



Who Takes Ownership of the City?

By Rick Cole

Forty years ago, as America's inner cities imploded, the *New Yorker* ran a sardonic cartoon. It portrayed a smug tower dweller overlooking a vista of tenements. "Ghettos aren't a problem, my dear," he blithely informs his wife. "Ghettos are a solution."

Today, the "urban crisis" is metastasizing across the planet. More than half of the world's 6.5 billion people now dwell in cities—and more than a billion of them survive in desperate slums. This gives global resonance to the environmental, economic, and social equity struggles of American cities. If we are to heed the words of Gandhi and "be the change we want to see in the world," thinking globally means acting locally. Creating a sustainable planet starts in our own hometowns.

But even those who recognize this responsibility seldom focus on the fundamentally public nature of this endeavor. Unique challenges of organizing city life gave birth to both the democratic and republican variants of self-rule. The very word "politics" is derived from the Greek word for shared urban space.

Moving Beyond Individualized Solutions

No matter how laudable personal and small-scale endeavors may be, planting trees, carrying canvas shopping bags, tending community gardens, and installing solar collectors will not collectively transform America's cities into models of sustainability. The sheer scale and complexity of the task will require public will, public resources, public policy, and public action.

While "all politics is local," there are some commonly shared misconceptions that deter us from fully recognizing the public sector's vital role in reshaping our cities.

The most pervasive is the mindset that takes for granted that local government primarily exists to provide specific services. Of course, the traditional

municipal functions we now take for granted (such as police, fire, parks, libraries, sewers, roads, and land use regulation) were all originally forged out of social upheaval and political struggle. Those who pioneered these services were crusaders, not functionaries. Today, however, the institutions organized to deliver these services have ossified into underfunded and self-perpetuating bureaucracies. Propping up these inherited structures takes precedence over the bold innovation needed to meet today's needs. If we were starting from scratch (as Sir Robert Peel did in passing the Metropolitan Police Act in Britain in 1829), would we safeguard peace and order primarily through an armed and insulated caste of uniformed officers? If we were looking to eliminate waste, would we construct elaborate sewage systems and provide weekly collection of garbage? That we have grafted elaborate adaptations onto our entrenched structures (from "community policing" to "recycling") only underscores their anachronism.

This investment in the past in turn reinforces the myth that the public sector is inherently inefficient and ineffective. There was a time when the burning passion of public service could put a man on the moon. Now we wonder whether it can fill potholes.

Another self-limiting mindset is our deep disdain for politics, which has become a shallow, petty, and self-interested game for insiders. The absence of real people in the debate and struggle over the concerns that affect their lives has robbed the public sector of both legitimacy and leverage. A professional political class has gradually supplanted the sphere of citizenship, relegating popular participation to mere voting



in elections—and on rare occasions banding together for single-issue self-interest, such as protesting a highway extension, affordable housing project, or tax increase. Without robust and broad-based social and political associations, urban public life is privatized and segregated and governance becomes an arena for mercenaries. Passivity perpetuates the self-fulfilling prophecy that political activity is futile—leaving politics to private interest lobbying.

A less pernicious, but equally misguided attitude, is the notion that public life is unimportant or simply boring. Whether it is the excuse that “people are busy” or the inescapable distractions of so-called “popular culture” (a euphemism for corporate entertainment), public life is neither compelling nor cool to most people. This is quite convenient for perpetuating the status quo. Our cities and our citizens face such tangible and significant questions as:

- How will we get around in the age of peak oil and global warming?
- How do we best utilize urban land to avoid sprawling onto farmland and sensitive habitat?
- Where should public resources be directed—and what investments should we make in our shared future?

Unfortunately, questions like these are avoided by politicians, neglected by the media, translated into bloodless administrative jargon by bureaucrats, overlooked by well-meaning single-issue activists, and end up being virtually ignored by the people whose lives are directly affected by them.

Learning from History: Grasping the Big Picture

Lamenting these ingrained delusions is not the same as changing them. How can they be overcome?

Despite the seemingly unprecedented depth and scope of our urban challenges in the 21st century, we fool ourselves if we think we have nothing to learn from history. Americans are particularly prone to preoccupation with the present, concocting excuses for why it’s so much harder to make change now than it was in the past. In reality, as abolitionist Frederick Douglass wrote, “Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never has and never will.”

Our urban history overflows with insight and inspiration relevant to the dangers and opportunities of our own time. How about reviving the public discourse and public spirit that brought us public libraries at a time when education and access to knowledge was confined to the very wealthy? Why not rekindle the enlightened self-interest and open-mindedness that inaugurated public health protection when typhoid, cholera, and dysentery stalked our streets?

As we look past the waning days of the Bush Administration and confront the huge work ahead of us to create sustainable cities, we can’t help but also want to think small. It makes a difference whether we sustain a Head Start program in Albuquerque or improve public school scores in Philadelphia or reclaim a park in Richmond or install solar collectors on a public works facility in Ventura. But the answer to “who owns the city?” lies with who takes ownership of the whole city, not just our part of it. That is the lesson of the millions of citizen activists who have built community and make change by taking ownership beyond their homes, their neighborhoods, and their parochial concerns. It’s the public will behind the public resources, public policy, and public action needed to make great and sustainable cities. ■

Photo:
Cityscape.

© 2010 Ali Thanawalla

*Rick Cole has been city manager of Ventura, California since 2004.
He previously served as city manager of Azusa and as mayor of Pasadena.*

& the **Race, Poverty Environment** the national journal for social and environmental justice

Editor Emeritus
Carl Anthony

Publisher
Juliet Ellis

Editor
B. Jesse Clarke

Design and Layout
B. Jesse Clarke

Copyediting and Proofreading
Merula Furtado

Publishing and Layout Assistant
Christine Joy Ferrer

Urban Habitat Board of Directors
Joe Brooks (Chair)
PolicyLink

Romel Pascual (Vice-Chair)
Mayor's Office, City of Los Angeles

Tamar Dorfman (Treasurer)
Policy Link

Carl Anthony
Cofounder, Urban Habitat

Malo Andre Hutson
*Department of City and Regional Planning
University of California, Berkeley*

Felicia Marcus
Natural Resources Defense Council

Arnold Perkins
Alameda Public Health Department (retired)

Deborah Johnson
San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency

Wade Crowfoot
Environmental Defense Fund

Organizations are listed for identification purposes only.

Subscribe to RP&E

Annual subscriptions are \$20 for groups and individuals; \$40 for institutions. (Free for grassroots groups upon request.)
Subscribe online at www.urbanhabitat.org or Send subscription checks to: *RP&E*, 436 14th Street, #1205, Oakland, CA 94612.

© 2010 by the individual creators and Urban Habitat. For specific reprint information, queries or submissions, please email editor@urbanhabitat.org.

ISSN# 1532-2874

Race, Poverty & the Environment was first published in 1990 by Urban Habitat Program and the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation's Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment. In the interest of dialogue, *RP&E* publishes diverse views. Opinions expressed are not necessarily those of the editors, Urban Habitat, or its funders.

Economic Justice

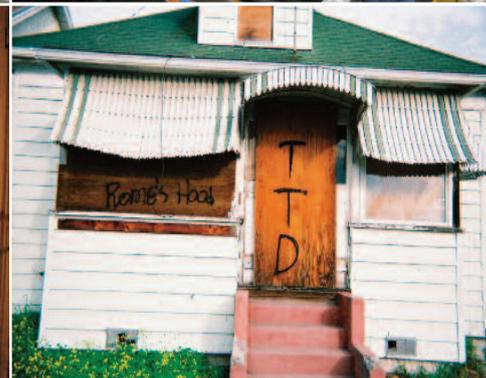


Environmental Justice



Racial Justice

Transportation Justice



Spaces, Places, and Regionalism

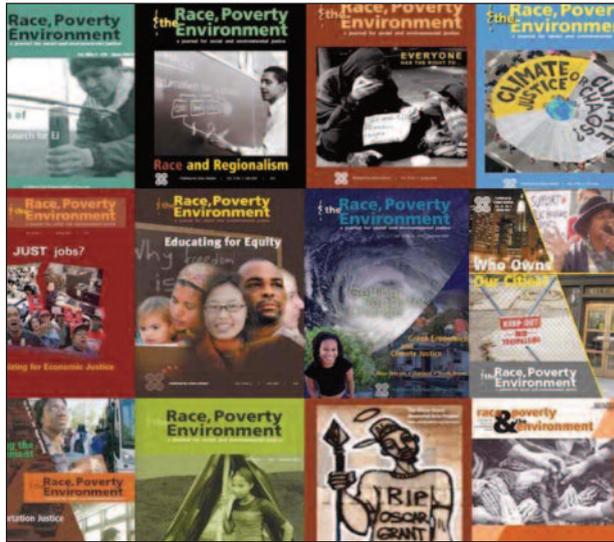
Photos: (Left) Green for all Rally. © 2010 Green for All
(Upper center) Chevron refinery in Richmond. © 2008 Scott Braley
(Lower center) Oscar Grant memorial graffiti. © 2009 Elliott Johnson
(Upper right) Bus Riders Union organizes in Los Angeles. © 2009 BRU
(Lower right) Foreclosed home in Richmond, CA. © 2009 Urban Habitat

the Race, Poverty & the Environment



the national journal for social and environmental justice

20th anniversary CD now available!



- Spring 1990 ♦ Earth Day
- Summer 1990 ♦ Cultural Diversity
- Winter 1991 ♦ Women of Color
- Spring 1991 ♦ Pesticides
- Summer 1991 ♦ Energy
- Winter 1992 ♦ The Summit
- Spring 1992 ♦ Asian/Pacific Islanders
- Summer 1992 ♦ Water
 - Fall 1992 ♦ Native Nations in 1992
- Spring 1993 ♦ Urban Problems
- Summer 1993 ♦ Population and Immigration
 - Fall 1993 ♦ Latinos and the Environment
- Spring 1994 ♦ Military Base Conversion
- Winter 1995 ♦ Environmental Justice and the Law
- Summer 1995 ♦ Nuclear Technology & Communities of Color
 - Fall 1995 ♦ Social Justice and Transportation
- Spring 1996 ♦ Multicultural Environmental Education
- Fall 1996 ♦ The Border
- Winter 2000 ♦ A Place at the Table:
 - Food & Environmental Justice
- Winter 2001 ♦ Reclaiming Land and Community:
 - Brownfields & Environmental Justice
- Summer 2002 ♦ Fixin' to Stay: Anti-Displacement Policy
 - Options & Community Response
- Summer 2003 ♦ Where Do We Go from Here? A Look at
 - the Long Road to Environmental Justice
- Fall 2003 ♦ Governing from the Grassroots:
 - EJ and Electoral Activism
- Summer 2004 ♦ Reclaiming our Resources: Imperialism and EJ
- Winter 2005 ♦ Burden of Proof: Using Research for EJ
- Winter 2006 ♦ Moving the Movement:
 - Transportation Justice
- Summer 2006 ♦ Getting Ready for Change:
 - Green Economics and Climate Justice
- Spring 2007 ♦ Just Jobs: Organizing for Economic Justice
- Fall 2007 ♦ Educating for Equity
- Spring 2008 ♦ Who Owns Our Cities?
- Fall 2008 ♦ Race and Regionalism
- Spring 2009 ♦ Everyone Has the Right to...
- Fall 2009 ♦ Climate Change: Catalyst or Catastrophe?
- Spring 2010 ♦ 20th Anniversary Edition

There are over 600 articles in the RP&E archives. Together they provide a compelling view of the environmental justice movement from its roots. Visit www.urbanhabitat.org/rpe where you can order back issues of *RP&E*, read from our archives, catch up on Environmental Justice news, research environmental justice, climate justice, transportation justice and much more. Our latest addition is *RP&E Radio*: audio recordings of in-depth interviews and speeches from the movements' for racial, economic and gender justice. Our 20th anniversary collection includes all the back issues in PDF format, an Excel or CSV index of issues, authors and articles and our first four podcasts. Order today!

Use the form below or order online:
www.urbanhabitat.org/subscribe

88

Yes! I want an annual subscription to *Race, Poverty & the Environment*.
 Sent free of charge to grassroots groups upon request.
 \$20 (Individuals) \$40 (Institutions)

Yes! I want to support *RP&E Radio*—send me the CD collection
 \$125 Other Donation \$ _____

Name: _____
 Organization: _____
 Address: _____
 State: _____ Zip: _____ Email: _____

A check is enclosed Please charge my Visa/MasterCard
 Visa/MC Number: _____ Exp. Date: _____
 (Please include the 3-4 digit card verification number found on the back of most credit cards.)

Signature: _____