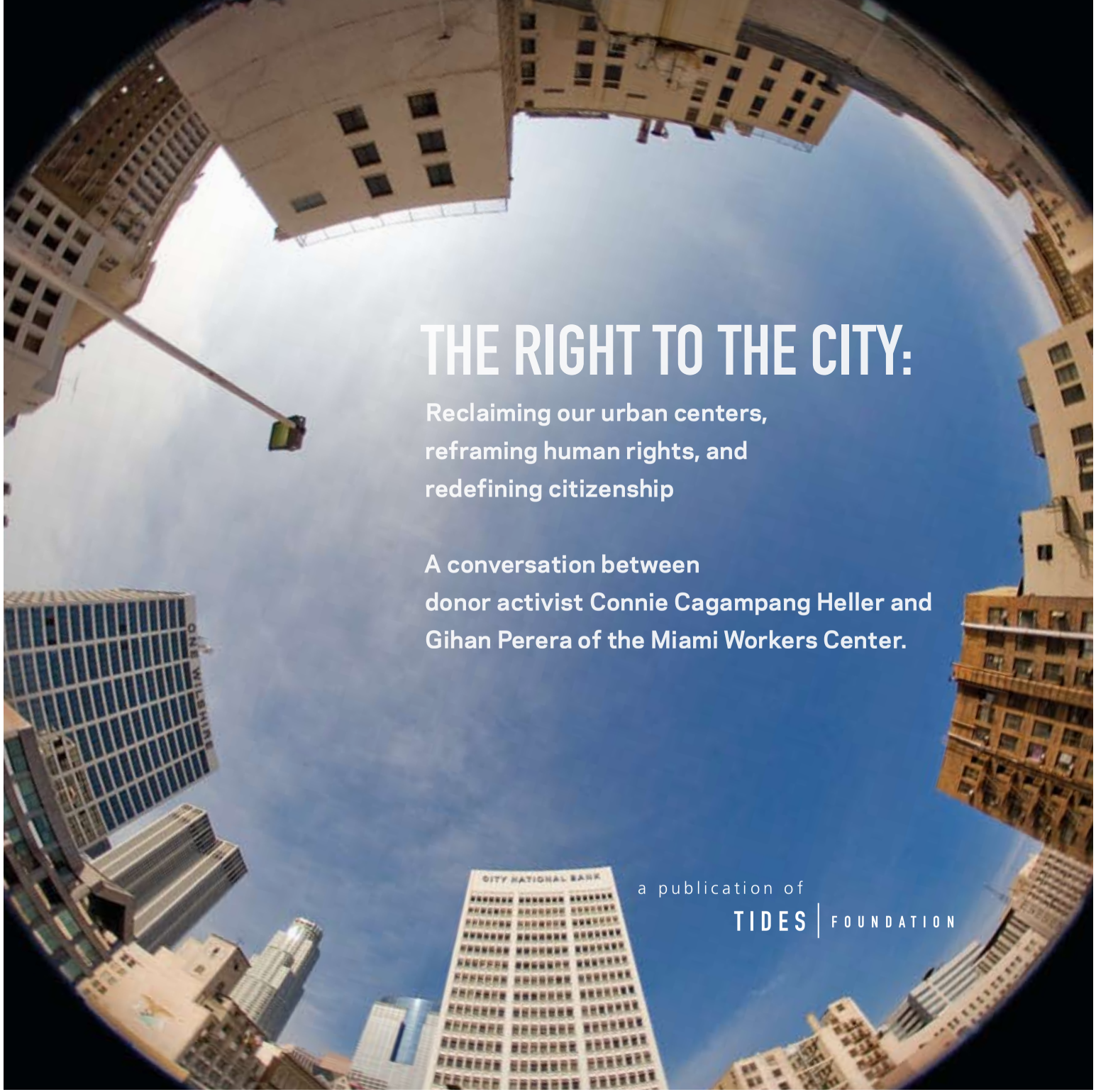

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY:

Reclaiming our urban centers, reframing human rights, and redefining citizenship

A conversation between donor activist Connie Cagampang Heller and Gihan Perera of the Miami Workers Center.

a publication of
TIDES | FOUNDATION

CONNIE CAGAMPANG HELLER

became involved in social change philanthropy in 2002. Her interest in race, ethnicity, and class has informed all aspects of her academic and professional career, both directly and indirectly, even prior to becoming a funder. She is currently the chair of the Social Justice Committee within the Democracy Alliance. In 2006, she began organizing the Linked Fate Salon, a dinner salon for young progressive leaders. At the salon, leaders can think about and discuss national progressive strategy and network with peers working on issues outside their own domain. Connie attended Mount Holyoke College and graduated from UC Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in East Asian Studies (Japan) and a master's of architecture. She also has a master's degree in anthropology from Columbia University. She has worked as an architect and as a commercial construction project manager and has team taught architecture at UC Berkeley.

GIHAN PERERA

is the co-founder and Executive Director of the Miami Workers Center. The Center is a strategy and action center whose purpose is to build the collective strength of low-income people of color and their communities in Miami. Gihan is also one of the co-founders of the Right to the City, a national alliance of over 30 grassroots organizations, legal service providers, academics, and policy groups seeking alternatives to gentrification and urban displacement of poor and working class communities of color. He is a nationally recognized social justice and progressive movement leader, organizer, and strategist. Gihan sits on the Advisory Committee of the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity, the Board of Directors of the local chapter of the ACLU, and the Board of the Miami Light Project, a local cultural organization. Prior to founding the Center, Gihan worked in the labor movement as a lead organizer throughout the South with ACTWO and as the recruitment director for the AFL-CIO's Organizing Institute.

Cover & Inside Photos: Ken Heyman

IN EARLY JANUARY OF 2007, A MOVEMENT WAS BORN.

The Right to the City blossomed out of a need to expand human rights in the United States and a desire to revitalize our cities.

Representatives from organizations and institutions concerned about and working for change in our society gathered in California. They discussed a framework that would inform organizing and action around issues of access to basic human rights in cities across the country.

Since then, the Right to the City has been the platform for numerous efforts and campaigns ranging from organizing communities in New Orleans to supporting immigrants becoming engaged with civic life.

Tides Foundation invited two participants at this founding convening to share their knowledge about the Right to the City. Donor activist Connie Cagampang Heller and co-founder of the Right to the City, Gihan Perera, discuss how this framework can offer a basis for real, positive social change and how different sectors of society can collaborate to make this change a reality.

INTRODUCTION

Photo: Ken Heyman

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RIGHT TO THE CITY FRAMEWORK

Photo: Ralph Barrera / Austin American Statesman / WPN

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CONNIE HELLER: I find that change happens through connections. I've been a donor activist for five years, and one of the biggest lessons I have learned is how to use the tremendous access I have in order to meet lots of different people and start new relationships. If I open myself up to developing those relationships, I'm able to then connect people who may not know each other—yet who need to be talking to one another and collaborating.

As a funder, something as simple as making an introduction can often really help. This way, I can provide value that goes beyond a check without actually getting in the way of the organization doing their own work.

GIHAN PERERA: Right. As simple as that seems, helping people connect is a huge contribution. My experience within the progressive movement is that each of us can get isolated within our own sectors. Part of that has to do with power and access, and part of it has to do with the simple fact that we have so much to do, that it's difficult to connect with one another. I think it's very important. Even though the Right to the City frame focuses on communities of color, working-class, and low-income communities that are being directly impacted by a slew of problems, the bigger idea is to be able to have those communities actually connect to a much broader grouping of people and factors.

MS. HELLER: In January of 2007, I was able to attend the first Right to the City convening *(see page 9)* and had the opportunity to connect with many people deeply involved in the progressive movement,

including you. For those unfamiliar with the idea, how would you describe the Right to the City?

MR. PERERA: The Right to the City is a framework to rebuild an urban movement in America's cities. It comes from a basic recognition that our American cities have been under attack. For example, since the 1960s, urban renewal programs have literally *removed* 1,600 black neighborhoods throughout the United States.

We have also seen the privatization of public services on a massive scale, exacerbating the tremendous displacement of working-class communities and communities of color across the country. And these communities are now in crisis.

Those of us most affected by this have been trying to fight back as best as we can—by fighting against developments, by trying to hold onto the neighborhoods. But we end up taking on fights on multiple fronts: around housing, around education, around transportation. And all of those fights become separate and often reactive.

The Right to the City alliance and frame is an attempt to say, "Can we determine our own agenda?" At the core of that agenda is to assert that we, the people who live in the cities, in neighborhoods and communities, have a right to actively participate and shape the policies and culture and the way that city operates. We have a right to live there; we have a right to participate, and we need to have power over the decisions that are made there.

In order for us to live there, we need some basic things, some basic human rights: housing, transportation, education, culture, and true participation in the creation of the city.

"The Right to the City is a framework to rebuild an urban movement in America's cities. It comes from a basic recognition that our American cities have been under attack."

MS. HELLER: That first Right to the City convening was a fantastic gathering of people and ideas. Since then, have the participating organizations been able to work together? Are there any new coordinated efforts that the alliance has been engaged in?

THE FIRST RIGHT TO THE CITY CONVENING, LOS ANGELES, JANUARY 11–14, 2007

The founding convening of the Right to the City alliance was held in Los Angeles, California on January 11-14, 2007.

Thirty base-building organizations from around the country, as well as supporting academics, researchers, legal, and media advisors attended this working meeting. The outcomes of the gathering include:

- a shared theoretical framework
- a plan and program for continued peer-to-peer support and cross-training
- a defined role for supporting academics, researchers, legal, and media advisors
- a six-month work plan for building the Alliance

Two fundamental principals are at the core of this platform and constitute the long-term goals of a national urban movement for the Right to the City.

- **The right to live in the city** as a counter to the current spate of gentrification and displacement. This requires policies and programs for affordable housing, education, family-supporting wages, quality education, and universal health care. This means re-designing and running cities as if women matter.
- **The right to democratic participation and power**, meaning the right to participate democratically in the production of urban space. This is a call for radical and inclusive democracy in all sectors of urban life.

Human rights demands of democracy, housing, education, dignity, and respect are the core of the Right to the City.

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY FOUNDING ORGANIZATIONS AND RESOURCE PEOPLE

- Tenants and Workers United Alexandria
- Vida Urbana Boston
- Chinese Progressive Association Boston
- ACE Boston
- TBD Chicago
- Organizing Neighborhood Equity (ONE D.C.) D.C.
- SAJE Los Angeles
- LACAN Los Angeles
- Union de Vecinos Los Angeles
- Little Tokyo Service Center Los Angeles
- Collective Space Los Angeles
- Miami Workers Center Miami
- Power U Miami
- TBD New Orleans
- FUREE New York
- Make the Road New York
- CAAV New York
- FIERCE New York
- Just Cause Oakland
- DARE Rhode Island
- Environmental Health Coalition San Diego
- POWER San Francisco
- St. Peters Housing Alliance San Francisco
- Resource People Affiliations
- Benjamin Beach Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles
- Chuck Elsessor National Low-Income Housing Coalition
- Gianpaolo Baiocchi U Mass Amherst
- Harmony Goldberg CUNY
- Jacqueline Leavitt UCLA Department of Urban Planning
- James de Fillipis Antipode
- Joan Byron Pratt Center for Community Development
- Laine Romero Alston & Haeyoung Yoon Urban Justice Center
- Makani Themba-Nixon Praxis Project
- Manuel Pastor USC
- Neil Smith NYU
- Nik Theodore University of Chicago
- Rene Poitevan NYU
- Tony Samara George Mason University (Fairfax, VA)

THE SOUL OF THE CITY

Photo: Anibal Greco / WPN

AND GENTRIFICATION

MR. PERERA: A thousand ideas have blossomed since the January meeting. For example, there is a group from the convening that went to New Orleans to help out with the massive displacement going on. There are an estimated 350,000 people being displaced from the region. It's the biggest wholesale gentrification in the country's history, and we felt it was just left hanging. We all were waiting for a big national group to come in and do something—and we kept waiting and waiting and waiting. And we finally all said, "Even if we are not at capacity with our own work, if we can't do something about New Orleans, then what's the point?" So a number of groups headed to New Orleans to start peer-to-peer sharing around campaign strategy, lead organizing, training people in fundraising, sharing our knowledge with groups there, and building relationships. That's going on right now.

Also, a number of groups have started to build a common database of major developers. We have each been battling with developers on countless issues, but we never connected the dots. We were dealing with the battles in our town—not realizing the same people were taking over your town and taking over three other towns and that they have a national strategy. Many of the real estate companies and the developer companies have conglomerated into huge monopolies. So that basic connection with national allies is critical.

MS. HELLER: When you talk about "taking on developers," it brings up the big idea of gentrification. I'm sure at one time, I considered gentrification to be a good thing. It was couched as an effort to

clean up an area of a city that was not cared for and obviously dilapidated. Of course now it means something very different to me. How would you explain the problems with gentrification efforts?

MR. PERERA: I think for all the groups that came together during the Right to the City convening, the biggest crisis that we were dealing with was this question of gentrification and wide-scale displacement of working-class families in low-income communities. So if you ask "What's the problem with that?" there is a front-end answer and a back-end answer. The front-end answer is that longstanding communities, usually of color—African American, Latino, Asian—which held social networks, economic networks, and cultural networks in history, are being displaced and thus destroyed. And with that destruction, there is a tremendous cost. When you destroy people's social networks, economic networks, and historical networks, it's not just a loss of place—it's a loss of soul. It's a loss of identity.

During that meeting, I heard the story of a group called FIERCE in New York, and it stuck in my mind. It's an organization of young LGBT and queer youth who ended up fighting for a neighborhood in which they didn't even live or work. But there was a queer youth center that occupied a space on a pier, and it had been their cultural home for a long time. Because of planned development around the pier, they were going to be evicted. It seems so basic, but it blew my mind to see queer issues fit so perfectly within this framework. They were fighting for their right to that space on the pier against the same pressures that all of us are fighting for around housing and other issues. It was one of the clearest examples for me around what the Right to the City is about.

MS. HELLER: You mentioned the idea of "a loss of soul," and to me that is very real. As somebody who also lives in a city, having different areas that have their own character adds immensely to the quality of the city. When you go to some of these newer cities and all of the long-standing communities have been removed or were never there, you sense the absence of a certain energy.

MR. PERERA: Yes, in fact, from North Carolina to Los Angeles, the strip-mallization of cities is taking place. What used to be there is being bulldozed. And the impact of that on people is something you feel in your gut. The reason I got into this work, the reason why many people fight to protect poor, low-income communities rather than welcome a beautiful, gated community in its place is that we want to belong to something. I want to belong to an interactive community—that's what keeps us connected. It's our identity. That's what makes our lives whole.

MS. HELLER: Absolutely. For myself, as a funder, I have never felt so connected to so many people around the country as I do now. Reaching out to leaders of community organizations and getting to know them and trying to understand why they do their work, what makes them excited to wake up every morning and get back to these fights is very compelling because these are difficult fights. As I have started trying to find ways to leverage the access and power that I hold as a funder and as an

ally to the organizations that I fund, I'm experiencing a real resistance to change in our society.

And sometimes there is resistance even within the progressive movement. The first time you and I met was at the Tides Momentum conference in April of 2006. I had been out as a funder for one year at that point, and I remember that I was struck by your presentation about the Right to the City frame. Because when I first began my philanthropy, I walked

"I want to belong to an interactive community—that's what keeps us connected. It's our identity. That's what makes our lives whole."

into a progressive movement that seemed divided into many silos, and oftentimes the people in these separate issue silos weren't talking to each other. It was like walking into a dysfunctional family, and I remember being a little stunned by it. But hearing you talk about the Right to the City framework was very exciting because this frame intuitively addresses how to bring people together across economic interests, across racial lines, across gender issues, and so much more. You brought people together in their common experience of living together—in this case, in the city, but really on this planet—and the struggle of trying to figure out how to live together.

MR. PERERA: I remember that; that was a fantastic conversation! And I remember that

Photo: © Sean Sprague / SpraguePhoto.com

Photo: © Sean Sprague / SpraguePhoto.com

even our conversation at first was structured in a compartmentalized way because of where the progressive movement is now. It seemed almost awkward to talk about something that unites us all in this grand vision, within the context of discussions about very well-defined and very critical issues. Our conversation was refreshing because while we recognized the importance of particular issue areas, we wanted to make an effort to not get stuck there. I talked to you about Right to the City and about all the community organizing groups that were in it. You seemed kind of intrigued but admitted you didn't know much about it, so I invited you to the first Right to the City convening in January. Now let me ask you: why did you go?

MS. HELLER: Part of what drives my work as a funder is getting to know the different people that are involved in the movement. I like to find out what people's stories are, where they came from, and why they do their work. I find that I learn a lot more that way, not just about the people but about the underlying issues. We're in this time right now where we're really trying to figure out how to pull together a progressive movement. And it's very clear to me that one of the things that we can do is try to create opportunities for different groups and different people to get to know each other—first as individuals, and then as organizations. That way we can actually have the groundwork that we need to work together.

I also frequently put myself into situations that I'm not comfortable in, that I'm not sure exactly what it will be like. When you first told me about the gathering around the Right to the City frame, it

Photo: Ken Heyman

Photo: Ken Heyman

sounded interesting to me personally. But I have also been encouraging other funders to support indigenous, grassroots organizing as a way of strengthening our democracy. And I felt like this was an important learning opportunity for me, especially in my efforts to advocate for that. I hadn't actually ever been to an organizing meeting because I, like many people my age, had spent my life just trying to have a job and earn some money and work on my own personal career and not really thinking collectively. The Right to the City conference was an opportunity for me to go see what a community vision of democracy looked like. And as you know, it was transformative for me to be in that environment and see the way that democracy was working in that context, working in a way I have never seen it work anywhere else. So that's what brought me there.

MR. PERERA: What do you mean by that? How did you see democracy working? I remember you saying something like that—and my take was, "People are being really difficult, and we're trying to work out how to get through this."

MS. HELLER: That's right. And what's happening in our cities is that people at all economic levels are really balkanized. We don't have many opportunities to interact with people who are not like ourselves, who work in different places or are from different economic backgrounds. At the Right to the City conference, it was wonderful to see so many people who were so different from each other. Everybody was represented there. College professors, funders, public housing organizers, SRO organizers, leaders of organizations of all

scales—all these people were in this room, working together on a collective project. And to my eyes, at least, they were clearly enjoying themselves.

There was a lot of energy in the room, but everybody was very respectful of each other. Everybody was very conscious of the power that they brought to the conversation and were trying to figure out how they could use it for positive outcomes rather than as a way to manipulate somebody else or improve their situation at someone else's expense.

Given our society, funder meetings are inherently a lot less diverse and have a different energy. The Right to the City conference encapsulated in a room what I love about living in a city. I like walking down a street in a city because of all the people that I don't know who I might meet. The Right to the City frame is a way to identify and to talk about what is really wonderful about living so close to so many people that are very different from oneself.

MR. PERERA: That brings me to my back-end reason for why gentrification is what we are fighting against. On the one hand, there is definitely a loss for people losing the community they once belonged to. But there is also a loss to the people who gentrify the neighborhoods because it's not an inclusive process. It's an attack on what was there before; new populations become something of an occupying force. And more often than not those populations feel the need to either secure themselves from what existed before or destroy what existed before.

"I have also been encouraging other funders to support indigenous, grassroots organizing as a way of strengthening our democracy."

And ultimately, what is happening on a grand scale across the United States is that there is an increase in privatized life, where you have to secure your own private utopia against everyone else. It's all based on exactly the opposite of what you just talked about. It's not based on how we actually secure the right for everyone to live there. It's based on people who have money and ability to have private wealth at the cost of everyone else. Whether people are moving into a gated community or paying for their own security service, it becomes part of the repeated destruction of neighborhoods and the wholesale departure of people who have lived there before. That might provide places to live, but under what conditions, under what quality of life?

When there is such increased polarization, it means that instead of being connected to all of these other people, your life is now in constant conflict. And we lose the ability to have public and cultural spaces that everyone can go to because conflict is so embedded in these spaces. It's the ultimate in a segregated life and a segregated city because we're all living in a very alienated and isolated way. Those being displaced are trying to fight to hold on, and the people who want to move into these communities have to push us out in order to stay. And it's a zero-sum game.

MS. HELLER: Most of the cities that you have mentioned as part of the coalition are cities that are expanding. But this displacement of communities brings up the issue of suburbs, exurbs, and even rural places or cities that aren't growing right now. How does the Right to the City frame address both stagnant and expanding cities?

MR. PERERA: I'll start with the cities that are expanding. All of the leaders who have come together in the Right to the City coalition are from hot-market cities, meaning that property values were going through the roof—including property values in long abandoned areas of the cities. That process of real estate speculation, coupled with the fact that cities' budgets were increasingly dependent on the real estate taxes, led to a cycle in which developers and developers' interests were deciding how cities were being shaped.

Our framework emerged because of the tension and displacement taking place in these cities. We needed to be clear about what we're fighting for, which was more than just resisting change. We needed a framework to articulate how to leverage these hot markets as a way to actually build community strength. The interesting thing is that now, five months after the first meeting, the whole condo market and the housing market has stalled. The conditions around the market, even in those cities, are changing pretty significantly. But what we're asking for is the same thing: basic human rights and the ability to enjoy those rights in the context of where we live now, whether that is an urban center or a rural area.

In a place like Detroit—where the entire inner city is almost abandoned and they're trying to figure out how to repopulate and build the city—even though the market conditions are different, our goals are the same. What's different are the opportunities and conditions that we have to work with. So in Detroit, where there is a lot of land and the market conditions are favorable, the Right to the City can be a blueprint for what we want to develop.

FROM POLICY TO POVERTY: A STRUCTURAL RACISM ANALYSIS

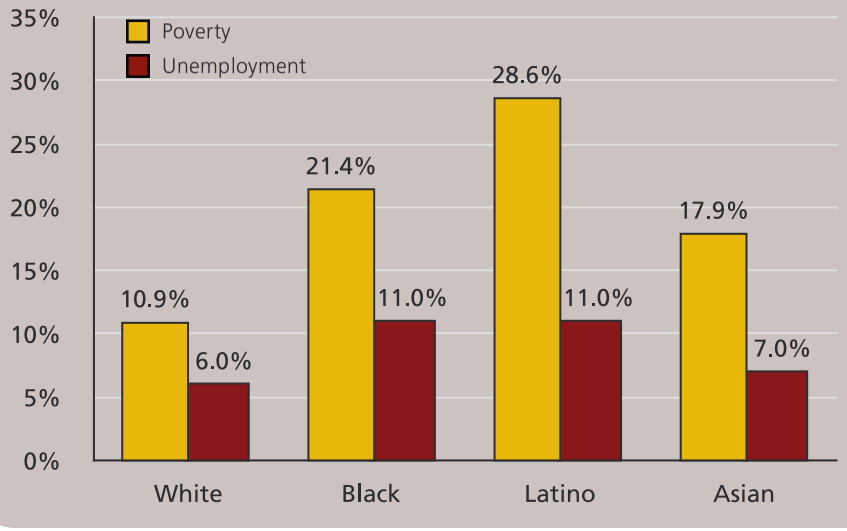
While overt racial discrimination has certainly decreased in this country, we are still grappling with the lasting effects of more than 60 years of discriminatory government policies. The Social Security Act, for example, initially excluded 80% of African Americans through policies such as the exclusion of all domestic and agricultural workers. And the Federal Housing Administration of the New Deal era refused to provide mortgages to blacks moving into white neighborhoods. While the laws may have changed, their legacy remains.

Housing policies, transportation subsidies, and education systems based on local tax base: these policies have not only helped to create more affluent and homogenous suburbs, but they have also created areas of "concentrated poverty." And areas of "concentrated poverty" are significantly harsher on people than living in poverty within a more affluent context.

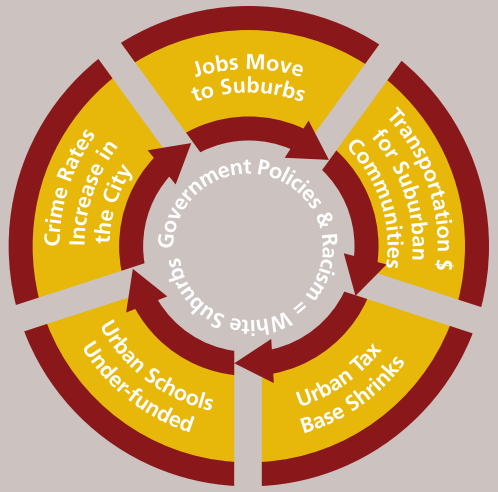
For example, tax incentives often spark developments and job opportunities outside city limits. But who is able to follow those jobs? Those who are able to move to a nearby suburb or those who can afford a car to get there. The likelihood that there will be a public transit solution is slim, since over 80% of our transportation dollars get spent on highways.

When jobs disappear, the tax base shrinks—which can start a spiral into concentrated poverty.

Poverty and Unemployment are higher in communities of color (2005)



The Vicious Cycle of Investment and Disinvestment and Racial Disparities

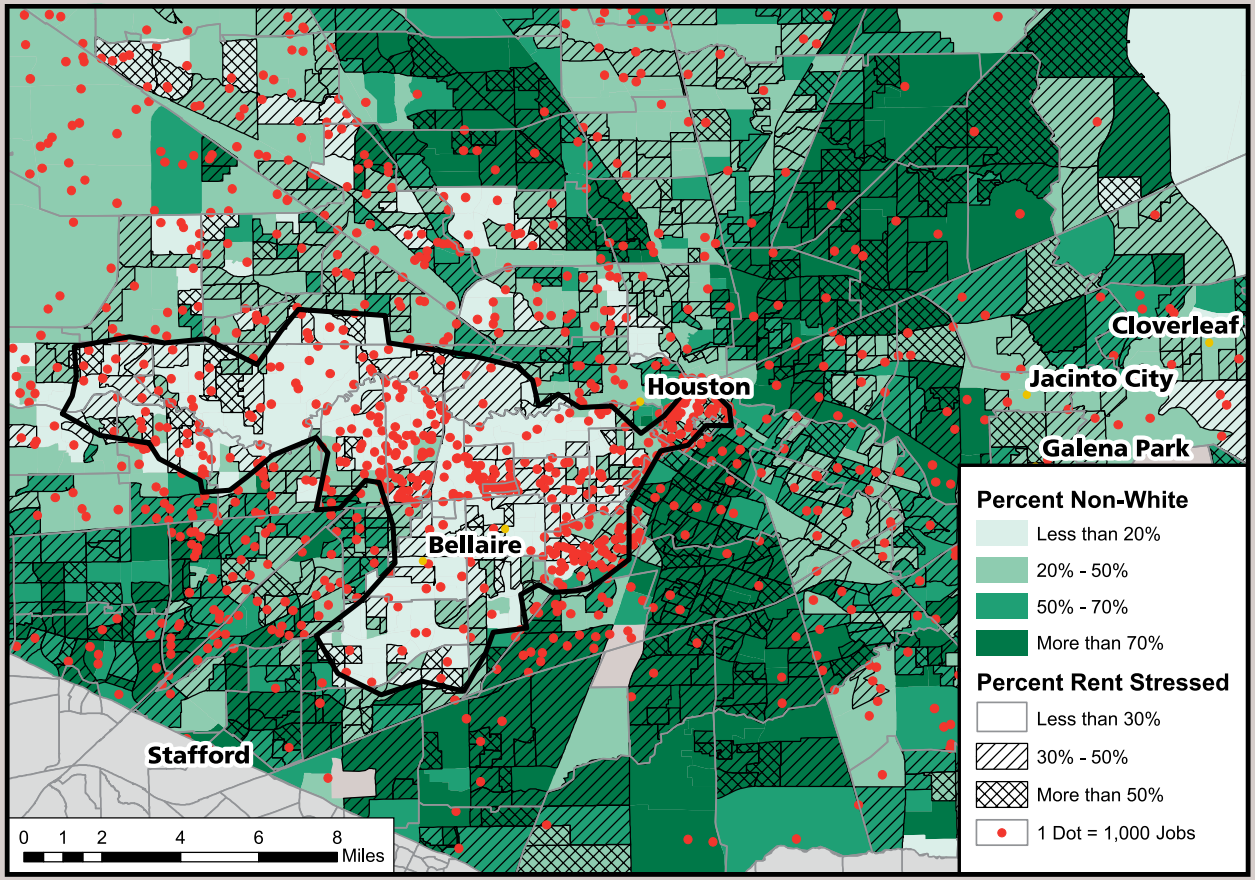


Source: Center for Social Inclusion

This means few tax dollars for schools, transportation, and other public services and little or no access to nearby services, making it exponentially more difficult to break the cycle Wholesale gentrification is then seen as revitalization. Frequently, however, this means existing residents are priced out and poverty migrates elsewhere.

Our challenge as a nation is to tackle fundamental community issues on the front-end: bringing the housing activists, the transportation activists, the education activists, and the health care activists together to create vital communities from the ground up.

Houston, TX: Jobs, Affordable Housing, and Communities of Color



Source: U.S. Census, ESRI, Inc., Center for Social Inclusion

Special thanks to the Center for Social Inclusion for data and graphs

WINNING COALITIONS OF UNLIKELY

PARTNERS

Photo: James Chase / Sustainable South Bronx

MR. PERERA: In Miami, we can use the Right to the City to hold back the city from transforming into a place that's only made for a few. What is happening in Miami is that people are being pushed from the inner city to the suburbs, to the exurbs, to everywhere else. But in Florida, there is no place to go. We have the Atlantic Ocean to the east and the Caribbean to the south, and then we have the Everglades, which is a river, to the west. The development interests wanted to actually build out into the Everglades and to destroy the Everglades in order to be able to deal with the people who are being displaced.

MS. HELLER: The proposed expansion into the Everglades was obviously an opportunity to work with local environmentalists. This gets back to our discussion about the progressive movement and the tendency to work in "issue silos." So how did you engage the environmental community in Miami or greater Florida?

MR. PERERA: The first thing the developers presented was actually a threat, and it was a threat to both the environmentalists and people in our communities. The threat was posed like this: under the conditions of hyper real estate price increases, the only way to build affordable housing—in this instance particularly for low-income, black, and latino residents—was to be able to push the urban development boundary out into the Everglades, ostensibly the only land that is now available for such developments. And they got a former congresswoman who had been a leader in the civil rights movement to

represent the developers' case. They framed the argument for why the urban development boundary needed to be moved as a civil rights issue for black people. And the environmentalists, of course, mobilized their entire white base to oppose the urban development boundary.

MS. HELLER: A classic strategy of divide and conquer.

urban development. We said that the solution to affordable housing wasn't to move black people to the Everglades. In fact, people wanted to rebuild in their own communities, which had plenty of land that had been vacant because of disinvestment or riots for decades. Why should that land now become condos instead of houses for the people who have gone through all this? And our members then testified that they didn't want to move out to

> **"What is happening in Miami is that people are being pushed from the inner city to the suburbs, to the exurbs, to everywhere else. But in Florida, there is no place to go."**

MR. PERERA: Completely. It was set up 100 percent as a black versus green issue. The developers brought in black people who needed houses to testify on their behalf because they couldn't afford housing in their neighborhoods anymore, which was a really difficult situation. It was a terrible situation not just for the Everglades. It was also terrible for us because it meant we would give up our neighborhoods to come move to the Everglades to get cheap housing.

But that double threat provided the opportunity. The community organizations reached out to the environmentalists to establish an alliance around this issue. And the environmentalists were clearly poised to lose the argument about protecting the Everglades. So we mobilized around the hearings talking about the Everglades and they didn't feel like they needed to. We argued that the solution was much closer to home and that we opposed the urban development boundary being moved because it was a clear attempt to displace people from their neighborhoods.

MS. HELLER: What about longterm relationships? Were you able to build lasting connections with the environmentalists? That's what's it's all about.

MR. PERERA: Yes, of course. Once the victory was ours, they were very supportive. But they didn't think about the connection at first.

MS. HELLER: They didn't see the value in those neighborhoods?

MR. PERERA: Right. The idea that people would *not* want to move out of those neighborhoods in the first place never occurred to them. They thought that black people would be jumping to get out of the neighborhood. They never thought about fighting to stay in and what that looked like. And we talked to our members as well, saying, "This is not a black versus green issue. This is an affordable housing issue and an environmental issue. Our fight for our neighborhood is key to this —and this is how we can win." It completely changed the debate, which meant we had a brand new set of friends in the environmental activists.

Photo: Thomas Alleman / WPN

"In fact, people wanted to rebuild in their own communities... Why should that land now become condos instead of houses for the people who have gone through all this?"

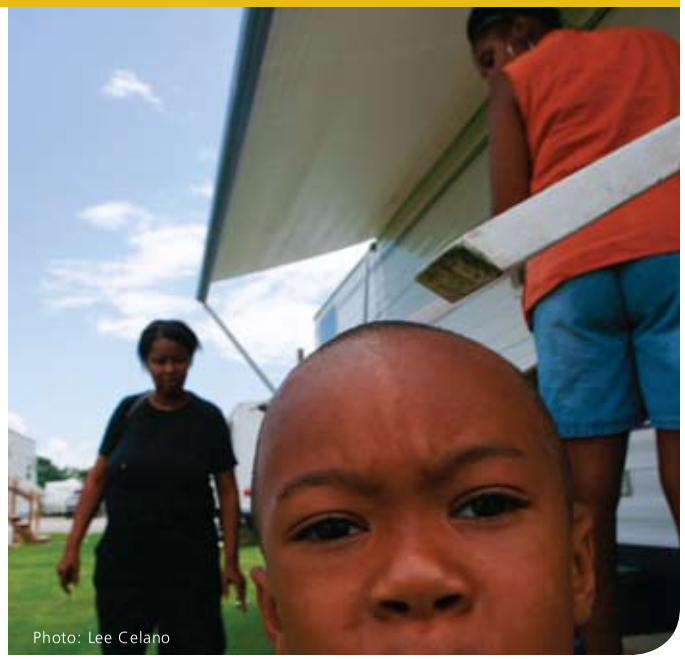


Photo: Lee Celano

And it built a relationship between us and several key environmental groups in a way that hasn't even been built between the environmental groups themselves. And it doesn't stop there. For example, we won a major agreement to actually rebuild housing in the neighborhood, something like 2- or 3,000 units. Over the course of time it will be a $100- or $200 million endeavor. But to actually implement this, we're going to need a ton more political support than just our neighborhood forces. These houses are now going to be built, and that

should take pressure off expanding the development boundary. That's good for the environment. But we also want those houses built on a green basis. And we will need the political support of many groups to build these houses on a green basis. And we also want these jobs to be well paying jobs, union jobs. So we're also reaching out to labor groups.

We know that if we are alone we are vulnerable because we've been fighting the good fight, alone, for 8 to 10 years—and that's not been enough.

MS. HELLER: Absolutely, because dominant politics don't recognize all the resources that different communities bring to the conversation. For example, I've been able to spend time with academics who are spending their lives studying race and race theories. They are trying to figure out how, as a country, we could use race in a positive, constructive way—as opposed to as a negative, dividing tool.

Which brings me to another component in all of this: educating funders.

If somebody is interested in moving funding to support community-based work, then let's educate that person. They should be able to speak to the issues they are funding eloquently and clearly. When I identified that I was interested in social justice and racial issues, people recognized the value of helping me to get grounded in the work. In the course of a year, I've been fortunate enough to receive a "crash course" in structural racism, race relations, movement building, and organizing. I've learned so much more than I ever could have if I had just been simply reading about these topics by myself. I wouldn't even have known which book to read to learn about these things. (Now I am trying to figure out ways that I can help share this information with others, particularly other individual funders.)

Through this process, it became very real for me how different communities bring resources to, organize around, and think about systemic relationships. And I also realized that I haven't become as well versed in other areas, such as the women's movement or the LGBT movement, which are equally important. But the point is, even though the resources are not always financial, there are ways in which we can connect and support each other.

MR. PERERA: You're right. Even in this case where we're trying to build this environmental/labor/community coalition, there is a low road and a high road to that coalition. The low road is labor wants jobs; the environmentalists want green buildings; the community wants houses. Traditional organizing theory is, "Just match up those self-interests and there you've got your coalition."

But I feel like we are at the end of being able to operate at that low level of self-interest because if we don't adopt each other on a higher plane, the coalition is going to be limited to that self-interest. So, for example, if the environmentalists are happy that they are building green houses but don't understand the importance of supporting the African American community's political power, it will not be a solid coalition. Once that project is over, if the threat to the African American

community still continues, those concerned about environmental issues may not be there with support.

So our job is to keep the conversation going. Yes, you're here for green buildings, but you also have to be doing this to actually build the power of a black community. That also has to be in their interest—not just for the green piece, but for the race and political power piece. That has to be central to their consciousness as environmentalists.

MS. HELLER: And that work has to take place on all sides.

MR. PERERA: Exactly. The same of course is true for us, and for labor, and for the health care advocates, etcetera. So it's going to take work in our organization to talk about what the environmental relationship to our community organizing is, what the relationship is with the LGBT community, and so on. That's not going to happen overnight. But there are leaders and members who are starting to get it and understand it at a deep level.

REACHING FOR THE TRIPLE BOTTOM LINE:

THE GREEN JOBS ACT OF 2007

Economic prosperity, environmental sustainability, social justice: How can we reach that trifecta?

The need for the United States to tackle global warming is now part of the national conversation. The next topic needs to be how to create a truly green economy that will both combat global warming and generate secure employment for low-income communities.

The Green Jobs Act of 2007 (HR 2847) is a great first step. The bill aims to help train workers for jobs in the renewable energy and energy-efficiency industries, thus creating "green pathways out of poverty" for tens of thousands of Americans seeking job opportunities in the booming green economy.

As of August 4, 2007, HR 2847 has been passed by the House and is being considered in conference committee. The Green Jobs Act of 2007:

- authorizes $125 million per year for green jobs training,
- reserves $25 million of this for creating pathways out of poverty for low-income adults, and
- provides funds to link research and development in the green industry to job standards and training curricula for new workers.

The Green Jobs Act is supported by a broad coalition of organizations, including The Ella Baker Center, Apollo Alliance, the Workforce Alliance, and the Center for American Progress.

To learn more, visit: http://ellabakercenter.org

CIVIC PARTICIPATION AND ELECTORAL

POLITICS

Photo: Victor James Blue / WPN

MS. HELLER: I spend a lot of energy and time around the electoral process, and these new relationships you have just described have real ramifications. There are ballot issues, legislative issues, or policy issues where environmentalists and community organizers need to work together.

MR. PERERA: Yes, because all of the different progressive groups are in something of a crisis. Even if one has more resources than others or an agenda that the media is friendlier to—despite us all having different resources and strengths—we're all generally losing. Which doesn't mean that we automatically figure out how to get together to form a block that can win, even if that's the "duh" answer. Rather, we first need to discover how we can build trust and relationships to foster the process of consciousness-raising. That will translate into victories. If we can move this green-labor community partnership around a housing project, maybe we can get out of our relative ghetto-ization to take on something broader in scope. Maybe we can expand to countywide or regional-wide challenges.

To figure out how to make that real seems overwhelming. It's difficult to decide where to start. But we have to start on whatever is in front of us today. That will lead to bigger things—to being able to make alliances that make real impact at the electoral level.

MS. HELLER: Can you breakdown the basic Right to the City frame with regards to electoral politics?

MR. PERERA: The major progressive centers throughout the country are formed around cities; that's where they are now. But through this widespread gentrification, not only race and class demographics are being shifted but also political demographics. We've been calling it redistricting by development, where longtime progressive voting bases are basically being wiped off the map. And generally what they're being replaced with is a much more affluent and generally much more conservative voter base. And so whether we choose to do anything about it or not, this process of gentrification is actually changing modern-day politics and political bases both in cities and nationally as well. It's also essentially about being able to preserve and strengthen communities' political power.

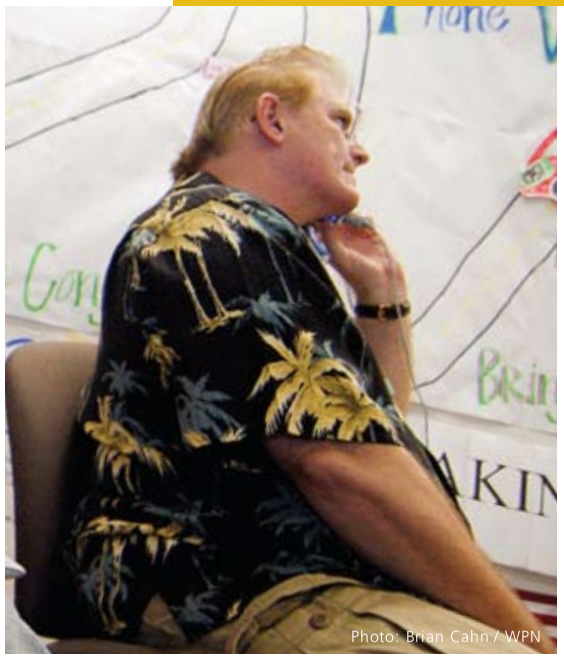
MS. HELLER: Much of this comes in at a high level. Does the coalition actively work with communities to do the simple things like register people to vote, educate people on the issues, have them educate their neighbors? Are you involved in any of that work in the context of the Right to the City?

MR. PERERA: Yes. There are a number of organizations in our alliance that do that work. In a number of cities, groups are beginning to figure out how electoral work becomes a tool in their overall agenda. That may mean registering voters, significantly increasing voter turnout, voter defense, and using the electoral season to educate and shape public opinion on issues.

The greatest impediment that we have around civic engagement, electoral or not, is a sense of people's complete separation from the overall political process. And this of course is directly related to their isolation from community life, from civic life, that comes with the loss of neighborhoods and longstanding communities. The Right to the City frame and all the organizations at its core are increasing the level to which people within our communities are democratically participating in everything around their lives. If they're active in a housing struggle, in a transportation struggle, in a struggle to maintain a public space, then they can become active in politics.


Photo: Alex Masi / WPN

"We've been calling it redistricting by development, where longtime progressive voting bases are basically being wiped off the map."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IMMIGRATION

Photo: Richard Alan Hannon / Baton Rouge Advocate / WPN

AND THE GLOBAL CITY

MS. HELLER: One of the current hot topics that seems to intersect directly with this is immigration. Our cities are and have always been changing a lot due to immigration. Today, however, it looks like it may become the next "third rail" or wedge issue. How does the Right to the City frame address immigration?

MR. PERERA: There is a theoretical answer and a very practical answer to that question. They go hand in hand in some ways. I think the theoretical answer is to recognize that our cities are now global cities. They operate within the United States in a relationship to the global economy. To understand a city is to then understand its relationship to the global economy.

Take New York, for instance. To really understand the economy and the structure of New York, you need to understand its role in finance and real estate not only in New York but throughout the globe. San Francisco, of course, has an impact on the West Coast, but also in the entire Pacific Rim. It's not just a city that exists within California in the Bay Area. It also plays a particular role in relationship to how the Pacific Rim is emerging. Miami holds almost every bank headquarters in Latin America, and most decisions about investment are happening in cafeterias across the street from those banks on Brickell Avenue in Miami. And it's from that context that investment and economic and policy decisions are being made throughout the world.

The question of immigration needs to be addressed from the context of this global economy. People are migrating, by choice or by desperation, in

relationship to decisions that are being made in global cities. Those decisions are impacting lives throughout the world. So in a sense you can no longer look at a city as a simple municipality; you can't even look at a city as simply being within a country. We have to look at cities in their relationship to the global economy. And that requires us to reimagine the question of citizenship.

In this context, the national citizenship standard doesn't work. Even the present immigration debate is an attempt to make national policy out of something that's ultimately an international situation. Managing what it means to be in a global economy through different types of guest worker programs would demand the development of different gradations of national citizenship. But right now we need to reimagine citizenship on our terms. For instance, using the scale of a city to be able to redefine citizenship holds a ton of potential. What we have been talking about in the Right to the City alliance is a municipal citizenship where we can, practically, open up the possibilities for forms of citizenship and civic engagement that are not just tied to national citizenship.


Photo: Peter G. Svarzbein / WPN

Boston, for example, is trying to move legislation that would give immigrants the right to vote in municipal elections and put them on their actual voting list. In New York, there have been similar efforts. In a number of places, immigrants have the rights to vote in school board elections. And on the one hand, that seems radical and revolutionary—giving immigrants the right to vote. But in fact, it's common sense. If your kids go to school, if you're paying taxes, why wouldn't you be able to vote on who is on the school board? There are so many forms of electoral work that are not national or state level that would be huge openings to start creating avenues for electoral participation and general civic participation. We are constrained by this national immigration debate. But if we actually took on this concept of municipal citizenship, we could break the ice on that entire paradigm and start creating a new definition of civic participation.

MS. HELLER: Given where the citizenship discussion is today, how has the frame helped you in dealing with tensions between people who have had long family histories in this country and people

who have relatively new histories but are potentially competing, for similar job or similar skill level jobs?

MR. PERERA: What the Right to the City frame has done is allowed us to have a common dialogue between those communities. In the story I told you about the housing victory in the African American community, the members there received their Right to the City based on their historic relationship


Photo: Ken Heyman

"This frame can bring together people across race lines, cultural lines, class lines and foster understanding about interconnected fates in the city."

over decades to that land in that community. In a nearby neighborhood, we have another Latino organization, mostly Caribbean and Central-American folks. And their neighborhood is also being gentrified, but they are much more recent arrivals to the city. And they are fighting for rights based on the fact that they're working in the city. The premise is, if I work here and I'm actually helping to build the city, why should I be pushed out of it?

MS. HELLER: What's compelling to me is the idea that this frame can bring together people across race lines, cultural lines, and class lines and foster understanding about interconnected fates in the city.

Photo: Ken Heyman

MR. PERERA: Yes, but we haven't worked it all out. In this case, the migrant workers are basing their right to the city on helping to create the city; and the African American community is basing its right on the historical relationship to the land. Well, those two rights could also be in competition with each other. As Latinos move into the African American community, how does the right to live in the place that you work relate to someone's historical relationship to that area? There are no easy answers.

But the frame has allowed us to actually talk about it in that way, which also helps us have a historical understanding. Why is the African American community there, for example? They migrated for work, from Georgia and Alabama, to build the railroad to transport agriculture to the north. And their original right to that land was because they were there to work, right? And in that process, Native Americans, who originally occupied that land, were displaced. Well, the migrants were pushed from their lands as well, so it provides a frame to have that conversation, to figure out a relationship between these rights, understanding the common roots and what we're up against.

MS. HELLER: And common humanity.

MR. PERERA: And common humanity. I mean, ultimately, the Right to the City frame is trying to urbanize and make very practical the human rights frame. It's taking this general declaration of human rights and making it real to people who live in cities.

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