

Deconstruction: from the surface symptom to a viable entry point

Phase 2 of a Dialectic and Deconstruction Solutions blueprint, on paper. This sheet is for the part most of us get wrong: stopping at the first explanation.

Dialectic and Deconstruction Solutions (DDS) is a sequence of questions, and a person with a pen can run it. No AI and no data center are needed. The engine at SolveSomething.com automates the questions. It does not own them. A blueprint is the written answer to all eight phases of the method, and this sheet carries us through the second one.

02 Deconstruction

We cannot solve a symptom. A symptom is what people see and feel: the tents on the block, the spill in the creek, the fight at the kitchen table. A driver is a structural force upstream of the symptom, and in DDS it has four parts: an actor, the incentive or constraint pressing on that actor, the behavior that results, and the loop that keeps the behavior stable. Deconstruction is the discipline of tracing a symptom back to its drivers and choosing the one we will act on. That choice is the entry point.

FUNCTION ONE

The problem was once a solution or an adaptation. Air conditioning and cars solved heat and distance. The conditions they created now melt the ice caps.

FUNCTION TWO

The component upstream of the polarized question. A polarized question is one that splits the room into two camps with nothing to do together. Regulate abortion, yes or no, is one. Reducing unwanted pregnancy sits upstream of it, and both camps can act there.

How to use this sheet

Each page stands alone and can be printed singly and handed around a table. Every fill-in line expects a few words, not a paragraph. Checkboxes are tests we run on our own answers, and an answer that fails one gets rewritten on the same page. The worked example on every page is the published blueprint "San Francisco's Encampments Are a Continuity Failure". The ladder page uses the abortion example instead, the clearest case of a polarized question with a usable rung above it.

PAGE	WHAT WE DO THERE	WHAT WE LEAVE WITH
2	Lock the umbrella problem and choose one driver	A bounded ambition sentence
3	Name the surface symptom and catch the false start	The explanation we are rejecting
4	Write the compassionate reality	Why smart, caring people have not fixed this
5	Ask what this problem once solved	The chain from need to symptom
6 and 7	Build three upstream drivers and test each	Drivers that pass the four-part test
8	Climb the ladder above the polarized question	The rung both sides can act on
9	Choose and test the entry point	The lever, and what it does not solve
10	Read the whole worked run on one page	A model to check our own run against

The test of a finished Phase 2: we can name a specific person who could act on the entry point this month, and the room does not split when we say it out loud.

The umbrella lock

Phase 1 in brief, because Phase 2 cannot start until the problem is named and the ambition is bounded.

The umbrella problem is the macro phenomenon in one sentence. It is a description, not a cause and not a moral judgment. Then we list the structural forces that feed it, pick one for this run, and say in writing what we are not solving. The method calls that last step bounded ambition. Precision signals seriousness. Overreach destroys trust.

THE CODE'S OWN EXAMPLES

- ☐ **Passes:** "Chronic homelessness in Denver." A phenomenon, described.
- ☐ **Fails:** "Lack of affordable housing." That is a driver, not the umbrella.
- ☐ **Fails:** "Society's failure to care." A moral frame, not a structural description.

A quick test: could a photograph show it? A phenomenon can be photographed. A driver and a moral frame cannot.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ENCAMPMENTS

UMBRELLA	Persistent street encampments in San Francisco that return after every clearance.
DRIVERS	Crisis as the only entry. Fragmented continuity across handoffs. Low-leverage enforcement. Housing supply and cost. Behavioral health capacity.
THIS RUN	Fragmented continuity across handoffs.

THE UMBRELLA PROBLEM

One sentence. What is happening, where, and to whom. No cause, no verdict.

- ☐ It describes a phenomenon rather than naming a cause.
- ☐ It contains no judgment of anyone.

THE MULTIPLE DRIVERS

Three to five structural forces that feed the umbrella. Each is a distinct mechanism that would need its own blueprint. Concise names only, the structure comes on pages 6 and 7.

BOUNDED AMBITION

Circle the driver this run addresses, then complete the sentence in the method's own form. We do not apologize for the scope, and page 9 asks for the rest again.

This blueprint addresses _____.

It does not attempt to resolve _____, which require separate interventions.

The surface symptom and the false start

What people see, then the explanation everyone reaches for first, and why we set it down.

The surface symptom is the experienced crisis, described without editorializing. Two or three sentences in a direct, clinical voice: what breaks down visibly, who notices, what it costs them. We are not explaining anything yet. We are recording what the room can already agree is happening.

THE SURFACE SYMPTOM

What do people see? What breaks down visibly? Where and how often?

- ☐ Every sentence could be confirmed by someone standing there.
- ☐ No sentence says why.

The false start is the first explanation. It arrives fast, it feels complete, and it does one of two things: it names a person's choice, or it names a single cause. Either way it ends the inquiry before the structure has been seen. We write it down so we can see it clearly and reject it in writing. The method states the rejection, for example "People choose to be homeless" or "Homelessness is a housing problem."

THE FALSE START WE ARE REJECTING

The explanation this room reached for first.

What it names instead of structure:

- ☐ A person's choice or character
- ☐ A single cause
- ☐ A single lever ("just do X")
- ☐ A moral frame or a villain

COMMON FALSE STARTS TO RECOGNIZE

- ☐ **They choose it.** A choice, with the constraints around the choice left out.
- ☐ **It is a housing problem.** One cause for a problem with five drivers.
- ☐ **Just enforce. Just provide services.** One lever, no loop.
- ☐ **Nobody cares.** A moral frame. It explains nothing about who does what.
- ☐ **We only need more money.** Money with no actor and no behavior.
- ☐ **The other side blocks it.** A villain. Villain narratives are prohibited in DDS.
- ☐ **It has always been this way.** A loop mistaken for a law of nature.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ENCAMPMENTS

SURFACE SYMPTOM	Tents and belongings occupy the same blocks month after month. A clearance empties a block, and within weeks the same people are back on it or the one beside it. Residents and shopkeepers see no change. People in the tents see the same cycle from the other side.
FALSE STARTS	"Just enforce" and "just provide services." Each names one lever. Neither says what happens after the lever is pulled, which is where the blueprint finds the problem.

The compassionate reality

Why smart, caring people have not fixed this already. An honest accounting of weight, not an excuse.

Before we propose anything, we name the legitimate structural constraints that have prevented progress. Three or four sentences that translate the conflict into values, incentives, and constraints. If our answer makes the people involved look stupid or cruel, it is not finished.

The mixed-motive rule: every actor is assumed to be responding rationally to incentives and constraints unless proven otherwise. Villain narratives are prohibited. A villain cannot be redesigned, an incentive can.

LOAD-BEARING OBSTACLES What in the current arrangement holds weight, so that removing it collapses something people need? _____ _____ _____	COMPETING PRESSURES Which legitimate demands pull against each other here? Name the pressure and who carries it. _____ _____ _____
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PREVIOUS ATTEMPTS AND WHAT THEY RAN INTO

What has been tried in good faith, and what structural fact stopped it?

THE COMPASSIONATE REALITY, WRITTEN OUT

Three or four sentences. Each one names a constraint, a pressure, or an incentive.

☐ No sentence attributes the failure to a character flaw.

☐ The people described would recognize themselves in it.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ENCAMPMENTS	
OBSTACLES AND PRESSURES	A block that is unsafe today demands a response today, and a clearance is the only response the city can deliver in a day. The person in the tent needs months of stable contact to leave it. The same budget is asked to buy both.
ATTEMPTS	Clearances, which move people one block over. Navigation centers, which fill and have no funded path after exit. More services, each behind its own door.
WRITTEN OUT	Each agency is funded for what it can count at its own door: beds filled, contacts made, blocks cleared. Nobody is funded for the person arriving intact at the next door. The people doing the work are doing it well inside a structure that loses the person at every transfer, and the public, seeing the same tents, concludes that nothing is being done.

The problem was a solution

The first function of deconstruction: what did this problem solve, for whom, under what constraint, and what changed?

A symptom is evidence of intelligence that once operated under constraint. Somebody faced a need, found a workable answer within the limits they had, and the answer created conditions that we now name as the problem. Read the chain backward and the symptom stops looking like a failure and starts looking like an old solution still running. This matters for design: a solution that is still solving something cannot be removed, it has to be replaced.

WORKED CHAIN: HEAT AND DISTANCE	
THE NEED	Rooms that were unbearable in summer, and towns that were too far apart to work across.
THE SOLUTION	Air conditioning and cars. Both worked at once, for almost everyone who could buy them.
WHAT IT CREATED	Cheap comfort anywhere, so people built where it was hot. Cheap distance, so homes spread away from work.
THE PROBLEM WE NOW NAME	Emissions from cooling and driving, and the ice they melt.

WORKED CHAIN: ENCAMPMENTS	
THE NEED	A block overrun by camps, and a public demanding it be cleared.
THE SOLUTION	A clearance, and a shelter bed offered for the night.
WHAT IT CREATED	Agencies funded per night and per clearance. Nobody paid for what happens the morning after.
THE PROBLEM	The same people on the same block, and a public that has stopped believing anything works.
WHAT CHANGED	The emergency the clearance answered is permanent now, and the clearance still delivers the one thing the city can show a resident by Friday.

OUR CHAIN

The need it answered, and for whom:

The solution, and the constraint it was built under:

The conditions it created:

The problem we now name:

WHAT CHANGED

The constraint the old solution answered is different now. What is different, and what is the old solution still doing for the people who keep it running?

☐ We can say what the symptom is still solving, and for whom.

☐ We can say what would be lost if it simply stopped.

Upstream drivers: the four-part test

What a driver has to contain before we are allowed to build on it.

Every upstream driver must specify four things. An actor: who is doing this. An incentive or constraint: what motivates or forces the behavior. A behavior: what they actually do. A reinforcing loop: what keeps the pattern stable. The method calls this the Upstream Driver Quality Test, and it exists to stop vague analysis like "social factors" or "cultural issues". Every driver must be mechanistic and falsifiable. A vague driver feels true and leads nowhere. A passing driver can be wrong, which is what makes it useful.

FIELD	FAILS: "LACK OF POLITICAL WILL"	PASSES: SEWER SPILLS BLUEPRINT
Actor A name we could put on a letter	"Politicians." Which ones? Nobody could receive this letter.	Public works and utility managers, with the engineering firm they have used for years.
Incentive or constraint A reason, not a mood	"They do not care enough." A mood. It cannot be changed by design.	A spill fine is small and arrives late. A tunnel is a 20-year contract with a familiar firm, and the consent decree already names it.
Behavior Something we could watch happen	"They fail to act." An absence, not an observation.	Hire the usual firm, accept the tunnel, call the cheaper system unproven, wait for the grant.
Loop Why it is still here next year	"And so nothing changes." Restates the symptom.	The tunnel takes 20 years, spills continue through the wait, the regulator writes the next decree naming the next tunnel.
Can we act on it?	No. There is no one to call and nothing to change.	Yes. Change the fine's size and timing, or give a tested cheaper system a safe harbor in the decree.

Read the failing column again. Each cell is something most of us have said in a meeting. The test is not an insult to the speaker, it is a request for the next sentence.

WORKED EXAMPLE: THE THREE ENCAMPMENT DRIVERS, IN BRIEF	
CRISIS IS THE ONLY ENTRY	Actor: the departments whose doors open on a 911 call, an emergency room, an arrest, or a clearance. Incentive: funded and measured on crisis response. Behavior: a person enters the system through a crisis and nowhere else. Loop: the response ends with the crisis, nobody is funded for the stabilization after it, and the next crisis is the next entry.
NOBODY OWNS THE HANDOFF	Actor: shelter, treatment, benefits and housing agencies, each with its own budget. Incentive: paid for throughput at their own door, not for the person arriving at the next one. Behavior: refer rather than hand off, close the case when the person leaves. Loop: each failed referral returns the person to the street, where every count starts over.
ENFORCEMENT WITH NO LANDING	Actor: police and public works crews answering residents' complaints. Incentive: a visibly clear block is the deliverable that can be measured this week. Behavior: clear, store belongings, move people along. Loop: the people move a block, the complaints follow them, the next clearance is scheduled.

Upstream drivers: three driver cards

Build each driver in its four parts, then run the test under it. A card that fails gets rewritten, not deleted.

Three to five drivers feed any umbrella problem, and we write at least three here. The checklist under each card is the Upstream Driver Quality Test from page 6. Name drivers we are not going to address as carefully as the one we are, since page 9 hands them to Phase 7.

DRIVER ONE	DRIVER TWO	DRIVER THREE
Name: _____	Name: _____	Name: _____
Actor, who is doing this: _____ _____	Actor, who is doing this: _____ _____	Actor, who is doing this: _____ _____
Incentive or constraint: _____ _____	Incentive or constraint: _____ _____	Incentive or constraint: _____ _____
Behavior, what they do: _____ _____	Behavior, what they do: _____ _____	Behavior, what they do: _____ _____
Reinforcing loop: _____ _____	Reinforcing loop: _____ _____	Reinforcing loop: _____ _____
Test ☐ Actor is a specific who ☐ Incentive is a reason, not a mood ☐ Behavior is observable ☐ Loop explains why it stays stable	Test ☐ Actor is a specific who ☐ Incentive is a reason, not a mood ☐ Behavior is observable ☐ Loop explains why it stays stable	Test ☐ Actor is a specific who ☐ Incentive is a reason, not a mood ☐ Behavior is observable ☐ Loop explains why it stays stable

DRIVERS FOUR AND FIVE, IF THE UMBRELLA HAS THEM

Names only. If one becomes the driver we act on, build its full card on a second copy of this page.

WHERE THE LOOPS MEET

Drivers that share a hinge point to the same entry point. In the encampments run, all three loops break at the same moment: when one system hands a person to the next. Where do our loops touch each other?

If a card cannot be filled past the actor, that is information. Either we need to ask someone who lives inside this driver, or it is not a driver and belongs on page 3 as a false start.

The upstream ladder

The second function of deconstruction: climb from the polarized question to the rung both sides can act on.

A surface question that splits the room cannot be the entry point, because half the room will spend its energy stopping the other half. Above it there is a rung where the two camps want the same thing. We climb one rung at a time by asking what sits upstream of this, and at each rung we run one test: does this rung split the room, or can both sides act here? The entry point is the lowest rung where both sides can act. Lower is better, because lower is closer to the symptom and faster to feel.

WORKED LADDER: ABORTION

RUNG 6

Access to contraception. Both sides can act. Fewer unwanted pregnancies.

RUNG 5

Sex education that reaches people before the pregnancy. Both sides can act, with argument about content.

RUNG 4

The cost of raising a child, and who carries it. Both sides can act.

RUNG 3

Whether completing a pregnancy is viable: work, housing, medical care. Both sides can act.

RUNG 2

Adoption as a real option rather than a slogan. Both sides can act.

RUNG 1

Regulate abortion, yes or no. Splits the room.

ENTRY POINT

Two groups of rungs: reduce unwanted pregnancy (rungs 5 and 6) and make completion viable (rungs 2 to 4). The published blueprint takes the second.

OUR LADDER, CLIMBED FROM THE BOTTOM

RUNG 6, FARTHEST UPSTREAM

☐ Splits the room

☐ Both sides can act

RUNG 5

☐ Splits the room

☐ Both sides can act

RUNG 4

☐ Splits the room

☐ Both sides can act

RUNG 3

☐ Splits the room

☐ Both sides can act

RUNG 2

☐ Splits the room

☐ Both sides can act

RUNG 1, THE SURFACE QUESTION

☐ Splits the room

☐ Both sides can act

THE RUNG WE CHOOSE

The lowest rung where both sides can act, and what each side would do there in its own words.

A rung is not upstream because it is bigger or more abstract. It is upstream because changing it changes the rung below. "Fix the culture" is not a rung. "Where homes are allowed to be built" is.

The entry point

Where we intervene: the structural lever, why this one, and what it does not solve.

The entry point is the point where intervention changes the whole system. The method writes it in four or five sentences, in the therapist-philosopher voice, with a structural metaphor: a beam, a hinge, a circuit, a gap. We name which driver it comes from, why this lever and not another, and what changes downstream when it moves. Then we test it. An entry point that fails a test is not thrown away, it goes one rung up on page 8 or one driver over on page 7.

THE ENTRY POINT

Which driver, and the hinge inside it:

Why this lever and not another:

What changes in the whole system when it moves:

The structural metaphor, in one sentence:

VIABILITY TESTS

☐ **Actionable by someone specific.** We can name the person or office.

☐ **Not polarizing.** Both sides of the room can act here.

☐ **Within reach of the people in the room.** It does not require someone absent to change first.

☐ **Not a symptom in disguise.** Moving it changes a loop, not a count.

WHAT THIS DOES NOT SOLVE

The drivers from page 2 that remain untouched. Phase 7 restates these as remaining components, so write them exactly.

Component ____ of ____ under this umbrella.

WORKED EXAMPLE: ENCAMPMENTS	
DRIVER AND HINGE	Fragmented continuity. All three loops break at the same hinge: the moment one system hands a person to the next.
WHY THIS LEVER	Enforcement and services both already exist and are both already funded. Neither fails for lack of effort. Both fail at the handoff, so a lever placed there moves both at once.
WHAT CHANGES	Continuity across every handoff: one accountable party stays with the person from clearance through shelter, treatment and housing. A clearance becomes a beginning instead of a reset, and the count of people on the block starts to mean something.
NOT SOLVED	Housing supply and cost. Behavioral health capacity. Crisis as the only entry, which the blueprint names and leaves for its own run.

The worked run on one page

The encampments blueprint's Phase 2, laid end to end, to check our own run against.

Read it top to bottom and watch the moves, not the content. Each row is a move: what is seen, what we reached for first, why smart, caring people have not fixed it, who does what and why and what keeps it stable, and where all of that turns on one hinge. Our run should make the same moves in the same order, in our own facts.

PHASE 2: SAN FRANCISCO'S ENCAMPMENTS ARE A CONTINUITY FAILURE	
UMBRELLA	Persistent street encampments in San Francisco that return after every clearance.
SURFACE SYMPTOM	Tents occupy the same blocks month after month. A clearance empties a block and within weeks the same people are back. Residents see no change. People in the tents see the same cycle from the other side.
FALSE START	"Just enforce" and "just provide services." One lever each, nothing said about what happens after it is pulled.
COMPASSIONATE REALITY	Each agency is funded for what it can count at its own door. Nobody is funded for the person arriving intact at the next door. The people doing the work do it well inside a structure that loses the person at every transfer, and the public, seeing the same tents, concludes that nothing is being done.
DRIVER ONE	Crisis is the only entry. Departments funded and measured on crisis response, so a person enters through a 911 call, an emergency room, an arrest or a clearance, and the response ends when the crisis does.
DRIVER TWO	Nobody owns the handoff. Agencies paid for throughput at their own door refer rather than hand off, and each failed referral returns the person to the street where the count starts over.
DRIVER THREE	Enforcement with no landing. Crews answering complaints deliver a clear block this week, the people move one block over, the complaints follow, the next clearance is scheduled.
THE HINGE	All three loops break at the same moment: when one system hands a person to the next.
ENTRY POINT	Continuity across every handoff, with one accountable party staying with the person from clearance through shelter, treatment and housing.
NOT SOLVED	Housing supply and cost. Behavioral health capacity. Crisis as the only entry.

BEFORE WE LEAVE PHASE 2

☐ The umbrella is a description, and this run addresses one driver under it.

☐ The false start is written down and rejected in writing.

☐ The compassionate reality names constraints, not characters.

☐ At least three drivers pass all four parts of the test.

☐ The entry point passes all four viability tests.

☐ What this run does not solve is listed, for Phase 7.

WHAT WE CARRY INTO PHASE 3

The entry point in one sentence, and the actors from the drivers, since the tensions of Phase 3 live between them.

Phase 3 is next: dialectics, where we name the competing values that the entry point will have to hold at once. The entry point tells us where to stand. Dialectics tells us what the standing costs, and who pays.