F orty 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. “Ghettoes aren’t a problem, my dear,” he blithely informs his wife. “Ghettoes 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 homelands.

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.
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Editor Emeritus
Carl Anthony

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Juliet Ellis

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B. Jesse Clarke

Design and Layout
B. Jesse Clarke

Copyediting and Proofreading
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Economic Justice

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Racial Justice

Spaces, Places, and Regionalism

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