

To Make Our Cities Green, We Must First Paint Them Red

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There's a famous book by the French Marxist Henri Lefebvre called *Le Droit à la ville*, which translates to *The Right to the City*. Written in 1968, Lefebvre was critical of the increasing sway that capitalism had over the city, and the resulting commodification of urban life and decline of the collective urban experience. In response, Lefebvre envisioned "the right to the city." He did not picture the right to the city as a rigid legal right, but rather as a continual right of the urban working class to democratically and collectively change the city. Lefebvre imagined cities in which all urban dwellers could shape and reshape the city, to both contribute to its rich fabric and benefit from its cultural and material production. The right to the city, as the geographer David Harvey writes, is: "... a right to change ourselves by changing the city ... the freedom to make and remake our cities."

In the age of ecological collapse and climate change, the right to the city could hardly be more important. The city has become the most critical geography for both climate change mitigation and adaptation. As the sociologist Daniel Aldana Cohen wrote recently, "Nothing will shape urban life in this century more than carbon — efforts to abolish it, and the consequences of its pollution." It's not an exaggeration to say that all urban issues are now also climate issues. The ways we provide and arrange housing, transit, food, water, education and energy are inextricably linked to the carbon output of cities.

In this respect, American cities are equal parts frustrating and tantalizing. On one hand, a century of government-subsidized, racially motivated, sprawling development has created a suburban monstrosity. The car is the dominant, if not only, mode of transportation in the suburbs. As a result, America emits more carbon through transportation than any other sector.

On the other hand, cities offer immense potential for zero-carbon living. When designed correctly, they can be compact, walkable and public transit-rich. Grocery stores, jobs, schools and all the necessities of daily life can be situated within a metro stop, a bike ride or short walk. The car doesn't have to be dominant, or relevant at all.

These three factors — the looming threat of climate change, the history of poor American urban planning and the potential of the low-carbon city — have led to the emergence of a new urban design consensus. Since the 1990s, everyone from local city planning departments to the United Nations have embraced “well designed, compact, walkable cities with good public transport” as a key part of the solution to climate change.

There’s no question that the city will be dramatically reshaped in the coming years. Now we must ask, in the Lefebvrian tradition: Does everyone share in the benefits of this reshaping? Does the urban working class control the process?

The answer, as of now, is no. I argue here that the ideas of sustainable urbanism, and their lack of an anti-capitalist foundation, will necessarily lead to gentrification, displacement and ultimately, green cities for the rich, and the rich only.

In most American contexts, sustainable urbanism is thought of as a technocratic, politically neutral means of reducing carbon emissions. Proponents generally wish to project their ideas onto the economic, social and geographic landscape without regard for existing inequalities or power structures. By refusing to take an anti-capitalist stand, the mainstream advocates for sustainable urbanism effectively cede power to those who already hold power — landlords, developers and the capitalist urban planning regime. There can be no right to the city when the power to reshape the city is in their hands, rather than the urban majority.

It’s important to understand, briefly, how capitalist urban planning works. Capitalist states claim they are impartial actors. This is a lie. Urban planners have always worked hand in hand with landlords, developers and industrialists. The enforcement of strict legal property rights privilege the property-owning class over the rest. Landlords rely on the police powers of the state to enforce evictions and keep order amongst tenants.

The state frequently uses eminent domain to destroy poor communities and put land to its “highest and best use,” which is usually code for handing it off to a developer. The state spends a huge amount of taxpayer money maintaining roads, sewers, public transit and other social infrastructure, the benefits of which are largely captured by private landowners. Developers rely on planners to create the appearance of democratic consent to planning decisions (public comment periods on new zoning laws or community design sessions for new developments are common examples of this).

Urban planning has also served to further state goals of racial segregation. Zoning laws have historically sited industrial districts near poor black neighborhoods, exposing these populations to toxic waste. State planners have enforced practices like redlining and urban renewal which segregated and displaced working class communities of color.

The trend of deferral to and subsidization of the private market has only worsened since the 1970s and the dawn of the neoliberal era. Consider low-income housing, for instance, which is now a publicly subsidized, private enterprise. The state’s primary methods of low-income housing provision are housing vouchers to low-income families (like the Section 8 program) and tax credits to developers (like the Low-Income Housing Tax Credit). These policies effectively subsidize landlords and developers, rather than simply building and maintaining social housing.

This is not to say that the state always acts in the interest of capitalists. At certain points in American history, reformers have succeeded in using the state to empower the working class, if only marginally. However, the state’s primary function under capitalism will always be to protect private interests.

Under this regime, the right to the city is denied, time and time again. Most city residents have little say in the reshaping of their city, and those who do not own property have almost no collective stake in its prosperity. They are ruled not only by their government, but by the powerful landlords and developers who pull the strings.

Under this arrangement, sustainable urbanism has been, and will continue to be, co-opted by private interests. This co-option takes two primary forms: intentional, and unintentional.

The first relationship, that I've laid out above, is intentional. The state engages in a myriad of planning and enforcement practices to actively enrich landlords and developers. In the context of sustainable urbanism, this usually takes the form of "smart growth" or "smart city" initiatives, in which cities and opportunistic developers co-opt sustainable urbanism to spur development. The hallmarks of state-planned sustainable urbanism — transit expansion, mixed-use zoning, densification, bike infrastructure — are almost always sold as development opportunities, rather than simply going green for the sake of going green.

In cities like Austin, planning for density has become a key part of the city's development strategy, as they try to attract the talents of young, educated professionals. In Seattle, Amazon, Google and Microsoft's headquarters have been supplemented with a variety of investments in public transit, densification and walkability, with a similar goal of attracting young, educated professionals. In Brooklyn, the development of a waterfront park only took place once a public-private partnership with luxury developers was struck. In other cases, smart growth governance results in the construction of "green" luxury developments — which, ironically, still tend to be carbon-intensive.

This pattern of development has sent housing prices skyrocketing and led to the displacement of low-income communities of color. Regardless of the method, smart growth governance is united by a common thread: the state pays lip service to environmentalism, while using its planning tools to enable and subsidize private development and profit.

The second relationship is murkier and less intentional. Under American capitalism, land is generally privately owned. It is a commodity good that can be speculated on. One day, a parcel of land can be worth one figure, and the next, due to any number of physical, cultural, social or economic factors, it can be worth more or less. As long as we can speculate on land, any action the state takes to improve the city will be absorbed by these private owners, in the form of increased rents or property values.

The intentions of the urban planner don't matter. Because of this, well-intentioned planning often leads to gentrification. As Samuel Stein writes in his book, *Capital City: Gentrification and the Real Estate State*, there is "a close link between good planning and gentrification, since private property owners [can] capitalize on the value the state adds to land ... any good that planners do is filtered through a system that dispossesses those who cannot pay."

The process of gentrification follows a simple economic logic. First, a landlord or developer realizes there is a gap between the actual rents they are extracting from their property and the potential rents they could be extracting from their property. Then, they go about changing the property to attract the new rents — whether that means evicting tenants or demolishing and constructing a new building. When enough landlords and developers in an area exploit the rent gap, a whole neighborhood can rapidly gentrify. This theory, the rent gap theory, shows that gentrification is premised on the ability of private landowners to both control the rents they are extracting from tenants and evict, demolish or otherwise alter their land. More simply, gentrification happens when land, and by extension housing, is under private, rather than social, ownership.

The rent gap theory helps explain why policies like rent control can help slow gentrification; the less power the landlords and developers have to evict and price gouge their tenants, the slower the gentrification will be. It's also important to note that in the United States, gentrification is almost always racialized. Low-income black and hispanic communities who lived through decades of austerity and disinvestment are often the first displaced by a wave of reinvestment.

Gentrification can and does occur when sustainable urbanism is co-opted — intentionally or unintentionally — by private market forces. Empirical evidence for this phenomenon has been building since 2009, when Sarah Dooling coined the phrase “environmental gentrification” to describe the process of homeless camps being cleared to make way for parks. One study found that the Atlanta Beltline — a 22 mile urban park and mass transit project — drastically increased nearby housing prices. In Vancouver, researchers found that efforts to densify certain areas of the city — a noble ecological goal — were closely linked to rising housing costs and gentrification. In Lower Manhattan, the creation of the famous High Line park led to the rapid displacement of a working class community.

Of course, gentrification is a complex phenomenon that is unevenly distributed across space and time. Many poor cities and communities are still suffering from the wave of disinvestment that characterized the 1970's and 80's. But, as Samuel Stein elucidates, these communities are also faced with a cruel and impossible choice: “Many want the benefits of good planning—safe streets, clean air, decent housing—but not the catastrophic tide of capital it summons. In these places, residents will often reject planners' interventions out of a well-founded fear that they will be kicked out of their neighborhoods before they ever enjoy the promised improvements.”

If the end goal of the sustainable urbanism project is to save the world, we must ask: who are we saving the world for?

Are we saving the world for the landlords, developers and wealthy minority? Or are we committed to a radical climate agenda that refuses to privilege any life above another?

The mainstream current of sustainable urbanism seems more interested in selling itself as a luxury product than being a blueprint for an egalitarian and ecologically friendly society. As long as land and housing are commodified and smart growth governance is promoted, displacement and gentrification will be inseparable from sustainable urbanism. Smart urban design will continue to be a vehicle for private profit accumulation, rather than liberatory sustainability. If we do not seize the right to the city, our urban spaces will soon be separated into privatized luxury enclaves and decrepit slums. We will enter a new stage of eco-apartheid.

The logical next question is: how do we claim this right?

The only way to seize the right to the city is to ensure that the urban working class can both control the urban planning process and enjoy the fruits of urban improvement, which necessarily means ending gentrification and displacement.

So, revolution. We can't socialize land and democratize planning without overthrowing capitalism. It's naive to think the \$217 trillion real estate industry and the capitalist state will be defeated with a thousand paper cut reforms.

But we are also far from the brink of revolution.

So in lieu of large scale upheaval, there are certain reforms that can help reduce harm to working class communities and give tenants the space to organize. First and foremost, socialists should support measures to decommodify housing wherever possible. Any measures that take housing stock

off of the market, like the construction of social housing or housing co-ops, are helpful. Community Land Trusts can accomplish similar goals by placing ownership of community land under community control. Every housing unit that is not on the private market is a small barricade against the tidal wave of gentrification.

Second, socialists should support reforms which tilt the balance of power in favor of tenants. Reforms like just cause eviction laws, right-to-counsel laws and rent control take power from landlords and give it to tenants. We should also support Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Acts (TOPAs), which allow tenants first right of refusal to buy their building when it goes up for sale and run it as a housing co-op. One consequence of the neoliberal era has been a decrease in militant working class movements, in large part due to anti-union and anti-organizing laws. Pro-tenant reforms can create a more stable base on which to organize tenant unions and build power.

Third, socialists should support democratic reforms to city planning processes. A good place to start is the establishment of democratically controlled planning commissions. As Samuel Stein points out in *Capital City*, the New York planning commission “is made up of four members with backgrounds in commercial real estate promotion, two luxury developers, two development consultants, a realtor, a nonprofit developer, a corporate lawyer, a business improvement district president and the building engineer behind Trump Tower.” Planning commissions are presumed to be politically neutral, but they often have a clear bias towards real estate interests. Democratizing these bodies, and electing tenants and housing activists onto them, is a small but important step in the right direction. Municipalities can also be pressured to implement participatory budgeting, which allows all residents to shape the city’s spending. Community-run democratic institutions like community land banks allow neighborhoods to decide what is done with vacant land.

These reforms — and ultimately, revolution — can only be won with militant social movements at their back. In Oakland, homeless families in the Moms 4 Housing collective occupied vacant homes, and as a result, are on the brink of winning TOPA legislation. Their actions have inspired similar groups, like Reclaiming Our Homes in Los Angeles, to occupy vacant homes. In New York, tenant organizing won the largest slate of reforms in decades, including strong rent stabilization laws. Historically, tenants have been at the forefront of every city-wide struggle. From the New York City rent strikes of the early 20th century to the urban eruptions of summer 1968, transformation of the city has always happened with the wind of labor and tenant organizing at its back.

Militant organizing is the only path. Capital will never give an inch without a fight.

Climate change is the greatest threat facing the world, and it is already wreaking havoc in marginalized communities. It is critical that our response is grounded in a sound analysis of capitalism and its machinations. Sustainable urbanism must be for everyone, not just gentrifiers, landlords, developers and the ruling class. We must claim the right to the city for all people.

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