

# Claiming the Right to the City: A Question of Power

By Gihan Perera

In January 2007, 30 organizations from seven cities got together in Los Angeles and adopted a framework to “urbanize” human rights. The goal is to ground human rights in the real lives and struggles of communities of color in United States cities and to utilize the human rights framework to unite and elevate our organizing.

The “Right to the City” Alliance is informed by a power analysis of what we’re up against in urban spaces, recognizing the role of United States cities in the global economy. Our analysis sees working class communities as central to the fight for human rights in the city while embracing a vision of life and democracy for all city dwellers.

All of the groups that assembled are facing huge pressures of displacement and gentrification of their communities. We explored the ways that neo-liberalism and the privatization of land use have turned our cities over to developers. We discussed how we’re fighting struggles for housing, use of traditional space, and against predatory development. We discovered how putting forward a proactive and simple assertion of our rights made a huge difference in how we understood our ongoing work. And we quickly recognized that so many of the issues we’re fighting for in our cities: housing, transportation, education, LGBT rights to space, and rights of culture, are inextricably interrelated. We just need a common way to talk about it, strategize, and develop our power in common terms. Toward that end, the Right to the City Alliance was initiated so that we can build local power toward a national agenda for our cities. So that, one day, we can build enough power to stand with our brothers and sisters in the global South and demand global justice for humanity.

## Demanding Change

Systems of power do not change unless they are forced to. The question for me in organizing has been

how do we actually translate a moral assertion of rights into a practical demand on power. Effective demands do two things. They weaken the power of existing systems of inequality and strengthen the rights and conditions of those whose rights are at risk.

The difference between a universal assertion of what’s right and a practical demand is that effective demands recognize current power relationships. To be useful, organizing demands must be winnable by our forces and the target of the demands must be capable of conceding and delivering on its promises.

As organizers of poor people, workers, women, immigrants, LGBT people, and formerly colonized and enslaved peoples, one of our most basic understandings is that we organize those who are most directly impacted by oppression to directly confront the powers which deny them of their rights. This is not just a reflection of an organizing method but an indication of a political principle. It’s a question of leadership of the oppressed, of the working class, and people of color in particular. We’re not just all humans. We are people, classes, races, ethnicities, genders with distinct and varied relationships to power. We believe that those whose power and rights are most crushed must be central to leading the fights for their own liberation. The struggle for human rights is then a struggle for them to directly claim their humanity against oppressive systems and institutions.

While the human rights framework’s main tenet of universal humanity is incredibly powerful as a

## Principles of Unity for the Right to the City Alliance

We believe the right to the city is the right for all people to produce the living conditions that meet their needs. This includes:

### **Land for People vs. Land for Speculation**

The right to land and housing that is free from market speculation and that serves the interests of community building, sustainable economies, and cultural and political space.

### **Land Ownership**

The right to permanent public ownership of urban territories for public use.

### **Economic Justice**

The right of working class communities of color, women, queer and transgender people to an economy that serves their interests.

### **Indigenous Justice**

The right of First Nation indigenous people to their ancestral lands that have historical or spiritual significance, regardless of state borders and urban or rural settings.

### **Environmental Justice**

The right to sustainable and healthy neighborhoods and workplaces, healing, quality health care, and reparations for the legacy of toxic abuses such as brownfields, cancer clusters, and superfund sites.

### **Freedom from Police and State Harassment**

The right to safe neighborhoods and protection from police, immigration, and vigilante repression.

### **Immigrant Justice**

The right of equal access to housing, employment, and public services regardless of race, ethnicity, and immigration status and without threat of deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement or employers.

### **Services and Community Institutions**

The right of working class communities of color to transportation, infrastructure, and services that reflect and support their cultural and social integrity.

### **Democracy and Participation**

The right of community control and decision making over the planning and governance of the cities where we live and work, with full transparency and accountability, including the right to public information without interrogation.

### **Reparations**

The right of working class communities of color to economic reciprocity and restoration from all local, national, and transnational institutions that have exploited or displaced the local economy.

### **Internationalism**

The right to support and build solidarity between cities across national boundaries, without state intervention.

### **Rural Justice**

The right of rural people to economically healthy and stable communities that are protected from environmental degradation and economic pressures that force migration to urban areas. ■

uniting force across nation states, class, and race, it must be grounded in a theory of power and social change to be effective. Even if we look back at Malcolm X's strategy of utilizing human rights to be able to get around the domination of the United States, successful execution is ultimately tied to the potential power of countries in the Third World and others to exert the power of the United Nations in relation to the power of the United States.

Malcolm spoke at a time when Third World liberation struggles were growing in power and the possibilities of overturning white supremacy and colonization were inspirational and almost definite. In the decades since Malcolm's words, those movements have subsided and the United States has become the sole global superpower. The United Nations and other international bodies have lost their influence and power. The United States not only has veto

power, it can completely sidestep, overstep, or step on the United Nations with its demands and generally win. The point here is that both internationally, nationally, and locally, the tool is only as strong as the power that is behind it.

Ironically, with the historic slide of progressive power the significance of human rights grows. Its strength now is as a tool for power building. For both Malcolm and the Right to the City Alliance, the importance of human rights is as a vision.

Malcolm's vision of human rights challenged the legitimacy of the United States government as the arbiter of justice. In the context of a fractured political left, and the dearth of progressive mass movements the human rights frame provides possibilities of putting forward bold, radical alternatives while appealing broadly to a common interest in the future of humanity. ■

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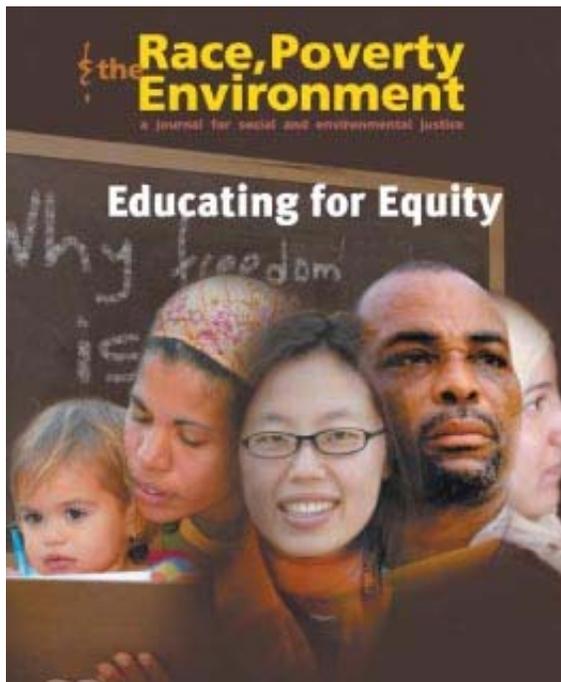
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