



Volume 40
Issue 1 *March*

Article 9

2013

'We Are Radical': The Right to the City Alliance and the Future of Community Organizing

Robert Fisher
University of Connecticut

Yuseph Katiya
Concordia University

Christopher Reid
Concordia University

Eric Shragge
Concordia University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the Social Policy Commons, Social Work Commons, and the Urban Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Fisher, Robert; Katiya, Yuseph; Reid, Christopher; and Shragge, Eric (2013) "'We Are Radical': The Right to the City Alliance and the Future of Community Organizing," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss1/9>

This Article is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



'We Are Radical': The Right to the City Alliance and the Future of Community Organizing

ROBERT FISHER

University of Connecticut
School of Social Work

YUSEPH KATIYA

CHRISTOPHER REID

ERIC SHRAGGE

Concordia University
School of Community and Public Affairs

This paper seeks to situate current efforts of The Right to the City Alliance and selected member groups in a longitudinal and cross-sectional qualitative study of the limits and potential of contemporary organizing. For three decades politicians, policy makers, advocates, academics, and even activists have promoted community-based efforts as the primary vehicle for contemporary social change. Local organizing has been seen as the best site and strategy for initiatives as diverse as community economic development, public school reform, social service delivery, and challenging the powers that be. In almost all cases these efforts have been constrained and moderated by a global political economy of neoliberalism, which promotes community initiatives at the same time as it foists additional burdens on local communities and community organizations. An overview of the Right to the City Alliance and selected member organizations reveals its relatively unique, alternative model of organizing. Study of the organization and its model enables us to look at some of the limits of this nascent effort, including how well the alliance model accomplishes the need for greater scale and power. It also enables us to compare it to other community organizing efforts and see how it fits with and informs contemporary mobilizations since 2010.

Key words: *Right to the City Alliance, organizing, neoliberalism, community organizations, transformative social movements*

With increased interest in community organizing since 2008 comes increased scrutiny of its limits as well as its potential. The severity of the most recent global economic crisis called into question not only the system's foundation of neoliberal capitalism but the failure of social change efforts to address it. Given the rebellions of Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street, imperfect as they turned out to be, many wonder what is the role of local organizing in the process of building power from below (Piven, 2008)? Can mass mobilizations succeed without grassroots constituents or organizations? On the other hand, can local work contribute to challenging contemporary urban disenfranchisement and building oppositional power beyond the grassroots at the state, national, and even global level? And what type of local activism and organizing at what larger scales actually challenges the structural causes of contemporary inequalities? These are theoretical and practice challenges which underscore the need for more knowledge of community organizing, specifically what it can contribute to contemporary social change and what needs to change in contemporary community organizing in order to have greater impact.

One grassroots effort that addresses these issues by uniting local initiatives with a radical analysis and practice is The Right to the City Alliance. There has been a great deal written about the Right to the City concept from theoretical and historical perspectives (Brenner, Marcuse, & Mayer, 2011; Harvey, 2012; Marcuse, 2009). The ideas of Henri Lefebvre and his call for a Right to the City in the late 1960s have regained importance as urban struggles against displacement and gentrification have become directions for urban mobilization across the globe. Lefebvre's theory seeks to restructure power relations in two fundamental ways: the right to participation and the right to appropriation of urban space. The former emphasizes the right to participate in any decision that affects the production of urban space. The latter challenges capitalist economic relations by putting needs-use value over the profit-exchange value inherent in capitalist production (Purcell, 2002, pp. 101-102).

The Right to the City Alliance uses Lefebvre's ideas not as an orthodox formulation per se, but as an intellectual guide to

challenge the negative effects of urban neoliberalism on urban participation and appropriation of urban space. Urban decision making on all issues should rest on the participation and ownership of the urban inhabitants, not just the state or capital. Their mission statement captures both aspects of Levefbre's analysis—participation and appropriation—proposing the Alliance's approach as, "...born out of the idea of a new kind of urban politics that asserts that everyone, particularly the disenfranchised not only has a right to the city, but as inhabitants, have a right to shape it, design it and operationalize an urban rights agenda" (Right to the City Alliance, 2012).

But the common elements that unite Alliance member organizations go beyond theories of a right to the city. All member organizations agree to a "Right to the City Platform" which summarizes the commonality that unites them. In a nutshell, they include 12 rights, among them Land for People not Speculation, Economic Justice, Environmental Justice, Indigenous Justice, Freedom from Police and State Harrassment, Immigrant Justice, Services and Community Institutions, Democracy and Participation, Reparations, Internationalism, and Rural Justice. And yet, how does this happen in actual practice? How are the radical ideas inherent in the right to the city concept and the Alliance's platform expressed on the ground in a movement-oriented organization?

To flesh out answers to the above questions, this article situates study of the Right to the City Alliance in debates and literature related to grassroots community organizing. It agrees with Leavitt, Samara, and Brady (2009, p. 7) that "as a movement and a theory, Right to the City remains a work in progress." The Alliance is still developing and still too young to evaluate with any high degree of confidence. On the other hand, we argue, in many ways the Right to the City Alliance is not new, as it builds on the many years of radical organizing of its member organizations. In contrast to the dominant direction in contemporary community organizing, which at least until very recently was moderated by the conservative context of the past 30 years and had adopted primarily a service- or market-oriented economic development strategy, the Right to the City Alliance offers an alternative politics and organizing practice that unites its member organizations, despite their different origins and emphases, into an oppositional organization

that challenges the structural basis of contemporary political economy. Situating their radical theory of change and their transformative practice of organizing in the field of community organizing—especially in relation to Alinsky organizing and that of ACORN—and evaluating the Alliance’s potential and challenges are the dual objectives of this article.

Right to the City Alliance: History and Ideology

In January 2007, the Miami Workers Center, Los Angeles’ Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), and Northern Virginia’s Tenants and Workers United convened a meeting in Los Angeles of over twenty grassroots community organizations from seven cities in the United States to discuss the founding of The Right to the City Alliance (RTTCA). Gihan Perera, co-founder of the Miami Workers Center, explains what the LA meeting represented for the attendant individuals and organizations:

All of the groups that assembled are facing huge pressures of displacement and gentrification of their communities. We explored the ways that neoliberalism and the privatization of land use have turned our cities over to developers. We discussed how we’re fighting struggles for housing, use of traditional space, and against predatory development. And we quickly recognized that so many of the issues we’re fighting for in our cities: housing, transportation, education, LGBT rights to space, and rights of culture, are inextricably interrelated. ... Toward that end, the Right to the City Alliance was initiated so that we can build local power toward a national agenda for our cities. (Perera, 2008, p. 12)

In June of that year, meeting at the United States Social Forum in Atlanta, Georgia, the Alliance was born. The Alliance sought to build a vision of a radical transformation of city power relations and real democratic practices. “At the founding conference, The Right to the City Alliance built on this framework and developed principles of unity ... that challenged market-based approaches to urban development and

support for economic justice, environmental justice, immigrant justice, racial justice, and democracy” (Goldberg, 2008, p. 3). Ideologically and politically, the Right to the City developed its basis of unity around such broad transformative demands (Perera, 2008). The Right to the City concept served less as a strict theoretical model and more as a radical credo to unite existing, like-minded organizations in a common political cause and vision. For the Alliance, the Right to the City concept is a flexible theory that unites groups around a critique of neoliberal capitalism’s negative effects on working class people and communities of people of color.

Groups invited to join the Alliance share a left-wing radicalism in their politics, strategies, and tactics. They also shared a focus on building power not simply *with* inner-city people of color but *by* their non-White base. This included a heavy emphasis on developing leadership among people of color and mobilizing members as well as delivering outcomes in inner-city communities. Significantly, the founding conference emphasized a theory of change with a broad, global perspective. Moreover, the Right to the City is not an orthodox theory. As Marcuse (2009) proposed, the underlying ideologies are a convergence between necessity and the demand for something better—a connection between the deprived and the discontented. He describes this as “... a battle of ideology ... grounded in material oppression but not limited to it, combining the demands of the oppressed with the aspirations of the alienated” (p. 192). In addressing both “materialist” as well as “post-materialist/quality-of-life” claims, member organizations bridge old and new social movement divides, another element all too rare in contemporary organizing. The diverse origins and histories of Alliance member organizations, discussed later, reflect roots in both old and new social movement forms. This mixing enables the Alliance to address dualistic divides—such as workplace vs. community-based locus of organizing, class vs. cultural orientation, and ideological vs. non-ideological strategies—which undermine other social change efforts (Fisher, 1994).

Harmony Goldberg (2010), a RTTCA member and commentator, summarizes below what she observed as the underlying common beliefs of the Right to the City Alliance and the

compatibility among the local groups invited to create the Alliance. First, the fight is against neoliberal globalization. This analysis of the context is linked to contemporary consequences of this historical period of capitalism for cities and working class communities. Second, the struggle cannot be confined to one system of oppression. An intersectional approach is invoked to examine the connection between different struggles and to be inclusive of all people who face oppression. Third, the city is the key site for the struggle. This belief recognizes the important role of cities in global capitalism. The analogy is made between the factory as the site of struggle in early forms of capitalism to the city being that site in the contemporary period. Similar to models of industrial unionism, the city replaces the overall industry and the community replaces the factory as organizing sites. Fourth, organizing oppressed people is the heart and soul of the movement. The goal is to build the collective power and leadership of working class people and people of color “who are on the frontlines of neoliberalism” (Goldberg, 2010, p. 103). Fifth, grassroots organizing is combined with deep political analysis. This dimension differentiates the Alliance from other community organizing traditions such as Alinsky and ACORN, insofar as there is a clear emphasis on an explicit analysis rooted in traditions of the Left and a commitment to using this analysis with its membership and leaders.

David Harvey (2012), echoing Lefebvre, describes this politicization and theory of Right to the City as follows:

Only when it is understood that those who build and sustain urban life have a primary claim to that which they have produced, and that one of their claims is to the unalienated right to make a city more after their heart’s own desire, will we arrive as a politics of the urban that will make sense. (p. xvi)

The Right to the City concept, extending from Lefebvre to more recent proponents such as Harvey, Marcuse, and Mayer, conceptualizes the urban as an incubator of revolutionary ideas, ideals and movements. But for Alliance founders, the “right to the city” seems more of a radical and flexible motto to build unity among its member organizations and to offer

an alternative intellectual space to explore radical consciousness and implement radical practice in contemporary social struggles.

The Alliance and its member organizations use a social action framework and fight on specific issues in order to make concrete gains by mobilizing members, working with local leaders, and using the power of this process to make demands and win changes that benefit the organizations' constituency. The Alliance departs from community organizing tradition by having an explicitly radical ideology. In sharp contrast to most organizing efforts that emphasize concrete gains and follow Alinsky's model, the members of the Right to the City Alliance combine concrete gains with use of a political analysis to mobilize members and make their organizations cohere (Swarts, 2008). While the Alliance members share much in common with Alinsky-style organizing, the radical, social movement emphasis of Alliance members distinguishes their work from Alinsky efforts, which have historically focused more on deliberative democracy and community building.

Currently there are 43 registered core member groups in the Alliance. They are concentrated primarily in major cities on the coasts with ten organizations in New York City, five in San Francisco, four in both Boston and Los Angeles, three in Miami and New Orleans and two each in Washington D. C. and Providence. Recently the organization expanded to interior cities such as St. Louis and Denver. The concentration in large multi-ethnic cities with a history of progressive struggle contributes to a common agenda and framework. The concentration of community organizations in particular cities enables citywide campaigns and coalitions in these major centers, that is, a focus beyond community that extends to demands for a Right to the City. This represents an impressive step forward in building beyond the grassroots. From the outset, a conscious effort was made in the Alliance to invite groups that differed in their origins and history, but which shared and could be united around an oppositional theory and practice. Member organizations brought together traditions from different periods of urban movements. This is another difference between the Alliance and Alinsky-style efforts which either organize religious congregations or build the organization member by member, door by door.

Building Radical Unity: Member Organizations

One of the strengths of the Alliance is that its member organizations embody a continuity of radical organizing traditions dating back to the 1970s. This radical politics has helped them to converge around a common political and social program. In the periodization that follows, we examine the dominant trends in the particular period. We note that the context is central and important but not determining, thus there is both continuity and change within urban social movements and community organizing. In addition, the strengths of the Alliance are derived from the continuities of their radicalism and action approaches, as well as the growth in learning and professionalization over the period discussed. These traditions are cumulative, insofar as practices and theories from each period contribute to the perspective of the Alliance.

Mayer (2009) acknowledges the value of this organizational diversity when she situates the Right to the City movement, including the Alliance, as part of the changing forms of urban resistance over the past 40 years. The first period Mayer discusses is the 1960s and the shift from factory to neighborhood as a locus of organizing with a focus on the 'reproductive sphere' or 'collective consumption.' The context of this period was dominated by assumptions of state provision and intervention through a variety of social programs. Demand targeted governments at all levels for reforms that would ameliorate poverty and deteriorating inner city conditions. Organizing was about making demands and putting pressure on political representatives. Assumptions ranged from the pragmatic (organizing limited to specific reforms) to the radical (organizing as part of a wider process of social transformation).

The oldest organizations in the Alliance—Chinese Progressive Association, San Francisco (1972), City Life/Vida Urbana, Boston (1973) and Chinese Progressive Association, Boston (1977)—all grew out of left wing movements and traditions. However, consistent with new social movement forms, their organizing of working class people was through neighborhoods and ethnicity rather than directly in factories, which were the primary sites of old social movement organizing. Both Chinese organizations have a commitment to labor organizing and rights but from a community perspective. City

Life/Vida Urbana has strong old and new left dimensions. Its credo is "Building solidarity to put people before profits," and its mission statement proclaims:

City Life/Vida Urbana is a grassroots community organization in Boston committed to fighting for racial, social, and economic justice and gender equality by building working class power through direct action, coalition building, education and advocacy. Through organizing poor and working class people of diverse races and nationalities, we promote individual empowerment, develop community leaders, and build collective power to effect systemic change and transform society. (City Life/Vida Urbana, n.d.)

According to Mayer (2009), urban social movements began to shift in the 1980s as a politics of austerity prevailed. In this period, with the growth of poverty and unemployment and restructuring and cutting of state services, urban movements became transformed and concentrated their energies on innovative services and cooperation, a transition "from protest to programs." In this context, urban protest did not completely disappear as much as new organizations formed that were rooted in local, professionalized services. The legacy of this period is the professionalization and service provision that came to shape much of community work. Often these efforts became isolated from protest activity and conflict-oriented organizing, but that was not the case for Right to the City Alliance member organizations which formed in this period. Four organizations were founded in the 1980s, including Centro Presente in Somerville, Massachusetts (1981) and Committee Against Anti-Asian Violence (1986) in New York. These and other organizations founded in that period began with and maintained a strong oppositional and conflictual stance. Like many of the other members of the Alliance, these groups blend a service component with their organizing; many offer services to a variety of clientele and provide educational programs. Nevertheless, in contrast to the dominant direction of community work in the 1980s, the member organizations from this period maintained a radical ideology and practice. Thus, they have been influenced by some of the direction of the 1980s but have not lost their radical edge and vision.

Most of the organizations in the Alliance were founded in a neoliberal context. That is, they began after 1990, many within the last ten years. This neoliberal context has brought contradictory challenges for community organizing and organizations (DeFilippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2010). With deteriorating social and economic conditions, and the reduction of state services, it would seem to be an ideal time to organize. Yet, the dominant trend in local work has been the depoliticization of community development and organizing. This change is related to expanding and shrinking conceptions of community. The turn to the community has been a mini-boom for many not-for-profit organizations, in terms of funding, recognition, and stature. But the growth in importance and support for community—especially in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada—has been mirrored by a diminished set of critical political perspectives. This shrinking of political goals has been accompanied by a focus on the community in-and-of-itself. This shift can broadly be described as a non-profitization or communitarianization of social welfare in which the public and private sectors shed vast social responsibilities on to communities incapable of addressing them. On the other hand, there is a limited basic understanding of communities as inward-looking and moderated. Conflict disappears, and contesting power relations as a goal of practice is lost at the local level. Despite this trend, the organizations in the Alliance founded since 1990 have not followed this path. Their critique of neoliberalism and their opposition to contemporary forms of capitalism at the city and community levels moved their organizing in a more radical direction.

These efforts not only challenge neoliberalism, but they reflect three important factors in their context: the growth of immigration, particularly in urban areas; the transformation of cities themselves; and the impact of the anti-globalization movement. First, the growth of migration has increased the number of urban poor and poor people of color, resulting in a huge labor pool of low skilled and precarious workers. Mayer (2009) argues these issues achieved prominence with anti-neoliberal and global justice movements working alongside of deprived and excluded groups to fight against the injustices and inequalities in contemporary cities. The majority of organizations in the Alliance were formed after 1990 and reflect these

urban transformations. They organize in new immigrant communities and are concerned with core issues of housing, urban displacement/gentrification and labor. Second, Mayer argues that in this period the city had become an arena of growth as a key part of the strategy of economic development dominated by the demands of finance capital (2009). In this phase, there has been a corresponding polarization of wealth and income with an enlarged urban poor working in low paying jobs. Urban redevelopment plans and mega-projects often result in displacement and contestation about the use of urban space. The levels of conflict combined local and global frameworks with anti-globalization activists working in the urban context to contest “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2008).

The ‘anti-globalization movement’ has influenced both the ways that groups in this period organize themselves and their theory of change. At the level of organization, a new form of organizing beyond the local emerged, influenced by the movement and the World Social Forums. The anti-globalization mobilization of large demonstrations—for example, Seattle in 1999—were based on autonomous organizations and movements working together with a decentralized and horizontal structures and processes, a model akin to the currently popular Transnational Activist Networks. The various forums, associated with the World Social Forum, have similar decentralized structures and processes. They bring actors from movements and organizations together, but the goal is not to build a unified strategy or organization but to share experiences, deepen analysis and to network between groups interested in the same issues. As Goldberg (2008) points out, the U.S. Social Forums provided the Alliance with a comparable space to reflect on organizing practices and the conditions of cities and served as a site where groups developed and shared analysis. The members of the Alliance tend to have either an anti-capitalist, anti-corporate, or at least an anti-neoliberal analysis, which has been encouraged and supported by the wider social movements that emerged in the period after 1990.

Despite the diverse historical roots of Alliance member organizations, both a radical theory of change and openness to new organizational forms links local efforts and remain essential building blocks of the Alliance structure. The challenges of migration and related low wage work, on the one hand,

and the dominance of finance capital and the impact it has had on urban development, especially pressures of gentrification and displacement, on the other, are two of the key challenges that shaped not only the context of Alliance members but the urban context for contemporary Right to the City theory. The move in 2007 to form the Right to the City Alliance and organize nationally in metro areas reflected a theory of change and practice strategy which was responding to the height of the loose-lending/capital flows into major cities and communities that were being overwhelmed by gentrification and the neoliberal economy on many fronts (Newman, personal communication, May 7, 2011). The post-2000 anti-globalization movement and related social forums have influenced their structure with bottom-up processes, in contrast with older traditions of the left based on party leadership and cadres. What the Alliance adds to anti-globalization struggles of the past few decades, as well as the more recent Occupy movement, is a grassroots grounding in pre-existing community organizations and their inner-city communities of activist people of color.

Right to the City Approaches to Local Practice

The member organizations of the Alliance prioritize a wide range of issues ranging from environment to youth engagement to small-scale business development. The local work demonstrates the orientation to practice that influences the general politics of the wider alliance. Two issues appear frequently among member organizations. The first is affordable housing and anti-gentrification. Many of the organizations have a long history of working on this question, and others have taken it on in relation to the foreclosure crisis and continued pressure for gentrification in poor and working class neighborhoods. The second issue is labor linked to migration. The restructuring of work coupled with large urban immigrant populations has made labor issues a major challenge and one taken on by many organizations in the Alliance. The examples below illustrate the approach and practices of two organizations on these issues.

Housing

Soon after the formation of the Right to the City Alliance, the United States entered the economic crisis of 2007, rooted in

market-driven urban development, exemplified by predatory lending practices and risky financial mechanisms. One consequence has been the dramatic rise in mortgage delinquencies and foreclosures. Between 2007 and 2009, it is estimated that 2.5 million Americans lost their homes to foreclosures, while 5.7 million borrowers remained at risk (Center for Responsible Lending, 2010). The foreclosures disproportionately affected people of color (Center for Responsible Lending, 2010). Furthermore, hidden in the crisis is the fact that 40% of foreclosure-related evictions are tenants (Gladora, 2009; Huber, 2009).

Boston's City Life/Vida Urbana (CL/VU) takes a sharp interest in the ways in which the foreclosure crisis has unjustly affected people of color in low-income communities of color in the Boston area. Based in Jamaica Plain, CL/VU's recent work has been particularly focused on the foreclosure question, organizing both tenants and homeowners against abusive lenders. In existence since 1973, CL/VU is nationally recognized for its struggles for eviction-free zones and community controlled housing throughout the 1980s and 1990s. More recently, CL/VU's Post-Foreclosure Eviction Defense Campaign combines direct action, mobilizing, popular education and legal action strategies to prevent unjust eviction.

Working through its Bank Tenant Association, CL/VU uses a "sword and shield" strategy. The "sword" refers to eviction blockades, vigils and other forms of direct action against lenders. Eviction blockades typically involve sit-ins and loud protests in front of the evictees' homes on the day that the authorities seek to seize the property (Leland & Laboni, 2010). CL/VU's defiant tactics are reminiscent of the Great Depression era, where organizing by Unemployed Councils included direct action to fight against and block forced evictions (Pearlstein, 2010). The "shield" aspect includes free legal representation and advocacy. This tactic delays the eviction process and raises the lenders' litigation costs. CL/VU have teamed up and developed legal strategies with the Harvard Legal Aid Bureau (Solman, 2010). Collaborating with Boston Community Capital, a community development intermediary, they purchase foreclosed properties and resell them to homeowners at an affordable price (Wishnia, 2010). According to David Grossman, Harvard Legal Aid Bureau's director, more homes have been saved in Boston "than any other city in the country" (in Solman, 2010).

Organizer Steve Meacham of CL/VU sees their work as integrating radical politics with pragmatic victories gained through collective action (Robinson, 2010). In their organizing, the politics are explicit, unlike efforts more closely tied to the Alinsky traditions. As Meacham puts it, reflecting the radical political orientation of Alliance members:

There's this debate about whether an organizer should bring his or her politics into the work. We don't think that's the right question. We think an organizer always brings their politics into the work: it's just a question of what politics it is.... Our political perspective which we lay out at the beginning creates the moral space that allows certain options to be chosen that weren't even on the table before.... In our experience individuals' defensive action on a really local scale can have offensive system challenging consequences depending on how they are conducted. (p. 84)

The goal in such "transformative" organizing is to address people's needs while raising political consciousness and challenging power from the local to the global levels.

Workplace Justice

A member organization of the RTTCA whose efforts are representative of the Alliance's multi-issue approach to social justice is Los Angeles' Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance (KIWA), formerly known as the Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates. While this organization is involved in diverse campaigns, which also focus on issues of housing, healthcare, education and electoral participation, it is their work on the intersections of immigration, employment and economic justice that we briefly highlight in this section.

KIWA is considered to be a 'worker center,' a broad categorization of grassroots community organizations that struggle for workers' rights and to improve life in low-income communities. John Liss, the executive director of Tenants and Workers United, a Virginian worker center and a co-founding organization of RTTCA, connects the creation of worker centers to the weakening of union organizing in the neoliberal era, stating "you have a vacuum created by the decline of organized labor

... what we're seeing is a new immigrant working class creating their own voice" (Greenhouse, 2006). As immigrant workers and communities confront the unjust realities of racial discrimination, low wages, job insecurity, and poor work conditions, worker centers struggle to make real changes through support services and organizing.

KIWA was founded by community organizers in Los Angeles' Koreatown in 1992. Founded to support and organize low-income Korean and Latino workers only one month prior to the L.A. Riots, which severely effected Koreatown, the organization has been strongly influenced by the city's problematic race relations since its inception (Omatsu, 2008). The Koreatown Restaurant Workers Justice Campaign and the Fair Share Living Wage Campaign in Koreatown supermarkets are two examples of their work. From 1996 to 2000, KIWA organized restaurant workers to take collective action against exploitative employers and the overall Koreatown restaurant industry. Their actions included picketing, boycotts, petitioning, marches, and even a hunger-strike. KIWA's "worker-led confrontations and campaigns" (KIWAa), as well as lawsuits against the Korean Restaurant Owners Association, resulted in significant victories for restaurant workers in a fairly brief period (KIWA, 2000).

The Restaurant Workers Association of Koreatown (RWAK), founded in 2000, "is an independent organization based at KIWA, which operates as a quasi-union, offering a range of benefits to its members" including a free medical clinic and assistance to members filing claims "for overtime, workers' compensation, and other wage claims" (Fine, 2005-2006, p. 424). RWAK represents a permanent commitment on behalf of restaurant workers to sustain a campaign against workplace exploitation in Koreatown's restaurant industry. Combining social action mobilizing, rights and organizing education and legal campaigns has proven to be an effective organizing model for KIWA, though there are still substantial and necessary improvements to be made. KIWA's living wage campaign has also made advances. Beginning in 2001, this ongoing campaign has secured living wage agreements in five supermarkets and has even in one case attached wage conditions "to a private development's land use appeals for the first

time in the city” (KIWA, 2011). In connecting living wage concerns to the very process of urban development, KIWA is producing the kind of innovative and transformative approach to urban justice that the RTTCA seeks to promote. Making connections between diverse struggles and issues is at the heart of the Alliance’s purpose.

Toward a Radical Community Organizing?

In an earlier analysis of community organizing which underscored the need for more radical approaches to community organizing, DeFilippis et al. (2010) presented a series of propositions intended to contrast a theory and practice of radical community organizing with the moderation of the majority of community development and organizing in the past 30 years. Others argue similarly for a theory and practice of “transformative organizing” (Mann, 2011). The Alliance seems to use the terms “radical” and “transformative” interchangeably. Mann (2011) defines the latter as follows:

Transformative organizing recruits masses of people to fight militantly for immediate concrete demands ... but always as part of a larger strategy to change structural conditions in the world.... Transformative organizing works to transform the system, transform the consciousness of the people being organized, and, in the process transform the consciousness of the organizer. (p. x)

Building on this work, we will briefly summarize five propositions for a more radical practice and compare them to the practice of the Alliance as well as selected other forms of contemporary community organizing.

The first proposition is to understand the importance of local power through community organizing, that is, building local power through organizations based on a sense of solidarity, belonging, and shared history. Radicalism is often rooted in the grievances of strong local communities (Calhoun, 2012). Second, community-based efforts need to understand their work as transcending the local community. The political potential from community emerges when there is an emphasis on working “within a place” rather than solely “about a place.”

Transcending the local can be evident on many levels, from an organization's vision to its organizational structure. Third, conflict over power must be a key orienting direction of community organizing. Without an oppositional theory and practice against contemporary injustices, organizing will amount to little and change less. Fourth, community organizing efforts and social movements must be seen as inextricably inter-connected. Local work forms the base for larger movements, and larger movements catalyze local work. Fifth, transformative organizing requires an explicit radical theory of change, and an analysis of the relationship between community, corporations and private capital, and the state. It also requires a commitment to popular education around the organization's practice and theory of change (DeFilippis et al., 2010).

To a remarkable degree, the members of the Right to the City Alliance share the above critique of contemporary conditions and limited resistance, as well as an understanding of what is necessary for community organizing to contribute to a movement for progressive social change. Each member organization challenges contemporary power arrangements at the local level and fights to build a broader movement for economic and social justice. They see local work as the best site for addressing issues and building social movement bases, but they also recognize that it is essential to build a national alliance of local organizations. They see the societal relations of power in the economy and the state as the targets for action and struggle. For them, it is essential to expose the contradictions of neoliberalism and promote resistance to it. They have an analysis of power and conflict that is central to their organizing. Many of the member organizations work beyond the local level, targeting private and public sectors from large corporations, such as those in the finance industry around foreclosure work, to municipal or state governments. Many of these characteristics are shared by more reform-oriented organizations following the traditions of Saul Alinsky and social action organizing. There are a couple of elements that differ, however, and these are where the Right to the City Alliance and their member organizations both make important contributions and raise some critical questions about the Alliance's capacity.

The Alliance is especially effective at mobilizing around an explicitly left wing analysis and sharing it through popular

political education with its members. They name the system neoliberal capitalism and understand how the nature of the system itself is the source of the issues that they face. Theodore argues that organizations within the Alliance:

have a strong current of popular education that runs through their very core. ... they view education as a process of social transformation. It is part of consciousness-raising and leadership development. (in Hugill & Brogan, 2011, p. 4)

A recent RTTCA document underscores this: "What we know is that really deep popular education with our organizations and our allies is key" (RTTCA, 2011, p. 3). For example, one of the organizations, POWER, based in San Francisco since 1996 and involved in organizing on many issues, developed a text to explain to members and leaders the role of the United States' imperial adventures in creating the social and economic problems linked to migration and poverty. To build an opposition movement for the long run requires an analysis that situates specific issues in a wider context.

In contrast, the majority of organizations coming out of the Alinsky tradition minimize the analysis and political education linked to it. The focus is on "self-interest," that is, specific issues and the recruitment and leadership development that each issue brings. Most organizing in the Alinsky tradition is concerned that radical politics, explicitly named, will alienate actual and potential members, stifle critical thinking, link the organization to the Left, and thereby subject the organization to repression such as that during the McCarthy or post 9/11 period. The Right to the City Alliance and the member groups that compose it believe that the possibility of social and economic transformation can only occur if the system is explicitly challenged. Member groups know that most people join community organizations primarily to address issues in their community, but many are also drawn in by a broader analysis, based on their lived experience, which puts local issues in a larger perspective.

The broader political analysis and commitment to a process of politicization results from a blending of member organizations in the RTTCA of explicitly ideological forms of

organizing from the early 1970s (City Life/Vida Urbana saw itself as a socialist organization) with efforts started since the late 1990s that have an explicitly ideological organizing more characteristic of the anti-globalization movement and Social Forum organizing. The Alliance and its member organizations link specific reforms and daily practice to a wider process of social transformation. Marcuse (2012) describes these as "transformative claims" because they redress relations of power, propose solutions that go to the root of the problem, redistribute resources, and prioritize human use over economic values. Or as André Gorz (1964) once put it regarding transformative demands:

To fight for alternative solutions and for structural reforms (that is to say, for intermediate objectives) is not to fight for improvements in the capitalist system; it is rather to break it up, to restrict it, to create counter-powers which, instead of creating a new equilibrium, undermine its very foundations. (cited in Bond, 2008, p. 4)

The connection between specific short-term gains and a longer-term vision is practiced through the building of these kinds of transformative reforms. Unlike most other contemporary community organizations, the Alliance does an excellent job of building conceptually beyond the local.

A more difficult question for the Alliance is how best to build organizationally beyond the local. How can the Alliance unite local efforts into a greater force that can contend for power on a more national scale? Central to their work is the necessity of building a movement that is national in scope and has the capacity to challenge powerful corporations as well as the neoliberal state. One recent strategy of the Alliance seeks to build scale, that is, expand their efforts to occur at and beyond the local level, by developing a "united front" with progressive community, labor, and environmental organizations. According to their "21st Century Cities—A Strategy to Win,"

To take Right to the City to the next level, the leadership is putting forward a strategy for municipal power to intentionally unite core constituencies with other

sectors of the progressive community, progressive labor, and urban environmentalists, toward a program of both defense and pro-actively fighting for the type of cities that will not only benefit our people but provide a way to address the root causes of what is happening. (RTTCA, 2011, p. 1)

One of the major contributions of the Alliance to such a united front would be its fundamental belief and actions regarding the need for "true, deep, radical, systemic, fundamental change" (Right to the City Alliance, 2011, p. 2). An example of their radical practice was the Boston Right to the City members participating in a coalition with community and labor organizations—including OCCUPY Boston—in Take Back Boston Tax Day on April 17, 2012, demanding that "tax dodgers pay their fair share." Another was a mass mobilization of members and leaders from eleven Right to the City organizations targeting a Bank of America shareholders meeting at its national headquarters in Charlotte, North Carolina on May 9, 2012, to "demand racial and economic justice from a predatory bank that has looted communities, increased the racial wealth gap, and robbed Americans of generations of financial security" (Right to the City Alliance, 2012). Both of these demonstrations emphasized the nature of contemporary capitalism in general, and more specifically the dominant role of finance capital in creating and perpetuating the current economic crisis for poor people in the United States.

But the major challenge to the Alliance's building national scale may be its "alliance" organizational structure. To understand this issue better we turn to another community organizing effort, ACORN, which offered a different organizational model. ACORN not only built a national grassroots organization but also won victories against national and even global targets through a combination of a strong national organization and widespread, dynamic grassroots chapters.¹

Briefly stated, ACORN used a uniform organizing model with local chapters having similar structures and processes. Its national organizational center had the power to coordinate local ACORN membership organizations across the United States into national campaigns. A campaign in 2004 against the predatory practices of H&R Block, for example, included two

days of coordinated, national protests each day in more than 50 cities where ACORN had grassroots local organizations. Scheduled in the midst of tax preparation season, the coordinated nationwide demonstrations quickly got the Fortune 500 multinational company to negotiate.

ACORN's work also included voter registration and referenda ballots in 2008 in states critical to Barack Obama's election. Even with its structure based on local organizing and dues-paying members, there was enough centralization to mobilize nationally. Historically, the organization, founded in 1970, grew both ways, from the locals up and the top down. The interaction between local work and national leadership allowed simultaneously the building of a grassroots, local base as well as a powerful national organization. The success of this model, not without flaws, was one of the reasons the right-wing conservatives pursued and played a major role in the destruction of ACORN (Atlas, 2010; DeFilippis et al., 2010).

The organizational structure of the Alliance differs from that of ACORN. The Right to the City Alliance was created out of already existing organizations, some with more than twenty years of history. Moreover, these organizations all came out of different traditions, priorities and local structures. Their basis of unity, the glue that binds them, combines a shared radical practice of grassroots organizing in inner-city communities of color with a radical analysis of the contemporary context of neoliberal capitalism and related urban processes and issues. The organizational structure, however, is more decentralized, more loosely coordinated, and based on an alliance/network model rather than being part of a single organization. It is an alliance of grassroots organizations, not a national organization with grassroots locals. One of the central lessons of the anti-globalization struggles of the past few decades was the need for grassroots bases, not just mass mobilizations. The Alliance's model fulfills well this emphasis on organizing at the grassroots. Clearly there is a common program that concretely shapes action and unites Alliance members. Alliance member organizers are well aware that building a local base with politicized leadership with diverse practice and a culture of radicalism creates the possibility of long-term transformative change, but any decentralized model of networking individual organizations, such as in the Alliance, challenges national coherence

and the ability to act together beyond the local arena.

To address these issues the Alliance does a number of things. It creates a "national space" and "national convenings" for efforts to work and support with each other. It mobilized a national demonstration at the National Conference of Mayors in 2008. The national membership supported an action by the Boston organizations targeting Bank of America. It resulted in a weekend of deliberation and action in Fall 2011, culminating in a massive protest against Bank of America which attracted some 3000 non-violent protestors (among them many from Occupy Boston which started up right before the demonstration) and which resulted in 24 arrests. Most significantly, as noted earlier, the Alliance recently hired its first national executive director, Rachel LaForest, and additional national staff to provide national direction and coordination.

Accordingly, the Alliance is still a relatively new organization with a new national staff. It remains to be seen how much joint organizing and movement building beyond the local occurs and how much capacity for organizational and movement building the talented and committed national staff can generate with the member organizations. Realistically speaking, the alliance model might not be strong enough, either in regards to making things cohere beyond the local organizations or in providing national direction and action. Facing anti-immigrant pressures in the post 9/11 era and the growth of a militant right wing, it is impressive that the Right to the City Alliance has been able to emerge with a strong active base and with a coherent analysis and agenda, all shaped by a radical framework. To their credit, they have been able to expand their organization and member organizations at a time when, at least up until now, organizing with a clear left wing analysis, ideology and agenda has not taken off.

In conclusion, the Alliance is already helping to meet the dramatic need for a coordinated economic justice response to counter the fragmentation of contemporary community organizations and the "NGOization" of local organizing. It has succeeded in bringing together some of the most dynamic and radical community organizations to build a common agenda and a space in which to share and deepen both their analysis and their practice. Nevertheless, challenges of scale need to be resolved at the organizational level, which is true for almost all

contemporary social change efforts. Grassroots organizations need to be united and well-coordinated beyond the local if they are to withstand likely attacks from a well-organized and funded opposition. Further, as Marnie Brady, a member of the Alliance's resource team, underscores, RTTC groups for the most part are located in the upper strata of U.S. urban centers of command/control, global finance, and trade. Regarding RTTC's challenge of scale, how do cities like Buffalo, Detroit, and Chicago, not to mention more urban/ex-urban centers in the South, join and expand the Alliance? There are other groups seeking community-controlled development without gentrification, fighting privatization of public housing, and demanding moratoria on foreclosures. At this time, the RTTCA joins in campaigns and intergroup platform development with other networks that include both similar and different membership bases, with some overlap, such as through the Interalliance Dialogue and more recently the New Bottom Line (Brady, 2011, 2013, personal correspondence).

If the Alliance is to be a national organization with the power to influence and shape policy and direction and confront the neoliberal social and economic agenda, it knows it has to provide more direction from the national level as well as broaden its organizational base. The united front strategy aims at addressing these and other issues of scale and power. How the Alliance evolves beyond the core member groups and their local focus will be key. The future of transformative community organizing in general and the Right to the City Alliance in particular rest on the resolution of these challenges. In the meantime the leaders, organizers, and members of the Alliance have already created an impressive organization that understands its challenges and approaches them with a blend of participatory democracy and fearless determination increasingly evident in some organizations, abroad and in the United States, since 2011 but largely marginalized for the 30 years prior.

(Endnotes)

1. While relatively unique among community organizing efforts, ACORN was not alone in combining grassroots organizing with a strong national organization. Nor is this approach even limited

to the Left. The Right, in groups like the Christian Coalition in the 1990s and the Tea Party more recently, has sought to use a similar, multi-scalar organizational structure, though groups on the Right usually have shallow grassroots and disproportionately heavy funding for national efforts, not to mention a diametrically opposed politics to that of the Right to the City.

References

- Atlas, J. (2010). *Seeds of change*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press.
- Bond, P. (2008). Reformist reforms, non-reformist reforms and global justice: Activist, NGO and intellectual challenges in the world social forum. *Societies Without Borders*, 3, 4-19.
- Brady, M. (2008). Building a movement against gentrification. *Progressive Planning*, 176(Summer), 11-13.
- Brenner, N., Marcuse, P., & Mayer, M. (Eds.). (2011). *Cities for people, not for profit: Critical urban theory and the Right to the City*. New York: Routledge.
- Calhoun, C. (2012). *The roots of radicalism: Tradition, the public sphere, and early nineteenth century social movements*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Center for Responsible Lending. (2010). *Foreclosures by race and ethnicity: The demographics of a crisis*. Retrieved November 27, 2010, from <http://www.responsiblelending.org/mortgage-lending/research-analysis/foreclosures-by-race-and-ethnicity.pdf>
- City Life/Vida Urbana. (n.d.). Mission and history. Retrieved February 27, 2013, from <http://www.clvu.org/about-us/mission-history>
- DeFilippis, J., Fisher R., & Shragge, E. (2010). *Contesting community- The limits and potential of local organizing*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Fine, J. (2005-2006). Worker centers: Organizing communities at the edge of the dream. *New York Law School Law Review*, 50(2), 417-463.
- Fisher, R. (1994). *Let the people decide: Neighborhood organizing in America*. Boston, MA: Twayne.
- Gladora, S. (2009). *A right to the city: Building a Los Angeles tenant union*. Retrieved November 26, 2010, from <http://www.lewis.ucla.edu/publications/studentreports/52008%20-%20A%20Right%20to%20the%20City.pdf>
- Goldberg, H. (2008). Building power in the city: Reflections on the emergence of the Right to the City Alliance and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. *In the middle of a whirlwind, convention protests, mooment and movements*. Retrieved February 27, 2013 from <http://www.inthemiddleofawhirlwind.info>

- Goldberg, H. (2010). Building power in the city: Reflections on the emergence of the Right to the City Alliance and the National Domestic Workers Alliance. In Team Colors Collective (Eds.), *Uses of a whirlwind: Movement, movements and contemporary radical currents in the United States* (pp. 97-108). Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Greenhouse, S. (2006, April 23). Immigrant workers find support in a growing network of assistance centers. *New York Times*. Retrieved January 20, 2010, from: <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/23/us/23center.html>
- Harvey, D. (2008). The right to the city. *New Left Review*, 53, 23-40.
- Harvey, D. (2012). *Rebel cities: From the Right to the City to the Urban Revolution*. New York: Verso Press.
- Huber, B. (2009). Even renters who are paid up are getting kicked out. *Christian Science Monitor*. Retrieved November 26, 2010, from <http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/2009/0324/even-renters-who-are-paid-up-are-getting-kicked-out>
- Hugill, D., & Brogan, P. (May 4, 2011). The everyday violence of urban neoliberalism: An interview with Nik Theodore. *Monthly Review*. Retrieved July 4, 2011 from <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/2011/theodore050411.html>
- KIWA. (n.d.). *Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance: KIWA victories*. Retrieved January 20, 2011, from <http://www.yacomitservice.com/kiwa/eng/board.php?board=kkkbodyonly&command=body&no=6>
- KIWA. (2000). *Koreatown Immigrant Workers Alliance: A survey of working conditions in the Koreatown restaurant industry: Summary*. Retrieved January 20, 2011 from <http://www.kiwa.org/e/rc6survK.htm>
- Leavitt, J., Samara, T. R., & Brady, M. (2009). The Right to the City Alliance: Time to democratize urban governance. *Progressive Planning*, 181(Fall), 4-10.
- Leland, J., & Laboni, L. (Producers). (2010, March 21). Putting a spotlight on the families of foreclosure [audio slide show]. *New York Times*. Retrieved November 27, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2010/03/21/us/0321-foreclosure-art-audio/index.html>
- Mann, E. (2011). *Playbook for progressives: 16 qualities of the successful organizer*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Marcuse, P. (2009). From critical urban theory to the Right to the City. *City*, 13(2-3), 185-197.
- Marcuse, P. (March 25, 2012). *Blog #11. Reforms, radical reforms and transformative claims*. Retrieved from <http://pmarcuse.wordpress.com/2012/03/25/11-blog-11-reforms-radical-reformstransformative-claims/>
- Mayer, M. (2009). The 'Right to the City' in the context of shifting mottos of urban social movements. *City*, 13(2-3), 362-374.
- Omatsu, G. (2008). Immigrant workers take the lead: A militant humility transforms L.A. Koreatown. In R.I. Buff (Ed.), *Immigrant rights in the shadows of citizenship* (pp. 266-282). New York: New York University Press.

- Pearlstein, D. (2010). Direct action against foreclosure and eviction: Lessons from the Great Depression. *Progressive Planning*, 182, 29-32.
- Perera, G. (2008). Claiming the right to the city: A question of power. *Race, Poverty & the Environment*, 15(1), 12-13. Retrieved from <http://www.urbanhabitat.org/files/15.Perera.pdf>
- Piven, F. F. (2008). Can power from below change the world? *American Sociological Review*, 73(1), 1-14.
- Purcell, M. (2002) Excavating Lefebvre—The Right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant. *Geojournal*, 58, 99-102.
- Right to the City Alliance. (2012). *Mission and history*. Retrieved from <http://righttothecity.org/index.php/about/mission-history>.
- Right to the City Member Congress. (Sept. 29 to Oct. 1, 2001). *21st century cities—A strategy to win* [Membership Congress statement]. Retrieved from righttothecity.org/downloads/21st-Century-Cities.pdf
- Robinson, B. (2010). A conversation on organizing models for social justice struggles in the City-CityLife/Vida Urbana, Picture the Homeless, Take back the Land, United Workers [moderator]. In Team Colors Collective (Eds.), *Uses of a Whirlwind: Movement, Movements and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, (pp. 79-84). Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Solman, P. (2010). Boston group helps homeowners 'stand up, fight back' against foreclosures. *PBS Newshour*. Public Broadcasting Corporation. Retrieved November 27, 2010, from http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/business/july-dec10/foreclosures_10-19.html
- Swarts, H. (2008). *Organizing urban America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tides Foundation. (2007). *The right to the city: Reclaiming our urban centers, reframing human rights, and redefining citizenship*. Retrieved November 27, 2010, from http://www.tidesfoundation.org/fileadmin/tf_pdfs/TheRightToTheCity.pdf
- Wishnia, S. (2010). Fighting on the frontlines of the foreclosure crisis: Citizens take on the monster banks. *Alternet*. Retrieved November 27, 2010, from http://www.alternet.org/story/145392/fighting_on_frontlines_of_the_foreclosure_crisis:_citizens_take_on_the_monster_banks/