

Right to the City In New York City

Race, Militarization of Public Spaces and Community Control

Tom Angotti

IN NEW YORK CITY, there are three major elements that have given rise to struggles against the dispossession of people and for a right to the city: race, the militarization of public spaces, and community control. Without understanding each of these, and the way they relate to each other, it is difficult to develop any strategies for organizing and planning in “the real estate capital of the world.” If we look at the long history of New York City, we can begin to understand that the struggles for the right to the city go back centuries.

Struggles for Racial Justice

The United States was born as a slave state. Even before the city was created, slaves were traded on Wall Street in Manhattan. After New York’s slaves were freed, the city’s wealthy continued to profit from the plantation economy in the South. New York City was and remains the place where surplus capital from throughout the world ends up, piling high the skyscrapers one after another. And with each wave of new real estate investment, the housing for free blacks, and

then new working class immigrants, got pushed further and further out from the center of the city. While white immigrant groups had access to new housing in the 20th century suburban boom, blacks were restricted to neighborhoods with inadequate housing and services. New immigrant groups from Africa, Asia and Latin America also found themselves excluded, and today the city remains among the most racially segregated in the nation.

One of the key urban struggles in the 20th century was to defend mostly African American and Latino communities from displacement by the federally financed urban renewal program. This struggle was closely tied to the civil rights movement, the most important social movement in our history. Urban renewal destroyed many neighborhoods and transformed them into upper income enclaves, while public housing was built on less expensive land. As the result of grassroots opposition (and the opposition of conservatives who opposed any government seizure of private property) the urban renewal program was abandoned in the 1970s. It gave way to market-driven speculation and

displacement, supported by the city’s zoning and land use policies. This kind of displacement – what we often call gentrification – is more difficult to combat. Since black and Latino communities are among the first to be gentrified, and exclusionary practices still limit the options of residents when they are forced to move, race is still very much at the center of the struggles for the right to the city.

Segregation and the Militarization of Public Space

Racial segregation has been facilitated by both the “velvet glove” of city planning policy and the “iron fist” of policing. Following the victories of the civil rights movement in the 1960s, President Richard Nixon launched the “war on crime,” which then merged with the “war on drugs.” As Michelle Alexander points out in her book, *The New Jim Crow*, these were in effect wars on black and Latino people in the US, particularly young men who are incarcerated for minor offenses. In New York City, “zero-tolerance policing” is the cover for massive intimidation

and incarceration of young men of color. The police practice of “stop and frisk” effectively criminalized gatherings in public spaces in black and Latino neighborhoods. After years of challenges, a major victory was won recently against this policy when a court, acknowledging that 94% of those stopped were black and Latino and less than 6% resulted in any charges, found the practice discriminatory. This was a victory for the right to the city.

After 9/11, policing entered a new phase as local police forces around the country became increasingly militarized and enlisted in the so-called war on terror. Surveillance cameras popped up all over the place, demonstrations were subject to encirclement and harassment by police, and police spying on political groups and Muslim communities intensified. Parallel to this, as real estate developers coveted every inch of land, the city under billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg went big-time into the privatization of public space. Private conservancies monopolized public

The New Williamsburg, Brooklyn Waterfront



Photo: Tom Argotti

parks in wealthier neighborhoods, and public plazas in downtown areas were maintained by private businesses that used them as waiting rooms for their customers. Instead of encouraging new public parks, the city promoted the development of “privately owned public spaces.” One of these new public-private spaces was Zuccotti Park, the site where Occupy Wall Street was born. Though this was a struggle about economic justice – for the 99% -- it was able to take advantage of somewhat sloppy rulemaking by the owners of the land to extend the occupation as long as it did. It was shut down, along with other Occupy sites around the country, in a coordinated national police/military action.

The struggle for the right to the city in New York involves organizing to put the public back in public spaces. It involves the struggles to save public schools, libraries and community gardens, and all of these are threatened by the latest waves of gentrification. This is not only about public space and environmental quality, it is about the right to the city.

The Struggles for Housing

Over a century ago, working class tenants facing rising rents and evictions organized and won rent regulations, and fought the landlord groups who have managed to get them to expire many times. While rent regulations are currently in place, over the last two decades more than 250,000 housing units

were deregulated, using legal and illegal tactics. Many of these deregulated units are in gentrifying neighborhoods, thus aggravating economic and racial segregation. One of the major struggles for the right to the city today is the fight for a rent freeze and the strengthening of controls when the existing law expires next year. It might seem contradictory that in this city that has such a powerful landlord class there is also a persistent tenant movement. But it is perfectly understandable because every time the powerful real estate investors and landowners pursue their profit-making agenda, they provoke tenants to get organized so they can protect their homes and avoid displacement. This movement cuts across classes and income levels, though its base remains working class people of color. It also exploits a real contradiction at the heart of the local business class: their access to low wage labor would be curtailed if there were no more low-rent housing left.

Thus, resistance to the privatization of public housing is both a result of tenant struggles and elite interests, explaining why New York City still has the largest stock of public housing in the country, even while the federal government has severely cut back its subsidies. Tenant organizations are currently organizing to push back efforts by city government to develop luxury housing on public housing land (see the report, *Keeping the Public in Public Housing*, at <http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/ccpd>). This is one of the most critical struggles for the right to the city.

The Right to Land

The struggles for housing, public space and racial justice add up to a larger set of struggles for control over land in the places where we live – the struggle to control our communities. To confront gentrification and displacement, we need to develop strategies that include many different tactics for controlling land. This may include expanding public ownership and regulation of land. There is one community land trust in New York City and a new interest in creating more. But the fundamental issue is not who owns the land – it’s who controls it. It’s about democratic control over land use policy. New York City’s neighborhoods have produced over 100 community plans in the last four decades and many of them came out of struggles against ravaging developers. The right to the city is bound up with the political struggles for the democratic control and planning of land and its integration with our everyday lives. **P²**