

Introduction

Making the Case for Progressive Engagement

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As the global economy continues to crumble the need to removing housing from the private market would seem to become more and more a self-evident truth. One would think that housing should be a basic right that all members of society should have access to. Yet, the ideologues of the market continue to shift public resources and public goods into private hands.

At the University of British Columbia, a major public research university in Vancouver, a private company managed by members of the regional development elite is in charge of a massive housing boom. When the market took a dive in the fall of 2008 and sales of private housing stock started to fall, the university's private development company shifted from building private condominiums to building rental units. One astute commentator has noted that development on UBC's lands is the equivalent of a "massive social theft" of public property. Members of the development elite run the university's businesses; they are linked through social and business ties to the companies that 'buy' the development rights who in turn are similarly linked to the real estate firms that market the new housing. While it has the appearance of a 'free market,' what is in fact going on seems more akin to a carefully organized transfer of what should be public capital into private profit.

The university is not alone in this drive toward privatizing public assets. Under successive provincial governments public housing projects have been transformed into private housing developments with an 'allocation of non-market' housing. A local cause

célèbre is Little Mountain Housing in the core of the City of Vancouver (see cover photo). Touted as one of Vancouver's oldest social housing projects with a vibrant social community, Little Mountain is slated for redevelopment by a private development company. As part of the deal some 'affordable' housing units will be made available to former Little Mountain residents, but in the meantime the residents have been evicted to clear the way for the privatization of one of the largest pieces of public land left in the City of Vancouver.

In the face of escalating land values in the Vancouver region, publicly held lands represent potential windfall profits for the development elite. Many public institutions, established decades ago, have a legacy of large 'undeveloped' acreage. Under the pretext of raising capital for public institutions the development elite has latched onto a way of profiting from the privatization of public property. They rationalize it within an ideological framework that asserts the primacy and efficiency of market mechanisms—they feel justified in their profiteering and have no qualms about using social networks to gain access to public lands.

The papers in this special issue on Engaged Anthropology show that Anthropologists and other researchers can engage effectively at the local level to counter the dominance of elites such as those in Vancouver. We do not need to let small well-organized elites control our destiny. Good research tied to progressive objectives can make a difference in our world.