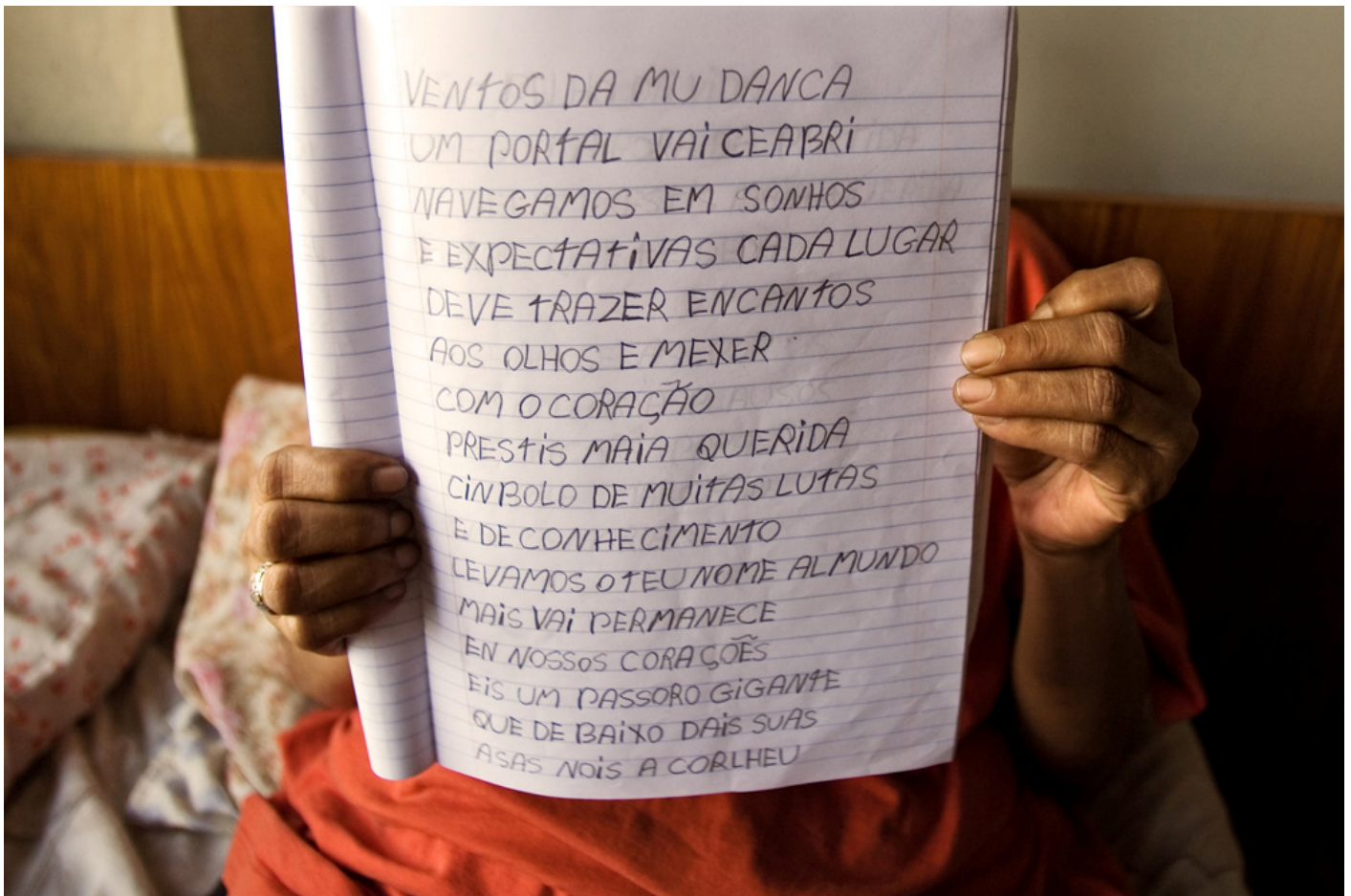


RIGHT TO THE CITY vs BRIDGING THE URBAN DIVIDE

Two Separate Approaches?

By Tom Angotti



COVER PICTURE: "THE BEGINNING" – BY TATIANA CARDEAL

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There are many urban divides in the world, not one “urban divide.” There is the divide between the hundreds of globalized metropolitan regions and the hundreds of thousands smaller cities, towns and villages. There are the divides between independent and dependent cities, rich and poor, secure and insecure, urban and rural, public and private, etc. And within the globalized metros new forms of exclusion and division are taking hold: gated communities, malls, technopoles, and office parks, connected to one another by a public infrastructure overtaken by private vehicles and public transit. This new paradigm for the division of urban land is growing with the expansion of global financial capital and its companion, globalized real estate. It is fostering the division of land for profit instead of meeting human needs.

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Describing all of the urban divides in the world is an endless project and by itself does little to enlighten us about ways to address them. We can also delude ourselves with the myth that there's something inherently wrong with "the divide." First of all, division by itself is neither "good" nor "bad." All matter divides, and all territories are divided. As societies and economies develop, they become more divided. Division by itself is not the problem. The problem is growing inequality. Division is a problem when it is exclusionary, when cities are divided up into spaces that heighten social and economic inequalities. This distinction between division and inequality is important because solutions too often are geared towards ideals of homogeneity, harmony and consensus formulated in the developed world, in the centers of global capital. The ideal vision deeply imbedded in the theories of Victorian urban planning that dominate today is one of an "undivided" city that is comprehensively and rationally planned. That ideal conceals difference, evades participatory democracy, and is used to foster development in the interests of the powerful.

In this paradigm there is also an underlying assumption that at the heart of the problem of divided urban territory is the "problem" of "slums."* Traditional urban planning has sought to redevelop cities by targeting poor neighborhoods as the key symptom of the problem; the result is usually destruction of many viable communities, often occupied by members of ethnic minorities, to facilitate the development of newly divided territories in which the displaced populations are forced to live in similar or worse conditions. The problem is not "the slums." The problem is not one of physical division. The problem is economic and social inequality. That cannot be solved by using physical urban planning. It requires fundamental changes in economic and social policy. Otherwise, urban planning simply reconfigures the spatial distribution of inequality.

What, if anything, does the concept of urban divide have to do with the Right to the City? The idea of the Right to the City starts with an appreciation for the conscious role of people who live and work in cities. They experience the city in their everyday lives; they are in a position to understand the problems

* In the United States, one of the victories of the Civil Rights movement was to expunge the use of this term from the official vocabulary. When our viable communities are called slums, they are targeted as unlivable, with residents who are objects and not subjects of history. The "slum clearance" program started in the 1950s disproportionately displaced African American neighborhoods and re-segregated cities. The movement against slum clearance successfully forced the end of this program and changed the language to one that assumes parity with other neighborhoods.

and to imagine solutions. Indeed, there are unrecognized urban planners in communities all over the earth. They often join collectively in struggles to save their communities from the traditional urban planners and the land development interests who claim to know what the problem is (the “slums”) and have the solution (new “development”). They are less interested in the phony schemes invented by government and private developers so they can participate in reviewing plans. They are more concerned about how to improve the quality of lives of their communities.

This ought to be the starting point for changing urban policies. Instead, the people in “slums” are either ignored or subjected to paternalistic attacks of philanthropy. They are usually the last to be engaged in discussion and debate and are delivered projects for improving urban life that they had no role in creating. Yet they are among the most experienced protagonists of urban life. If we look closely, many communities in countries as diverse as India and the United States, Brazil and Germany, South Africa and Japan, have generated their own community plans that seek to improve the quality of life while addressing fundamental issues of social equality. Their emerging utopias are often diverse, changing, and sometimes powerful; certainly not all are socially inclusive, but they are no more exclusive than others. Many communities throughout the world have been self-built, without the intervention of urban planners and architects; this should be the starting point for planning and development – learning from the past instead of discarding everything for an uncertain future. Communities have learned collectively to address their problems in a conscious and incremental way, usually without the benefit of government help. For the most part governments and international agencies start from the top by attacking the symptoms of territorial division instead of starting from the bottom and seeking partnerships with effective agents of change. The result is increased displacement and re-segregation, growing inequality, and the rise of the new city of enclaves.

The Right to the City offers an alternative starting point grounded in equality and social justice. It is not an abstract ideal for the perfect city but a framework for empowering the majority of people living in cities to take control of the land, envision their futures, improve their lives, and redefine the very meaning and practice of urban planning. This inevitably entails conflicts within communities, between communities, and conflicts at regional, national and global levels. The question is then where do we fit in this diverse, chaotic, and dynamic urban world, not how do we turn it into some static creation translated from an investor’s spreadsheet into urban space? The focus on the rights of people to services that address basic human needs – the right to housing, food security, health care, clean water and air, for

example – is part of the Right to the City. But the Right to the City is much more complex. It addresses the right to engage in the contradictory processes of political and economic liberation that are essential to securing specific rights within the spaces where people live and work.