

Struggles for the Right to the City: a Common Theme in Europe

The relevance of residents' struggles facing the failure of neo-conservatism

The increasing number of campaigns born of the withdrawal of state involvement in the housing sector constitutes a common thread throughout Europe. They propose possible answers along with diverse and valuable breakthroughs, and advocate non-market solutions for the housing crisis.

These protests have long pointed the finger at the real estate bubble created by the neo-conservative approach, which favors the monopoly of private investors and the eradication of citizen participation.

These initiatives exhibit strong political and social territorial identities, bringing them into conflict with seemingly invincible institutional and economic models.

At a time when the global financial crisis is calling into question the withdrawal of state involvement advocated by supporters of neo-conservatism, it is striking to note the relevance and sense of responsibility which characterize these struggles.

Neighborhood committees, resident groups, squatters and cooperatives all systematically call into question the narrow-minded doctrine of reducing everything to budgetary constraints. They also show that these constraints are above all political and ideological choices.

At a time when the market-based model is serving to increase the number of poorly-housed people in Europe (70 million poorly-housed people, including 3 million homeless people), it would be hard to deny the legitimacy and pertinence of the alternative solutions demanded by these struggles.

The common theme of local conflicts throughout Europe

Violations of housing rights, evictions of the working classes in the wake of the gentrification of city centers and the deficit of accessible housing are perceived most clearly at the local level. And the local level is where the quantity of buildings and residences that are closed or empty can also be observed. Which is why citizen and activist initiatives are also local.

Local resistance movements, proposals and protests have a common basis that goes beyond borders.

From one end of the continent to the other, we can find initiatives which put property at the community's disposal, create links based on solidarity and collaboration to recuperate buildings otherwise destined to be destroyed, propose reopening homes abandoned due to market practices and bring social urbanism to life. In addition, these initiatives very often

ask public authorities to be mediators of a new social urban pact that includes resident participation.

These multiple and varied initiatives have created exchanges and analyses on the European level, and have gradually been building up their effectiveness. Most participants consider the collective and social ownership of buildings as a constituent of the right to housing and to the city.

There are those who advocate creating “free zones” outside of the market. Christiania in Copenhagen is probably the most progressive example. Others demand the implementation of an innovative public service for housing, as is the case of Vivere Cooperative 2000 in Rome.

These movements are reviving the cooperative labor movements of the 19th and 20th centuries which demanded dignified and affordable housing and often self-managed a part of the housing sector.

In the previous century, the internationalization of conflicts and protest organizations was linked to revolutionary movements and the Internationale. Today, internationalization corresponds to the fight against Europeanization of neo-conservative globalization.

In other words, these struggles challenge the effects of the European Union’s approach to urbanism, characterized by reducing cities to battlefields between investors, the impact of the free movement of capital, budget cuts due to monetary stability pacts, attacks on the public housing sector in the name of freedom of competition, treatment of migrations by spatial division of cities and the segregation of “dangerous classes”.

The present and future of international inhabitants networks

Curiosity triggered by reading the articles below will without a doubt feed the desire to know more about the international networks that have developed, and that promote debate and the construction of common strategies.

In the 1970s and 80s, social left movements were already showing solidarity with those fighting violent evictions and promoting meetings for exchanging ideas and information.

The late 80s and early 90s were marked by the development of the European Union as a political entity and meetings of European housing ministers. Without having any real authority in the housing domain, the European Commission was already intervening more or less directly in this sector, through adopting directives on construction, taxation, insurance, etc.

Parallel to these meetings, a European front of inhabitants comprised of tenant organizations, poorly-housed individuals, committed professionals and more or less institutional networks (IAI, FEANTSA, etc.) gave birth to the European Charter for the Right to Housing and the Fight against Exclusion.

These networks demonstrated a capacity for efficient lobbying of EU institutions. They introduced the idea that, in the face of the evolution of the housing crisis, the EU needed to reposition itself.

These were the first of the “alternative meetings” to EU ministerial meetings, organized by inhabitant organizations. They are not counter-summits, but rather initiatives which demand radical alternatives on a European level: recognition and enforceability of housing rights, implementation of a directive against evictions, use of structural funds, taxation of vacant housing and property investments, development of a European public housing service, etc.

This new international movement addressing urbanism and housing issues has been driven both by international meetings (for example, the 1995 Habitat II Conference in Istanbul) and by the development of the alternative-globalization social forums. Residents’ movements are increasingly taking shape and finding a voice on both the worldwide and European levels.

These developments have provided fertile ground for militant inhabitant networks such as the International Alliance of Inhabitants and No-Vox International. They use different approaches to help locally-based organizations emerge and link them up internationally over the long term.

The radicalism and multi-dimensionality of these movements are founded on the fact that residents, too often considered as the adjustment variables of urban development, have an active role to play in innovative approaches to housing.

Whistleblowers in threats of evictions, negotiators with public powers in the rehabilitation of certain neighborhoods, initiators of proposals in the requisition and transformation of vacant housing for the homeless, negotiators with local authorities showing solidarity and wishing to create “eviction-free zones” (see the decrees prohibiting evictions signed by around ten French mayors): these significant roles show that an effective international force of resident organizations is being built up, a force for the long term rooted in convergence and solidarity.

Translation from the original “Les luttes pour le droit à la ville”. Brooke Bates and Philippa Bowe Smith, volunteers of the International Alliance of Inhabitants. May 2009.