

The City

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In the early 20th century, radical workplace activists put forward the idea that, in building workplace organizations or unions self-managed by rank and file workers, and in challenging the bosses for control of production, they were “building the new society in the shell of the old.” They envisioned rank and file self-management of the union or organization of workplace struggle as foreshadowing grassroots bodies through which workers would manage production in a non-market, post-capitalist society.

The assumption here is that self-management, having control over your life, having a say over the decisions that affect you, should be central to our vision of a post-capitalist future.

But self-management isn't relevant only to our control over our work, the sphere of production, but to the sphere of consumption as well. What sorts of housing do we want to live in? What sorts of services do we want available in our neighborhoods? What do we want the layout of the city to be? What products do we want produced? Our economic vision needs a means of providing people with say over consumption decisions that affect them.

This idea is reflected in the Participatory Economics vision which proposes both workers councils and neighborhood consumption councils as building blocks of self-management. For cities, Participatory Economics poses the possibility of a horizontal, self-managing regionalism in planning investment in transportation and other infrastructure as well as in meeting social needs such as housing, child care, and health care.

Participatory planning would mean that people, starting in their local councils, would develop proposals for what they want to be produced. Both as individuals, for private consumption, as well as for items of collective consumption, we figure out what we want to consume, and what work we want to do. These proposals filter outward through organizations over a larger geographic scope insofar as they have impact on a larger area. Through a process of give-and-take between workers and consumers, proposals would be refined into a comprehensive agenda for social production.

Land use decisions are also a part of this give-and-take process, and issues like the relationship between housing and worksites becomes a negotiated process among production groups and neighborhood councils. For example, would people most prefer to move back more in the direction of the pre-capitalist artisanal city, with work and housing in close proximity? Well, if so, we would expect that to be reflected in decisions about investment in the built environment.

Participatory economics implies the elimination of some of the main forces that have shaped the capitalist city.

Work site decisions would not be simply a question of what the CEO thinks best. The spatial sorting of the population by class and race in the capitalist city is built on huge disparities in income and power, which would no longer exist in an economic system where remuneration is based on work effort or sacrifice and corporate-style hierarchies no longer rule.

From a participatory economic point of view, the principle of self-management says that each person is to have a say over decisions that affect them and in proportion as they are affected. This implies that there can no longer be external negative impacts like air pollution that are simply imposed dictatorily on people without those people having a say about it. The huge environmental burden of polluting uses, such as over-reliance on private auto transport, will have to be properly taken into account in a self-managing, participatory economy.

We can envision participatory economics emerging as a real alternative through the development of mass, self-managing social movements, from a resurgent, self-managed form of worker unionism, in the sphere of production, to self-managed tenant organizations and mass organizations of all kinds.

Housing is a major area of consumption that is also a source of much conflict, from people securing shelter by squatting in vacant buildings, to renters organizing tenant unions and rent strikes. Within capitalism, the status of land and housing as a commodity, and the cycle of investment in the built environment, generates both periods of decay and deterioration of working class neighborhoods as well as re-investment and displacement, when professional and business people use their higher incomes to outbid the working class for housing.

Peter Marcuse has written: "The opposite of gentrification should not be decay and abandonment but democratization of housing." An interesting tactic for democratization of housing that has emerged in the U.S. in the last two decades are community land trusts, which are typically formed in response to either rising rents and displacement or in response to deterioration and decay.

Community land trusts are land cooperatives that enroll members in a geographic area and act as a non-profit developer of resident-controlled housing. As a democratic membership organization, the community land trust can empower people in a neighborhood to control what is done with the land there, what services are provided in the neighborhood, and ensure that an adequate supply of housing is provided at prices working people can afford.

The basic concept is that the community land trust holds land in a community in perpetuity, taking it off the speculative market. Dwellings are typically sold to residents in some form of limited equity ownership. The long-run affordability of the housing is enforced by a groundlease. A departing household must sell their house or apartment back to the community land trust at a restricted price, to keep housing prices low. The community land trust approach thus works at decommodifying both land and buildings.

Self-management is implemented along two dimensions: Residents have control over the buildings they live in, but the community is empowered to control housing prices and land use.

At various times labor unions and other groups in the U.S. have formed limited equity housing coops to provide working class housing at affordable prices. The community land trust model was developed in the '60s to overcome problems that have tended to destroy limited equity housing cooperatives in the U.S.

The problem is, someone who owns a share in a housing coop has a personal self-interest in getting the maximum possible price when selling. For this reason, coop share owners eventually figure out ways to break the limits on equity. The housing then becomes just another real estate commodity.

This happens because the larger working class community, who have a stake in preserving low housing prices, are not a party to the market transaction between seller and buyer. In fact, this is a case of a negative externality.

The community land trust solution to this problem is to organize the people who would be externally impacted so that they do have a say over this decision. Community land trusts have separate categories of membership, owners of limited equity dwellings versus others in the community who are not owners. Each elects the same number of representatives to the council or board of directors and split votes can be taken in general assemblies on major issues. The effect is to ensure that people who would be adversely impacted by breaking the limits on equity are represented, and can prevent conversion of the housing into unrestricted commodities.

There is a second problem that limited equity coops have encountered in the U.S. Given the concentration of expertise about economic management at the top of the social pyramid and huge inequalities in U.S. society, not everyone has the opportunity to acquire knowledge that would be relevant to effectively managing buildings. If low-income people are set loose in a stand-alone coop, they may be taken advantage of by unscrupulous building contractors or property management firms. Management by untrained amateurs sometimes creates problems like this even for condominium associations of professional people.

The more traditional approach to social housing, either run by state entities or by non-profit community development corporations, overcomes this problem by concentrating the expertise and decision-making in a corporate-style hierarchy. The problem is, the relationship to the tenant is paternalistic, and the residents have no control over the places where they live or the shape of the built environment around them.

By contrast, the community land trust solution to this problem is to do training of residents and develop in the residents the skills for effective management of their buildings. The community land trust is there to provide guidance and backup in case problems are encountered. The “you’re-on-your-own” approach of the market is replaced by a more collaborative approach in which knowledge and risks are shared.

The community land trust thus acts as a buffer to protect the housing coops against the corrosive effects of the surrounding capitalist economy.

We can imagine various ways in which the community land trust model could be extended. People who are going to live in buildings could be actively involved in the design of the buildings, so that the new buildings are customized to meet their particular needs and tastes.

Community land trusts can try to secure powers of eminent domain, to dislodge properties from speculators and absentee landlords. For example, through political struggle, Dudley Street Neighbors, a Boston community land trust, was able to get a limited power of eminent domain

In cities where large-scale squatting of buildings has occurred, community land trusts could be used as the means to regularize or legalize the residents control of their buildings, in a way that prevents the land and buildings from becoming real estate commodities.

Tenants organized in tenant unions could work with a community land trust to buy out the landlord and gain control, collectivizing the building.

In situations where public housing projects are under threat of being privatized, the tenants could use the community land trust approach to keep the land off the speculative market and gain control over their buildings.

These last several examples illustrate ways that community land trusts can be used as a tactic in the ongoing class struggle over the built environment.

Some community land trusts in the U.S. have provided spaces for health clinics and child care centers. Space could also be provided for work collectives.

The principle of self-management can be applied to services that are developed for communities so that immediate gains are consistent with the long-run vision of a self-managed society. A city-wide network of community land trusts might provide spaces for a city-wide network of worker-collective groceries or worker coop child care centers, for example.

The example of the community land trust suggests that we can develop organizations that begin to play, in an embryonic way, the sort of role envisioned for the Neighborhood Council in Participatory Economics, where we have a participatory, democratic body to decide what sorts of services or what sorts of economic development or what sorts of housing we want in a neighborhood.

Right now funding for social housing in any form is scarce in the U.S. The prospects for changing this depend upon the trajectory of social change, it depends upon the balance of forces in the U.S.

The workplace organizations of struggle, the unions, will continue to be a crucial potential force for change, because of their size and position in the economy.

I would envision an alliance — a people's alliance — of unions, tenant groups, and other mass organizations coming together around a multiplicity of concerns that affect city dwellers in their daily lives — not only housing but health care, transportation, child care, schools, and other issues.

If organizations are not to be simply run by professional cadre or reduced to a hardcore of committed activists, we need to figure out ways that make it easier for the average working person to be involved in movements. When people must work two jobs or 60 hours a week to make ends meet, it's hard for them to find the time to be involved in organizations. This brings out the importance of efforts to gain more free time for people, such as reviving the movement to shorten the workweek without loss in pay. Quality, affordable childcare is also important if parents are to find the time to be involved in community organizations.

The way in which we organize for change is important in shaping what the outcome will be down the road. If we develop organizations that simply implement a corporate-style hierarchy internally, how is that consistent with participatory self-management as a goal? That form of organization sends the wrong message, develops the wrong habits of thought.

If our aim is a society based on self-management, we need to work to develop movements and organizations now that are self-managed, organizations based on participation and democratic control, such as unions self-managed by rank and file workers. Through the experience of direct control of these organizations, people can develop skills and self-confidence and better knowledge of the system they are up against.

We build the self-managed city in the process of the struggle for change.

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