Introduction

In order to introduce my research topic, I’d like to start with an anecdote from The Wheelhouse, Pitzer College’s bicycle repair space located in Ontario, California. The Wheelhouse’s regulars and volunteers joined together on a Saturday afternoon to discuss how The Wheelhouse could be more effective in serving Ontario’s community. It was unlike a typical focus group discussion. There were no long tables or featured speakers. There were twelve people who were from different backgrounds, ethnicities and cultures, and who’d had diverse life experiences. The discussion flowed naturally without any preprogrammed formal agenda. The suggestions for making the Wheelhouse a more vital space consisted of expanding the hours that The Wheelhouse was open, providing another bike stand so more people could work on bike repairs simultaneously, and increasing the number of bikes that we could distribute to the community. Although these suggestions were all reasonable and helpful for The Wheelhouse, I sat there feeling
that the conversation was unfinished. After the time I’d spent working at The Wheelhouse, being welcomed by the homeless community and having observed a little bit of the homeless experience, I believed that the Wheelhouse could be so much more than just a place to fix a bike. I spoke out during the meeting and said that I think we have the ability to create change for the homeless in Ontario through our work at The Wheelhouse. Not just change how a bike works, but change the treatment of the people on those bikes. For eight seconds silence took hold of the meeting. “I dunno, I just want justice,” I said, trying to clarify what I thought. No responses. Jay, a fifty-four year-old homeless man broke the silence with four simple words: “Not in this city.”

I held those eight seconds of silence and Jay’s mater of fact statement with me for a while after that Saturday. It was hard for me to understand why silence lingered on longer than I thought it would. Why no one responded with excitement and hope. I felt motivated. I felt that the homeless population that I have gotten to know and respect deserved so much more from the city of Ontario. I felt that with organization, enough people, and hope, change could be created; that the violence against Ontario’s homeless could be ameliorated through collective action. I knew that this little bike shop felt like so much more than just a little bike shop. The optimism that The Wheelhouse regulars gave me helped me believe that The Wheelhouse could fight the mistreatment and misperceptions of the homeless by collectively taking a stand. “Not in this city.” Jay’s dismissive head shake and frown replayed over and over again in my mind. Why did Jay have zero hope that the city of Ontario could ever change its treatment toward the homeless, when I felt as if hope and excitement were bursting out of my seams? After contemplating this question I finally came to a conclusion. I am not Jay. It is about as
simple as you can get, but I found its significance breaks down barriers that my mind had not been able to see over before. I have not been knocked off of my feet enough times to have the hope drained from me. I am not a fifty-four year-old man who has been on the streets for twenty-five years. Societal institutions have not suppressed me for half my life. Repetitive police brutality has not turned whatever hope and self-love I had to begin with into self-hate. I am a nineteen-year old white middle-class student, who hasn’t been oppressed and treated inhumanly, who has always had a roof over my head, and whose vision hasn’t yet been manipulated by society into viewing homeless people as lazy, undeserving individuals. I can see the amount of respect that the homeless population deserves. I can see that they should be treated as humans, and I believe that if I can get them to see that as well, collectively we can make a difference. The Wheelhouse can foster change. The Wheelhouse can be so much more than just a bike shop.

In this research paper, I will first discuss some background information on homelessness, basic human rights of the homeless, and the history of The Wheelhouse. I will then outline the methods I used to gather data. Because the right to access public space and the right to freedom of movement are the primary injustices that I believe The Wheelhouse can better, I have focused my paper on these two areas; reviewing the literature and summarizing my data and analysis in these two areas separately. Lastly, I will conclude with my thoughts and recommendations about how The Wheelhouse can become a place to reinstate hope and empower the Ontario community to restore the human rights of Ontario’s homeless.
Background Information

Brief History of Homelessness

Before I begin discussing Ontario’s homeless through insights from The Wheelhouse, I must first provide the general definition of homeless and then contextualize background information about homeless populations first in America, then California, and finally narrow down my analysis to the city of Ontario.

Data about homeless populations is difficult to collect accurately due to the migration of homeless, their “off-the-grid” lifestyles, and the constant flux of individuals from being sheltered to not. Homelessness is produced by individual’s inability to pay for housing (The State of Homelessness in America 2012; pg. 4). Everyone is susceptible to becoming homeless. The reasons for homelessness in America are multiple, but it has primarily stemmed from America’s changes in economic and social development. The last two centuries have seen a move from a more rural/farming lifestyle to a more industrialized/urban-based citizenry (Understanding Rural America 1995). This migration from rural farm towns to urban cities has resulted in cities becoming more populated, and many metropolises being less able to provide for all of their inhabitants.

With 135,928 homeless people in 2011, California is the state that has the highest number of homeless people in America (The State of Homelessness in America 2012; pg. 20). California also has the largest population in America, but still has one of the highest rates of homeless in the country (2010 Census Data). Homeless people residing in California have an easier time persevering through winters. California’s large population and nice weather are correlated to the large homeless population.
Ontario is located in the Inland Empire area of California, a city that is approximately thirty-five miles east of downtown Los Angeles. Ontario has a population of approximately 163,924 people (2010 Census Data). Ontario has an interesting history with the homeless. In the early 2000s, the city government became alarmed at the number of homeless people seen in the Ontario area (Tent Cities in America 2010). The city officials wanted to address this issue with the creation of a Tent City in 2007 (Tent Cities in America 2010). The Temporary Homeless Services Area (THSA) established that the mission of the Tent City was “to provide one place for Ontario’s homeless to congregate and receive consolidated services and also to address complaints from residents to address the homeless” (Tent Cities in America 2010). Due to the services and space that the City of Ontario was providing for its homeless, in 2008, Ontario became a magnet for homeless from other places. Homeless traveled from out of the state and Tent City swelled to 400 persons, well over the intention to house only 50 to 100 occupants (Tent Cities in America 2010). Due to the draw of Ontario’s Tent City, Ontario could not handle nor support the number of homeless that were residing within its boundaries. The overcrowding and lack of space and resources caused Tent City to fade out. As a result, Ontario’s large homeless population is now managed through churches that provide shelter, food, and services. Through strict enforcement of the City’s municipal codes, Ontario has become an inhospitable place for the homeless.

The Homeless and Restriction of Basic Human Rights

Human rights are outlined in various treaties universally as well as nationally, but one of the most accepted summaries is found in the United Nations Universal Declaration
of Human Rights, ratified in 1948 (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). This document outlines the basic human rights that belong equally to every person in every nation. Upon review of this document, it is clear that many of these universal rights are not accessible to the homeless. Clear in my review of the literature is the existence of a marked diminution of the rights of the homeless over the past decades. Some of the basic human rights that the homeless do not have, or rights that are limited are: right to security, right to freedom of movement, right to work (which may be pan-handling), right to own property, right to peaceful assembly, right to education, right to an acceptable standard of living and right to participate in government (voting) (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948). Additionally, the homeless are sometimes subjected to the following human rights violations: arbitrary arrest, degrading treatment, and discrimination.

Human rights are also violated outside of codes and treaties through unacknowledged structural violence. Seemingly acceptable institutions, such as city governments and police bureaucrats are violating human rights. “Structural violence” a term coined by Johan Galtung is used to describe violence that is indirect and usually goes unnoticed and unchallenged due to there being no physical violence done by any actor (Nevins 2003; pg. 185). Some situations that perpetuate structural violence are police brutality and lack of funding for social services that are allocated by cities. It is important to notice and establish which institutions are hurting the homeless communities through structural violence so that we continue the fight for just treatment of the homeless.
Brief History of The Wheelhouse

The Wheelhouse was created by efforts of students, faculty, and local community members through Pitzer College’s “justice-oriented, interdisciplinary program in urban studies and community-based research” (Pitzer in Ontario). The Wheelhouse was once just a shed outside of the house in Ontario where the courses were taught. It was initially established by students who determined that the city of Ontario lacked adequate transportation options for the community. Pitzer in Ontario students coined the name “The Wheelhouse” and opened the shop in November 2010.

Utilization of The Wheelhouse was slow to start. The Wheelhouses’ suburban location is a major reason for the limited use. There is no clear view of The Wheelhouse from the road. Despite efforts at advertising The Wheelhouse, from November 2010 until October 2012 the frequency of Wheelhouse-goers stayed low: approximately two patrons per week. However, beginning in late October 2012, The Wheelhouse started to transform. It now serves approximately fourteen people a week. I assume that this transformation began to take place because specific bicyclists stumbled upon the big yellow sign that stands up in the front yard. Word of mouth about The Wheelhouse’s affordability and its welcoming environment spread. The real success of The Wheelhouse began when community members, specifically homeless individuals, routinely visited The Wheelhouse during operating hours. Through time spent working together, trust and friendships were formed. The Wheelhouse’s success stems from community members turning into partners; people coming by to fix their bikes, volunteering to fix other peoples bikes, and just coming by to hang out.
Settings and Methods

The majority of my fieldwork was carried out at The Wheelhouse. However, I also did collected data at STRIVE, a community center well-used by Ontario’s homeless population, and at a popular grocery store in South Ontario called Stater Bros.

The Wheelhouse is a transformed garage outside of the Pitzer in Ontario house on H and Euclid. The comfy chairs and brightly decorated graffiti outside The Wheelhouse as well as the funky tunes blasting on speakers within all contribute to The Wheelhouses’ welcoming and dynamic energy. Inside the walls are covered with all the tools necessary for bike repair and the drawers are filled with donated or used bike parts. Time always flew by when interning at The Wheelhouse. Meaningful and fun conversation between whoever walked into The Wheelhouse and whoever was already there filled up the space with a sense of community and appreciation. Titles to establish authority were unnecessary. The lack of concentrated personal power allowed knowledge to be effortlessly transferred from one individual to another regardless of who you were, how old you were, or where you came from. Over shared tools and communal effort I always felt that after each shift I left The Wheelhouse with newly gained knowledge, friendships, and that general head-nodding, mouth turned-up type of good feeling. The positive and warm energy that fostered sincere conversations, comfort, and friendships can be hugely credited to a smiling bearded man who you could usually find in The Wheelhouse working on bikes or drinking maté named Max Estella. Max works at The Wheelhouse and was The Wheelhouse urban fellow throughout my semester. I will take the lessons I learned about the beauty that can be generated from the generosity and fairness which Max exemplified throughout all of my life.
The data for my research paper was obtained from interactions and conversations with the homeless at The Wheelhouse. For four months (September – December 2012), I spent approximately thirteen hours a week fixing bikes and forming relationships with individuals who came into The Wheelhouse. Most of these individuals were homeless who traveled and slept in Ontario. I learned about many of the injustices experienced by Ontario’s homeless. The genuine friendships that I formed throughout the semester contextualized these injustices and lit a newfound fire in me and spurred me to research homelessness in Ontario in hopes of improving the situation of the homeless population.

My research is of the narrative ethnographic type. I conducted informal interviews throughout the entire semester with patrons of The Wheelhouse. When someone in The Wheelhouse articulated an interesting point, I would ask for verbal consent to record them and ask if their words could assist me in writing this paper. I conducted an informal interview at STRIVE with Jay. Jay is a homeless man in Ontario who is well respected by many other homeless Wheelhouse-goers. During this interview Jay recounted numerous different interactions with the Ontario police where he experienced police brutality.

I performed a formal interview with Charlie, a former homeless person in Ontario and a Wheelhouse-regular who I consider a great friend. During this formal interview Charlie helped me gain a better understanding of the injustices he has experienced while in Ontario. Primarily about injustices regarding access to public space and impediments to freedom of movement.

I conducted informal interviews at a popular Ontario grocery store located in the heart of the city named Stater Brothers. I interviewed one customer after another for a
total of thirty minutes and asked about their opinions of the homeless population in Ontario.

**Research Focus 1 - The Homeless and the Assault on Public Space**

**Literature Review**

Access to public space is a key issue among urban populations. To set the stage for my ethnographic case study of the Wheelhouse’s collaboration with Ontario’s homeless, I will analyze the scholarship that links public space and homelessness. The rights of the homeless to share public space with non-homeless people have been systematically stripped over the past decades. This has occurred in tandem with the disappearance of state-based supportive services (Wolch 1998). To understand the role of public space in this process, I will review the work of key authors, beginning with broad ideas about the privatization of public space (Lefebvre, Illich), and then narrow my focus by discussing literature that deals with the intersections of shrinking public space specifically for homeless or other poor marginalized groups (Davis, Mitchell).

According to Henri Lefebvre in “The Production of Space,” public space is a product that has a tangible reality like money, capital and other commodities (Lefebvre, 1991). Lefebvre argues that public space is subject to monopoly and control—and is thus the basis of intense exclusion (Lefebvre 1991; pg. 49). When people are denied access to public space, these people are seen as “other” or “strange” and marginalized.

According to Ivan Illich in “Deschooling Society,” what he calls “convivial institutions,” such as subway lines, public markets, parks, sidewalks, etc. that are thought to be more public and democratic are actually becoming less accessible, thereby making
them more elitist (Illich 1971; pg. 32). When access to public space in communities is limited, it adversely affects the political exchange of a community. Illich summarizes that “every simple need to which an institutional answer is found permits the invention of a new class of poor and a new definition of poverty” (Illich 1971; pg. 4).

When public space becomes less accessible, it hurts poor communities to a greater degree as they use public space for necessity to a much greater extent whereas rich communities have the privilege to use public space for pleasure. Renovation of public space is being used to displace homeless communities away from heavily used urban spaces. In Mike Davis’ literature, “History of Downtown Los Angeles ‘Skid Row,’” various design innovations demonstrate the efforts of the city of Los Angeles to separate out the homeless population (Davis, 1992). According to Davis, Los Angeles City deliberately and repetitively turns on sprinklers in parks and sidewalks to prevent sleeping, “bum-proofs” seating at bus stops, adds protection of dumpsters to prevent squatting, and has eliminated all city toilets and running water (Davis 1992; pg. 223). Physical barriers aimed at relocating homeless individuals are not the only methods that cities are using to shield public space from public people.

Many cities are attempting to control and conceal their homeless population through enforcement of laws. Harsh restrictions such as prohibiting sitting or lying down in particular places, urinating, littering, panhandling, and camping are becoming more and more common in cities to target the homeless. Don Mitchell speaks of public space in “The Annihilation of Space by Law” saying that in city after city concerned with “livability” officials have striven to make urban centers attractive and have turned to the “annihilation of space by law” (Mitchell 1997; pg. 7). Mitchell articulates, “Officials
have found legal remedies that seek to cleanse the streets of those left behind by the economy and erasing the spaces in which these undesirables live” (Mitchell 1997; pg. 7). The displacement of the homeless population due to anti-homeless laws leaves no space for the homeless population to live.

The American Alliance for Rights and Responsibilities (AARR) is an organization defined as “an activist arm of The Communitarian Network, litigating to defend local and municipal initiatives that promote what it regards as increases safety, civility, and community responsibility” (Waldron, pg. 371, 2000). The AARR is fighting to relocate homeless people out of public space. The AARR claims that the point of such relocation through restrictions “is not to oppress the homeless or to diminish their liberty, but to reduce annoyance, to produce a fair basis on which all citizens could make use of the public spaces of their city, and to allow parks and squares to become once again a healthy focus for the public life of the community” (Waldron, pg. 373, 2000).

Background on Ontario, Data, and Analysis

Like many cities in America, the City of Ontario deals with its homelessness population through anti-homeless codes. The municipal codes are such that the homeless are barred from public spaces (such as parks) after sunset, cannot transport their belongings in shopping carts, have a difficult time voting, are barred from gathering in public spaces (this is called loitering when the homeless do it), and cannot ask for money on public spaces (pan-handling) (City of Ontario Municipal Codes 2011).

While working at The Wheelhouse I have heard about the experiences of Ontario’s homeless and how the police enforce the municipal codes. Homeless people in Ontario cannot sit and have a bite or a drink with a friend because this interaction is said
to be illegal when on public space. The homeless cannot transport or store their belongings (many needed for survival) in shopping carts, so they either “ditch” what they have when they come across the police, or drape everything that they own on their bike, or put all their belongings in a baby stroller. As for participation in elections, there is little to no outreach to Ontario’s homeless so their opinions as measured by their vote go unheard. These anti-homelessness codes are dehumanizing homeless individuals and collectively adding to the public’s negative perception of homeless and homeless’ negative perception of themselves.

My research has shown that this stripping of rights from the homeless has significantly affected their quality of life. One of the major concerns that the homeless have is their lack of access to public space. Ontario regulations, city officials, police enforcement, and public discomfort are making it illegal for the homeless to use any of its “public space.” The lack of access to public space hinders the capability of the homeless to assemble and collectively organize. The city of Ontario and the police behave in a way described earlier as one of “structural violence” by inflicting repetitive harassment of the homeless community. The municipal code bars the homeless from public spaces after sunset, forces many homeless individuals that live on the streets to be fined by the city, harassed by the police, and repetitively dehumanized.

Ontario police keep a tight eye on the homeless populations. Through my data I’ve learned about many episodes of police brutality regarding use of public space. I’ve heard numerous personal accounts of people being ticketed for sleeping in a public space or police harassment for being in a public space for an extended amount of time. I will
now review three specific events of police harassment that illuminate three different ways in which the homeless are having their right to access public space restricted.

The first example was discussed by Jay. With frustration and exhaustion, Jay explained to me how Ontario’s police were ordered to raid all public dumpsters to relocate the homeless (Jay, Interview, December 7th, 2012). The Ontario police traveled to each dumpster throughout the entire city to remove individuals from structures that were made for holding garbage. It is as if the city officials were implying that their trash was more important than a human body. I am not saying that dumpsters should be made available for use as homes for the homeless, but if someone is struggling to find warmth in Ontario’s cold desert nights, then why not just let them sense that five-degree difference. Why not let homeless feel protected from life on the streets in this 6’ x 4’ x 4’ metal structure. Those homeless individuals that were using dumpsters for shelter were not harming anyone. The only harm that was being done was self-inflicted by city officials who feared the public perception that their city was dirty. The dumpster raiding by police in the city of Ontario is just one example of homeless people being denied public space. If sleeping in a dumpster is not demeaning enough, being rejected from a dumpster, and not having the ability to sleep in any public space further dehumanizes the homeless. Police in Ontario, and many cities in America, are chasing homeless individuals from one miserable spot to the other.

A formal interview with Charlie led me to see how often the homeless endure police harassment over their access to public space in Ontario. When I asked Charlie if there was any public space that he could go to he responded with raised eyebrows, ―In Ontario?‖ “Yeah,” I said. He immediately shook his head, “Hell no.” By the end of our
conversation I too was shaking my head, “Hell no” is right. Here is Charlie’s account of his interactions with the police over public space:

“No you can’t chill in Ontario. They are gonna say hey-yay what are you doing here. And I thought this was America. Especially if you have a backpack ya know what I mean? You look like any kind of homeless they will say okay what are you doing? If you are sitting there they’ll be like hey what are you doing? Loitering? Why the hell is the bench there in the first place?”

[…]

“I can only speak for me. But they are going to mess with me because of the way I look. They’ll say hey, he’s kinda cute, I don’t even need to buy him dinner, let me just feel him up really quick. And they send me on my way because they know I aint got nothing. Some of them already know me, but they mess with me anyways cause they wanna catch me slipping. Ya know? I aint got my shoelaces tied together, I’m good” (Charlie, Interview, December 4th, 2012).

The scale and frequency of recurring police harassment of the homeless population in Ontario can only really be understood by the individuals themselves. The conversation with Charlie illuminated how the police use profiling to target the homeless. If an individual looked homeless, suspicion, harassment, and herding of the individual would commence. Because the homeless spend so much of their time moving from place to place and interacting with the police, they have little time left to improving their situation.
The last example of how the city of Ontario deals with the homeless population comes from an informal interview with a man working at a local Ontario grocery store, Stater Brothers. He talked to me about how a crowd of at least twenty homeless persons used to gather in front of the store. However, a month ago the owner of the shopping center and the police started to enforce the code that regulates the public space in front of the Stater Brothers store. However, a month ago the owner of the shopping center and the police started to enforce the code that regulates the public space in front of the Stater Brothers store. The regulation of the public space in front of the store was enforced through police due to the owner’s fear of losing consumers from public annoyances. This event involving public space and homelessness portrays the difficulty for homeless to collectively come together in Ontario.

These three events I shared were stories of personal encounters that clearly show the restriction of human rights of the homeless (access to public space) by frequent police harassment. The Wheelhouse offers a safe space for community members of any background. For homeless individuals in Ontario, this means they have access to a space where the police will not harass them and a place where they will not be distinguished as annoyances but treated as humans. The Wheelhouse offers a break from the mistreatment that homeless face on city streets. It is a place of friendship and positivity as well as a space for homeless to come together in hopes of homeless advocacy.

Research Focus 2 - The Homeless and the Limiting Freedom of Movement

Literature Review:
Homeless populations have had their basic human right to freedom of movement restricted and limited. However, when mobility is gained, hope and empowerment are restored. While much literature exists on the challenges of transportation among low-income communities, little scholarship provides an explicit treatment of transportation among homeless populations. I will first touch on the issues of access to transportation for poor populations and then I will discuss mobility specific to homeless populations.

The access to different modes of transport distinguishes wealthy from poor populations. In “Energy and Equity,” Ivan Illich discusses how speed of movement has the consequence of perpetuating the inequalities that exist in society (Illich 1974). This difference in speed creates a societal perception of those who can do, and those who cannot. According to Illich, “equal speeds have equally distorting effects on the perception of space, time, and personal potency in rich and in poor countries” (Illich 1974; pg.11). Illich illustrates his thesis by depicting imagery of a “habitual passenger [that is] caught at the wrong end of growing inequality, time scarcity, and personal impotence” (Illich 1974; pg. 11). This have-not walks to destinations but hopes to have the speed and advantage of riding a bike or a bus. Traveling by public transportation the passenger dreams to have the privilege of escaping the inconveniences through ownership of a personal vehicle. As the elite of society continue to advance themselves via rapid mobility the gap between rich and poor will continue to grow.

Similar to Illich, Robert D. Ballard articulates in “Differential Vulnerabilities” that American society is divided into those with cars and those without, and this distinction marks the “have-nots” as more vulnerable (Bullard 2008). According to
Ballard, the vulnerability that poor communities experience are “social injustices perpetuated by government and business on the poor” (Bullard 2008; pg. 757).

A recent study by Christine Jocoy and Vincent Del Casino relates the homeless’s lack of access to transportation (automobile) and dependency on other means of transportation to the likelihood of downward social movement (Jocoy and Casinao 2008). Jocoy and Del Casino’s research on homeless people and their use of public transit led them to hypothesize that homeless populations are often found in “spaces of containment,” sites in which marginalized populations, such as the homeless, are maintained through construction of social and exclusive barriers to their mobility (Jocoy and Casinao 2008; pg. 2). Spaces of containment and lack of access to reliable transportation limit the ability of homeless and low-income populations to keep up with the fast pace of modern society.

Anne Holthaus recognized that as cities continue to enlarge, jobs and stable housing have moved farther away from each other (Holthaus 2004). Access to reliable transportation becomes a basic need in line with food, clothing, and shelter. As access to reliable transportation becomes a preeminent civil right and human necessity, it can be an agent to empower homeless communities and a means of creating upward mobility.

**Background on Ontario, Data, and Analysis**

In the United States, the mainstay of transportation and freedom of movement is via the automobile. The homeless population in our country does not generally have access to the automobile; instead relying on public transportation or walking. The situation in Ontario is similar. The homeless in Ontario move around the city using
public transportation (bus routes and the metro link), walking, and biking. Unless homeless individuals have a friend with a car who is willing to assist them, these are the only methods of transportation that are available to them. As stated earlier, in order to escape homelessness mobility is an absolute necessity.

The bus routes and metro link offered in Ontario are flawed and are not free of charge. Ontario does not have the money to disperse bus stops throughout the vast city: this eliminates the option of bus reliability. Walking as a main method of transportation in the city of Ontario is not realistic as Ontario covers 49.9 square miles without a centralized area for job sites and service institutions (Ontario, California). In order to be self-sufficient and independent, walking cannot be an individual’s main source of mobility in Ontario. That leaves us with bicycles.

Bicycles have the advantage of offering individuals affordable, healthy, and rapid transportation that also have the ability to empower. Even with the advantages that bikes offer, they too are not free of charge. Homeless individuals biking throughout Ontario everyday are likely to encounter bike issues that require maintenance and involve money or time. Bicycle problems can usually easily be fixed with money, however, the homeless are unlikely to have the privilege of an easy fix. Wheels may pop, brakes may stop working, and parts may need replacing. For people without money it is difficult to pay for a bicycle repairman, or own the tools and parts needed to repair a bike. There are barriers for the bike as a means of reliable transportation as well.

Through free service, free parts, and a welcoming environment The Wheelhouse is a place where Ontario’s homeless population can be guaranteed the right to mobility; no individual is turned away due to lack of funds. The Wheelhouse is upending society’s
construct of elitist mobility rights by guaranteeing freedom of movement despite income or structural oppression. This shift is paving the way for homeless individuals in Ontario to get off the streets and creating justice for the homeless populations.

During one of our conversations, Charlie told me that approximately seventy percent of Ontario’s homeless ride bikes to stay mobile. This information solidifies the need for The Wheelhouse as a way to serve the homeless in their quest to retain basic human rights by affordably keeping those well-used bicycles up and running. Before my internship I was aware that reliable and practical transportation was necessary for human functionality for obvious reasons (to get to stores, go to appointments, go to jobs or job interviews, go to banks, etc.), however, my research at The Wheelhouse revealed two other reasons why mobility through bikes is essential for the homeless.

Charlie expressed that one reason why mobility via bicycling is necessary for the homeless is that it gives them the ability to more easily avoid police harassment. When I asked Charlie if he thought that the police targeted him in the same way when he was biking compared to walking, Charlie responded with:

“Oh no, not a bike” Charlie replicates the sound wind makes when it hits your body on a fast moving pace. “They messed with me on a bike a couple of times but it might have been my fault.” This is most likely due to Charlie’s tendency to ride against traffic: tisk, tisk. “If you are on a bike you have less of a chance of them messing with you. If you are walking, they are gonna be like hey what’s going on pal. But if you are on a bike you can just go vvroom gone, see ya later bye” (Charlie, Interview, December 4th, 2012)
Intimidation by the police should not be a daily factor in anyone’s life; however, it is a reality for Ontario’s homeless. Riding throughout Ontario instead of walking is a way to avoid police harassment.

The more surprising advantage of bicycling as a means of mobility for the homeless was voiced by a homeless man named Buster.

“Without my bike I’m lost. I gotta keep a bike with me. I always gotta have one. Because if you don’t do that then you get caught up in what’s going on out here, and I don’t wanna get caught up. You get caught up in what everyone else is doing. I gotta stay moving. Cause if I see something I don’t like, I’m gone. I can take off. I gotta move. This doesn’t feel right, this is not for me, I’ll laugh and talk for a minute but then I gotta go” (Buster, Interview, December 4th, 2012)

The ability to immediately escape hazardous or uncomfortable situations by car was, for me, an unrecognized privilege until this conversation with Buster. Bicycles provide homeless individuals the ability to escape street drug use or physical fights. Unlike the sluggish response that occurs when people disentangle themselves from a situation while on foot, people can more quickly extricate themselves from dangerous or inappropriate situations while on bikes.

Mobility through biking is essential for Ontario’s homeless to travel to various locations, to avoid police harassment, and to escape trouble on the streets. Additionally, people gain a sense of empowerment through retaining their right to move freely.
Empowerment can go a long way in cultivating hope within individuals, which can lead to social change. The free service and parts for bikes that The Wheelhouse offers is keeping many homeless individuals mobile on functional bikes, while retaining their basic right to freedom of movement.

There are innumerable accounts that I have heard this semester from homeless Wheelhouse patrons describing how essential their bike is for their life and how appreciative they feel toward The Wheelhouse for providing free service, parts and equipment. However, one of the most touching moments came from a homeless man and a Wheelhouse regular named Depp. While riding his bike in Ontario, Depp was hit by a car. He was not seriously injured, but his bike was damaged and was no longer functional. Depp brought his bike to The Wheelhouse and we spent the next hour or so fixing it up alongside a shared pizza. After his bike was fixed he immediately got on it to test out how it rode. He flew out of that driveway. A few minutes later Depp returned with a smile on his face. A sense of liberation radiated from him, both from his stance and his energy. Recognizing this I asked Depp how riding made him feel.

“It makes you feel young. It’s like a drug except it’s better than any drug. Makes you feel unstoppable, you’re not hurting no one you are just going. I know what a bird feels like” (Depp, Interview, December 11th, 2012).

That was all I needed to hear to be confident about the usefulness and necessity of The Wheelhouse. In order to preserve the empowerment that results from the freedom of mobility spread by bicycling among Ontario’s homeless, The Wheelhouse must survive;
it must keep functioning and must keep fixing bikes for free. When I asked Charlie if he thought his mobility was limited because he was on a bike he said,

“Limited, do I feel what? Held down, trapped by the man? No. No cause I have a bike. I can go anywhere. Fuck the man” (Charlie, Interview, December 4th, 2012).

**Conclusion**

Social change has a few necessary ingredients. One of these is having a safe place where ideas can be discussed, experiences shared and commonalities identified. If the homeless population can come together to realize their oppression, they can take the first step toward identifying their situation and move toward activism and change. Another essential ingredient is fostering a sense of hope and empowerment within oppressed communities. Spaces that cultivate a welcoming environment and give the sense that change is possible are spaces where democracy occurs.

The Wheelhouse fosters both comfort and empowerment. The Wheelhouse is an area where homeless individuals can escape the likelihood of harassment by the police because they exist in the public sphere. This respite allows homeless persons to feel secure and aids in self-recovery and self-love. The Wheelhouse cultivates a sense of empowerment for the homeless through maintaining their right to freedom of movement despite lack of funds. A working bicycle allows homeless individuals to regain their sense of personhood and independence.
Although The Wheelhouse has not solved injustices done by the city, it is counteracting some of them through offering a space free of harassment and offering access to affordable mobility. By restoring human rights of the homeless, The Wheelhouse has the capability to create a community that can stand up to Ontario’s city and police officials to demand fair treatment. Max Estella explained to me a “stop sign theory.” In this theory a small achievement by the community spurs people to try to achieve bigger things. The stop sign example is that after a community has been successful in collectively organize themselves to make the city add a stop sign on a busy street. They realize that they have the power and ability to create change in the city. It’s that first step that is important to build hope. The Wheelhouse is creating hope within homeless individuals in Ontario and in my opinion, is on its way of putting in their “stop sign.”

I had much difficulty writing this paper. Not with writing the literature reviews or analyzing the data, but with trying to make my words as beautiful as The Wheelhouse actually is. At the beginning of the semester during one of my first conversations with Charlie we talked about his friends in Ontario. I asked him who his friends were and he said he had none. During my last day at The Wheelhouse at the end of the semester I asked Charlie if that had changed. “Yeah.” He said, “Dramatically. With y’all yeah.” I smiled and fist pounded Charlie and then said, “I feel like The Wheelhouse is helping form so many friendships and connections and that can led to something so beautiful.” Charlie with a matter of fact tone responded with, “It seems like it already is. It already does.”
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Lastly I would like to thank The Wheelhouse and all of the community that fix bikes, dance to music, eat pizza, have meaningful conversations, and share laughs together within it. You have all made The Wheelhouse something so beautiful.
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