



Right to the City Transatlantic Roundtable Nov. 22-23, 2013



Final Report

Against the backdrop of rising rents, gentrification, displacement, and the criminalization of poor and homeless people in cities worldwide, a growing number of urban grassroots groups and social movements are fighting for their “right to the city.” This expression was originally coined by the French philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, who argued in his book *Le droit à la ville* (1968) that Paris and other cities were increasingly permeated by the capitalist logic of exploitation and capital accumulation: working- and middle-class neighborhoods were becoming mere warehouses of workers, whose urban environments were shaped *for* and not *by* them. Lefebvre described the right to the city as a right to “urban life, to renewed centrality, to places of encounter and exchange, to life rhythms and time uses, enabling the full and complete usage of these moments and places, etc.”¹

At a recent two-day workshop, the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung—New York Office and the Right to the City Alliance (also based in New York City) brought together housing justice groups from six European and three U.S. cities working on a variety of issues: gentrification and tenant rights, foreclosures and evictions, homelessness, and neoliberal city redevelopment. The goal was to determine the commonalities, differences, and best practices of these groups in order to network and learn from each other—thus contributing to better organized and more effective grassroots movements for housing justice at a time when the powers and interests of finance are tearing communities apart and dispossessing millions. Participating in this workshop were members of the following groups:

- [A Város Mindenkié](#) (The City is for All) – Budapest, Hungary
- [EncounterAthens](#) – Greece
- [Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca](#) (Movement of Mortgage Victims) – Valencia, Spain
- [Droit au Logement](#) (Right to Housing) – Paris, France
- [HABITA](#) – Colectivo pelo Direito à Habitação e à Cidade (Collective on Housing Rights and the City) – Lisbon, Portugal
- [Recht auf Stadt](#) (Right to the City) – Hamburg, Germany
- [Occupy Our Homes Atlanta](#) (OOHA)
- [East LA Community Corporation](#) – Los Angeles
- [Causa Justa :: Just Cause](#) (CJC) – Bay Area
- [Picture the Homeless](#) – New York

Additional participants included three academics (Margit Mayer - Free University Berlin, Peter Marcuse - Columbia University, and Gilda Haas - UCLA Luskin School of Public Affairs), as well as staff members from RLS-NYC and the Right to the City Alliance.

The workshop revealed remarkable similarities between the groups and the socio-economic contexts within which they work. For instance, Occupy Our Homes in Atlanta and the Plataforma de Afectados por la Hipoteca (PAH) from Spain both organize individuals and families affected by the foreclosure crisis and use similar tactics such as eviction resistance and home occupations. In both geographic contexts

¹ Henri Lefebvre (1996 [1968]) „The Right to the City,“ in H. Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, E. Kofman and E. Lebas (eds), Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, pp. 63-184.

the housing markets were flooded with credit from external institutions, making subprime mortgages readily available and sold and ultimately causing a housing bubble. In Atlanta and other U.S. cities, banks began to swamp low-income communities of color with credit following a new banking deregulation bill passed in 1999. This legislation allowed commercial banks to sell mortgages to investment banks, which then pooled them together and sold them many times over in the financial market. After decades of denying people of color home loans, the banks now aggressively courted these communities, practicing what is called “reverse redlining:” the mortgages they sold to Black and Latino customers had higher interest rates and less favorable conditions than those offered to whites with similar credit ratings. Once the bubble burst, the results of these predatory practices were devastating. There are currently around 1,000 foreclosures in Atlanta every month, and nationwide Black Americans have lost a much higher share of their median wealth than whites (53% versus 16%).

In Spain, the real estate boom was in part funded by German and other Northern European banks desperate to invest their surplus capital. They too offered subprime mortgages to those who couldn't afford them. On average, there are currently 115 evictions taking place each day in Spain. Making the situation particularly difficult for debtors is the fact that it is prohibited to simply walk away from an underwater mortgage. In the U.S. this allows many homeowners to start over—albeit under difficult circumstances—when they can no longer afford their mortgage payments. In Spain, by contrast, the inability to pay for a mortgage usually traps the individuals in life-long debt, causing such desperation that many people choose suicide. PAH has created an [online memorial](#) for those who have taken their own lives.

Another clear similarity exists between A Város Mindenkié in Budapest and Picture the Homeless in New York. Both groups fight against the stigmatization, criminalization, and displacement of “roof-less” individuals. They also adhere to the principle that their organizations should be led and represented externally by homeless people. One strategy both organizations have successfully employed has been to offer free legal clinics run by volunteer lawyers to inform homeless people about their rights and assist them with paperwork. Since its inception, Picture the Homeless has fought against the crackdown on so-called quality-of-life offenses such as panhandling, prostitution, graffiti, and sleeping or drinking alcohol in public, which New York City's former mayor, Rudolph Giuliani, implemented in the early 1990s. In Hungary there has also been a concerted effort to criminalize the homeless since 2010, rendering “dumpster diving” and living in public spaces not only illegal but punishable with high fines and even jail time. This criminalization has also led to the demolition of huts homeless people had built for themselves in the woods outside of Budapest. The similarities between these groups are not coincidental, though, because Picture the Homeless actually helped found A Város Mindenkié by conducting an extensive workshop in Budapest for local activists there several years ago.

The Right to the City Roundtable also highlighted some clear differences between the European and U.S.-based groups. For example, all groups from the U.S. have at least one paid staff member, whereas all European groups are entirely volunteer-led. This observation led to discussions about the advantages and drawbacks of having staff. The U.S. groups described how this feature can lead to an overreliance on large foundations with ties to private corporations. On the other hand, some of the community organizing strategies to mobilize those affected are very time-intensive. For instance, going from door-to-door to in neighborhoods hard-hit by foreclosures is usually done by paid canvassers in the U.S.

Another central point of discussion was the question of how groups can mobilize members of the middle class, or indeed whether they even should. HABITA from Lisbon, Portugal, told the group that they initially only worked with residents in the informal, dilapidated settlements on the outskirts of Lisbon,

but were now trying to include more members of the middle class—with the additional purpose to stop this group from shifting to the right. HABITA realized that using the Right to the City framework allowed them to overcome their previous, rather narrower focus on housing, since this concept raises more general questions about the kind of city or even society in which people desire to live. A group that has already successfully brought together a wide variety of community groups is the network *Recht auf Stadt* from Hamburg, Germany. It consists of 56 different local initiatives, some of which are more mainstream, middle-class organizations, while others are radical leftist groups organizing tenants in social housing. Dawn from the San Francisco Bay Area argued that in order to win over people who self-identify as middle-class, *Causa Justa* :: Just Cause used the Marxist understanding of the term “working class” as all people who don’t own the means of production. This definition allows them to highlight what a high-earning employee of a software company has in common with a Salvadoran domestic worker, and where their interests overlap.

At the end of the workshop, all participants decided to draft a joint resolution against the eviction of the residents of [Corrala Utopía](#), a squatted building in Seville, Spain. During the final feedback round, Rita from Lisbon emphasized how the work on the ground is often exhausting and somewhat lonely, and that networking opportunities like this workshop were crucial, both to overcome this isolation by learning about the similar struggles going on elsewhere and to avoid reinventing the wheel by learning about tactics other have already used. Iolanda from Valencia said she was impressed that so many groups from different countries identified capitalism as the underlying problem of the housing crisis. She concluded by saying: “We are like David against Goliath. When I go back to Spain I can tell my people there are a lot of Davids around the world.” Jutka from Budapest agreed: “We really have to work and cooperate together to fight this damn capitalist system!”

Project Manager Jenny Weyel – New York – January, 2013