

CURATOR INSIGHTS ON EVICTED

By Sarah A. Leavitt

The *Evicted* exhibition is designed to introduce our visitors to an important and underreported topic: low-income renter eviction. We worked with sociologist Matthew Desmond, an architecture firm, Matter Architecture Practice, a radio producer, Unfurl, and a graphic design firm, mgmt., to present a unique museum experience: an exhibition that situates visitors in a bleak scenario experienced by millions of Americans.



THE BOOK *Evicted* is based on Matthew Desmond’s *Evicted: Poverty & Profit in the American City* (Crown, 2016). We sprinkled quotations from the book all over the show, each one highlighting one of the points we wanted to emphasize. One of my favorites is in the last room, placed there to remind us that the eviction crisis we’ve just learned about is not inevitable and that other futures are possible:

ALL THIS SUFFERING IS SHAMEFUL AND UNNECESSARY. BECAUSE IT IS UNNECESSARY, THERE IS HOPE. THESE PROBLEMS ARE NEITHER INTRACTABLE NOR ETERNAL. A DIFFERENT KIND OF SOCIETY IS POSSIBLE, AND POWERFUL SOLUTIONS ARE WITHIN OUR COLLECTIVE REACH.

DESIGN The exhibition uses four structural “houses” to establish the fundamental idea—home should represent safety, and the eviction crisis has put the relationship many people have with shelter in danger. The houses in the exhibition, though, are not quite right; they’re not doing the job of providing shelter and safety as a home should. The wallpaper is on the outside, the outlets are on the outside, and one of them is missing most of the roof and walls. These structures are showing us what happens when home is threatened: everything goes wrong.

INFOGRAPHICS Using common house keys as visual tools in a graph showcasing an ugly statistic, as we do in the beginning of the exhibition, is a way to twist our understanding of home, demonstrating what happens when home is ripped away and your key no longer works. The house key is a simple, profound, and poignant symbol of home. It conveys all the security that should accompany the place we live—a key is what separates home from the outside world and only allows in trusted friends and family. Eviction rips apart that connection.

HOUSEHOLD BELONGINGS Featured in the exhibition is a shrink-wrapped pallet of household belongings, demonstrating visually that violent moment in an eviction when a family’s belongings are no longer their own—they are left for scavenging by the neighbors, or they are stored, unreachable, indefinitely. These particular items will be returned to a local non-profit, A Wider Circle, after the exhibition closes, and will be distributed to those in need in our own Washington, D.C., area community, helping a new family start over at home.

VOICES In this exhibition, we have the opportunity to hear from people who have experienced eviction in their own lives. Our audio production team from Unfurl Productions spent some time in Landlord-Tenant court in Camden, New Jersey, and found several people interested in telling their stories to a wide audience. I believe being able to hear from people about their own experiences is always a powerful way to build connections in an exhibition.

MAPS We used a map of the United States at both the beginning and end of the exhibition. Though eviction is a crisis nationwide, and we see that from the start, our country has the capability to change this narrative. The ending map shows examples of folks all over the country from throughout the last century who have advocated for change and helped people facing housing insecurity.



WHAT CAN I DO ABOUT HOUSING INSTABILITY IN MY COMMUNITY?

Whether or not you are affected by housing instability, you can take actions to improve your situation and our communities overall. The low-income rental housing crisis affects more than 11 million people throughout the United States. Minimum wage doesn't cover the rent for a 2-bedroom apartment anywhere in the country. Close to 2.5 million people were evicted last year, with even more experiencing housing instability. Eviction threatens all aspects of family life: health, jobs, school, and personal relationships. As the Museum's exhibition reveals, we have an eviction crisis in America.

RIGHT NOW

VISIT [Evicted](#) at the National Building Museum—through May 19, 2019.

READ [Evicted: Poverty and Profit in the American City](#) by Matthew Desmond.

Available in Museum Shop

RESEARCH eviction rates across the country and see where your area fits by using [Eviction Lab](#), the first-ever database of eviction data in the country. Share the research with local aid groups and elected officials in your area.

KEEP UP with the news, especially recent reporting about evictions in the [Baltimore Sun](#) and the [New York Times](#).

SIGN a [petition to get the housing affordability crisis on the agenda in Congress](#), powered by the non-profit organization for renters, [Make Room](#).

TAKE SOME TIME

ATTEND [Home, Health, and Finance for Renters](#) at the National Building Museum on Sunday, September 16 to learn more about resources available for low-income renters.

JOIN a book club or meetup group that focuses on these issues.

LEARN more about [nuisance ordinances and ways you might work on this issue in your community](#). Nuisance laws penalize people who live in sites where a certain number of calls are made for police service or instances of alleged crimes. Because of these laws, landlords end up removing victims of crimes from their homes, even if the perpetrator does not live there.

GET REALLY INVOLVED

ADVOCATE for the civil right to counsel. [There is no civil right to counsel in America](#), the way there is for criminal cases. However, some cities such as New York and San Francisco are starting to enact right to counsel legislation.

LEARN more about [right to counsel in housing court](#), look at the map to find where your state fits in, and bring up this issue with your local legislators.

DONATE, VOLUNTEER, OR WORK for an organization that helps people who have experienced eviction. See list to the right for some suggestions.



NO MORAL CODE OR ETHICAL PRINCIPLE
NO PIECE OF SCRIPTURE OR HOLY TEACHING
CAN BE SUMMONED TO DEFEND WHAT WE
HAVE ALLOWED OUR COUNTRY TO BECOME
— MATTHEW DESMOND

EVICTED NATION

Organizations in the D.C./ Maryland/Virginia area working to combat poverty and homelessness; provide voice to tenants; provide legal counsel to tenants in housing court, and other related issues:

[A Wider Circle](#)

[Bread for the City](#)

[DC Central Kitchen](#)

[Public Justice Center](#)

[DC Pro Bono Bar Association](#)

[Legal Aid of the District of Columbia](#)

[Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless](#)

[Voices for Civil Justice](#)

[Friendship Place](#)

National organizations working on homelessness issues:

[National Coalition for the Homeless](#)

[National Alliance to End Homelessness](#)

[National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty](#)



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