

Gentrifying Downtown Miami

By Tony Roshan Samara and Grace Chang

Manny Diaz has a vision, and he's made no secret of it. As the mayor of Miami, Diaz wants to cement the city's position as an economic, political, and cultural hub for the Americas and pursue the holy grail of mayors everywhere: world city status. Diaz, perhaps unlike other mayors though, is well positioned for this quest. He was recently elected head of the United States Conference of Mayors and hosted this year's Super Bowl, one of those big-ticket events that many aspiring world cities in the United States fall over each other to attract.

However, a deeper look at Miami reveals that as politicians and big business run after "world city" status, they attack poor communities of color. They refuse to build new homes for the poor, or they nab major events like the Super Bowl but never direct the money to those who actually need it. "There's no discussion of how these huge opportunities benefit communities," said Denise Perry of Power U, a Miami grassroots organization. "So, people might get an extra eight hours of work selling bottled water on the street corner, but there's nothing for us in the end."

In January 2007, some 30 community-based groups banded together at a conference in Los Angeles to form an alliance called Right to the City, whose leaders want to link the gentrification happening in Miami to that in Detroit, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and abroad. According to alliance members, Americans are facing a new urban politics, wherein the word "redevelopment" has come to mean little more than tailoring every aspect of city life for corporations and affluent consumers. Those who advocate for the "right to the city" argue that simple neglect of poor communities no longer suffices under this new urban politics. Instead, the push is to remove the poor entirely from the newly gilded downtowns. Countering this will require thinking about the larger rights that people have to their cities. (See "Claiming the Right to the City," on page 12 of this issue.)

Overtown Faces Gentrification

Nowhere in Miami is the new urban politics more evident than in Overtown, a historic and predominantly Black community located adjacent to downtown. More than 50 percent of its residents live in poverty. Median family income is just over \$14,000 a year, and approximately 90 percent of residents are renters. This marks a dramatic shift from less than 50 years ago, when many Black residents owned businesses and homes. The decline began in the early 1960s, when major highways were built through the central business district of Overtown. More than 10,000 people were removed from the area, mirroring the abandonment of many urban areas across the country by the federal government, industry, and working- and middle-class whites.

Long neglected, the Overtown neighborhood has in recent years become an area of interest to the city and to developers. The "revitalization" of Miami has made Overtown suddenly valuable again, but the proximity of a poor, Black neighborhood to downtown stands as a glaring obstacle to urban renewal. This combination of "bad" people and good land could mean only one thing in the new Miami: the neighborhood had to be redeveloped.

In Overtown, as in most low-income communities of color, the issue of housing is paramount. Without affordable places to live, other pressing concerns like jobs and education become irrelevant. Predictably,



housing and land are shaping up as the central conflict points in the struggle over Miami.

In 2007, Power U confronted the city bureaucracy about its negligence on the housing question. Miami has one of the highest levels of vacant public housing in the nation yet has done little to fill these vacancies, suggesting that the city would rather allow the empty units to fall into disrepair, condemn them and then “redevelop” them. It is part of what might be called a slow “scorched earth” removal policy. In response, the grassroots Miami Workers Center led a “Fill the Vacancies” campaign that began in 2004. In February 2007, as part of that campaign, Power U and another group, Take Back the Land, seized vacant public housing units and moved in two families. “There are over 41,000 people on Miami-Dade’s housing assistance wait list,” said Bernadette Armand, an organizer with Power U. “Meanwhile, the Board of County Commissioners is allowing many of these public housing units to remain vacant for five years or more. They do not want to address or solve this gentrification and housing crisis.”

Police arrived and activists were arrested, but a message had been sent to city officials, developers, and investors: people would defend their right to the land.

Right to the City

A number of progressive academics and grassroots social movements are looking for ways to understand and respond to the changes in many cities around the

world and their devastating effects on poor communities. While there is no consensus on a definition of “Right to the City,” it is clear that cities are rapidly becoming a central battleground in the new world order. As urban scholars have documented, major cities have become global command centers for moving money across borders. The decline in urban manufacturing in the United States and Europe has left many cities with thousands of people who have no jobs or entry into the new economies but who do live on valuable city land. The implications for poor people of color are clear: where they were once segregated in abandoned downtowns while Whites fled to the suburbs, now they are expected to disperse to the peripheries as cities are taken back. Increasingly, their presence in the city in any capacity other than as cheap labor is unwelcome—a blight on the landscape of the new “entertainment” city. Members of the Right to the City Alliance hope that this framework will help poor people draw connections between what they experience on a daily basis and what happens in other communities. And, understanding that gentrification is a large-scale, global problem might just be the way for people to create a bigger vision for what they want to change.

“We are frustrated with just pushing for jobs and a small percentage of housing,” said Sara Mersha, the executive director of Direct Action for Rights and Equality in Providence, Rhode Island. A right to the city analysis, she observed, puts the focus on the colo-

Photo:

Community organizations and public housing residents from across the nation, along with Miami Workers Center and Power U Center for Social Change, storm the Housing Agency of New Orleans (HANO) demanding the right of return for New Orleans residents. August 31, 2007.

Courtesy of: <http://neworleans.indymedia.org/news/2007/09/10953.php>

nization of entire communities and highlights the national and international dimensions of gentrification. This means linking the increase in rental and ownership costs, the development of luxury condos and the threatened displacement of Black, Cambodian, Puerto Rican, and other oppressed communities of color in Providence to the commodification of land and real estate speculation that are ravaging metro regions across much of the globe.

Failing to fill public housing is one major strategy to disperse poor communities. Another, familiar to urban residents across the country, is to actively support, politically and financially, the development of unaffordable housing, particularly the increasingly ubiquitous luxury condominium. In Overtown, the community is faced with a politically connected developer, the Crosswinds Communities, a privately held residential housing and development company based outside of Detroit, Michigan.

Crosswinds proposes to build luxury homes on publicly owned land in Overtown that has been vacant for 20 years, which it gained access to in an uncompetitive, no-bid process. The project is still in its early stages, and Power U, along with its allies, has been successful in delaying construction for two years. In fact, Power U chose to focus on this particular project because they see it as a harbinger of development, a preview of the vision that city elites have for their community.

Minimum yearly income to qualify for a home in the Crosswinds development is \$40,000, in a community where the median family income is \$14,000. According to a study done by researchers Marcos Feldman and Jen Wolfe-Borum at Florida International University, the median family income in Overtown implies that monthly housing costs over \$350 would be out of the reach of most residents. Currently, the market rate for a one-bedroom apartment in Miami-Dade County is \$775, and the vast majority of Crosswinds units would be priced at market rates. Local residents argue that the Crosswinds project could cause more than 6,000 residents to be displaced and a historic cultural center of Miami to be lost.

Detroit and Miami Residents Fight Crosswinds

The campaign to mobilize the community against the Crosswinds project demonstrates some of the ways that the Right to the City framework can be used. “We went to Detroit, where Crosswinds has done the exact same thing to a Black community and completely flattened that neighborhood,” said Perry, the organizer with Power U. “Everyone’s been displaced, and they’re building luxury condominiums. In Detroit, it happened as they were building the new stadium.”

Having learned of this earlier struggle in Detroit, Power U set out to prevent a repeat in Overtown. “We interviewed the people in Detroit and brought them to Miami. So, when there was a public hearing, they were able to speak out, based on real experience that they had with the same developer there.”

Perry and her group used the Right to the City idea to emphasize that this was not just a local fight. “We could have carried on the Crosswinds campaign as only being mad at our local commissioner and only making our local commissioner the target, but then we’re missing the entire picture. Neoliberalism, corporations... all of those pieces would be missing if we only focused on the commissioner,” Perry said. “When our members talk about Crosswinds they also look around the city of Miami at the increase in poverty, the increase in homelessness. As we help people understand it more, they can name it even more clearly, but they already understand it. It’s just about sharing theory and language amongst organizations, which will help build a broader-scale movement.”

It is exactly this combination of popular education, analysis, and mobilization that the organizers of the Right to the City Alliance envision will galvanize a national movement. And while developers and their friends in city government try to paint these community efforts as anti-development, longtime Overtown resident and Power U member Howard Watts counters such attempts to seize the public relations high ground. Speaking to the Miami Sun Post, Watts asserted: “They say we don’t want development, which is false. We want development, but development for us.” ■

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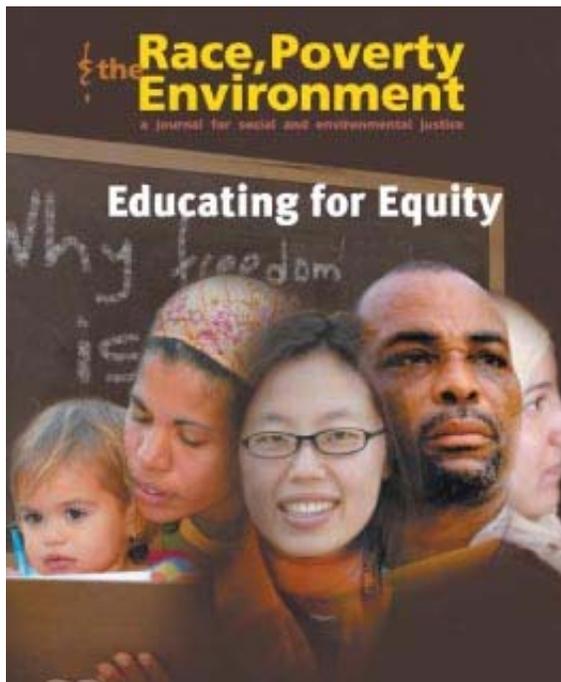
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