



WHOSE STREETS?
OUR STREETS!

waronwant.org/RightToTheCity

THE RIGHT TO THE CITY

Whose streets? Our streets!

Over half the world's population lives in cities, with our relationships, environment and daily lives intimately shaped and formed by our urban surroundings. And yet, most of us have no power over these surroundings.

In the UK, rocketing house prices, gentrification and government policies like the 'bedroom tax' are violating our Right to the City. Constant surveillance and the new anti-squatting laws have eroded it further, creating a Big Brother culture of fear and criminalising the occupation of unused buildings at a time of rising homelessness.

We have no say over our surroundings, the social and community fabric of where we live, the natural spaces around us or future developments in our area. Cities are built by people, but not for people.

What controls how our cities are made and shaped is profit. Urban spaces become no more than commodities, to be bought and sold as such. Your quality of urban life depends on how much you can pay, with the 1% coming out tops.

But people are fighting back. People must come before profit.

Cities must be made for people, by people. We must take back our streets!

The Right to the City broken down:

What right? People's right to reclaim, use, shape and remake our urban surroundings

Whose right? Everyone's common right, particularly people who are excluded or marginalised

What city? Your city how you choose to create it!



The Right to the City – what is it?

The 'Right to the City' was first coined in 1968 by the French Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre. In the context of rapid urbanisation, the civil rights movement backed a demand that people, not capital or the state, must have control over how cities are designed, shaped and run.²

The Right to the City was further popularised by David Harvey, who defines it as:

“far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city. It is, moreover, a common rather than an individual right since this transformation inevitably depends upon the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization. The freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves is, I want to argue, one of the most precious yet most neglected of our human rights.”³

At its heart, the Right to the City is more than just improving people's neighbourhoods and housing, or improving the city and its surroundings. It is about democratic control over the city, with the right to access, occupy and use urban space.⁴

FIGHTING FOR THE RIGHT

British urban life

Margaret Thatcher's policy of Right to Buy sold social housing into private hands, removed collective control of cities, increased inequality and ultimately made affordable, decent housing a scarce commodity. It violated any notion of a Right to the City and continues to have a crippling effect on people hoping to have a home of their own.

The policies of the current coalition government have only worsened this, with measures including rising council tax, benefit caps and the 'bedroom tax', which forces people out of housing. In London, there is a lack of legislation controlling private landlords and letting agents from profiting from the shortage of rental properties. The Right to the City is denied to the poorest and most vulnerable, whilst making the rich richer.

In Britain resistance has been mainly localised and focused on a single issue or aspect of housing. To reclaim cities, struggles need to be united around shared ideals to build a broad-based popular campaign fighting for affordable, secure housing for all regardless of tenure.⁵

People must unite to take back the city.





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South African shack dwellers reclaiming their cities

In South Africa, the constitution states everyone must have access to housing. Yet, like under apartheid planning, cities continue to centralise wealth and opportunity for a few, whilst most are shut out, in appalling conditions, miles from public services or work opportunities. In the world's second most unequal country, one in four people live in metal shacks, lacking basic services like water, electricity and toilets.

War on Want's partner, Abahlali baseMjondolo (meaning *people living in shacks*), is South Africa's largest social movement. They campaign for everyone to have a life of dignity based on equal access to land, housing and basic services.

Abahlali baseMjondolo has won numerous successes in their fight for the Right to the City, including a Constitutional Court battle against a law to demolish homes as part of a clean-up campaign ahead of the 2010 FIFA World Cup. But such victories have a heavy cost, with violence and intimidation being all too common.

Cities must be reclaimed: they will not be given back.



Taking back the streets in Brazil

Despite being the sixth largest economy in the world, Brazil is among the top 10 most unequal countries in the world, with over a fifth of the population living below the poverty line.

Rapid urbanisation over the last few decades has led to eight in 10 Brazilians living in highly unequal urban areas. This changed situation mobilised social movements and civil society to lobby for urban reform.⁶ In 2001, the Right to the City was inserted into the Brazilian Constitution, following Lefebvre's conception. For the first time in the world, the Right to the City moved beyond an abstract concept to a legal right.⁷

Again in 2013, ahead of the 2014 FIFA World Cup and 2016 Olympics, civil society claimed their Right to the City. This time it was through mass public demonstrations across the country. People called for improvements in services, particularly education, healthcare and transportation. By taking to the streets, many of their demands have been met.

The Right to the City is just the start in taking back the streets!

Turkey

Gezi Park in Istanbul, was the site of mass protests in 2013, with people opposing the development of a shopping complex for profit in favour of keeping a park for people.

The USA

The Right to the City Alliance was formed in 2007, currently bringing together 43 member organisations fighting against gentrification and displacement.⁸

Spain

Rising poverty has made Spain the most unequal country in Europe and has meant that many people are no longer able to pay their mortgages. Powerful movements have fought back resisting evictions, occupying buildings and changing the law to prevent evictions of the most vulnerable people.

Europe

The European Action Coalition has made 19 October the day to unite struggles across the continent under the banner of the Right to Housing and the City. The central call is housing for people, not for profit.

The World Charter of the Right to the City was developed in 2004 at the World Social Forum. The Charter creates a common platform to ensure that everyone can lead a life of dignity in cities.⁹

LIVE AND WORK IN THE CITY

The Right to the City frequently focuses on housing alone. Yet to truly take back the streets, people must have control not only of land, housing and services, but also of how the city is shaped for workers.

In London, street markets have become gentrified, pushing already marginalised traders out whilst letting bigger businesses in. In Queen's Road market in Newham, traders organised and fought back, thus resisting the destruction of their market by developers to make way for high-rise apartment blocks.

In many countries, the majority of the workforce works in the informal economy, many scraping a living as street vendors and market traders. Selling anything and everything they can to make ends meet, cities and towns are central to their survival. However, they are frequently met with harassment, discrimination and criminalisation, whilst working in appalling conditions lacking running water and sanitation.

Fighting back is difficult, as organising is actively discouraged or even banned and vendors are shut out of decisions affecting their livelihoods, such as the use of levies collected in their places of work.

War on Want's partners in Kenya, Malawi and Zambia are literally taking back the streets. They organise informal traders and lobby local and national policy makers to allow street vendors and market traders to work. This fight has led to huge successes in reclaiming the Right to the City, such as a presidential decree permitting street vending in Zambia and laws being passed in Kenya protecting traders and ensuring all cities must include spaces for people to trade.





BUILDING THE FIGHT

Across the world people have been demanding their Right to the City. Now is the time to demand cities for people, not profit!

Struggles have already begun locally, where they need to be, to be firmly rooted in the realities, resources and networks of the people living there.¹⁰ From this starting point, ways of making democratic decisions about the city and shaping it can be put in place. People can start reclaiming urban spaces for public, political or cultural events.

The Right to the City can unite local struggles in asking who has the power in each city.¹¹ Under this banner, we, the people, can join together to form a broad-based social movement supporting the dispossessed and marginalised to reclaim the streets.

**It's time to come together to fight for the
Right to the City and take back the streets.
Now is the time to start a new urban
revolution. Whose streets? Our streets!**



War on Want fights the root causes of poverty and human rights violations, as part of the worldwide movement for global justice. Our vision is a world free from poverty and oppression, based on social justice, equality and human rights for all.

Notes

- ¹ Adapted from Marcuse, P. (2012). 'Whose right(s) to what city?' In *Cities for People, Not for Profit. Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. N. Brenner, P. Marcuse and M. Mayer (Eds.)
- ² See Purcell, M. (2002). 'Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant'. *Geojournal* 58: 99–108 and Harvey, D. (2008). 'The Right to the City'. *New Left Review* 53: 23–40.
- ³ Harvey, D. (2008). 'The Right to the City'. *New Left Review* 53: 23–40.
- ⁴ Purcell, M. (2002). 'Excavating Lefebvre: The right to the city and its urban politics of the inhabitant'. *Geojournal* 58: 99–108
- ⁵ Hodkinson, S. (2011). 'Revenge of the repossessed'. *Red Pepper* 178: 18–21.
- ⁶ Avritzer, L. (2010). 'Democratizing urban policy in Brazil: participation and the right to the city'. In *Citizen Action and National Policy Reform: Making Change Happen*. J. Gaventa and R. McGee (Eds.).
- ⁷ Fernandes, E. (2007). 'Constructing the 'Right To the City' in Brazil'. *Social & Legal Studies*, 16, 2: 201–219.
- ⁸ See www.righttothecity.org
- ⁹ See the Right to the City Charter on www.hic-net.org
- ¹⁰ Pithouse, R (2009) in M. Mayer (2012) 'The 'right to the city' in urban social movements'. In *Cities for People, Not for Profit. Critical Urban Theory and the Right to the City*. N. Brenner, P. Marcuse and M. Mayer (Eds.)
- ¹¹ Harvey, D. (2008). 'The Right to the City'. *New Left Review* 53: 23–40.



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The Right to the City means:

- Buildings are no longer vacant whilst tens of thousands of people are left homeless
- Everyone can decide how our community, including our schools, hospitals and transport systems, are run and developed
- All of us have the opportunity to live in housing that is affordable, secure and that we control regardless of tenure

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FIGHTING GLOBAL POVERTY