

## The City Belongs to All of Us

New organizing on economic issues fueled by the urban commons

By [Philip Cryan](#)

In our cities today, many of the most important decisions affecting poor and middle-class residents get made without those residents having any say in the matter. When it comes to economic and community development, in particular, democracy is out of commission. Developers, big business, and wealthy residents call the shots?? often to disastrous effect, as we've seen in the housing-bubble burst and current economic crisis. In the critical decisions that shape the quality of people's lives in our cities, there's little attention paid to the things that matter most to most people. The only goals taken seriously are those that can be measured in dollars, and the only power that citizens are granted in the process is that of individual consumers and, every couple of years, of voters.

Economic inequality across America is fast approaching pre-Depression levels, and it's even worse in metropolitan areas thanks to seven decades of urban flight by wealthy and white residents. This inequity between rich and poor in our cities has become so familiar that it now seems part of the natural environment. We've come to think of the political decisions that created this inequity as something like weather patterns ?? impersonal economic forces we can do nothing to change.

But the situation is not hopeless, especially at this dramatic moment in our history. The time seems ripe for new strategies and actions, some of which would have sounded wildly improbable a short while ago.

One of the most compelling ideas now beginning to be discussed is the need to shift from a market-based society to a commons-based society. In America today, the ideal of "The Market" has become an out-of-control engine reshaping nearly every aspect of life from education to the environment to our private lives. The commons?? "all the things we all own together that are not for sale to the highest bidder??" has been lost in this process, impoverishing us all to a larger or smaller degree. Many things fall within that definition of the commons?? air, water, health of the land, the internet, public health, scientific knowledge, cultural traditions, even languages. For the most part, commons do not have price tags. Imagine them for a moment as properties in which each of us holds an equal share of stock.

The idea of the commons is not new; it's been an element of human civilization since the beginning. But it's recently been rediscovered, inspiring a new perspective in fields ranging from digital culture to environmental campaigns. Many commons-based solutions have been advanced in efforts to revitalize and empower urban communities, even if citizens and grassroots organizations don't necessarily use the language of the commons. A commons-based society is one that values and protects commons assets, managing them for the benefit of the common good. Market-based solutions can be valuable tools as long as they do not undermine the strengths of the commons itself. The transition to a commons-based society would bring more fairness, democracy and environmental protection.

You can already see examples of growing commons consciousness on city streets today as community organizations around the country—“mostly in low-income urban communities with many people of color?”—have begun to push back against the economic and political forces shaping our cities. These groups may not describe their goal as a commons-based society, but the work they do in advocating bold new policies and organizing citizens to defend the public interest is the first step toward shifting people’s worldview. These groups challenge three underlying assumptions in economic and political policy that are at the root of our market-based society: 1) that everyone exists primarily as an individual, not as a member of a community; 2) that everything people value can be delivered through the market system; and 3) that democracy means nothing more than casting an occasional vote.

A number of these new urban organizations have joined together to assert “the right for all people to produce the living conditions that meet their needs.” Calling their alliance the Right to the City, these newly empowered citizens are stepping forward to take a leading role in the decision-making that affects their futures. And other community organizations not involved in this alliance have been forging connections across the usual divides—“race, class, geography, issues and types of organizations?”—to pose a potent challenge to business-as-usual in the ways their cities are run. Rev. Joe Jackson, the director of a faith-based organization in Milwaukee, MICAH, coined a memorable phrase that has become a unifying message for this new urban campaign: “The city belongs to all of us!”

What kind of new urban strategies work best in achieving the economic, political and commons-based goals embodied in this bold declaration? That is the question this report seeks to propose some answers to. After evaluating dozens of groups across the nation dedicated to the idea that their cities should be governed of, by and for the people, six promising strategies emerged:

#### 1.) Local Production for Local Needs

The community as a whole determines which of the things they value aren’t being adequately provided through a market-based system. They then search for the means to produce these things in their own community—“many of which are commons such as health and cultural opportunities, rather than goods.

#### 2.) A Green Economy that Works for All of Us

The necessary transition to a green economy that produces drastically fewer greenhouse gas emissions and environmental toxins must provide livelihoods for low-income city residents, who generally live in the most polluted neighborhoods and have a much smaller ecological footprint than either suburban or wealthy people.

#### 3.) The Right to Housing

Families must not be forced from their homes as a result of speculation or deception practiced by others. Defense of every resident’s right to decent, affordable housing is a fundamental goal of a commons-based society.

#### 4.) Community Land Trusts

This cooperative form of property ownership draws upon commons principles by taking land out of the real estate market, which increases people’s affordable housing options and grants community members the right to directly govern their own neighborhoods.

#### 5.) Metropolitan Democracy

Because many of the inequities in public services, education, and economic opportunities throughout metropolitan regions arise from stark disparities in municipal tax revenues, we need new metro-wide institutions that can help level the playing field for residents of low-income communities.

#### 6.) A New Kind of Governing

The best way to ensure the city belongs to all of us is to change how cities are governed, and by whom. That will mean the creation of a new political alignment that reaches across lines of race, class, geography, and specific issues. Also needed is a new approach in how we think of elections, elected officials and leadership development.

The primary focus of this emerging urban movement has been on neighborhood-, city- and metropolitan-level strategies, not on the federal and state policy context within which cities operate. Of course, any campaign to bring change to a city that is not also deeply involved in federal- and state-level issues is in for some serious disappointment. Still, more often than not, bold innovations at the local and regional level drive national debate toward significant reforms. This was the case during the New Deal era and, with hope, it will be again during the Obama presidency.

### The State of the City Today

From the suburban flight of the 1950s and 60s to the painful economic crisis unfolding today, our cities have gone through major waves of economic and demographic transformation: redlining, suburban flight, disinvestment, gentrification and more. Though each wave has been different, there's a common thread: developers, big business, and wealthy citizens drove the changes, with little democratic participation from low-income and minority communities who, not coincidentally, experienced the most harmful effects.

As a result, nearly all our metropolitan areas today are characterized by sharp inequalities in wealth, home ownership, public services, education, health care and economic opportunity among different neighborhoods and municipalities. It has become easy to see these divisions as the natural cause of events. The "secession of the successful" (as former Secretary of Labor Robert Reich memorably put it) into their own enclaves, and the lockhold over urban economic development by wealthy developers and their allies has been going on for so long that it is rarely seen as the product of political decisions, which could be changed.

One of the most noticeable features of cities today is a huge gap in ownership. "Poverty is not simply a lack of income," notes Chuck Matthei, a pioneer in the creation of Community Land Trusts. "Examine the economy of most low-income communities and you will find far more money flowing than one might suspect. The problem is that what flows in flows right back out." The money circulating through poor neighborhoods gets extracted by businesses and landlords who spend and invest most of it somewhere else. (It is important to note that many of the problems of concentrated poverty are no longer limited to city-center neighborhoods. Many older, inner-ring suburbs are in just as bad a shape as central cities. In both places, poor residents watch wealth flow out of their communities.)

The needs and wishes of the poor are not taken seriously, except in their roles as consumers. But, of course, that power is limited because they have less money to spend??"a clear case of what's wrong with a market-based society. This leads to what Gihan Perera, executive director of the Miami Workers Center and a leader of the Right to the City alliance, has called "the strip-mallization of our cities." A neighborhood's physical surroundings are shaped by the profit-making motives of people who live somewhere elsewhere.

The influence of real estate developers, in particular, over public officials has been a defining characteristic of politics in most U.S. cities for decades. But as Richard Healey of the Grassroots Policy Project points out, "the combined effects of globalization, suburbanization and forty years of policies that have fragmented municipal jurisdictions and encouraged capital flight" have weakened traditional urban power arrangements considerably in recent years, creating a potential opening for citizens and organizations seeking to shape economic development and land use decisions in their community.

### Keeping Our Eyes on the Prize

As long as outside interests continue to have the largest say about what happens in our cities, things we all own in common and depend upon—“public institutions, public services and public spaces and other examples of the commons?”—will continue to be trampled. Some are wantonly destroyed or taken over; others are simply neglected, marginalized or privatized. The loss of these urban commons drains us of many of the resources needed to defend and strengthen our communities: strong social bonds; a sense of mutual dependence upon one another; vibrant civic institutions; public gathering places for public conversations; historical memory; distinct local cultures; democratic control over public decisions; government we see as ours.

As Chet Bowers, author and Environmental Studies professor at the University of Oregon, has noted, the whole reason “the cultural commons” of our communities are under siege is that “our participation in them is largely part of the taken-for-granted experience of everyday life,” not something to which we pay a lot of conscious attention. As a result, “awareness of their loss too often occurs after they have been enclosed ??” when it is too late to resist.”

All too often when political movements and organizations seek to reverse this process of privatization/deprivation (two words with the same etymological root, as *On The Commons* Fellow Jonathan Rowe notes) by proposing alternative strategies for community economic development, these new strategies often continue to reduce community members to the roles of consumer and employee, to accept wealth inequality as a given, to measure “development” with the same indicators used by real estate developers and corporations (investment and job quantities), and to define our success and failure in the dollar terms. Far from taking on market-based propositions about who we are and what we value directly, such campaigns aim for what’s most politically achievable this year, putting no attention on reconfiguring the range of what’s achievable ten years from now. While many of the short-term fights are absolutely urgent and necessary, we can’t afford to lose sight of our broader goals.

### Bringing Democracy Back Home

We are in a time of great change, with many people thinking anew about who we are and what we value, what government is and what markets are. This could help bring about a transformation of politics, economics, social relations and everyday life in our cities. The only way these shifts in thinking will add up to meaningful change, however, is if the new direction for urbanAmerica is guided by working- and middle-class people, not by the usual suspects who have held power in our cities for decades.

Under the banner of “The Right to the City,” an alliance of some of the country’s most effective and forward-thinking urban community organizations has formed to assert a different path for the future of our communities. Richard Healey has observed, “The ‘right to the city’ represents a change in worldview ??” 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.”

As one innovative urban organization, Just Cause Oakland, puts it in their mission statement: “Our work is envisioning and creating the city we want to live in.” That is at the core of the new message coming out of urban America: “The city belongs to all of us!”

In a city that belongs to all of us, every policy proposal is evaluated by the standards of racial justice, environmental sustainability and community strength. Another defining characteristic is that democracy goes far, far beyond voting—“it means reconceptualizing political power in the city to include all the people. In true democracy, it is “regular folks” who run things. The point is for citizens to create, lead, govern.

At the heart of the declaration that “The city belongs to us” is the idea of a commons-based society.

Looking at our communities through the lens of the commons provides a different way of viewing property, ownership and management of resources ??? it represents a way of thinking not wholly structured around individualism, privatization and markets.

So what can be done to effectively preserve, nurture, manage and expand the urban commons? There are many possible answers, but they all begin with a recognition that ??? contrary to what economists, policy-makers and pundits across the political spectrum say — we are capable of managing a wide variety of commons for the benefit of everyone. There are numerous real-world examples of commons that have been sustained for generations, even centuries.

Some of these commons-management systems are extremely sophisticated and complex, such as the acequias of New Mexico, which are communal irrigation systems maintained for centuries through voluntary collective effort. Others are relatively simple, and found everywhere, such as blood banks or public libraries. Yet society often fails to appreciate these commons operating all around us because they do not attach prices to services, thus defying the long-held view that humans always make decisions out of an individualistic “profit-maximizing” impulse. The commons-based worldview declares that we are fundamentally social beings who make many decisions based on a consideration of the common good. In practical terms, that leads to an emphasis on public participation??? in which the people affected by the decisions make the decisions. That’s what democracy is all about.

## Six Bold Ways to Build a City that Belongs to All of Us

### 1. Local Production for Local Needs

In a city that belongs to all of us, the most important question to ask is this: what are the things we value most? If any of these things, which can be commons-based needs as well as goods, are being provided at levels far below what we would like to see, then let’s produce them ourselves.

The point of markets, presumably, is to serve human beings ??? to make us happier and more secure. To whatever extent they are not doing this it stands to reason that we should work together, outside markets, to produce those things. The list can include areas where the market fails many urban neighborhoods (such as fresh locally-grown food), areas the market tends to overlook (public gathering places), areas it undervalues (local culture and youth programs), areas that are outside its scope (continuing education opportunities) and areas it actually undermines (health and wellness). We already do this, of course, with any number of things markets cannot reliably provide but the commons and true democracy can: social security for the elderly, roads and sidewalks, parks, basic public services. There is no reason we can’t produce more of these important things ourselves.

This is the approach taken by the Hyde Square Task Force, a youth organization in the Jamaica Plain section of Boston. After an extensive assessment of what people most wanted in their community, the Task Force raised money, hired staff, and created new programs to provide the following things that their community valued:

- Murals and other forms of public art
- Health-related education and training for youth
- Strong literacy among young people
- Community organizing
- Dance performances and other cultural events

At any given time, the program employs between 75 and 125 high school students, part-time, to help foster and create these common assets. Beyond the value of what is produced, the community also “gains from the work we’re doing because the young people are developing, they’re becoming better students, they’re becoming more informed and knowledgeable members of society,” says Chrisaldi

Vásquez, the Task Force's Coordinator of Organizing and Policy Initiatives.

Vásquez's introduction to community organizing began at age 14 when she helped block a K-mart slated to take over a vacant lot in the community, and secured funding to put a Youth and Community Center there instead. Just as she did in that campaign, participants in the Task Force's youth-development programs today receive extensive job training, gain professional experience and leadership skills, and "most importantly" come to see themselves as change-agents in society. Last year, through an entirely youth-led effort, they campaigned to reinstate civics as a required course in Boston's public high schools.

"The high school students realized they were learning a lot of things through their work with the Task Force that the importance of voting, how government works that they weren't learning in school, but should be," Vásquez says. Through a city-wide campaign, they lined up support from the City Council, then packed a public hearing on the proposal with more than 300 students. This school year the Boston Public Schools is running a pilot version of the course in two schools, using a curriculum developed by Task Force members.

The growing local food movement provides another important model for how urban communities can choose to produce things people value that existing markets don't provide. Organizations like the People's Grocery in Oakland are springing up in cities around the country, finding new ways to bring local food "as well as teaching how to grow it" to low- and middle-income city residents.

Many people's newfound fondness for buying food at farmers markets and other locally-sourced settings not only offers healthier and tastier food but a greater sense of community and civic engagement. Sociologists have found that on average consumers have ten times as many conversations at farmers' markets as they do at supermarkets. Moreover, the money spent at farmers markets circulates in the local economy, instead of being taken out of it by out-of-town companies. Organizations seeking to promote both the physical and economic health of their communities can push for getting healthy locally-grown produce into the meals served to kids at schools.

An incredible diversity of nonprofit, charitable and religious organizations exist in our cities today, providing many of the vital social services and community benefits that we value and that markets and government agencies have failed to provide. Some of these groups have even taken on the manufacturing or sale of what we would usually think of as private-market goods, through nonprofit business enterprises: bakeries, clothing stores, health care clinics, landscaping firms, workshops, factories and urban farms. At the same time, many poor urban communities have fast-increasing numbers of unemployed or underemployed residents who face multiple barriers to obtaining good jobs. These kind of enterprises can hatch two birds with one egg: offering goods, services, and qualities of community life that people need at the same time as providing job-training, solid professional experience, and a living wage to the workers they employ.

In the end, there is no better way to connect low-income people with jobs than through public-works programs, as was proven in the 1930s. Such programs in fact hatch three birds, not two, with a single egg: they also help boost the economy during a serious economic downturn. In this time of economic turmoil and political change, public works programs that were once political anathema just a year ago are gaining favor again everywhere from Washington to local city halls. These programs could be run by groups like the Hyde Square Task Force as well as by government agencies.

## 2. A Green Economy That Works for All of Us

There is a lot of talk right now about "green-collar jobs" and "the green economy." We can no longer put off dealing with global climate change. So far, cities have been leading the way in the U.S., by setting long-term emissions-reduction goals that are in line with what scientists say will be necessary to

avoid ecological cataclysm. And this shift to a green economy could create great new opportunities for urban communities.

Significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions will require expanding cities' public transit systems, retrofitting existing buildings with energy-efficiency improvements, constructing high-density mixed-use residential developments that encourage walking and biking, installing solar panels on rooftops, converting dirty power sources to renewable energy, and many other significant projects in urban America. Much of the work to make these changes is likely to be relatively high-paying but not requiring a college degree?"the perfect opportunity to boost low-income communities just as public works jobs did in the 1930s. In fact, the Obama Administration has included some of these kind of projects in the recently-passed stimulus package ??” a down payment on much more significant investments required to tackle climate change and stabilize the economy.

The U.S. Department of Energy, for example, estimates that for every \$1 million invested in improving home energy efficiency for low-income people, 52 jobs are created in those communities. Houston and several other cities have already run pilot programs in poor neighborhoods, with impressive results. These programs not only reduce greenhouse emissions and generate new jobs. They also offer immediate reductions in city residents' heating and cooling bills.

One of the organizations spearheading thinking about the promise of the green economy is the Apollo Alliance, which since 2002 has advocated investments in a green economy as a unique opportunity to bring together a new progressive political coalition of environmentalists, labor and citizens groups “to address three goals simultaneously: a healthy environment, a vital economy, and social equity.” For urban communities, this marks a great opportunity to get working on saving the planet and strengthening their own communities at the same time.

Making a transition to a green economy will require a major overhaul of urban infrastructure and programs that create thousands of new jobs and other opportunities. In a city that belongs to all of us, citizens would be directly involved in the design of these programs and would make sure they benefit people in our communities most in need of the opportunity. The Apollo Alliance and a couple of visionary local organizations ??? the Ella Baker Center for Human Rights in Oakland, and Sustainable South Bronx in New York ??? have given us a good start on figuring out how we can make this happen.

Sustainable South Bronx's Project BEST (Bronx Environmental Stewardship Training) is a ten-week training program in environmental stewardship and resource management, offering trainees six different technical certifications and hands-on experience with green projects, including green roof installation and maintenance, wetlands and riverbank restoration, hazardous waste cleanup and urban horticulture. The programs' graduates, who also receive a thorough education about environmental justice, have a 90% job-placement rate.

The Ella Baker Center has been at the forefront of pushing sustainable economic initiatives onto the political agenda in Washington, getting \$125 million in green jobs funding included in the 2007 Energy Bill. The organization has also partnered with the city of Oakland to create the Oakland Green Jobs Corps, a job training and paid-internship program for low-income youth.

For any serious green transformation of American life, it is essential that progressive forces understand we're all in this together. For decades, we didn't feel like we needed each other to win; we believed that by winning small victories sector-by-sector, issue-by-issue, or neighborhood-by-neighborhood it would add up to major social change. But now there are numerous signs all over the country that urban organizations with diverse constituencies can converge in tackling pressing problems. In Oakland and Los Angeles, for instance, the Teamsters union developed a plan to clean the air around the cityies' ports. Meanwhile green organizations, according to the D.C.-based resource center Good Jobs First,

have moved, “beyond narrowly defined ‘environmental’ issues to engage such challenges as creating family-sustaining jobs in the urban core, bringing much-needed private capital into underinvested communities while avoiding displacement of low-income and middle-income families, and providing the range of public services that together constitute ‘livable communities,’ with attention to child care, health care, and parks and open space.”

### 3. The Right to Housing

In a city that belongs to all of us people cannot be forced out of their homes without just cause. And the definition of the phrase “just cause” is very important at a time when many homeowners are being forced from their homes due to predatory lending practices and rampant speculation practiced by others.

What can be done about the foreclosures? The first response from the federal government was to bail out lending institutions, rather than to directly help homeowners. It is still unclear how much the first efforts targeting homeowners “?” announced by the Obama administration in February 2009 “ *will help. Some cities have stepped in to enact a short-term moratorium on foreclosures*“ a good start “?” and loan-refinancing options for homeowners in default on their loans.

There is however a refreshingly straightforward solution that would provide far more stability and security for homeowners facing foreclosure and renters whose landlords face foreclosure: a new law could allow homeowners in danger of foreclosure to rent their properties from the lenders at fair market rates. As long as homeowners kept up with monthly rent payments, they would not be foreclosed on. Many banks would likely respond to such a policy by renegotiating the terms of loans with homeowners, to avoid becoming the long-term landlords for thousands of properties.

Bills seeking to enact this policy have been introduced in Congress and some state legislatures, but without a colossal push from grassroots groups, these bills’ political prospects aren’t very good. There is no reason such a policy could not be adopted at the city level, which might inspire state and federal officials to follow suit. The high percentages of city residents affected by the subprime crisis, including neighbors not in danger of foreclosure seeing more vacant homes in the neighborhood and watching housing prices plummet, strengthens the political feasibility of the idea.

City Life/Vida Urbana, a community organization in Boston that is a founding member of the Right to the City alliance, has taken a leading role in demonstrating how grassroots groups can transform the debate about foreclosures. Over the last couple years, City Life/Vida Urbana has led more than a dozen eviction blockades, in which community members join people facing foreclosure to assert people’s right to remain in their homes. Some community members block the entrance to the building, risking arrest, while scores of others stand in support in the front yard or the sidewalk in front of the building. This is “a last-resort effort,” notes City Life/Vida Urbana tenant organizer Soledad Lawrence. “After we’ve attempted to secure their right to stay in their home through the courts, and after negotiations with the bank or the servicing company working for the bank “?” when all that fails, we do a blockade.” In every eviction blockade organized by City Life/Vida Urbana so far, Lawrence adds, “the bank has backed down. The constable has never even made it to the building. In many cases, the city called the bank to ask them to sit down and work out a negotiation.”

City Life/Vida Urbana organizer Steve Meacham told the Boston Globe, “the eviction [protest] brings a lot of publicity and attention ... it raises the issue of who’s getting bailed out and who’s getting stiffed.” In other words, community members altered the terms of debate by making the questions of ownership, rights and eviction moral and public issues.

In the process of defending their neighbors’ right to remain in their homes, community members who participate in the blockades gain some powerful first-hand knowledge about the relationship between

rights and collective action, property and political power. They are vividly reminded of the simple fact, noted by prominent commons scholars Elinor Ostrom of Indiana University and Nives Dolsak of the University of Washington, that “the allocation of rights to resources . . . is a political act.” Property is a social right, after all, something defined not by the individual owner but by the society of which he or she is part. In bringing this simple fact to light, the eviction blockades resemble the “penny auctions” of the 1930s, in which dozens or hundreds of farmers would show up at foreclosure auctions for their neighbors’ farms, bid a penny and then dare any outsider or banker to try bidding more.

City Life/Vida Urbana’s anti-eviction strategy grew out of years of work during the real estate bubble defending city residents from forced out of their homes by skyrocketing property values and gentrification. City Life/Vida Urbana set up what they called an “Anti-Displacement Zone,” and organized tenants to respond as a group to any attempts to evict other residents of the zone. As City Life/Vida Urbana’s efforts demonstrate, the real issue at stake is people’s right to stay in their homes and neighborhoods.

In the last year, eviction blockades and other forms of protest against foreclosures have spread to cities throughout the country, from Philadelphia to Cleveland to Oakland. In many cases they have been successful in getting lenders to renegotiate loan terms. Collective action defending the right to the city has kept people in their homes.

#### 4. Community Land Trusts

Community Land Trusts (CLTs) are a unique commons-based form of property rights. Instead of the usual arrangements where individual property-owners hold all the rights or where corporate property-owners are legally accountable to shareholders, land trusts are “owned” by a board of “trustees” who are legally accountable to whoever has been defined in the trust’s charter as its “beneficiaries.” Community Land Trusts were introduced to the U.S. in the 1960s and 1970s by the Institute for Community Economics (ICE), which drew on a variety of established international models, particularly from India. ICE’s idea was that trusts would be governed by their membership, and open both to those who reside on the particular land and to other members of the local community.

In most CLT arrangements residents own the house where they live, and can accumulate a modest amount of property value through improvements they’ve made to the land and house when they sell it. But they cannot profit from the real-estate value of the land itself, which remains in the ownership of the trust. The model has stood up well as way to stabilize affordable housing for low- to moderate-income people (although not for the lowest-income people). The positive results of removing property from the volatility of the real estate market can be seen in the Dudley Street neighborhood of Roxbury in Boston, where a powerful community organization in 1988 turned many vacant lots into a CLT.

“Four hundred new homes occupy once-weed-strewn lots; small businesses thrive; a greenhouse grows organic produce for local restaurants; parks and playgrounds have been rebuilt; and next door a \$100 million community center is underway. Home prices in this section of Roxbury are as much as 10 times higher than when the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative formed in 1984. The housing in the trust, however, remains available to the next nurse, teacher, or bank teller who wants to stay in the community,” wrote David Abramowitz and Roz Greenstein in the Boston Globe.

The CLT model has been more widely adopted in rural settings than cities, to protect land from development (a model used by the Nature Conservancy) or to preserve land for farming. But there are increasing examples of urban CLTs designed to allow low-income families to become first-time homeowners. Typically, a CLT involves a 99-year lease of the land, which is inheritable just like regular real estate property and which can be renewed on the same terms when it expires. Each housing CLT lays out a formula to determine how much equity residents can acquire, which determines how

much money sellers of CLT homes receive from the sale; usually this formula is based primarily on how many years they have been in the home and what improvements they have made to the property. The amount of money they get is naturally much smaller than would be the case for a conventional, private home-owner whose home's real-estate value has appreciated.

One of the great strengths of the CLT model is that trustees are legally bound to show "undivided loyalty" to the trust's beneficiaries. Just as a corporate executive who fails to act in good faith to maximize profits has violated the terms of his employment, a trustee who fails to act in good faith to protect the land, ensure affordability for CLT residents, or fulfill any other duty to beneficiaries stipulated in the terms of the trust can be held legally accountable for this failure.

One promising example of an urban CLT is the Figueroa Corridor CLT in Los Angeles. The land trust emerged out of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), a community organizing group that is another founding member of the Right to the City alliance. SAJE and a coalition of other groups negotiated a Community Benefits Agreement (a powerful tool in which developers agree to provide a community with certain benefits in exchange for the right to undertake a development in that community) with the Staples Center, which was planning a huge development in the Figueroa Corridor. They secured \$5 million for affordable housing from the developers. The developers, however, did not want to be involved in providing the affordable housing; they preferred to grant the \$5 million as seed money to a non-profit group, which was how the Figueroa Corridor CLT (FCCLT) was created.

While it is still in its early stages "*acquiring land, seeking further funding, doing community-based planning*" the FCCLT offers a compelling example of how the CLT model can strengthen other forms of community action. When the FCCLT needed to conduct a survey of the conditions of houses, commercial buildings, streets, sidewalks, public transportation, parks, businesses, vacant lots, etc., it sponsored a community "walkabout." Small teams of community members walked their neighborhoods and conducted the survey, assessing conditions according to criteria community members themselves had developed in a series of community meetings "It was gratifying for us to see," says FCCLT organizer Monic Uriarte, "that we can take on big things, and do them ourselves."

"One way to build on the existing momentum," note urban scholars Gar Alperovitz, Thad Williamson and David Imbroscio, "would be to extend the land trust model to the commercial sector. Land trusts can be used as a base to launch community-owned business endeavors, or a portion of land trust acreage can be leased to private commercial ventures, whose rents can in turn be used for broader community revitalization projects."

This idea raises very interesting possibilities. Could a CLT with a strong interest in promoting community-owned small businesses and no financial interest in the property value of the land they lease?" simply because it's a land trust?" lower overhead costs for community-owned businesses to make them more competitive? Could a model be developed where a successful commercial district on CLT land generates lease revenues that continuously fund expansion of the CLT, including the creation of more affordable housing? There seems no reason "*besides the huge challenges of securing funding*" why commercial, and even industrial, land uses cannot be incorporated into the CLT model.

Organizations seeking to create a CLT face one large obstacle: finding funds to buy the land in the first place. This greatly limits the reach and usefulness of this strategy for protecting urban neighborhoods from the forces of gentrification and foreclosure. Still, some poor urban community organizations have succeeded in piecing together the necessary funding from foundations and individuals. And the experience of the Figueroa Corridor CLT suggests another approach: making funding for CLTs part of Community Benefits Agreements negotiated with developers. Another potential source of funding for CLTs is local, state and federal government. A number of different matching-grant, subsidy, or tax-break policies could be developed "or extended beyond their current modest levels" to help

community organizations form CLTs and acquire land. Local governments could also do what the city of Boston chose to do in the late 1980s when it granted the non-profit Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative eminent domain rights to claim vacant lots for redevelopment. With that level of city support ??” or even just a few sizable matching grants ??” the funding challenges of creating a CLT may not look quite as daunting.

As a model for taking low- and middle-income families’ homes out of the risky swings of the real estate market, for maintaining neighborhood stability, for empowering community members to do their own planning, and for allowing community members to manage their communities for the long haul, CLTs show tremendous promise for building a city that belongs to all of us.

## 5. Metropolitan Democracy

It is impossible to understand the condition of poor inner city neighborhoods and inner-ring suburbs in our cities today without talking about the secession of the successful into upscale enclaves. These privileged retreats of the rich and upper middle-class enjoy a lavish tax base, excellent basic services, top-flight schools and are walled off from the problems of the wider metropolitan area. “The fundamental reality is one of growing economic segregation in the context of rising overall inequality. People of different income classes are moving away from each other,” write Peter Dreier, John Mollenkopf, and Todd Swanstrom, the authors of *Place Matters: Metropolitics for the 21st Century*.

This worsening situation is created by the degree of autonomy each municipality within a metropolitan area has and the lack of metropolitan-area wide institutions of governing and public services. This problem creates severe inequality in education, in access to basic services and in property tax revenues between municipalities, all of which wreak havoc on poor communities. As Dreier, Mollenkopf and Swanstrom write, “Local governments engage in a beggar-thy-neighbor competition with one another. In the competition for favored residents and investments, each jurisdiction has a strong incentive to adopt zoning and development policies that exclude potential residents with below-median incomes or who require more costly services.”

And race is a huge factor in this tragedy, although it is often not talked about honestly. The illusion that the problems of impoverished communities of color compared to affluent white suburbs can be understood as a product of the “kinds of people” who live there, independent of any assessment of the relationships of power and property-ownership among different racial and class groups ??” is astonishingly prevalent in our culture today. This view is at the roots of many destructive political perspectives and policy prescriptions.

As a result of all these trends, the idea that the city belongs to all of us needs to be enlarged to the whole metropolitan area. “Only new policies for metropolitan governance that level the playing field and bring all parts of the metropolis into a dialogue with each other” can bring real equity to our cities, say the authors of *Place Matters*. Practical steps in this direction??“the creation of elected bodies charged with making some metro-wide decisions on taxation, educational expenditures, policies governing developers, regional planning??“are likely to be fiercely resisted by affluent suburbanites. To overcome this resistance, very broad political coalitions are required.

Two metropolitan areas have already adopted pieces of a metropolitan planning strategy:

Portland, Oregon does economic and land use planning on a regional scale, while Minneapolis-St. Paul has created a shared regional approach on taxation and educational expenditures.

The Portland Metro Council, an elected body with seven councilors, makes long-range decisions on land-use, planning, and economic development for a metropolitan area that covers three counties, including 25 separate cities. It manages Portland’s “urban growth boundary,” a line beyond which suburban development cannot spread, which has encouraged the creation of transit-friendly mixed-use

developments and established a forward-looking urban planning process that has slowed sprawl and channeled reinvestment back into city neighborhoods and inner suburbs.

The creation of a single, elected metro-wide body like the Portland Metro Council can affect the bargaining power of developers and corporations compared to public officials and community groups, by eliminating the race to the bottom among municipalities. Instead of dangling the possibility of investment in front of a half-dozen different municipalities and waiting to see which one offers the fattest tax break, corporations or developers have just one group of people they must negotiate with. The metro-wide body can also negotiate for so-called “clawback” agreements to make sure investors deliver on the benefits they’ve promised to communities, which is very hard for individual municipalities to pull off.

Minnesota’s Twin Cities have practiced for more than 35 years another form of metro-wide cooperation: tax-base sharing. Such arrangements pool a percentage of regional tax revenues and redistribute it to local municipalities with less capacity to raise money due to their weaker tax bases. The exact formula used in the Twin Cities is complicated, but municipalities’ contributions to the tax pool come from growth in their commercial or industrial tax base; and one of the scheme’s most careful students, University of Minnesota law professor and former Minnesota state legislator Myron Orfield, has shown that it has greatly reduced property tax disparities among communities within the metropolitan area. This not only provides more revenues to the municipalities and school districts with the poorest residents, it also lessens the race-to-the-bottom in attracting investment, since a percentage of any revenues generated by new development are shared among jurisdictions across the metropolitan area.

The success of this limited tax base sharing in the Twin Cities could inspire other kinds of taxation and expenditure sharing throughout metropolitan areas. Many policy analysts have recommended “commuter taxes” or other mechanisms for getting people who live in the suburbs but work in the city to pay their fair share for the city-center services on which they depend (like road maintenance, infrastructure, sewers, police). In some cities the shortfall from the lack of such a tax is considerable: the city of Cleveland, for example, lost almost one-half of its population over the second half of the twentieth century. “Even though it has 400,000 fewer people, and they are poorer, the city has to maintain the same number of miles of streets, sewers, and water lines,” write Dreier and his colleagues, and they have to maintain them for many of the very people whose departure caused the shortfall: suburban commuters who used to be city residents.

Policies coordinated on the metropolitan level would allow cities to genuinely address questions of equity and begin to correct for some of the imbalances and injustices wrought by the “secession of the successful” and segregation that characterize our metropolitan areas.

## 6. A New Kind of Governing

The last and most important strategy for building a city that belongs to all of us is, very simply, for all of us to be the ones running it. City government that is truly of, by and for the people would look pretty radically different from the kind of governing most of us are accustomed to seeing today.

There are a number of critical elements that must be in place for this to happen: deep coalition-building among diverse organizations, a transformative political agenda, a new relationship to elections and elected officials, and the incorporation of leadership development as a central component in all community campaigns and organizing.

### Deep coalition-building

To let people of all neighborhoods, classes and races govern their cities would require mobilizing a new coalition of many community organizations across all parts of the metropolitan area??“unions, faith-

based groups, small business-owners, advocacy organizations, neighborhood organizations and a number of other groups. And it would involve these different organizations and constituent groups coming together around an agenda much greater than the sum of their self-interested parts, as the Miami Workers Center's Gihan Perera has long insisted. This means the coalition's purpose would not be simply an adding up of the individual policy agendas of its groups. The policy agenda would be determined, instead, by a long-term strategy oriented toward exercising governing power. This level of collaboration depends, obviously, upon the successful nurturing of long-term relationships among the various organizations involved. This degree of commitment explains why I mostly use the term "alignment" in this section, as an alternative to "coalition." Coalitions form around a campaign, an issue, a political moment. What is required, for the city to belong to all of us, is a new and lasting broad-based collaboration, built around an agenda that pushes beyond what's politically winnable at the moment.

There are seeds of this kind of alignment to be found in the successful living-wage campaigns in many cities over the last fifteen years and even more so in Community Benefits Agreement (CBA) efforts. In both cases, broad coalitions formed, usually with community organizations representing poor urban communities of color and labor unions at the heart of them. CBAs, which involve developers providing certain community benefits in exchange for permission to pursue a project in that community, set up the need for ongoing relationships among the different groups involved. Long after negotiating and winning the CBA, the coalition continues to play an active role in shaping its implementation.

Beyond all the difficulties of bringing organizations with different bases, political priorities and approaches to organizing and advocacy together in a lasting alignment, one of the most crucial practical hurdles to be overcome is the traditional divisions between cities and suburbs. For an effective alignment, inner-ring or in any case, poorer suburbs must be brought together with central city neighborhoods. The economy of the metropolitan area is a single organism. Developers and big business play municipalities off against one another, navigating the political field by seeking out the most favorable places to operate. For the metropolitan region to belong to all of us, we must be able to strategize and mobilize at that scale as well. Progressive urban forces today simply cannot afford to ignore the suburbs and with them the possibility of winning lasting majority support among metro-area voters.

#### A transformative agenda

For a new political alignment to change how cities are run, it must change the terms of public debate about how we measure success or failure in economic development and political governance. We need to offer a new perspective on who policies and programs serve, and to whom they answer.

For practical lessons on how to realign governance, we need look no further than the right-wing resurgence of the 1970s and 1980s. More positively, we can look back to the civil rights movement or to the labor organizing that produced the New Deal. In all three cases, innovations, political vision, and "envelope-pushing" at the local level played a pivotal role in launching national movements and articulating the long-term transformative political agendas of those movements. Each of these movements transformed the political debate and the governing system of the era, changing not just policies and elected officials but the rules of the political and economic game. They set out to shift the stories, images and terms of everyday political conversation and transform the range of policy options on the table for discussion. Too often progressive forces today even in a time of great changes and deep public trust in a transformative leader publicize what is moderate and cautious about their proposals instead of emphasizing their transformative nature, which could attract broader support from people in search of new values. They choose a short-term let's-get-the-best-we-can strategy rather than a long-term let's-change-the-terms-of-debate strategy that could affect the range of what's

politically possible.

The last twenty years of debate over health care provide a clear illustration. The central issue debated, across two decades, has been how people view government, not anything to do with actual health care policy options.

To succeed in making major transformations, the civil rights movement, the early 20th Century labor movement, and 1970s-80s radical right had to change the way a great many people think about what's politically possible on a spectrum of key questions??“what's fair, what they expect from government, what markets can and can't do, and what their own role is in democracy. So a transformative agenda ??” a phrase I borrow from the powerful and innovative Minnesota faith-based organization ISAIAH ??” actually involves three transformations at once: the range of “serious” options on the table; the rules of the governing system; and people's consciousness.

This is a very tall order. But if the history of earlier movements teaches us anything, it is that (on the progressive side, anyway) we should not be waiting around for leaders, or national political organizations, to construct a transformative agenda for us. Barack Obama may prove to be the best possible occupant of the Oval Office for our times??” as FDR arguably was for his own. But without pressure from organized citizens pushing a transformative agenda ??” something FDR had plenty of ??” Obama will be unable to achieve lasting transformation. It's up to us to change the terms of political debate.

A new relationship to elections and elected officials

Success in running our cities for the benefit of all means working both inside and outside the halls of government. For many community organizations, what's most unfamiliar will be the “inside” part. They are accustomed to seeing “the people” and elected officials in a mutually exclusive and often antagonistic relationship. They also see their political role as limited, not just through the limitations of non-profit tax status but their own sense of purpose and theory of social change. They see their work as pressuring, protesting, advocating, and holding accountable, not as endorsing or otherwise supporting candidates in order to build progressive majorities in legislatures, or running their own people for office.

For other organizations??“unions, in particular ??” the “inside” part is all too familiar. So much of their political energy and resources goes into helping “good people” get elected, there is little time, capacity, or political flexibility left for other work outside the halls of government besides the core functions of workplace organizing and bargaining. It becomes easy to forget that even the best-intentioned of elected officials can achieve very little that is of political significance without strong, organized pressure from outside. For that pressure to be effective, it must come ??” as professors Michael I.J. Bennett and Robert P. Glioth summed up in a careful survey of academic research assessing urban economic development in U.S. cities ??” from “a grassroots, multiracial, multiclass coalition for change.”

So what would it look like for a new alignment??“organizations representing poor people and people of color, labor unions, faith-based groups, and small businesses together with progressive groups, community-based organizations, and environmental and other “issue” organizations??” to actually govern? This is one of the areas where the need for bold thinking and experimentation is greatest. Certain aspects of what it could look like are fairly clear:

- The candidates would have to be largely people who come out of these organizations.
- Urban organizations' non-electoral work of community organizing and “envisioning and creating the city we want to live in” (as Just Cause Oakland puts it) would include a central emphasis on leadership development.

- Active electoral support, through all stages of the election process from primary contests to election day, would be viewed as a critical piece of the alignment's work by all organizations involved.
- The relationship between the alignment and the elected official would have to be a strong and deep one, with accountability maintained throughout his or her tenure in office.

### Developing leaders as a central component of community work

Where do we go to find the people who will create a new kind of governing? They are among the people we know, people doing the work of making change. We cannot hope to build a new governing coalition without hundreds of new leaders running for office and operating in a wide variety of other roles, inside city hall and out.

It is through the experience of actually managing local urban commons (like a Community Land Trust or community-run public-works and job-training programs) and successfully pushing for and shaping public initiatives (like green jobs programs or anti-gentrification and foreclosure policies) that leaders develop who are proficient in listening, leading and governing. To develop the leaders we will need in two or ten years, we have to be willing to share power widely in the organizing efforts we're engaged in today. Learning happens best when there is something very real at stake, like managing a Community Benefits Agreement or a city-council campaign.

Success depends not just on competence and tactical proficiency but on the ability to think creatively and to stimulate the creative thinking of others. Much of what needs to be done has either not been done before or not been done frequently or well enough to provide us with any ready templates. The leaders we need must be imaginative and at the same time directly accountable to their communities and organizations. The habits of such accountability must be built in from the earliest stages of leadership development, so that by the time leaders who come up through our organizations are in senior positions of responsibility it's such a fundamental piece of political conviction and personal integrity that it can be no more easily discarded than one's family history or religious beliefs.

In short: the only path to a city that belongs to all of us is conscious investment in the development of new, bold, competent, confident leaders.

### Conclusion

Changes are coming.

What kind? That's up to us.

The prevailing worldview today says we're strictly individuals, consumers. It says that markets reflect what people value. It says democracy is only about voting once every couple years.

But what do we say?

We have been trained to look upon economic trends as like the weather ??” natural forces that are impossible to control. We learn to regard wealth and poverty as products of individuals' will and actions, forgetting crucial factors like class, race, property and inheritance. We are taught that racial segregation and concentration of poverty are inevitable.

How do we imagine possibilities other than market fundamentalism and hyper-individualism? This remains a challenge, even in these more-hopeful times. Corporations and the right have gotten the better of us for a long time on the battleground of ideas and values. Today too many progressives are content to celebrate victories and trust in elected leaders, as if those leaders didn't desperately need us to push them, with vision, if they're going to achieve significant change. This context makes it all the more impressive and promising that calls for a “city that belongs to all of us” have been arising, for several years now, from those urban neighborhoods hardest hit by rising inequality, segregation, and

political exclusion.

Our neighborhoods, cities, and community organizations face enormous political and economic challenges right now. There is no solution to those challenges that will happen by any means other than our own efforts.

“Even when local reforms are blocked by interventions from higher levels,” notes David Reynolds, a labor studies scholar at Wayne State University, “policy agendas first developed locally can be translated into state and national politics.” Many of the accomplishments of the New Deal era began as local initiatives. For all his political vision and strength as a leader, waiting on Obama as “another FDR” to lead us toward fundamental transformation is a mistake; FDR didn’t lead Americans the first time. He depended upon bold social movements ??” Unemployed Councils, striking workers, veterans ??” articulating a transformative agenda and powerfully mobilizing people to enact progressive national reforms. Nothing about Obama’s historic and hope-inspiring election has changed that basic political dynamic: it’s up to us. Visionary community organizations in cities throughout the country are pointing us toward a new conception of ownership, citizenship, democracy, the commons.

So what are we going to do?

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