

# The Right to Housing: A Holistic Perspective. From Concept to Advocacy, Policy, and Practice

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POSITION PAPER

*We received and we gladly publish a contribution by distinguished author Prof. Ron Shiffman. [MS]*

Housing issues have been of paramount concern in developed and developing nations for decades because of the inability of many to access adequate housing based on their income, class, race, religion, or geography. Many associate this lack of access to housing as a result of local phenomena and therefore do not believe that it warrants regional, national, or international attention. As a result, substantive discussion of housing policies, programs, and production on a global and national level have been largely avoided. The impact of macroeconomic policies on housing and shelter needs are therefore not addressed. Discussions of housing policies and programs have often been limited to theorists and advocates for the poor and to those who philosophically and politically are committed to concepts like the “right to the city” of which “the right to housing” is an essential component.

Complicating this situation is the reality that urban professionals – architects, urban planners, engineers – who have informed perspectives on housing, community development, and environmental issues are caught in a moral and ethical quandary trying to navigate between the demands of the private sector and the demands of a more equitable social, economic, and just society. These contradictions, or conundrums in search of solutions, are often magnified by the need for these professionals to engage in advocacy that in turn poses problems for them professionally and technically. Professionally, they would have to challenge government and the private sector who are often their clients; and technically, since

in many cases they are neither trained in nor have access to the tools and resources necessary to address the housing problems faced by a growing number of people – both in terms of demand and supply. Absent altogether from the discussion are those directly impacted – low- and moderate-income residents, communities of color, and others who are often marginalized and exploited by these decisions.

This paper seeks to address the issues of housing from a universal perspective. One that recognizes that, like education and health, housing should be considered a fundamental right and should not be treated as a commodity subject to speculation and profiteering. Simply stated, housing should not be subject to a systemic process leading to increasingly exploitative profits. To effectively address this, we need to understand what the “right to the city” and the “right to housing” mean in today’s socio-environmental and socio-economic context. My intention in this paper is to bridge the thinking of academics and theorists with urban practitioners and local decision makers who are tasked with the responsibility of implementing housing and land use policies and programs including the preservation and production of housing.

#### EMERGENCE OF THE “RIGHT TO THE CITY” IN THE CONTEXT OF THE TIMES

My work has been principally as a university-based practitioner – not a researcher or theoretician – assisting community-based and community-initiated housing, and community development efforts. My intention in this paper is to build on my experiences as a practitioner closely allied with researchers, theorists, and community activists to move from theories of “housing as a right” and “the right to the city”; to principles, policies, and programs that can guide housing practitioners to address some of the “wicked housing and community development problems” we face today and in the days, weeks, and years that follow. To do this, I believe that we need to identify and hone the tools by which urban professionals can begin to address these interwoven issues. Our allied professions need to develop policies and programs that will enable us to facilitate the development of housing and the communities that these concepts envision and the techniques necessary to address the discords that might arise when these rights come into conflict with other rights.

Lefebvre, a French philosopher, and sociologist, explored this idea of rights and access in his 1968 monograph, entitled *The Right to the City*. Some forty years later, David Harvey, a British born economic geographer, astutely built upon on this concept by stating,

... the right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover a common rather than an

individual right since the transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights [...]"<sup>1</sup>

At about the same time that Lefebvre was focusing on the “right to the city” as an analytical lens with which to examine the then contemporary urban and community struggles, several emerging urban planning practitioners in the United States were also struggling to define or redefine what their professional roles should be given the struggles that were taking place in the communities that surrounded them. In essence, context and “the times” had an impact on both sides of the Atlantic. In the United States, the mid-to-late 1960s were punctuated by a variety of movements – protests of the US involvement in the war in Vietnam, frustration with the aborted effort to eliminate poverty in the US, the civil rights movement and the struggle for women’s equality, and the growing demands of college students for more relevant engagement in the communities that housed their campuses. These issues dominated the news as did the growing unrest in BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and People Of Color] communities resulting in what some referred to as urban rebellions and others as riots. The rapid sequence of assassinations of civil rights leaders and other progressive political leaders, including the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, rocked the nation. President Kennedy challenged the nation to address “our aspirations” rather than cater to “our fears”; Kennedy was a leader who challenged us individually and collectively and he and the “Kennedy legacy initiatives”<sup>2</sup> had a significant impact on a generation of Americans.

These factors led many to question their role as emerging professionals – especially those of us who entertained entry into fields that impacted the urban environment – community organizers, architects, and urban planners.<sup>3</sup> During that period, Paul and Linda Davidoff wrote the seminal article entitled “Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning”<sup>4</sup> which attracted the attention of many of us. Their idea that planning needed to reflect the fact that cities were comprised of diverse and pluralistic communities, each with different needs and aspirations required a different approach to planning and development. In essence they were prescribing the work that I and my colleagues at Pratt were engaged in Bedford Stuyvesant under the tutelage of community activists such as Donald Benjamin, Elsie Richardson, Carlos Russell, and Shirley Chisholm. What emerged was planning and development work dedicated to using one’s technical and professional skills to assist those who heretofore had been denied access to those skills. Skills that could help develop plans to meet the needs and aspirations of an African-American immigrant community rather than the needs of the powerful and the politically connected. While we did not use the terms “right to the city” or “right to housing,” the work that we at Pratt Institute Center for Community and Environmental Development<sup>5</sup> were engaged in was a fight

for a “right to the city” for those we worked with – a struggle that continues today. The concepts of advocacy planning, community-based planning, and participatory planning emerged.

Many of those efforts were successful. Communities that faced abandonment and neglect fought back: they defeated badly conceived urban renewal plans; they conceived of and launched the community development corporation movement; fought discriminatory racial and religious covenants; and exposed mortgage and insurance redlining. On the local level they developed tenant and community-based organizations whose efforts led to the adoption of anti-harassment and anti-solicitation orders that helped to curb evictions and displacement and curtailed the practice of blockbusting. On a national level they initiated regulations governing banking institutions, such as the Home Mortgage Disclosure Act (HMDA) that in turn led to the Community Reinvestment Act (CRA). Legislation like the CRA, which required banks to affirmatively lend in low-income areas, preserved and revitalized many neighborhoods. It was a vehicle that provided countless people with the ability to stay and thrive in the city. It enhanced and facilitated the “right to the city.”

#### SUCCESS CAN CREATE FUTURE CHALLENGES

Indeed, some of those successes have led over the years to some of the problems we face today. Neighborhoods to which people fled because they feared the racial changes that occurred and the perception of decline have stabilized to the point where people seeking affordable housing now seek out those areas to move to. This has, in some places led to widespread displacement. My friend and former Pratt colleague, Tom Angotti, in his book, *New York for Sale* (2008) described this phenomenon:...

... as tenants and small business owners invest their time and money [I would add ‘energy’] to gradually upgrade their neighborhoods, real estate investors become attracted to these areas [...]. As investors large and small move in, they effectively appropriate the value generated by others. This is the essence of what is known as gentrification. It is simply a change in demographics. It is the appropriation of economic value by one class from another.<sup>6</sup>

I would add that the adverse impact of this phenomenon is also the displacement of people, jobs, and culture. Fine-tuning the CRA to include anti-displacement and anti-harassment language and to focus on “people” and not on “geography or place” as the beneficiaries of the investment, could go a long way to curtail its misuse. Adding new tools such as community land trusts and mutual housing association models and the reintroduction of old interventions such as social housing (aka public housing), adoption of anti-solicitation, and anti-harassment protections

could go a long way to curtailing these abuses. We believed then and now that new interventions were warranted.

## ONGOING NEED TO CHALLENGE AND CONTEST

A fundamental aspect of Lefebvre's work was his recognition that "the forces of alienation" in an urban context need to be constantly challenged and contested. Rob Robinson, a brilliant advocate for the right to housing, who has himself experienced homelessness, argues that if many other countries can think in terms of "human rights" and frame policies to implement that "right," why can't the United States, with all its purported wealth, adopt it. He cites South Africa's post-apartheid constitution and that of Brazil, among some others. He correctly points out that "the right to housing" must go beyond the "right to a bed" as it is defined in some places. He argues that land should serve a social purpose and that, "until you control the land you can't control for sustainable affordable housing for poor people."

Today that challenge is as great as it has ever been. The right to housing must be understood as part of today's integral and universal struggle for dignity and justice and for freedom from want. National, state, and municipal governments too often misunderstand the right to housing as merely a commitment to housing production programs and ignore the adverse impacts of racial, social, economic, cultural, and environmental discrimination and the absence of access to equitable and judicially just support systems. The right to adequate and affordable housing is a product of the intersection of economic, social, and cultural justice. It should be conceived of as a common good, universally available and not as a commodity accessible only to a privileged few.

## CODIFYING THE RIGHT TO HOUSING

The commitment to "housing as a right" was articulated in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (Universal Declaration) and again in the 1966 United Nations International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). They can be summarized as follows: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights states in Article 25 (1)] that

... everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for health and well-being of himself [or herself] and his [or her] family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services.

In the ICESCR, Article 11(1) deals most directly with housing rights:

The States parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself [or herself]

and his [or her] family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of international co-operation based on free consent.<sup>7</sup>

The difference between the 1948 Universal Declaration and the 1966 ICESCR documents is that the Universal Declaration is not binding on nations; while the ICESCR requires those nations that ratified it to “take appropriate steps to ensure the realization” of a right to housing. By ratifying the ICESCR, states not only accept the principle of a right to housing, but also have a binding obligation to uphold and promote this right.

The United States (US) Congress in the Housing Act of 1949, declared:

SEC. 2. The Congress hereby declares that the general welfare and security of the Nation and the health and living standards of its people require housing production and related community development sufficient to remedy the serious housing shortage, the elimination of sub-standard and other inadequate housing through the clearance of slums and blighted areas, and the realization as soon as feasible of the goal of a decent home and a suitable living environment for every American family, thus contributing to the development and redevelopment of communities and to the advancement of the growth, wealth, and security of the Nation.

## FINANCIALIZATION OF HOUSING

As long as fifty years ago, Sharon Segretta Sutton spoke to the dissonance between these two documents. She observed:

We need to reorient the 1949 construction industry stance to human well-being and then we can refine that stance to reflect the effects of climate change and racism on people’s ability to secure their needs.<sup>8</sup>

Sutton explained that the focus historically has been on brick-and-mortar development, responsive to the hegemony of the construction industry inclusive of developers. The deviation and slippage from the international focus on human well-being is significant and should be specifically acknowledged and addressed, period. This is more pressing than ever with banks and others purchasing houses as a place to park capital – a process which we refer to as the “financialization of housing.” A process that is rapidly emerging and is the antithesis of the right to housing.

Leilani Farha, as the former UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, was the key author of the report entitled “Financialization of Housing and the Right to Adequate Housing (2017)”:<sup>9</sup>

Housing and commercial real estate have become the “commodity of choice” for corporate finance and the pace at which financial corporations and funds are taking over housing and real estate in many cities is staggering.

- (1) The value of global real estate is about US\$ 217 trillion, nearly
- (2) 60 per cent of the value of all global assets, with residential real estate comprising 75 per cent of the total.
- (3) In the course of one year, from mid-2013 to mid-2014, corporate buying of larger properties in the top 100 recipient global cities
- (4) rose from US\$ 600 billion to US\$ 1 trillion.
- (5) Housing is at the centre of an historic structural transformation in global investment and the economies of the industrialized world with profound consequences for those in need of adequate housing.

Leilani Farha, in a speech at Yale University argued that

Neoliberal stalwarts imposed now known-to-be-erroneous notion that if you just deregulate, take away tenant protections, remove the government from social housing, things will run smoother, more housing will be built, it'll trickle down, and benefit everybody [...] but trickle-down economics has been debunked – it is the neoliberalism that has allowed the likes of Blackstone [one of the largest private equity firms] to do what it has done in the area of housing [...] [they] went on a shopping spree in which they bought more than 50,000 foreclosed homes from banks [...] [these purchases] contributed to destroying the lives of already destroyed families – they created high cost rentals, made a killing and then remove[d] themselves from the equation with lots more zeros in their bank accounts.<sup>10</sup>

The challenges that today's market forces pose, aided by the neoliberal policies of developed nations, are coming into direct conflict with the problems that we encounter daily. The same UN report goes on to demonstrate the need for greater accountability. They write:

The “Practical guide to ESG [Environmental, Social and Governance] integration for equity investing,” for example, makes no reference to human rights in relation to investments in housing and other real estate. The International Organization of Securities Commissions, whose members regulate more than 95 per cent of the world's capital markets, has not addressed the central role that human rights in general and the right to housing in particular should play in the regulation of capital markets.<sup>11</sup>

This is simply wrong and must be changed.

## BEYOND RIGHTING A SET OF WRONGS

All the foundational policy statements regarding the right to housing cited above must be refined and updated to meet the needs and challenges of tomorrow. The interrelated impacts of climate change and racism have forced millions to be uprooted, while countless other lives are lost and many more are threatened by gentrification, homelessness, poverty, and inadequate housing. These violations of human rights, in particular the right to housing and the right to life, as well as other rights, such as the rights to health, physical integrity, privacy, water and sanitation, are rarely addressed as such by governments, human rights institutions, or our judicial systems. The reality is that climate change will force increasing numbers of people to be displaced due to what many are calling climigratory (climate change related) issues. Given that already and increasingly grim reality, our responsibility today is to guarantee future generations of their “right to housing,” and to make sure that their rights can be met without dramatic disruptions.

If we are barely able to meet the “right to housing” today, how will we be able to address that right in the future given the anticipated and dramatic increases in the numbers of people projected to be displaced due to climate change? How will we be able to assure our children and their children their right to housing and the ability to live lives where dignity and justice coupled with the enhancement of one’s ability to satisfy their basic needs exists? Present programs and policies are not designed to address the “wicked” challenges that face us. The level of funding to address the issues, while a fraction of the cost of not acting, is nowhere near what it needs to be. Failure to act today, in turn, will be costly in terms of lives lost and in the uncontrollable disruptions that will inevitably cascade throughout our planet, disrupting lives and uprooting nations.

## THINKING DIFFERENTLY – ECOSYSTEMS, INTEGRATIVE/HOLISTIC THINKING, TRANSDISCIPLINARY AND BIOPSYCHOSOCIAL MODELS

Today many urbanists, ranging from geographers, social worker, psychiatrists, community activists, and environmentalists, refer to places as ecosystems. They seek to look at places in a holistic manner and compel us to address the complex interplay of social, economic, physical, and environmental issues that impact people and places. Manfred Max-Neef, the Chilean philosopher and barefoot economist, urges addressing a problem from a transdisciplinary perspective, arguing that an expert can describe a problem, a multidisciplinary group can explain a problem, but only when one reaches a transdisciplinary state can we understand the problem, and understanding is necessary for us to address that problem. Mindy Fullilove, a psychiatrist, author, and friend, suggests that a biopsychosocial model be used to assess a problem, building on the work of George Engel (1977). In describing some of her early work in Harlem,

Mindy writes:

The structure of the neighborhood had been destroyed and its vitality vitiated. I could not explain in scientific terms how the built environment and social system were connected. Using the biopsychosocial model as my guide, I began to search in geography, environmental psychology, anthropology, sociology and history to find the answers. The geographers taught me about “place,” bounded areas that have social and psychological meaning, such as one’s home. The environmental psychologists explained that there are essential connections between individuals and place, as well as among residents of a given place, and between and among residents of different places.

Mindy goes on to add that:

Reading history was a major part of that work. The United States, despite arguing that its revolutionary fight was for “freedom,” established itself as a slave nation, preserving and protecting the rights of slave owners, and counting enslaved people as only three-fifths of a person. [...] African Americans and their white allies carried out a sustained struggle to abolish slavery and establish freedom and equality. However, gains in the Reconstruction era were largely lost as inclusive democratic institutions were replaced by the Jim Crow system, [...]

A paradox of the post–civil rights era has been that the problems supposedly “fixed” by the movement have endured and even worsened. What emerged instead of an integrated nirvana was the “urban crisis,” a polite way of saying “inner-city black poverty.” Conservative politicians promulgated the idea that this was a failure of “personal responsibility,” which took hold in the public’s imagination but was patently false. The perspective of the psychology of place helps us track a different story, that of a series of forced displacements that had devastating effects on inner-city communities [...].<sup>12</sup>

Mindy Fullilove’s use of the biopsychosocial model enabled her to go beyond a superficial understanding to a far more substantive understanding of the interconnected issues we as urbanists face. Susan Motley and I, writing about the impact of community development organizations in the 1990s, argued for a holistic and integrated approach to addressing urban problems. We argued:

Successful community development, as originally envisioned, required an integrative and comprehensive planning approach that recognized all of the community’s needs – social, economic, and

physical – and that sought to develop opportunities for personal, group, and community growth. Peirce and Steinbach quote Stewart Perry, whom they describe as a chronicler of the CDC (Community Development Corporation) movement, as saying: “The conception was that being poor is not an individual affair but rather a systematic disease.”

[Motley and I went on to say] “This integrative approach is often alien to macro planners, grants officers, and government officials, who tend to view things programmatically and categorically, but it is viewed as essential by area residents who experience the cumulative impact of all of these phenomena. Indeed, it is at the community and/or neighborhood level that one feels their impact and senses the potential for developing and delivering integrative approaches to achieve community development objectives. For this reason, the [community development] movement and other integrative and comprehensive planning initiatives were embraced by many people and communities.”

Because of their direct and experiential engagement with people and neighborhoods, Max-Neef, Fullilove, Engel, Motley, and many others from differing perspectives and disciplines, discovered the importance of addressing the issue of the “right to the city” from a holistic and integrative perspective – in reality an understanding of the ecosystem that has evolved. The same integrative and holistic approach is necessary when we seek to address the “right to housing.”

## THE NEED INTENSIFIES

The right to housing underlies a wide range of urban policies and programs; ranging from patterns of land ownership and land use to the techniques of construction and the beneficiaries of the use of the land, and the level of privatization of land uses.<sup>13</sup> The right to housing defies a narrow definition and challenges us as professionals to develop a holistic and integrated means of achieving the benefits that are being sought. The challenges we face today require us to redefine the role of urban professionals so that we are capable of addressing the challenges of today and tomorrow. This will not happen overnight or as quickly as we need it to occur. New York City, as in many parts of the United States (US), has long suffered from a chronic shortage of affordable housing. The US has never seriously embraced housing as a national priority – unlike, for instance, post-war Europe where recovery demanded massive government housing production. Even the federal public housing program was a reluctant and parsimonious effort, poorly crafted in ways that exacerbated racial and social inequalities.

New York City’s public housing program, while generally seen as successful, was the result of not one federal program but rather a series

of six or seven different programs undertaken between 1937 and today. Financial support for housing production on the supply side has all but ended at the federal level, with tax credits being the main incentive to entice private developers to subsidize some housing. Demand-side subsidies such as Section 8 help renters but have not proven successful in stimulating production of housing at affordable rents.<sup>14</sup> Home ownership programs have similarly fallen short of providing support below the level of the working middle class, leaving lower income families in need.

A steep decline in housing production, the pandemic, and climate change – particularly with respect to rising sea levels and flood hazard – means that we now face a crisis of unprecedented proportions and complexity. We have a present need and we know that need will grow exponentially if not addressed quickly and intensively. The current moment may offer an opportunity for a call to arms, to finally focus our attention. New York City and New York State should be urged to use its resources and capacities to forge innovative approaches to achieve “housing as a right” goals and in doing that, model for the nation a “new agenda for housing as a right.”

The convergence of the racial reckoning underway and the emergence from the COVID-19 pandemic may offer an opportunity for a call to arms to finally focus our attention on housing as a human right. We need to design and adapt new sustainable building tools such as mass timber, and/or the development of carbon-free concrete and the aggressive and creative use of wind and solar. We need to dramatically increase sustainable housing production and to face up to the inevitable consequences of sea level rises, riverine flooding, excessive heat, and generally chaotic weather patterns. We need to develop and utilize a range of humanistic planning approaches to redress the long-ignored environmental and social inequities that adversely impact too many people. However, unless we begin to challenge ourselves and our professions the change necessary for our collective survival will be deferred.

First and foremost, we must stop the loss of the existing supply of affordable housing and curtail efforts to privatize our low-cost housing stock or any land that is now in public ownership or subject to public oversight. The idea of land trusts, mutual housing associations, and adoption of a panoply of community housing ownership models should be studied, crafted, and adopted. Granting tenure rights to tenants and protections against harassment and unconscionable increases in rent must be on the table and a part of the tool kit for planning and policymakers to utilize. A massive expansion of social housing, public housing, co-housing, and community-owned non-profit housing models should be developed, financed, and launched.

In the August 26, 2022, *Next City* newsletter, there is a piece about a recently released Brookings Institution report on gun violence and mental health. At first blush, one can ask what has this to do with housing as a right? To quote the newsletter,

We describe those social determinants and document how local leaders are using that knowledge to make their communities safer. A well-known concept in public health, “social determinants” are the physical and social conditions that shape the places where we live, learn, work and play – and thus, our ability to live [a] long and healthy life [...] What’s less widely acknowledged is that “social determinants” also shaped the safety of our communities. This becomes clearer when looking at patterns of gun violence in cities and towns, in which gun homicides are spatially concentrated in a small set of streets within a small set of disinvested neighborhoods that have high rates of poverty, pollution and racial segregation. A large body of evidence shows that addressing [the] social determinant of safety at the hyperlocal [or community] level is vital to reducing this violence. These efforts can include increasing the quality of housing, adding greenery,<sup>15</sup> improving air quality, employing at risk youth, revitalizing vacant lots and many other examples.

They conclude by urging that we look beyond the specific issue at hand and focus on the broader array of place-based social determinants. In essence, reinforcing the idea of a “comprehensive and integrative” or “ecosystem approach” or, as Fullilove called it, a biopsychosocial model.

#### NEED FOR A NEW AGENDA – A REPARATIONS AGENDA

In essence we need to forge a new agenda. That new agenda should weave together policies and programs that

- (1) maximize housing choice for those seeking housing, as well as for those to be relocated as a result of climate change, including the ability to relocate communities in their entirety, if the situation warrants it;
- (2) establish choice as a framework for providing affordable housing, and building equitable and healthy multi-racial, multi-class communities; these should be accompanied by qualitative educational and economic initiatives.
- (3) guarantee equitable opportunities including reparational financial and programmatic assistance for those most egregiously discriminated against in the United States: black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) – whether for housing, employment, health, education, upward mobility, access to resources, political power, and more.

- (4) explore and utilize creative and potentially lucrative sources of finance such as a stock transfer tax<sup>16</sup> or the “Robin Hood Tax” as proposed by Professor James Tobin<sup>17</sup>; or innovative financing strategies proposed by Louis Kelso,<sup>18</sup> the father of the “employee stock ownership plans,” who argued that access to capital and the democratization of money could and should be used to achieve economic justice.<sup>19</sup>

These financial strategies, coupled with hyperlocal innovative financing strategies like QUIPO<sup>20</sup> or Asia Initiative’s SoCCs,<sup>21</sup> are efforts that could benefit, enhance, stabilize, and finance healthy, vibrant multiracial, multi-class communities built upon the principles of “housing as a right,” and thus should be explored and utilized.

While it is tempting simply to point out that if we did not spend \$10 bn per month on misguided wars and even more on tax breaks for the wealthy, all funded by deficit financing, there would be ample capital for housing subsidies, it is probably more realistic to look at redistributing those federal funds that are already allocated to housing and at other regulatory changes that might support low-income housing production.<sup>22</sup> Most European countries (the UK included) have now eliminated any mortgage tax credit for homeowners. While it is probably politically unrealistic to expect the US to follow suit, it may be possible to free up as much as \$30 bn per annum simply by restricting the mortgage tax credit to those most in need, and/or to first-time home buyers. With redistributed mortgage tax relief and Low-Income Tax Credit (LITC) funds, it would be possible to look at more effective use of supply-side subsidies to build more housing and create viable multiracial, multicultural, mixed-income communities of opportunity.

It can be argued that many of these proposals are a form of reparations since they are designed to overcome existing and future problems – “wicked” problems – whose origins are embedded in the social and economic injustices of the past and are sustained by many present-day policies. Thomas Piketty, the author of *A Brief History of Equality* (2021), observed:

... the current distribution of wealth among the countries of the world and within countries bears the deep mark of the slaveholding, colonial past. Knowledge of this past is indispensable for improving our understanding of the origins and injustices of the past present economic system, but in itself it does not suffice to formulate solutions and remedies. The question is complex and requires thorough, detailed examinations. [...] Rejecting any discussion of reparations, even when other spoliations and injustices that are just as far in the past continue to be indemnified, considerably complicates the development of new norms of universal justice that are acceptable to all. It is time to understand that the logic of “remedial justice” and “universal justice” are complementary and have to move forward in concert the one supporting the other.

For all that it is very clear that reparations alone will not allow us to settle all the problems to repair the damage done by racism and colonialism, we also have to change the economic system on a systematic basis, by reducing inequalities and ensuring that everyone has the most egalitarian access possible to education, employment, and property, independently of his or her origins. To fight discrimination, we must also pursue policies that are as ambitious, coherent and verifiable as possible, but without rigidifying identities, which are always plural and multidimensional.<sup>23</sup>

## THE NEED FOR COLLECTIVE ACTION

We need to revisit our codes of ethics and professional conduct and strengthen our commitment as urban practitioners to benefit the public. We need to develop and hone our technical capabilities to redress actions that have contributed to racial and class discrimination. We need to rethink our roles to benefit the whole, to benefit the collective rather than enhance the private. In essence, we need to recognize that for us to flourish as individuals, that we as urban professionals need to be concerned about our neighbors and the environment we inhabit and impact. Exploitation of the “other” undermines our ability to flourish and grow as individuals and undermines our ability to build community. It means that we as urban professionals need to rethink the movement of the past four decades toward privatization and move toward a collective effort to address problems of colonization, sexism, classism, racism, and the exploitation of people and our natural and constructed ecosystems.

Urban professionals tend to rely on their particular professional sets of expertise and as a result prioritize and categorize issues rather than thinking differently – thinking holistically. We need to rethink our approaches and to depend on teamwork – based on an assessment of the whole, of the woven fabric rather than the individual threads that comprise that fabric. The fact is that our survival as individuals is dependent on our collective actions. There are no silver bullets and we need to acknowledge that superheroes are based on fiction, not reality. We have to rediscover government, rebuild its capacity, and rebuild people’s faith in governmental institutions. To do that we must rebuild trust and to do that we must learn to listen and to be free to talk truth to power. Without effective government institutions we will not be able to meet the needs of people now and into the future.

Most importantly we need to understand the important role that a vibrant and dynamic multiracial, multicultural democracy plays in the development and success of governmental structures. Today, urban planning professionals, architects, and designers cannot be dispassionate. We cannot be apolitical, and we cannot abdicate our responsibility to address the challenges we face. We cannot hide behind the cloak of neutrality.

Neutrality is to ally with those who deny climate change, deny existing structural inequities; with those forces that would curtail opportunity for future generations. Collectively we must lead and not allow ourselves to surrender to cynicism – the need to build a sustainable future is and should be the goal of our collective efforts.

We have the ability, the ideas, and the creativity to bring about change. We know what we need to do to start on the path to recovery and to protect our planet and our people. What we need is the courage to start. We must turn our backs on the naysayers and, like the structural engineers, design a system based on a structure that will not collapse. A system that denies people the right to the city and the right to housing is like a building with a structure incapable of carrying the loads that it needs to sustain. An engineer would not allow a building to be built that cannot carry the loads contained within it. We as urbanists, as ecologists, as architects and as planners can no longer engage in a system that endangers us all if it doesn't guarantee the right to housing for our most vulnerable populations.



Figure 1. Container Housing, Williamsburg, New York 2011.

## Notes

1. David Harvey, "The Right to the City," *New Left Review* 53, Sept-Oct (2008): 2.
2. In 2017, Aida Amoako in the *JSTOR Daily*, on what would have been JFK's 100 birthday, wrote: "The evocation of the Kennedy legacy as a political tool began immediately after the president's death. President Johnson, addressing a joint session of Congress two days after the funeral, relayed his desire to continue Kennedy's work. 'Now,' he stated, 'the ideas and ideals which he so nobly represented must and will be translated into effective action.' Johnson was specific, calling on Congress to pass Kennedy's civil rights and tax bills. The fledgling president claimed that to pass the former especially would be the greatest tribute to Kennedy's memory. Johnson repeatedly evoked Kennedy's memory, immortalized in the 'minds and memories of mankind,' as a reminder not just of what had been lost, but of what could be achieved in his name."
3. People like Ellen Lurie, Chester Hartman, Frances Piven, Jane Jacobs, Max Bond, Clarence Funnye, Peter Marcuse, Tony Schuman, Walter Thabit, Tom Angotti, Donald Benjamin, and many others whose work bridging profession, academia, and community inspired a generation of students and community activists.
4. Paul Davidoff, "Advocacy and Pluralism in Planning," *Journal of the American Institute of Planners* 31, no. 4 (1965): 331-338 – doi:10.1080/01944366508978187.
5. The same was true of Max Bond's work at the Architect's Renewal Committee in Harlem, or Chester Hartman when he was at Harvard, or Walter Thabit and his colleagues at "Planners for Equal Opportunity."
6. Tom Angotti, *New York for Sale: Community Planning Confronts Global Real Estate* (Cambridge MA, USA: The MIT Press, 2008), 108.
7. Byrne and Culhane, Penn Law: Legal Scholarship Repository, 2011.
8. From an email sent to the author by Sharon Egretta Sutton on February 4, 2021, commenting on the writing of the initial draft of the report on the right to housing.
9. Leilani Farha, "Financialization of Housing and the Right to Adequate Housing," 3 - <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G17/009/56/PDF/G1700956.pdf?OpenElement>.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 18.
12. Mindy Thompson Fullilove, *Main Street: How a City's Heart Connects Us All* (New York: New Village Press, September 2020) – quote is from an early draft shared by the author.
13. According to the UN report cited above, "Many corporate owners of housing are nameless. In the first fiscal quarter of 2015, 58 per cent of all property purchases over \$3 million in the United States were made by limited liability companies rather than named people, and the majority of those purchases were in cash, creating a greater level of anonymity. More than 36,000 properties in London are held by shell companies registered in offshore havens such as Bermuda, the British Virgin Islands, the Isle of Man and Jersey." p. 10.
14. "Between 2017 and 2021 the city lost nearly 100,000 units that rented for less than \$1,500 a month, according to the survey. It gained roughly the same number that rented for \$2,300 or more, continuing a 30-year trend." *NYTimes* – <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/08/08/nyregion/why-the-rent-is-so-high.html>.
15. Anthony Barr, Hanna Love, and Andre Perry, "It's Not Just Mental Health. Addressing 'Social Determinants of Safety' Can Prevent Gun Violence," Next City website, August 26, 2022 – <https://nextcity.org/urbanist-news/not-mental-health-social-determinants-of-safety-prevent-gun-violence>.
16. The stock transfer tax is a tax imposed on the transfer of a security from one party to another. In NY State it is imposed on the sale or transfer of a variety of securities. In New York State the tax was collected every day but since the mid-80s it has been rebated immediately. For more information go to: <https://www.tax.ny.gov/bus/stock/stktridx.htm>
17. <https://www.google.com/search?q=define+tobin+tax&ie=UTF-8&oe=UTF-8&hl=en-us&client=safari>
18. "Access to capital ownership," asserted Kelso, "is as fundamental a human right as the right to the fruits of one's labor." Furthermore, Kelso argued, "the democratization of capital credit is the 'social key' to universalizing access to future ownership of productive wealth, so that every person, as an owner, could eventually gain income independence through the

profits from one's capital." Quote from Louis Kelso's "Economic Vision for the 21st Century," by Norman G. Kurland and Dawn K. Brohawn (© 2004–2016 Center for Economic and Social Justice. Updated from the original article published in *Owners at Work*, the newsletter of the Ohio Employee Ownership Center, Winter 1999–2000.)

19. For example, "The City of Vancouver recently approved a 1 per cent tax, which would apply to both foreign and domestic investors, on vacant homes in order to address the issue of approximately 20,000 vacant homes in its overheated speculative housing market. Net revenue from those taxes is to be invested in affordable housing initiatives." – <https://vancouver.ca/home-property-development/empty-homes-tax.aspx>.

20. QUIPU is a community-based decentralized bank for micro businesses in Latin America founded by the community and MIT alumni.

21. SoCCs, initially launched by a community-based organization in India working with Asia Initiatives, is a community currency designed to build social good: <https://www.asiainitiatives.org/soccs>.

22. As of 2019, mortgage tax relief cost the treasury \$70–100 billion annually. The estimated cost of the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit to the federal Treasury in FY19 was \$8 billion. A presidential advisory panel, headed by former Senator Connie Mack, recommended limiting the mortgage tax deduction to loans up to \$313,000 from the then ceiling of \$1M which arguably benefits wealthier homeowners than low-income homeowners. The ceiling was subsequently reduced to \$500,000. It would seem that some redistribution of the current mortgage tax relief, combined with a more efficient use of the LITC funds would be progressive and could free up significant capital for other subsidies.

23. Thomas Piketty, *Brief History of Equality* (Cambridge MA, USA: Belknap/Harvard, 2021), 93–94.

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## Credits

Figure 1: photo by © Eve Baron.

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