

From the Camps to the Neighborhoods

A Conversation with Movement Generation

Interview by Ellen Choy

The transformation of the Occupy moment into power for movements that can actually challenge entrenched economic interests will be a complex process. Movement Generation activists recently gathered to reflect on what it will take to make this happen. For the full interview visit urbanhabitat.org/rpe/radio

Ellen Choy: Why are you committed to the Occupy movement?

Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan: We think Occupy's critical because we believe that mass movements are a vital ingredient to shifting the public debate and moving us closer to transforming the economy and the political system. This is not just about making demands on the state, but also about reclaiming our right to meet our own needs directly, in community—to restore our resilience, our ability to support one another, to look after each other, to have the means to do that collectively. I think Occupy is presenting a really important model for how people can work together to set priorities and make decisions about how to best meet each others' needs in a way that's responsive and responsible to the place where they live.

Carla Perez: Movement Generation is trying to flesh out and articulate a concept around an organizing model. This model organizes people around the direct decision-making process and physical work in meeting a need at hand. Whether it's needing to grow our own food because of the discriminatory land-use processes that haven't allowed for fresh produce in our neighborhood (at least, not without highly gentrifying our historically black, Latino, working class, diverse community); or putting people back in their homes by repairing them and making them accessible; or building our own schools. And doing it in a way that forces a right-to-govern question. You know there's some legal or other kind of barrier that you're going to hit up against. They're going to say, "You can't use tax money to do that!" Or, "You're exceeding the amount of food that's



permissible on a lot of this size in an area that's zoned in this way!" That gives us the opportunity to say, "Who are you to say that we can't do this when you have made political decisions that take these essential resources out of our community?"

Resilience-based organizing. That's what Occupy is doing, too. It's learning how to self-govern and self-manage and bring people together to get directly involved in that process at multiple levels.

Gopal Dayaneni: We don't think that a movement is going to emerge solely out of the long, hard slogging organizing of 501(c)3 organizations. It's going to need those sparks and those pushes of mass momentum. All of those things need to be in relationship to each other. And we do not have time to miss opportunities. It is okay for us to jump onto an opportunity like Occupy to try and create a psychic break with the system, to spark a shift away from the dominant culture. It's okay for us to try that and to be unsuccessful. But it's not okay for us to miss the boat. Because for us to be committed to the long haul, something has to change very soon, or the long haul will not be pleasant. Communities in Oakland will have a much harder fight if things don't change really quickly, very soon. It's going to be a

hard road regardless, but we have the opportunity to set up transformations in our relationships to each other that will make it better. That, for us, is another reason why the movement can't be missed.

Choy: The reclamation of land and housing has become a pinnacle battleground for Occupy. Interestingly enough, this directly overlaps with Movement Generation's commitment to a strategy where land reclamation is central. How did land and housing become an Occupy fight? And why is this critical?

Mascarenhas-Swan: One is the obvious plight of many of our families after this [real estate] bubble burst. The financial sector had duped a lot of families of color and working class people into deep debt based on this bubble and then ended up putting folks out on the street—foreclosing on family homes. That's obviously one way the land reclamation [issue] has come to bear. People recognize that housing and access to land is a basic human right. No one should be out on the street at any time. People need shelter; and not only shelter, but a stable and safe place to call home. When so many millions have had their families impacted by this foreclosure crisis—it's a clear call to reclaim what we believe is a basic right.

Dayaneni: This idea that we need to fundamentally change the tenure relationship to land and housing in this country, to take soil out of the market, to restore the commons—all of these ideas share a common history. What's interesting for us right now is that there is an opportunity to take the tactic of claiming space and connecting it with real political projects that can transform people's relationship to place. One of the ways that we think about the ongoing and ever-escalating food crisis in the City of Oakland is: "What huge plots of land can we take to do urban agriculture?" That's important, but from our perspective, it's almost more important to have small lots that half-a-dozen or dozen families around a neighborhood can share control of and grow food on, together. Not because it will meet all of their needs, but because it changes their relationship to the community, to the place. That's where the transformative work happens.

The idea of people actually laboring in their own interests, as a form of organizing, is what's transforma-



tive, instead of door-knocking to convince people that they should work together to take a plot of land where they can have a community garden. The idea of the action as an organizing opportunity in and of itself that the people model, join in, and can have control of—that's what ultimately butts up against the rules. The rules of the city or the rules of the developer. And as we all know, the rules are made by the rulers. Until we are the rulers, the rules don't serve us, they serve the rulers. So, the idea of us actually doing the work and using the actions to organize people is an exciting possibility.

Mateo Nube: The part that connects to Movement Generation's interpretation of both our societal crisis and the solution to it, is that our profit-based, pollution-based economy sees land as a commodity. The next step to seeing land as a commodity is to disrespect land and disrespect everything that depends on that land—all species and ecosystems. That's a mismanagement of [our] home. Many members of our species have forgotten what it means to take good care of our home and take good care of each other. So then, land reclamation becomes an expression of: "We, the people who live in this neighborhood," or "We, who've been here for a long time, are the best keepers of this place." We need to re-learn what being keepers of a place is and to have ownership over that keeping. Land reclamation, I think, is a really logical, healthy, proactive, generative way of calling the question: Will big corporations and capitalists determine how we manage where we live? Or will those of us who live here, or who deserve to live here, or have historically lived here, be the ones to manage that space and make the decisions. ■

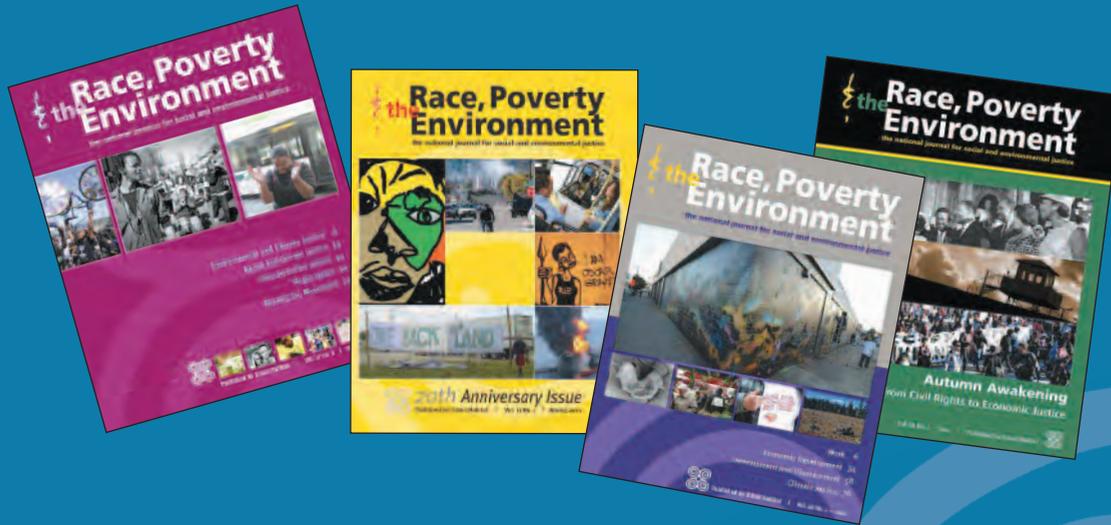
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Michelle Mascarenhas-Swan, Carla Perez, Mateo Nube, and Ellen Choy are members of Movement Generation. Ellen Choy is also a producer on KPFA radio's Apex Express.

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