

EDITORIAL

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY: THE ENTITLED AND THE EXCLUDED

By Alessandro Busà

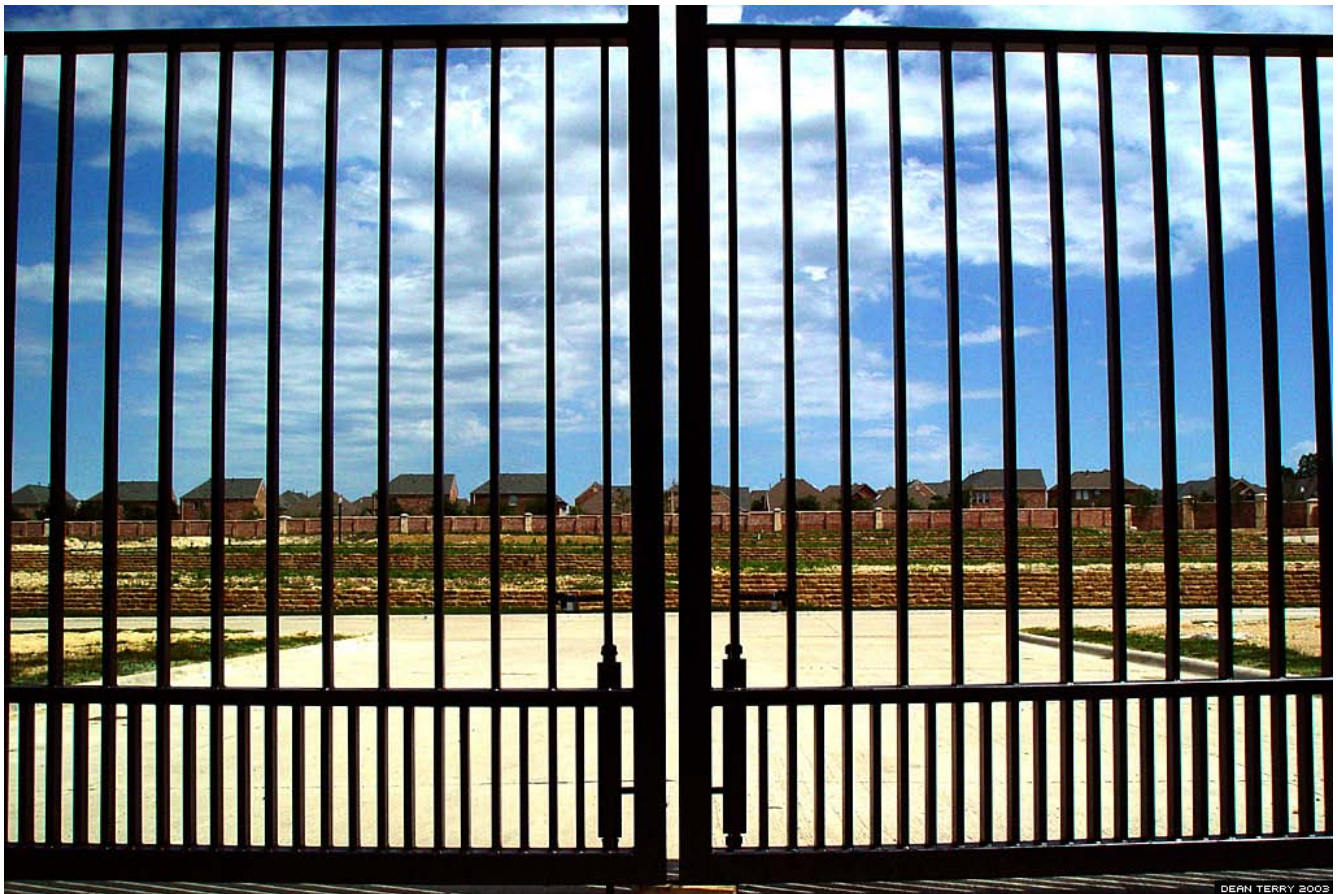


PHOTO COVER: Gated Community in Plano, Texas (Photo by Dean Terry)

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By Alessandro Busà*

Why an issue on “the right to the city”?

Over 40 years after Henry Lefebvre’s *Le Droit à la Ville* (“The Right to the City”, 1968) was conceived, the notion of a “renewed right to urban life”¹, or in other words “a right to an equitable usufruct of cities within the principles of sustainability, democracy, equity, and social justice”² has hardly ever seemed as out of reach as it does today.

The ongoing unfolding of the global recession, whose consequences have been devastating particularly to disadvantaged communities worldwide, is once again highlighting the underlying contradictions and the systemic dysfunctionality of dominant models of profit-driven urbanization. In the U.S., the recession has spurred a widening gap between rich and poor³, while a wave of foreclosures has sent thousands of once-middle class households in the streets, in homeless shelters, or in “tent cities”, in the midst of an ocean of vacant properties (see Kathy Sanborn, in this issue).

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¹ Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 1996: 158. Blackwell, Malden, MA

² Excerpt from the “World Charter for The Right to the City”, 2004-2005 (see pdf for free download in this issue)

³ U.S. Census Bureau, October 1st 2009

Yet again, the most dramatic human costs of this crisis are to be seen among the poor across the developing world: the World Bank has estimated that up to 90 million extra people world-wide have fallen into extreme poverty (less than US \$1.25 per day) in 2009 as a result of the global economic slowdown⁴. This represents a reversal in the global extreme poverty reduction trend since 2005, with the global number of extreme poor rising to over 1.2 billion people only this year.

Within this discouraging framework, the massive bail-outs of the financial sector, only partially offset by often sporadic and meager government interventions for those hardest hit by the crisis, have been spreading a wave of outrage around the world - an indignation shared by radical activists and moderate commentators alike.

The current crisis is not only a crisis of trust towards the financial and political institutions, but also towards the system on which they are grounded. The crisis should call into question the ideological assumptions which have underpinned global economic policies over the last decades, such as deregulation, profit-driven urbanization, an overall dominance of market rules in all areas of life and an overemphasis on unsustainable forms of growth. And yet, as Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer (2009) maintain: "Paradoxically, the conflicts, failures, instabilities and crisis tendencies associated with capitalist urbanization have led not to its dissolution or transcendence, but to its continual reinvention through a dynamic process of 'implosion-explosion' (Lefebvre, 2003) and 'creative destruction' (Harvey, 1989). Consequently, despite its destructive, destabilizing social and environmental consequences, capital's relentless drive to enhance profitability has long played, and continues to play, a powerful role in producing and transforming urban socio-spatial configurations."

CITIES AND THE CRISIS

It was the very process of capitalist urbanization, assisted in its constant search for markets by a profusion of all sorts of complex, risky financial instruments, that has been mainly responsible for the current crisis, as many commentators have been contending (see David Harvey⁵ and Neil Smith⁶ in this issue).

According to Neil Smith⁷:

"The whole experience coming out of the Keynesian post second world war, the whole neoliberal moment that supplanted Keynesianism has been one in which city building has been one of the most central means of capital accumulation. Real estate is about the construction of

⁴ World Bank, *Global Monitoring Report 2009: A Development Emergency*

⁵ "The Urban Roots of the Fiscal Crisis", lecture by David Harvey at Harvard University Graduate School of Design, April 16th, 2009.

⁶ "The present Crisis is a Crisis of City Building, keynote lecture by Neil Smith at the "The Neoliberal Frontline" Conference, Community Center Mosor, Zagreb, December 4th, 2008.

⁷ Ibidem

surplus value in the landscape [...] It is possible to see the present crisis as an urban-centered crisis of city building, a crisis of the very urbanism that Lefebvre thought, was taking over from industrialization [as a means of capital accumulation].”

According to David Harvey⁸, the current crisis is the latest in a long list of crises whose epicenter has been the property market:

“It’s important to remember that we’ve had many financial crises over these last thirty years, and many of those crises have been related to urbanization, and have been about property. We had the Savings and Loans crisis in 1987-89, when somewhere around 600 or 800 banks or financial institutions were declared bankrupt, and this was a crisis tied very much to commercial property. In 1992 the Swedish banking system went bankrupt over excessive property development. In 1989 the Japanese economy crashed around land market prices.”

In the “Urban Revolution” (1970), Lefebvre suggested that the phenomenon of urbanization has taken over from industrialization as a means of capital accumulation: rather than urbanization being a physical incarnation of capitalism, the process of urbanization creates in itself the conditions for the circulation of capital.

Advanced capitalist cities play a pivotal role as the stages of production, circulation and consumption of commodities, and their evolving patterns of socio-spatial organization are continually reorganized to create new outlets for capital (Harvey, 1989, 2008). To ensure this ability, specific interest groups strive to reach a position of overpowering influence in the “production of space” (Lefebvre, 1974). In the context of capitalist urbanization, the social production of space has therefore a tendency to be commanded by hegemonic groups as a tool to an unfettered production of new outlets for capital accumulation.

“City producers”⁹ globally, from New York to Mumbai, from Johannesburg to Sao Paulo, are investing in the production of space and services targeted to an international, volatile, affluent urban class, while cutting public investments on infrastructures and social provisions. Advanced capitalist cities engage in bidding wars with each other in a struggle to attract corporate capital, leveraging tax incentives and other public subsidies as weapons and enticements. David Harvey (2008) also shows how private spaces of consumption and the reduction of citizens to consumers are central to capitalist urbanization, in that they facilitate the absorption of surplus value - he calls this phenomenon “surplus capital absorption” through city planning. It is an end-game scenario in which cities and neighborhoods in effect cannibalistically consume themselves in bidding wars to satisfy an often ungrateful corporate interest, attracting more and more of the same, while the poorest and

⁸ David Harvey’s remarks at the opening plenary of “The City from Below Conference”. Baltimore, April 18, 2009.

⁹ “City Producers, City Consumers and the Representation of the City in Bloomberg’s New York”, lecture by Alessandro Busà at the Annual Meeting of the Association of American Geographers (AAG). Las Vegas (Nevada), March 22 th -27th, 2009.

undesirables are pushed further out. For Brenner, Marcuse and Mayer (2009) “Contemporary urban transformations textured by global capitalism are leading to the uneven production of space, unsustainable urbanization, inequalities of city-building and dwelling, and the differential rights to the city”.

Evidences of such divisive processes of urban restructuring are all around us, in the clearance of slums in Mumbai to make room for new luxury housing (see Matt Birkinshaw and Victoria Harris, in this issue), as well as in the unequal response to disasters granted to the residents of New York and New Orleans (see Peter Marcuse, in this issue); in the development of enclosed wealth enclaves (see Peer Smets and Aliye Ahu Gülümser, Tüzin Baycan Levent, in this issue), as much as in the production of “environmentally sustainable” citadels at the cost of evictions of thousands of peasants in China (see Peter Sigrist, in this issue).

An over three-decades-long and still ongoing process of economic restructuring inspired by the ideology of an unrestrained market dominance on all aspect of economic, social and cultural life, and politically set forth through the tightening of welfare provisions and the privileging of corporative interest, is leading all too often to the marginalization, exclusion, displacement, disempowerment or in certain countries, the outright political oppression of specific social strata at the benefit of others. The promises of an increasingly generalized wealth through the trickle-down effects of globalization have shown their underlying contradictions, while in many cases, the unaccountability of financial institutions and corporations whose interests are deeply embedded in local and state governments, and the obedient passivity of the latter, seem to have mined any real effectiveness of citizen action and collective engagement in urban issues, let alone the belief in a progressive and courageous political turn.

The American election of Barack Obama has set an encouraging example, showing that parliamentary-democratic decisions still allow people to have a say in the political agenda. However, it also seems to be showing that consolidated power structures are seemingly immune to change, and that the dominance of corporate interests in the political agenda can be challenged only up to a point. “When the centers of economic power remain in the hands of multinational corporations and unaccountable financial institutions, elections may have only a limited impact on the actual operations of global capitalism” (Brenner, Marcuse, Mayer, 2009).

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY TODAY

Given this framework, a right to “equitable human settlements [...] in which all people, without discrimination of any kind as to race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or social status, have equal access to housing, infrastructure, health

services, adequate food and water, education and open spaces”¹⁰, has hardly ever seemed as unapproachable as it does today. This notwithstanding, in the latest years a revival of interest in Henri Lefebvre’s ideas on “the right to the city” has propagated among scholars and activists alike, as a way to counteract market-driven urbanism and commit to values of human dignity and human rights for all.

The writings of Lefebvre had gained momentum in France and the world in relation to the social movements of '68. In western countries, the late Sixties were “the golden age” of industrialization, an era of collective social reproduction favored by the Keynesian system of social provisions, but also a time when civil rights movements worldwide vehemently emerged to confront the contradictions of the capitalist system.

Lefebvre believed: "The right to the city cannot be conceived of as a simple visiting right or as a return to traditional cities. It can only be formulated as a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*." (1968). Decades later, David Harvey would enrich this vision by claiming that the right to the city is “not merely a right to access what already exists, but a right to change it after our heart’s desire”:

If [Robert] Park is correct, that in making the city we are re-making ourselves, in making the city we are re-making ourselves, then the question of the right to the city cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be, what kinds of social relations we seek, what relations to nature we cherish, what style of life we desire, what aesthetic values we hold. The right to the city is, therefore, far more than a right of individual access to the resources that the city embodies: it is a right to change the city more after our heart’s desire. It is, moreover, a collective rather than an individual right since changing the city inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power over the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake ourselves and our cities is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.” (David Harvey, 2008)

That is, a right not only to inhabit urban spaces, but also to participate in a city as an ongoing work of creation, production, and negotiation. The right to the city therefore should start with the reclaiming of spaces of active citizenship, of political participation and of public discussion (see Lois Ascher, in this Issue) at the local level.

In the political practice, the “Right to the City” seeks to promote equal access to the potential benefits of the city for all urban dwellers, and to encourage the democratic participation of all urban dwellers in decision-making processes, notably on the municipal level, so that urban inhabitants may fully realize their fundamental rights and liberties. The right to the city thus fundamentally challenges

¹⁰ Excerpts of “The Habitat Agenda Goals and Principles, Commitments and the Global Plan of Action”, 2003

existing power relations and the production of urban space under the framework of capital-driven urbanization.

Yet, if we look around us, this is a time when the absolute majority of urban dwellers worldwide is deeply disenfranchised of any right whatsoever to influence public decisions through democratic and proactive participation. Indeed, of the most disturbing problems according to Lefebvre (1970) is the “extraordinary passivity of the people most directly involved” in the urban question - the users of urban space. For David Harvey (2008), the dramatic reality of the urban condition is that “a selected few do the imagining and designing”.

“One critical project is to develop new notions of citizenship that extend the limits of politics and expand the decision-making control of citizens” (Mark Purcell, 2003). In other words, the solution lays in radically challenging the current framework to allow for an active citizenry through democratic participation in public decisions.

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY IN PRACTICE

The notion of "the right to the city" has become an universal keyword which links the most diverse social movements and connects their struggles for access to space and decisional power in cities and towns worldwide. Some of these movements are based on specific identities (such as ethnicity, class, sexuality, gender, age, disability, homelessness, among other), others on specific themes of action (such as affordable housing, public space, access to natural resources, services and infrastructures, preservation, urban citizenship, globalization, urban enfranchisement, social and environmental justice).

The “right to the city” has been codified in general programs, and at times implemented in specific urban policies at the local scale, resulting in world charters, global coalitions of cities and municipal statutes, as well as in the development of numerous projects, manifestos, conferences and seminars. Parallels can be drawn between the City Statute of Brazil, the “right to housing” pioneered by the Habitat International Coalition, and the World Charter on the Right to the City, elaborated at the Social Forum of the Americas (Quito, Ecuador – July 2004) and the World Urban Forum (Barcelona, Spain – September 2004). Their aim is to advance the implementation of the “Right to the City” ideals into specific urban policies.

The following is a partial catalog of programs and institutions which reflect, either explicitly or implicitly, the paradigms of the “Right to the City”. Porto Alegre has been the forerunner of a “participatory municipal budget program” initiated in the 1980s, and now implemented in over 70 cities in Brazil. The Right To The City Alliance, in the U.S., is an advocacy group representing a widespread network of local community organizations, which emerged in 2007 as a call to halt the

displacement of low-income people in districts undergoing gentrification and development pressure, and includes now over forty member organizations and resource allies in seven states and more than a dozen local jurisdictions. Among its actions are the NOLA, a program of peer support and technical assistance to New Orleans housing organizations, and programs aimed at developing a national agenda for public and subsidized housing in the United States. UN-HABITAT's Global Campaign on Urban Governance offers a conceptual framework of principles of participatory urban governance and is advancing a set of policy measures focusing on issues such as civic participation in decision-making, transparency in local governance, and participatory budgeting. It organizes the bi-annual World Urban Forum, and a range of programs and initiatives on urban poverty, environmental and social sustainability, gender policy, housing policy, housing rights. UN-HABITAT and UNESCO work closely in promoting the holistic notion of the "Right to the City" at the international level, and in supporting inclusive forms of urban governance. UNESCO is advancing an international network of social and nongovernmental organizations, academic and professional groups to promote policies in support of the "Right to the City" and its adoption as a new collective human right.

As grassroots, bottom-up claims are being explored at an institutional level, notions of active citizenship and community participation are gaining momentum, visibility and strength. However, whether the institutionalization of these claims may fall short on explicitly addressing the structural change implicit in the concept – the claim to challenge existing power relations under the framework of capital-driven urbanization - is subject of debate.

THE CITY AS AN *OEUVRE* AND THE POSSIBLE CITY

The first paragraph of the "World Charter for the right to the city" reads:

*"Cities are potentially territories with plenty of economical, environmental, political, and cultural diversity and wealth. Cities are far from offering equal conditions and opportunities to its inhabitants. The majority of the urban population is prevented from or limited to fulfilling their elementary needs because of their economic, social, cultural, ethnic, gender, and age. This situation leads us to the challenge of building a sustainable model of society and urban life, which would be based on the principles of solidarity, freedom, equity, dignity and social justice."*¹¹

Lefebvre (1996) also defined the city as: "an *oeuvre*, closer to a work of art than to a simple material product. If there is production of the city, and social relations in the city, it is a production and reproduction of human beings by human beings, rather than a production of objects. The city has a

¹¹ Excerpt from the "World Charter for The Right to the City", 2004-2005 (see pdf for free download in this issue)

history; it is the work of a history, that is, of clearly defined people and groups who establish this *oeuvre*, in historical conditions."

Max Weber¹² wrote "City air makes one free". In reality, cities have never been places of harmony and freedom for all. Struggles over the relations of power are what cities have been about since the beginning of history. And today, the very cities we call advanced, those that are supposed to embody the progress of human civilization, are the theatres of profound inequalities and divisions - the glittering stages of consumption and commodification on the foreground of the darkest corners of disempowerment and despair.

And yet, through history these very cities have been the physical contexts in which radical changes have been envisioned and forwarded: "Capitalist cities are not only sites for strategies of capital accumulation; they are also arenas in which the conflicts and contradictions associated with historically and geographically specific accumulation strategies are expressed and fought out. As such, capitalist cities have long served as spaces for envisioning, and indeed mobilizing towards, alternatives to capitalism itself, its associated process of profit-driven urbanization and its relentless commodification and re-commodification of urban spaces." (Brenner, Marcuse, Mayer, 2009).

And we need to believe in a change. "The city to which the "right to the city" slogan refers is clearly not the present city; it is the desired city, the better society, the alternative to the present that the slogan "Another World is Possible" refers to. If the city is the expression of class relationships, as Manuel Castells has appropriately said, then the right that is in question is the right to change existing class relationships, the right to a city of equality, of justice, or multi-dimensional humanity, David Harvey's "city of heart's desire" (Peter Marcuse¹³).

In this "desired city", space should be produced and re-produced through an active participation rather than passively experienced or consumed. The process of city growth should be re-defined as a process of negotiation, confrontation and interaction between a wealth of different actors who have an equal say.

David Harvey once asked: "Can we build an urban utopia?" He offered to reverse the juridical construction of individual rights to private property, to individual profit, equality of opportunity in the market and freedom of consumption choice, in favor of a different array of rights, those of human dignity and social equality. He concluded: "We cannot do without utopian plans and ideals of justice. They are indispensable for motivation and for action. Alternative ideas coupled with outrage at injustice have long animated the quest for social change [...] If our urban world has been imagined

¹² "Die Stadtluft macht frei" in Max Weber, "The City" (New York: Free Press, 1956)

¹³ Peter Marcuse, "What Right to What City?", working paper, 2008

and made, then it can be reimagined and remade. The inalienable right to the city is worth fighting for.”¹⁴

IN THIS ISSUE

This special issue of “The Urban Reinventors” has been elaborated in a long time lapse, with the help and the original contributions of a wealth of excellent scholars and social activists, professional journalists and amateur writers, established artists and homeless poets, in a sort of collective writing experiment. Once again, we aim to keep the urban debate alive through a cross-sectional dialogue involving policy makers, the academia, activists and social movements. We have tried our best to make this issue as enjoyable, inspiring and understandable to the widest audience possible as we could.

Several papers in this issue engage with the divisions and inequalities propelled by processes of neoliberal socio-spatial restructuring at the global scale. These span from critical commentaries on the link between social justice and divisions of class ([Peter Marcuse](#)), to accounts on the global scale of *revanchism* and on the urban roots of the global financial crisis ([Neil Smith](#)). Other papers explore the challenges associated with Lefebvre's concept of the “right to the city” and its practical implementation. These range from theoretical reflections on the challenges to overcome the divisive imperatives of capitalist urbanization ([Tom Angotti](#)), through reflections on the meaning of public citizenship ([Anna Plyushteva](#)), to accounts on the potential of public space as a theater for civic engagement ([Lois Ascher](#)).

In addition, this issue hopes to give a partial answer to the title question (In what way does capitalist urbanization grant differential rights to the city? Who is entitled, and who is excluded from such right?) with investigative contributions focusing on the divisive tendency of dominant models of capitalist urbanization on the local scale: from critical accounts of “urban sustainability” models of development in China at the cost of mass-displacement of peasant villages ([Peter Sigrist](#)), through reflections on the socio-cultural impacts of the production of wealth enclaves and gated citadels on urban governance ([Peer Smets](#)), to detailed analysis of the ongoing development of vertical gated communities in Turkey ([Aliye Ahu Gülümser, Tüzin Baycan Levent](#)).

Other authors engage with issues of dispossession, marginalization or exclusion, with investigations on patterns of urban restructuring in the global South - from the slums of Mumbai ([Matt Birkinshaw and Victoria Harris](#)) to the favelas of Belo Horizonte ([Gustavo Rivera](#)) - and in the North, with a reportage from Californian “tent cities” ([Kathy Sanborn](#)) and a paper on the struggles of German

¹⁴ David Harvey, “Can we build an Urban Utopia?”, online onTimes Higher Education, 14 February 2003

trailer parks inhabitants ([Manuel Lutz](#), forthcoming in this issue). [Margit Mayer](#) engages with the reorientation of welfare policies targeting social exclusion in Germany, while [Kate Shaw](#) reports on successful examples of (midly) sustainable gentrification in Australia.

MORE, IN THIS ISSUE

The [Urban Stories](#) section introduces three underground novelists and their stories of marginalization and dispossession. In ["Tales of a Little Ghetto Girl"](#), Kathy Henry, a single mother of three children, writes about her experiences of being black, female and poor in the ghettos of Chicago. In ["Homeless for the Holidays"](#), a bizarre Edgar Swamp tells us the story of a Christmas of his own choice as a homeless, while in ["The Green Fields of America"](#), D.L. Lewis writes about "the depths of human dignity when confronted with life's random inequities". Finally, in the short poem ["126th Street and me"](#), Rafaela Santos describes her love for Harlem, the place she calls home, and the fears associated with its sweeping gentrification.

The [Gallery](#) section explores different facets of the contemporary urban condition – portraying, through visual fragments, broader issues of great relevance in urban research, such as the increasing social polarization and spatial segregation within cities and regions, the rise of enclaves for the wealthy and ghettos for the poor, the gentrification and the upgrading of formerly low-income areas in booming downtowns, the increasing disenfranchisement of the poor and the marginal in global cities.

["The Right to The City: The Entitled and the Excluded"](#) is the first experiment of collective gallery on "The Urban Reinventors". It features works of professional and amateur photographers, artists and reporters from different backgrounds and walks of life, all of whom have used photography as a medium to portray through images - in different ways and through different standpoints - the conditions of contemporary urban living. From the European downtowns to the South American slums, from the gated communities in Florida to the squatters settlements in Berlin, the group has collected a high-quality selection of images describing the places of entitlement and exclusion, and the people who have benefited, and those who have been excluded, from the "Right To The City".

The ["Prestes Maia Reportage: A Diary of exclusion"](#) collects fragments of a visual diary that Brazilian photographer Tatiana Cardeal has been keeping during the *Prestes Maia* occupation in the heart of São Paulo, between 2005 and 2007. The *Prestes Maia*, a former textile factory, has been home to around 2,000 people and has been considered the largest occupation ever occurred in Latin America.

His experiences as a Vietnam veteran and homeless man has given Leroy Skalstad a unique insight into the lives of the subjects he photographs. In the gallery ["The Homeless Photographer"](#), Skalstad

portrays the stories of dispossession and marginalization of the homeless men and women he regularly meets as a regular volunteer at the homeless shelters of Milwaukee.

The hilarious graphic works featured in the gallery [“The Duality of Darius Twin”](#) leave the viewer with not only an assault on the senses but a question of what may become of our streets if our wildest imaginations took over. Darius Twin turns the urban landscapes into a playground for the imagination: in his world, giant creatures break into skyscrapers and dinosaurs wander undisturbed in the streets, while an industrial site turns into an open aerial battle ground of seagulls knife-fighting for territory.

[“La Banlieu à pied”](#) is a collection of images from the Banlieues of Paris by French photographer Ludovic Maillard, while in [“Night and Decay”](#), Australian photographer Lynn Smith shows his night images of urban decay, inspired by the works of Rut Blees Luxemburg and William Eggleston.

The [video galleries](#) feature trailers from recently released or upcoming documentary films such as “American Casino” on the causes and outcomes of the financial crisis, two short films about the *Prestes Maia* occupation, full short documentaries about the gentrification of New York, with accounts from Harlem, the Lower East Side, Brooklyn and Coney Island, and updates on the demolitions of public housing in New Orleans. This section also includes filmed conference talks by David Harvey, Neil Smith and Peter Marcuse on the “right to the city”, and much more.

Finally, before the release of this issue we have collected a wealth of documents on the “right to the city” for [free download \(pdf\)](#). These include: “The World Charter for the Right to the City” and several reports by the Right to the City Alliance, TIDES Foundation, UN Habitat and UNESCO. Also for free download are the agenda “Supporting Urban Prosperity” by Barack Obama and Joe Biden, and important studies on the effectiveness of mandatory inclusionary zoning experiments from the Furman Center for Real Estate and Housing Policy, PolicyLink, Pratt Institute and the American Planning Association. Also included are a “Charter for Oppositional Architecture” funded by the German group Anarchitektur, and informative pamphlets from the “Save Coney Island” coalition, of which the Urban Reinventors are proud supporters.

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