we've been [reminded again recently](#), in case we somehow forgot, the "facts" of news reporting are not actually neutral. Just plain data is part of a political context, too. For example, New York City counts homeless people, in an annual pavement-pounding overnight effort. But the city – despite its technocratic, data-driven mayor – has never counted homes without people. Why not?

Yesterday I went to the official release of "[Banking on Vacancy: Homelessness and Real Estate Speculation](#)," a report based on a study conducted by Picture the Homeless (PTH) here in NYC. The results demonstrate that [there is more than enough space for everyone living in the city to have a roof over their heads](#). And the fact that the hard data proving this deceptively simple point had to come from a grassroots group illuminates the resistance that the powerful have towards information that might challenge them.

I've long liked PTH because, first of all, they're a membership organization that's founded and led by currently and formerly homeless people – i.e. the people most affected by what the group exists to fight. There's a small staff, but the members are directly involved in all organizational activities. Furthermore, they use a combination of more traditional channels (legislative proposals, legal reform) and direct action (demonstrations, banner drops, building occupations) in their work. And sometimes [they do both at the same time](#). At a pre-release event in the fall, a PTH member summed up their attitude to bureaucratic static on the question of whether the city would ever sponsor a citywide vacant housing count: "We're going to do it, whether you like it or not!"

City officials had told PTH that NYC has a 2% vacancy rate, which turned out to be calculated by whether a building had been occupied two years prior. So if a building has been empty of residents for three or more years – because of, say, a landlord who can make a good profit off a street-level business's rent alone without the hassle of tenants in the apartments above – it's not considered "vacant." PTH was also told repeatedly that a city-sponsored vacant housing count would be complicated and prohibitively expensive, in the millions of dollars. (In the end, around \$150,000 was spent to count a third of the city in a third of a year.)

“Banking on Vacancy” came out of a collaboration between PTH and Hunter College’s Center for Community Planning & Development (HCCCPD). The philosophy of the campaign was illustrated by Hunter professor Peter Kwong at yesterday’s event when he talked about “activist scholarship,” where the questions being addressed in the university come from the needs of the community, and engagement with those questions is a joint effort between the academics and the community members. Other speakers ranged from the Manhattan borough president and City Councilmembers to a PTH member who passionately reminded attendees that the work is not just about issuing a report (“Take back the land! Take back the buildings!”).

The bulk of the vacant housing census took place over a widely-publicized series of weekends in summer 2011. PTH members and allies (including your correspondent) convened in churches, community centers, and public library branches and then went out to identify vacant buildings and lots in neighborhoods spanning selected Community Board districts in all five boroughs. The report explains the full data collection process – the numerous Freedom of Information Law requests to almost a dozen city agencies that mostly got ignored or netted ineffective information (as one section is titled, “City Data Is a Useless Mess”), the almost 300 volunteers with varying levels of experience, the evolution of paper housing count surveys to Excel files to [OASIS](#) to [PLUTO](#) and other data utilities.

I’m writing about all this for Library Juice not because I think that everyone is interested in the vagaries of NYC housing policy (though if you’re a local, I hope you are!). The point is that community-driven data collection is *important* – it’s part of organizing, the process itself reflects and reinforces the values of the community, and it’s possibly the only way that a needed change can be kicked into gear.

“Numbers are power,” said HCCCPD’s Tom Angotti. But it’s not just the data, of course, which can end up sitting on a shelf. Like PTH member Willie Baptist said: “You’re going to have to get up and do something about it.”