

# Editorial

# Who Owns Our Cities?

## *Artists Defending and Creating Public Spaces*

Kjell Skyllstad\* Editor in Chief

Who owns our cities?  
Who owns our countries?  
Who owns our world?  
Who owns space?

The era of the great land grabbers, the conquistadors and colonizers may be over. And still there might be more reasons than ever to ask some basic questions of ownership and rights to our cities. Last years UN Habitat conference in Quito set out to include it in their agenda but failed to come up with sufficiently sustainable and workable answers and actions.<sup>1</sup> This happened in spite of declarations adopted at national and regional preparatory meetings. The Oslo Statement on the “New Urban Agenda” adopted this recommendation under the Land issues chapter:

“People with limited resources cannot choose where they want to live. They are forced into surroundings where environmental conditions are at its worse and living costs minimal. Ownership is unclear, insufficiently regulated and poor people rent housing without rights. One of the most critical issues in growing cities is lack of land for housing purposes at affordable price. Approximately 1/4 of the worlds’ population (1.7 billion) are without land property. The conference is of the opinion that NUA should promote property forms that include collective, individual, traditional, formal and informal solutions. This would imply strengthening legal protection against forced evictions, destruction, assault and other deprivations” (<http://habitat-norge.org/the-oslo-statement-on-the-new-urban-agenda> p.3.)

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Since then the political conflicts over territories have continued unsolved while new nationalist movements have brought forth new leaders ready to undo preventive legislation on a national and local scale.

The right to the city is not the privilege of a few to enjoy a care free secluded life in suburban luxury while large parts of the population still live below the poverty line in run down inner city housing. And yet the new US administration is proposing scrapping or severely curtailing programs that have functioned as security lines for the urban poor like the Community Development Program enacted to assist the most vulnerable sector of the population. The program included assistance projects like Meals on Wheels, homeless shelters and neighborhood revitalization initiatives. These programs were supported by the Home Investment Partnership and aimed at the state and local governments building, buying and rehabilitating affordable housing.

The right to the city should also be the right for the immigrant populations to share the services offered on an equal footing. In the US this is guaranteed by the administration of the so-called Sanctuary Cities dotting the landscape. In a recent study Gregory Scruggs, senior correspondent for Citiscope, a leading online news journal for urban issues, traces the movement of Sanctuary cities in the US since its foundation nearly 40 years ago in Los Angeles when the police were prohibited from holding suspects through requiring proof of legal status. Scruggs sees the Sanctuary City movement as a reaction against aggressive deportation efforts by the federal government and refers to the deportation of 410,000 people during the 2012 fiscal year. This number then dropped to 240,000 during 2016. (<http://citiscope.org/story/2017/canada-experiments-us-sanctuary-city-model>)

Now this right is under serious pressure from the central government, threatening to withhold federal funding to cities still upholding the Sanctuary status, and leading foreign-born individuals to cross the border to Canada in great numbers.

In Europe, the rights and well-being of the immigrant and refugee populations have been secured by the cities who have joined the European Union Network of Intercultural Cities. In a previous editorial,<sup>2</sup> I have tried to focus on the role that artists have played in preparing the way for such legislation by promoting and defending spaces for cultural and social sharing in the cities of Oslo (OXLO – Oslo Extra Large) and Hamamatsu, Japan’s music capital. With the rise of nationalist parties in Europe even these avenues for interethnic urban cultural sharing could now be under threat.

So finally, the right to the city for the urban population means the right to enjoy the benefits of cultural and social sharing afforded by the open public meeting spaces that together act as the very engine for creative city living. This was the theme of the Urban Research Plaza’s 15th Forum at the Faculty of Fine and Applied Arts of Chulalongkorn University. In the ASEAN region an important step has been taken to safeguard these spaces through the unique program of mapping

the living arts activities in all of Bangkok's 50 districts initiated and led by Professor Bussakorn Binson, Chair of the Urban Research Plaza of Chulalongkorn University that is now ready to take the next step in vitalizing these local cultural powerhouses keeping our city vibrantly alive.

In this field there are important challenges ahead now waiting for the creative sector to come up with new initiatives: Safeguarding and creating public urban spaces for children, youth and the elderly. It will include protecting old and designing new playgrounds, youth centers, park recreations areas, creating better and safer communication facilities.

The artist community has a key to open a better urban future.

Kjell Skyllstad

### Endnotes

1 Screams and Visions. The arts Embracing Urban Challenges in *Journal of Urban Culture Research*, vol. 13, 2016, pp 4-7.

2 The Tale of Two Cities: Urban Profiles for Partnership and Participation in *JUCR*, vol.12, pp. 4 -7.

