

# INDYPENDENT READER

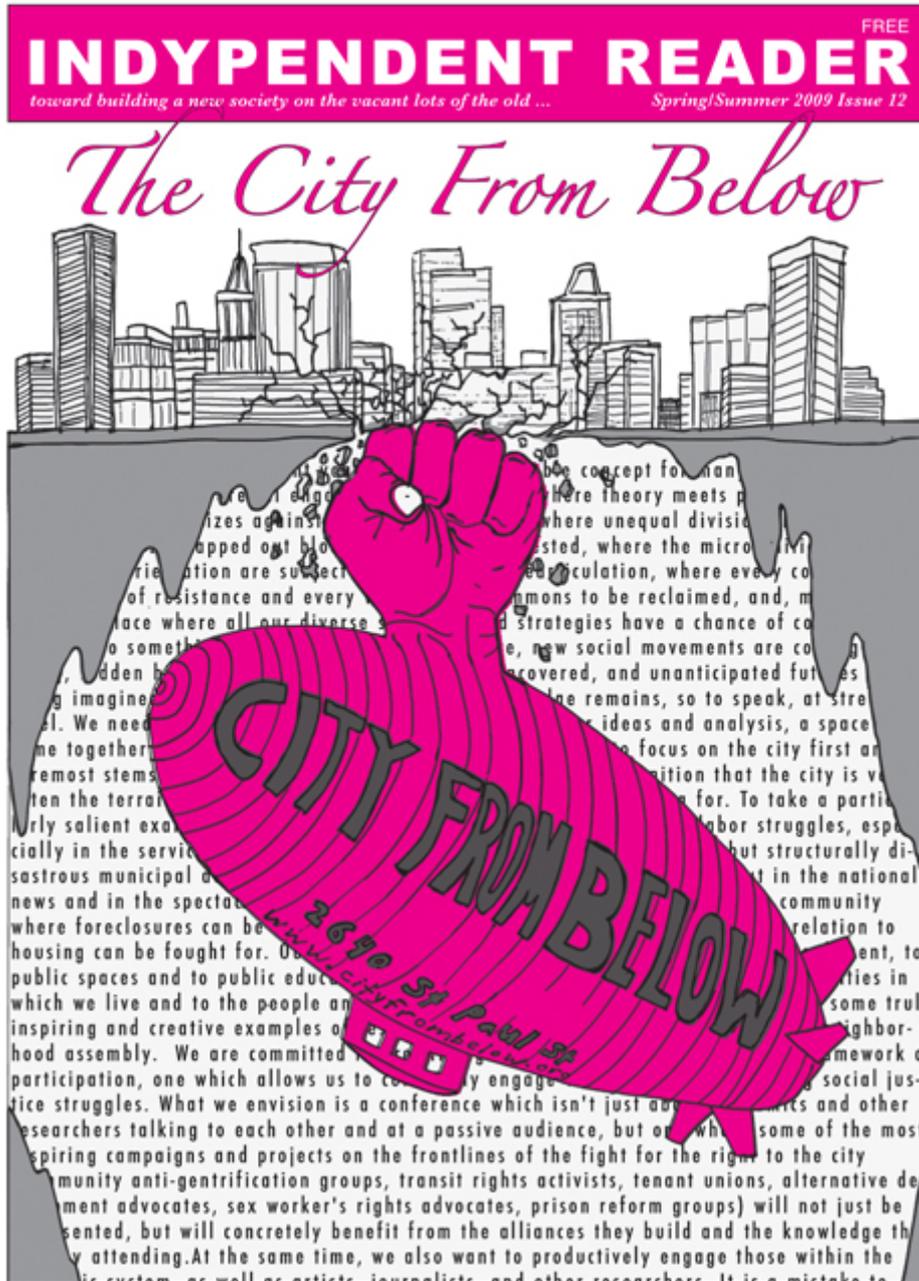
toward building a new society on the vacant lots of the old . . .

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## Spring/Summer 2009 Issue 12

Submitted by creidy on June 4, 2009 - 15:57



### Introduction:

This special national issue of the *Independent Reader* comes out of a conference held in Baltimore this March called the City From Below, which was co-organized by the *Indyreader*, Participation Park (a political project centered around a community garden on a reclaimed vacant lot in East Baltimore), and Red Emma's Bookstore Coffeehouse, a worker-owned and democratically

managed collective project in Baltimore's Mt. Vernon neighborhood. The conference came out of our recognition that all of our projects were in very concrete ways focusing their energies on what might be called a politics of urban infrastructure – working towards a media platform for Baltimore's social movements, creating a public space and sustainable urban agricultural alternative, building a business oriented not towards profit but towards social justice, and the distribution of radical information – and in a way such that all of our individual projects reinforce each other through the larger horizontal networks of social movements we all exist within.

For us and our projects, this kind of mutually reinforcing dynamic is one of the most exciting things about this kind of city-centric activism and organizing – it's not only that we're working to make the cities we live in a better place, but in some sense, it's the city itself that's working towards this goal.

Taken to its limit, it's a vision of urban democracy where the city's inhabitants themselves directly control the way the city works and how it grows – not in the sense that they get to elect a mayor or a councilperson once every few years, but that they actively participate in a thriving fabric of locally controlled projects and initiatives which build and manage the urban environment.

And it's this that led us to put together conference we wound up calling "The City From Below." From the start, we worked under the assumption that "another conference was possible." We wanted to organize something that wouldn't solely consist of experts detached from - and above - social movements talking to a passive audience, but that we could really drive the conference "from below"- with social movements setting the agenda and the tone of the conversations to be had. We consulted with social justice organizations here in Baltimore as a part of the conference organizing process, in particular building a strong partnership with the United Workers as they ramped up the organizing for their own major event, the B'More Fair and Human Rights Zone March on the Inner Harbor. We prioritized inviting and funding the travel for groups that were working at the grassroots level in radical ways to address urban injustice, getting folks like Miami's Take Back the Land, NYC's Picture the Homeless, and Boston's City Life/Vida Urbana to Baltimore for the conference. And we did this all without any financial support from universities or big grant-makers, relying instead on the power and energy within our own social movement networks to pull it off. While there are many things we could have done better, overall we felt we did a good job of living up to the Zapatista slogan from which we drew part of the conference title – "from below and to the left" – a description of a politics which starts from the bottom-up, in which the process of figuring out where we're going and how we're getting there is a dialogue, an experiment and a conversation in which we listen to each other and decide on our goals, our strategy, and our tactics together.

The response we received to our calls for participation (more proposals than we could accommodate in a packed three-day program) confirmed our initial assumption that there was indeed something really productive about using "the city" as a way to think and act on a multiplicity of political concerns in a shared framework. As capitalism tries to give itself a green makeover, thinking about urban sustainability reveals the unavoidable connections between food supplies, public spaces, common lands, and inexcusable inequalities based in race and class divisions. Thinking about art in the city leads you to think about the role that artists play in gentrification, and

drives groups, like Brooklyn's Not An Alternative, to work out ways that cultural producers can involve themselves instead in urban social justice struggles. Thinking about social movements in the city leads you to think about how they communicate, what stories they tell themselves and others, how they preserve and transmit their own history, and how they use media to agitate and organize. Thinking about the millions of people in prison in the U.S. makes you connect the dots between a crumbling economy, institutionalized racism, and the militarized approach to policing exemplified by the "War on Drugs." "The City From Below" was broad enough of a platform to bring together insurgent urban planners and designers with the members of a social movement mobilizing shack-dwellers and other dispossessed communities to fight displacement and evictions in the wake of post-Apartheid South Africa's enthusiastic embrace of neoliberal development policies, and at the same time, focused enough that a real conversation, productive for all parties involved, might just take place.

Perhaps nowhere was this ability of "the city" to draw together multiple strands of struggle and resistance into concrete problems and potential new avenues of collective action for social justice more apparent than in the multiple presentations which dealt with the impact of the current economic crisis on the city. While, at the national level, the crisis plays out in the stratosphere of financial capital, with bailouts and bankers, the effects in the city are much more real. While fictitious assets vanish from the corporate balance sheets, real homes disappear as families are foreclosed on, real public infrastructure crumbles as budgets are slashed. Formulating an appropriate radical response to the crisis from below was a major concern of many who presented at the conference – how does a community stop foreclosures through direct action? How can foreclosed or abandoned properties be reappropriated to bypass now generally discredited market mechanisms and directly provide housing to those who need it? How do we build communities of care and sustainable food systems that provide what we all need to live, outside of disastrously unstable (and fundamentally exploitative) globalized financial systems? The economic crisis is not just an aberration, but points towards serious contradictions in the capitalist system – built on the creation of speculative wealth and the transfer of power away from the people who have to suffer the consequences, this is perhaps no where more evident than in the city, where the prevailing model of development "from above" and for the benefit of the already privileged has used imaginary property values to replace neighborhoods with condominiums, to subsidize private projects like hotels and casinos instead of public projects like schools and hospitals. The bursting of the housing bubble and the domino effect bringing down banks and insurance companies is just a symptom of the real crisis – an economy of privatization and dispossession, undemocratic to the core, which puts the markets and profit first and the real needs of people a distant second.

Perhaps the most inspiring thing about "The City From Below" was the way in which one could see, in the various overlapping initiatives and struggles represented at the conference, the glimmers of an appropriate response. This response is one which contests the dominance of private property and private interests in directing urban development, which asserts the right of the city's inhabitants to housing, food, and above all to dignity, and which reimagines urban space as a site of collective experimentation and the construction of alternatives rather than a territory to be controlled and managed. And this response, the outlines of which the conference helped us see, is to be constructed out of what makes the city beautiful – not politicians and bureaucrats or

speculators and developers, but people living together, learning from each other, sharing spaces, working and fighting side by side, building a future together. It is a vision not only of a just and equitable city, but of the reinvention and reinvigoration of urban democracy it would take to make such a city real.

We wanted to make sure that the discussions and ideas that resonated with us so strongly the weekend of the conference continued to resonate in larger and larger circles; these are important things that need to be said, and heard, and reworked and reimagined, cross-pollinating with other ideas, with other organizations that weren't able to make it to Baltimore, with other perspectives on the city. To that end, we tried to document "The City From Below" as best we could – and in fact much of the weekend's sessions can be viewed online at [cityfrombelow.org](http://cityfrombelow.org). But over a hundred hours of video footage is not a way to bring someone into a conversation, and so we arrive at the object in your hands now – which combines material from the conference itself with further reflections by some of the participants and beyond, and is intended simultaneously for widespread distribution through the vibrant networks of creative urban activism across the country and beyond, as well as for the normal Baltimore audience of the Independent Reader. It's a single piece of a larger conversation, and we hope you find it interesting and useful.

—*John Duda*

*for the City from Below Organizing Crew*

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