

# The Seventh Generation

*"In our every deliberation, we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations."*

*—From The Great Law of the Iroquois Confederacy*

## Occupy Urban Planning!

by Tom Angotti and Marie Kennedy

ON SEPTEMBER 17, 2011, a group of protesters occupied a public plaza near Wall Street in New York City. They stayed for two months and kicked off the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement, which has involved over 1,500 occupations in towns and cities throughout the United States in its first six months.

Polls consistently show that the majority of people in this country are upset with Wall Street and support the occupiers, so this movement is unique because it was born already securing majority approval—something so many other movements have to struggle many years to achieve. Following and building on the massive occupation of Wisconsin's statehouse by union supporters over a year ago, Occupy Wall Street (OWS) has helped to radically shift the terrain for political discussions in this country. The electoral circus organized in preparation for the November 2012 presidential contest looks more and more like a noisy diversion primed by the unlimited contributions of wealthy corporations and individuals, highlighted by the Republican/Tea Party tussle to select a candidate to face President Barack Obama.

Most OWS activists have rejected calls from the established political class to get "a program" so that a

deal can be cut—a deal that aims to get people to "be pragmatic" and settle for the minimal reforms the establishment is prepared to concede. OWS has a powerful radical and progressive undercurrent that won't follow the protocols of a broken political system run by corporations and the wealthy, and a process that offers them participation without democracy. While the fire was lit with the active involvement of anarchists and revolutionaries, this is a movement that clearly cuts across classical political lines and is beginning to establish a new way of thinking about the economy and society. While populated by many young people, it brings together all generations; while mostly white, it is starting to breach racial barriers in a way that earlier movements never did.

It is a mistake to view the OWS movement as only the six-month-old baby born in the U.S.A. OWS is one part of a global response to the conditions created by a global capitalist crisis. This includes uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt and other Middle Eastern nations, the *Indignados* in Spain and Mexico, the striking students in Chile, the massive protests in Greece and other places too numerous to mention here. Add to this the powerful ongoing movements against evictions and displacement throughout the world, movements that have been raising similar demands and using similar tactics as OWS for many generations.

Occupation is the thread running through the strategies of global movements that advocate the right to the city and the rights to housing, health care, education and all human rights. It is an essential element in the strategies that aim to demonstrate in practice that another and better world is possible. It can help meet the immediate needs of people who have lost their homes

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and jobs, but it is much more than a short-term remedy. Occupation of land has been used successfully by the Landless Worker's Movement of Brazil, the shack dwellers of South Africa and the sidewalk sleepers in Mumbai, to mention only a few recent examples. It has often been a direct response to state-sponsored urban redevelopment programs ("slum clearance") and private real estate developers who evict tenants so they can create new luxury enclaves. In the U.S. during the Great Depression, people thrown out of their homes founded new settlements (known as Hoovervilles) and organized groups to reclaim homes and farms after banks and landlords evicted the tenants. In the massive housing abandonment of the 1970s, squatters and homesteaders took over vacant buildings and when landlords, banks and insurance companies walked away from entire neighborhoods, local people organized to take control of them. For that matter, today's occupiers also draw on the legacies of the lunch counter sit-in movement of 1960-61 that desegregated restaurants across the South and the earlier sit-down strikers of the 1930s who occupied their factories, along with international counterparts ranging from Italian auto workers in 1919-20 to present-day workplace occupation movements from Argentina to Korea. In sum, occupation is part of a deep historical process of achieving democratic control over land and basic human rights.

So where do progressive urban planners and community activists fit in this movement?

Sadly, the urban planning profession remains by and large silent on the major issues of the day. Even worse, it fails to recognize its contribution to the problems. The professional mainstream was a vocal supporter of government housing policies that promoted homeownership as the solution to the housing problem, ignoring the deep racial and economic inequities in the housing market and society. Planners touted the benefits of "growth" (smart growth) and "economic development." These free-market myths covered over the catastrophic secondary mortgage market, subprime crisis and over-leveraged housing that led to the devastation of neighborhoods and displacement of many working people. Many planners, and the related professions of architects, designers and engineers, limited their focus to the areas of their expertise—the built environment and local places—but ignored the big issues of economic equality, social justice and the tyranny of global capitalism.

Occupy Wall Street was born at the very heart of the city planned in the image of global capital. The city's professional planners can take credit for having helped to design the Wall Streets of the world as sacred enclaves for the wealthy, with virtual and actual walls preventing ordinary people from witnessing the financial

transactions that so seriously usurped their own economic livelihoods. Particularly in New York City, official planners have followed the mythical notion of "highest and best use" to facilitate the creation of huge high-rise enclaves around the centers of financial capital. These exclusive districts are made possible by the extravagant surplus profits from Wall Street and, thanks to zoning and local fiscal policy, very little of that surplus ends up providing homes for those that need them the most.

Most planners today accept as a given the neoliberal principle that no public funds should be spent on public parks. Planners helped create Zuccotti Park in Lower Manhattan, a "privately owned public space" made possible through zoning incentives. Ironically, through an oversight on their part, they failed to require that this particular park had to close at dark, thus opening up the way for the two-month OWS occupation. The OWS protesters have not only threatened to violate the sanctity of private property and capitalism, but they are also challenging the distorted notion of "public space" that planners have promoted through "public-private partnerships." Clearly, in this scheme of things, it's the 1 percent, the private partner, who is the controlling partner.

Progressives in planning and the design professions who want to

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see the commons reclaimed and protected are excited that OWS has brought this issue to the fore. But OWS raises fundamental questions that go beyond the narrow issues of physical design and regulation: who has the right to public space and a right to the city? This is where we begin to lose the attention of too many architects and planners. This is where we have to recognize the historic exclusions from public space based on race, class, gender and sexual orientation. Not far from Wall Street, black and Latino neighborhoods are terrorized by police officers who last year stopped and frisked over 600,000 mostly young males, arresting only 7 percent, but clearly undermining basic human rights to the commons. Particularly since the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center, police surveillance and control of public spaces has grown to proportions George Orwell foresaw in his futuristic tale, *1984*. OWS can and must be an integral part of the historic struggles to end racial apartheid in the city. It can also help highlight the many ways that women, queer people and the disabled have been systematically excluded from public spaces by design, policing and maintenance policies. OWS itself is threatened daily by an increasingly militarized police state, and this is the basis for strategic partnerships all over the city and world.

As urban planners make progress in reclaiming the commons, we

can easily reproduce these historic divides. We tend to applaud the creation of more public plazas and help plan and design them. But what if the reclaimed space becomes instead an exclusive domain for the few? What if the public plaza becomes a patio for corporate retail outlets, a free amenity for consumers or, in some cases, a site of obligatory consumption (cafes and restaurants)? What if the space is designed and managed in a way that reinforces the traditional racial and class divides? This is happening because neoliberal public-private partnerships are creating new public places only in those parts of the city that have corporate businesses that can afford to maintain the not-so-public places as amenities. Unless we can clearly say to government that it's not good enough to just create public places, but that they must be accessible, open and democratic spaces, we become part of the problem. We give in to planning's chronic occupational hazard—physical determinism—and fetishize the space instead of caring about people. In this sense, OWS is much more than a struggle for physical space.

Finally, unless we embrace the global significance of occupation and become a part of it, we in the U.S. run the risk of reinforcing the global inequalities made possible by this nation's economic and military might—even though we might end up with a little more space for ourselves. **P<sup>2</sup>**