The Minneapolis Armory is an occupied building, barricaded from the law, an island of anarchy two blocks from City Hall, where the irresistible force of defiance has met the immovable object of indifference.

The occupiers, a scraggly collection of dissidents born sometime around the 1969 Summer of Love, swath themselves in urban guerrilla drab just as if they were beamed in time from the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco two decades ago.

The barricades are up, resistance plans laid, hiding places set. There are bedrooms, portable latrines, a communal kitchen, even a modest library of revolutionary and anarchist literature.

But the riot police haven't come. A deputy chief stopped by to chat Tuesday afternoon, but, after a week of occupation, the cops have done little else. It's just as if nothing had happened. So the standoff, begun May 4 when the group broke into the vacant building as a protest against homelessness, promises to drag on. It could last a long time.

"The police have said they have no intentions of getting us out, and talk continues on what to do," said 23-year-old Eddie Nix, a veteran of homeless squats in Copenhagen, Amsterdam and Berlin. "We plan to stay."

It appears that the homeless protesters have discovered a hole in the social fabric, a squabble between the city and the county that keeps both occupied in court over the future of the armory.

The county, which owns it, wants to tear it down and build a high-rise jail; the city, which has the police force, wants to preserve the building for a youth center.

The protesters are with the city on this one. "If they come and arrest us, we're the people who are going to fill it anyway," said Nix, who has developed a healthy sense of irony in his years as an international squatter.

Deputy Chief Dave Dobrotka, a seasoned cop who knows irony when he sees it, said the police are in no hurry to storm the armory, even though he knows full well that "The county would want us to get them out."

Instead of employing force, Dobrotka sauntered over to the armory yesterday afternoon to check out a rumor that the protesters would simply leave if they were asked to. The rumor proved unfounded.

Acting alone, however, Dobrotka breached the armory's defenses: "There was nobody outside, so I yelled up there," he recounted. "I saw nobody on the roof, and I just walked in."

After a brief talk with Mark Thisius, a member of Up and Out of Poverty, Dobrotka left peacefully. "I'm a little tired of being the boogeyman," he said. "The MPD is tired of it."

So far, the dozen or so protesters occupying the building have given the police little reason to act. They have taken care to paint their political slogans on banners and sheets, rather than on walls, and they have built frames of plastic to cover historic murals inside the building.

"Nobody here has to be violent or destructive," said Ron Albert, a 24-year-old theater artist who normally lives in a garage and plays in a band. "We highly discourage even spray paint."

They also say they discourage drugs and alcohol, to the point of having already evicted someone who tried to bring some in. "That would ruin the whole thing," Nix said.

What they want is housing. Not for themselves, because most of them have places to stay, but for some 2,000 other homeless people in the Twin Cities.

"It would be really nice if kids could come in and not have to worry about racism, sexism and discrimination," said John Kosmas, 21. "If this place works, it doesn't need to be a jail. Just give people a place to have fun and not have to pay for it."

They already have formed the tentative framework of their idealistic utopia amid cots, sleeping bags and the assorted debris of the armory's damp, crumbling interior. There is no electricity or water.
A kitchen area in an old classroom is stocked with bread, peanut butter, coffee and juice, as well as hummus and tabouli donated by the Seward Cafe. There's talk of starting a soup kitchen. Fliers are being prepared to invite artists and craftspeople to come and set up shops as part of an ad hoc community center.

Leadership roles have been removed. "It's a communal coalition," Albert said. "There's no kingpin. It's as equal as the Constitution wants the country to be."

Outside, on the sidewalk facing 6th St., there is little evidence of the uprising within, other than a few revolutionary banners hanging from barred windows.

A delivery truck driver passed by at lunch time yesterday and yelled, "Get a job."

Moments later, however, a woman emerged from a Marriott Hotel delivery truck and carted over a pot of coffee.

Said Nix: "A lot of people here are more fortunate than the people who need to be here."

Caption: PHOTO
Memo: SP02B

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