

For some people, home is where the Hill is

THE GLOBE ABROAD

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in NEW YORK



Jacquie McNish, in her second year as *The Globe and Mail's* second New York correspondent since the *Report on Business* bureau opened in 1986, takes a two-part look at New York City's enterprising homeless. Ms. McNish, a former *Wall Street Journal* reporter, previously covered financial services at *The Globe*. These articles are the sixth of a series highlighting *The Globe's* 10 foreign bureaus.

IN the shadow of the Manhattan Bridge's rusting arches, residents of the Hill go about their Saturday-morning chores.

While music blares from a nearby stereo, Sammy Ramirez hammers away on an addition to his house; Yokbill Lee reinsulates his roof; and Nick Fracaro rakes garbage off his lawn.

Keeping a vigil on these domestic tasks are thousands of gawking passersby whose cars stream off the bridge's exit ramp. Passing barely an arm's length from the Hill's communal vegetable garden, most drivers roll down their windows and stare glumly. Some honk their horns and jerk their thumbs up in approval. A bold few take photographs.

The object of their fascination is one of the city's longest-standing shantytowns, built and occupied by

about 30 homeless men and women. Mr. Ramirez's addition is a plywood lean-to the size of a large closet; Mr. Lee's roof is a crazy quilt of carpets and mattresses tied together with brightly coloured rags; and Mr. Fracaro's dirt lawn surrounds a massive 19-foot tepee stitched out of canvas mailbags.

To many drivers and nearby residents, the haphazard collection of wood, cardboard and metal huts on the Hill is a haunting symbol of the financially troubled city's inability to cope with its growing ranks of homeless.

After a decade of soaring rents wiped out most low-rent housing, and rising unemployment threw hundreds of thousands out of work, New York has become home to one of the largest homeless populations in the United States.

"This is America's shame," said Nick Tragaras, the manager of a small diner down the street from the Hill. "A big country like this goes out of its way to help other countries, but it can't even give the people up there a decent roof over their heads."

But most of the men and the few women who live on the Hill are not ashamed about their living conditions. Since the first huts were thrown up five years ago, the Hill has given them permanent shelter and a sense of community.

"This is my Ponderosa," said Mr. Ramirez, pointing a hammer at his sprawling ranchhouse of slanted wooden rooms that he built from used lumber.

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Community a refuge

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Since he moved to the Hill three years ago, he has created a home that, he said, compares favourably with many of the run-down apartments he previously rented in New York's ghettos. It also comes without the aggravation of monthly bills or landlords.

The Ponderosa is brimming with the comforts of most conventional homes. Used furniture and such rusting appliances as a washing machine, dryer, stereo, television and small fridge crowd every corner. His belongings were accumulated over the years on daily scavenging expeditions through city streets and garbage bins.

The appliances run on electricity that Mr. Ramirez siphons from the Manhattan Bridge. There is enough left over for his neighbours to operate electric frying pans, alarm clocks and a few TV sets.

Water is drawn from a nearby fire hydrant. For heat on cold nights, residents make bed warmers out of tin pots filled with embers from fires in old oil drums. Lending an odd legitimacy to the community, city garbage collectors unexpectedly began weekly pickups from the Hill a year ago.

"It's a pretty good setup; I can't complain," Mr. Ramirez said.

Most of the Hill's residents earn money by unloading trucks for nearby stores, collecting refundable cans from city streets or reselling abandoned and sometimes stolen goods.

The alternatives for most of the Hill's residents are bleak. Because many are single, the mostly black or Hispanic men that live on the Hill rank at the bottom of the city's priority lists for public housing. Most can't get a steady job because they lack proper training or have drug or alcohol problems. Some simply prefer the shanty life to a low-wage job that barely pays enough to cover high city rents.

New York has many temporary shelters for the homeless, but single men are usually dispatched to cavernous armories where armed security guards treat them like prisoners, and where violence and theft are rampant.

Although drug use is a growing problem on the Hill, its residents have been luckier than most of the city's homeless squatters. In the past year, larger shantytowns on the Lower East Side and near Central Park were razed by city bulldozers after local residents complained of increased violence, drug trafficking and garbage pollution.

City officials have mostly ignored the people on the Hill because it is on state property at the foot of the bridge. The dishevelled shanties do not seem to offend many residents in Chinatown, where dirty, clogged streets are the norm.

The Hill's future was also helped by the arrival last Thanksgiving of Mr. Fracaro, 39, and Gabriele

Schafer, 33, a Brooklyn couple who produce experimental plays about such social outcasts as punks or the mentally ill.

Initially, the couple's plan was to put a tepee on the Hill to mark the anniversary of the Wounded Knee Indian massacre and to draw attention to the plight of the homeless. They slept in the tepee the first night to protect it from vandals, but ended up staying a year to learn more about the community.

"It was the least dilettante thing to do," Ms. Schafer said.

The tepee's presence has helped generate support for the Hill from New York's art and journalism community. The New Yorker published a lengthy report on the shantytown this summer, and the Municipal Arts Society of New York featured the tepee in a special publication on city landmarks.

In September, dozens of theatre-goers trotted through the shantytown to watch the couple's performance of a Heiner Mueller play that was staged in the tepee and featured a walk-on appearance by one of the Hill's homeless. By performing plays on the Hill, the couple hopes to generate more respect for the community.

"We're demanding that people accept the lifestyle that the people on the Hill have chosen," Ms. Schafer said.

Lately, however, the orderly life on the Hill has been plagued by a problem that inevitably infects most poor neighbourhoods in the city. This summer, drug sellers set up shop in a corner of the shantytown, scaring away some long-time residents and attracting so many newcomers that some anticipate the city may send in the bulldozers.

Such a precarious future would be devastating for most communities, but people on the Hill are always prepared for upheaval. "Let them come and tear it down," Ms. Schafer said. "We'll just build it back up the next day."

NEXT: Night of the living redeemers