

GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

The City Belongs to Us

by Richard Healey

Coming out of years of hard struggles, many urban-based organizations have developed more sophisticated strategies for building the power to set new, democratic urban agendas. They recognize the need for city and region-wide alliances that represent communities and constituencies who have long been excluded from urban power regimes. They also know that problems in the inner cities have shown up in the suburbs, and that these problems can't be solved only at the city level. Today's organizers and leaders realize that almost every urban issue is also a regional, state, national, and sometimes, even a global issue. Urban strategy, therefore, has to take into account the need for linkages and networks across these levels.

The spirit of this new thinking about urban power is captured in a phrase I heard from a leader in Milwaukee, the Rev. Joe Jackson, who said "The city belongs to us." This idea is also the organizing principle for a new national network of urban-based groups called the "Right to the City Alliance." According to Gihan Perera, Executive Director of the Miami Workers Center, the 'right to the city' is a way of asserting that "we, the people who live in cities, neighborhoods and communities have a right to participate and shape the policies and culture and the way that city operates. We have a right to live there; we have a right to participate, and we need to have power over the decisions that are made there." Read more from Gihan at the following link: www.tidesfoundation.org/ideas-action/the-right-to-the-city/index.html.

The 'right to the city' represents a change in world-view — that ordinary people have the right and the ability to be part of making the major decisions shaping our lives, that all the inhabitants of a city need to participate in decision-making with real power. The right to the city means taking democracy very seriously, rescuing it from the hollow formalities of voting and professional lobbying. A living, breathing democracy in our cities is about power for working and poor people, African Americans, Latinos, immigrant communities, including people who are not

allowed to vote (non-citizens, ex-felons, youth), through participation in decisions that affect our lives and communities. As individuals, this would mean a transformation in our own consciousness, to move toward a critical consciousness about our society and ourselves.

Part of developing a critical consciousness is about being part of something larger that engages these questions, so being part of community groups, congregations, unions, etc. is essential for developing critical consciousness through ideas, action and reflection. In dialog with others, grassroots members of our organizations must look more critically and how racism works on multiple levels to to constrain political possibilities, to deny a voice to entire communities based on race, immigrant status and income, and to keep us weak and divided.

Rethinking the Urban Power Structure

One implication of 'the city belongs to us' is that ordinary people can run for office and be elected, running on a platform crafted by their own organizations. The people that the elected officials work so closely with and are most accountable to should be people from community organizations and immigrant rights and civil rights organizations, from unions and small business owners, congregations and social service advocates. This runs counter to our experience with urban power structures. Usually the group that sets the terms of debate, that understands and controls economic development, etc., is comprised of representatives from top corporations in the area, real estate interests, insurance industry reps, law firms and the Chamber of Commerce, along with corporate media owners. These are considered to be the people who understand how politics work, who know how to get things done, who can foster a good business climate, etc. These are the ones who most often get to work with elected officials on setting the urban agenda.

These traditional urban regimes are much weaker today, thanks to the combined effects of globalization, suburbanization and forty years of policies that have fragmented municipal jurisdictions and encouraged capital flight. This means that there is a political opportunity or opening in many urban areas. As the old power regime retreats, our groups can step up. But we need a long-term strategy for power in order to take advantage of this opening.

A Long-term Political Agenda

Can we determine our own agenda? This is critical to achieving the 'right to the city.' Most of the time we work on issue campaigns that can be taken to elected officials, city councils, and state legislatures now. Our issue campaigns have to be realistic and winnable. We also need, however, to think about creating a long-term political agenda that is aligned with our long-term goals. Such an agenda can help ensure that the issues we work on, the way we cut them, how we work on them, who we are in alliances with — the tactics of regular organizing — are in line with our goals.

To be able to move an agenda, we need a greatly expanded base and a strategic alliance of groups that can have a coordinated strategy and sense of the roles that each group can play as part of developing and moving the agenda.

The Role of Base-building

The base is the foundation upon which an urban strategy depends. Though we understand that an urban strategy is also a regional and national strategy, we want to assert that

- 1) Cities are strategically critical for achieving our goals of economic and racial justice.
- 2) A well-organized, urban base led by Blacks, immigrants, workers and Latinos is critical.
- 3) Those groups are the anchors of an urban base, of its leadership, and this base is fundamental for this strategy.

It is the base that needs to feel ownership of the long-term strategy and its goals. This is the group that can develop and hold on to a critical consciousness, rooted in their core beliefs and values. They can use it as part of their organizing to promote a transformative worldview, rooted also in a deeper set of convictions and understandings.

Alliance-Building

After the base, the next key element of urban strategy is figuring out how to create a new power alignment for the entire metropolitan region, composed of congregations and civic associations, unions, small and some medium businesses, and grassroots and community organizations.

This new power grouping can aim to partner with elected officials on setting the long-term agenda and politics for the metropolitan region. Some parts of the new alignment have to be base-building organizations that are promoting a transformative worldview across the region. The goals we are discussing are long-term goals. They demand that people act from their deepest and best values, not short-term material interests, internalized racial constructs, or fears of immigrants. There needs to be a process of organizing, mobilization, and education — across the metropolitan region, across lines of race and class — that builds on the core base, and, over time, to create a much larger and wider mass base across the region.

One role for a broader alliance is advancing an electoral strategy, which is a key part of a strategy to gain governing power in our cities

Leadership Development

The 'right to the city' implies that ordinary people can play roles that generally only small handful of elites play. Just that alone means that we have to think about leadership development in a much bigger and deeper way, in terms of how thousands of people become experienced and confident civic leaders — leaders who understand our goals, promote our long-term agenda, and are rooted in shared convictions and beliefs about radical democracy, human dignity, shared prosperity and collective power.

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