

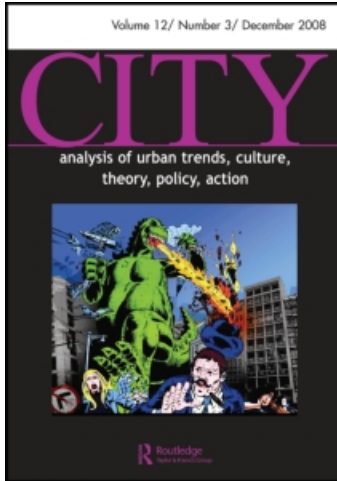
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Mapping (in)justice

Gilda Haas

One of the most compelling ideas in Ed Soja's *Seeking Spatial Justice* is his use of (in)justice, a Tao of spatial justice where forces of oppression and resistance exist simultaneously in geographies of praxis, co-creating each other's objective conditions.

(In)justice is an apt frame for the story arc of my own economic justice work. It provides a large container for the big picture, the reciprocity of place and agency, uniting problem and goal as one.

A few years ago, economists declared that LA was the most unequal city in the USA as evidenced by the vast distance between the richest and poorest residents. As far as I'm concerned, until LA turns up dead last in the inequality Olympics, the primary goal of urban policy must be to bring people closer together. Our yardstick for evaluating policy success or failure would thus be the degree to which inequality has been measurably reduced.

What is good for LA in this regard is also good for the nation. As national policy has served to shape the neoliberal city, the country's economic divide has grown to a chasm reminiscent of the height of the robber barons.

Reversing a process that began almost 40 years ago and has grown deep roots into our national psyche is steady work. It requires the care and feeding of the collective potential of grassroots leaders, the people who channel (in)justice through the stories of their lives, where one moment they are inspiring their neighbors to think and act together to challenge power, and then in the next, they are pushing a broom in an office building or sewing pockets on a dress in a sweatshop or putting children to sleep in a shared bedroom contaminated with lead, mold and vermin.

That sustenance consists of the spaces and tools that enable ordinary people to shape

the future, and in doing so, become (extra)ordinary.

Many of us call those spaces and tools popular education.

Popular education is education for true democracy. Its purpose is to provide people with the information, knowledge and critical conversations that can inform collective decision-making, which is the essence of democratic practice.

Popular education also serves to translate research, experience and history into a shared practice so that (in)justice, its historical moment and its strategic importance can be seen and addressed in action.

Popular education is the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' that can tease out commonalities between poor whites, immigrants and the progeny of former slaves, explaining the geographies of (in)justice that deny some communities credit, decent housing, essential services or even the right to name and remain in the neighborhoods where they have lived for decades.

It is a theory-building endeavor which can be used to produce a people's own theory of change.

What follows is a gallery of images, tools and stories that represent the pushback against and within spatial (in)justice and the kind of critical conversations that are needed for that to succeed.

I hope these small offerings contribute to the utility of this important idea presented in Soja's book.

Follow the money

In 1989, I organized Communities for Accountable Reinvestment, an LA-based coalition led primarily by women of color

dedicated to eliminating redlining (the bank practice of geographically denying loans to communities of color) and producing positive community reinvestment. We mapped patterns of lending discrimination in South Central Los Angeles and used that evidence to support Community Reinvestment Act challenges against big bank mergers and were rewarded with a rare Federal Reserve public hearing in South Central Los Angeles (the scene of the crime). I presented the same information to the Congressional Banking Committee several times.

We employed the results of these tactics as leverage to negotiated agreements with bank presidents for housing and small business loans for the community. Later, we used the same maps and data and constituency to organize our own democratic financial

institution—the South Central People’s Federal Credit Union.

The flier depicted in Figure 1 was drafted in 1990, in the heat of a campaign to bring Security Pacific Bank, a giant at the time, to the community bargaining table. It tells a story that places the long-term community struggle against redlining in the context of the government’s response to that era’s savings and loan debacle (which was pretty similar to the government’s response to the recent mortgage crisis—to bail out the banks, to discount the assets of failed banks and offer them to mega-banks deemed ‘too big to fail’).

Our goal was to provide community residents a sense of standing and entitlement to demands for financial justice. Coalition leaders used the flier to illuminate what the arcane world of banking policy had to do

The flyer is a complex collage of text and graphics. At the top left, a 'RULES' box describes the 1977 Community Reinvestment Act. Next to it is a 'GO' sign with an arrow. The top right section features 'SECURITY PACIFIC' ads, a 'COMMUNITY PROTEST' illustration of a person with a sign, and a 'BRIGHT IDEA' lightbulb icon. The middle section is dominated by a 'Let's Play REDLINING' graphic with a man in a top hat and a 'TAKE BACK THE BAIL-OUT BUCKS!' rally announcement. Below this are 'SECURITY PACIFIC'S FUTURE PLANS' and 'SECURITY PACIFIC BUYS GIBRALTAR' sections. The bottom row includes 'GIBRALTAR SAVINGS FOR SALE, CHEAP', 'SECURITY PACIFIC Don't worry, be happy!', and 'FEDERAL RESERVE' and 'GO BACK 3 SPACES' sections. The entire flyer is filled with small text, illustrations, and bold headlines.

Figure 1 'Redlining' flier prepared for the Communities for Accountable Reinvestment coalition in 1990.

with neighborhoods like South Central Los Angeles where only a few bank branches existed in a 60 square mile area, and those branches rarely made loans to local residents. It helped them tell a story about financial policy's winners and losers.

As you can see from the blank spaces on the flier where the specific date and time and place of the action should be, this flier was never completed. Although it was only distributed to a handful of people, it made its way onto the pages of a magazine and a Bank of America management meeting. It evidently produced conversations within Security Pacific as well, because a meeting with the bank president was scheduled before we had time to complete plans for the demonstration.

As mentioned, we also used our data to tell a proactive story that became the business plan and charter application for the South Central People's Federal Credit Union. At that time, the US government had not chartered a single community development credit union for over a decade, and it appeared that our application, submitted a year before, would meet the same fate. We had not yet heard from the regulators.

The eruption of the 1992 civil unrest changed the terms of that conversation. The media called daily during those days, expressing a new clarity that redlining had been one of the fuels of the fires. Credit union regulators who had ignored us in the past requested a meeting in my office to 'rethink' our application, which was then approved in quick order.

As time passed, our credit union went the way of far larger institutions, like Security Pacific and Washington Mutual, first devoured in a merger and then dissolved. This is not surprising, because the structural relationships that define the US financial sector, for the most part, remain the same as they ever were.

As a result, our current financial crisis in 2010 is a powerful *déjà vu* experience for people who live in communities like South Central Los Angeles. This time, instead of being denied loans, residents were provided

with untenable loans—the worst, most expensive forms of credit available. This has led to the largest loss of black wealth in the USA since there was such a thing as black wealth.

Naming rights

In 1998, Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE) and about two dozen ally organizations joined forces to create the Coalition for a Responsible USC as a counter-weight to the dominant role that the University of Southern California has played in the development of South Central Los Angeles. The Hotel and Restaurant Employees Union (HERE), a key founding member, had represented university food service workers, many who lived in the neighborhood, for 30 years, but had not obtained a contract with the university for the past five years. Winning a contract for the primarily Latino workers became the coalition's first campaign and was viewed as an opportunity to build labor-community relationships through shared work, while adding value to a current struggle.

We won that campaign, but midway through, we all read about a 'Figuroa Corridor' planning initiative in the newspaper. The account indicated that plans were far along, that there had been community participation—though a quick survey revealed that none of our organizations had been invited to the party. The goal of the plan was to integrate and improve the 30 block strip between the university and downtown LA to the north, facing away its location in South Central Los Angeles.

Here was yet another instance of those in power claiming naming rights. In the private sector, this is heavily monetized. For example, the Staples discount office supply superstore chain paid \$116 million dollars for a 20-year contract to fix its name to what is now known as the Staples Center stadium. Ten years into that contract, they decided to hedge their bets in an uncertain economy

recently and produced the ‘first ever lifetime naming-rights extension for a major market arena’ for an undisclosed amount.

In the public sector, the naming rights default to the powerful. The university was able to rename the historic black community of West Adams as University Park. The City Council a few years back deleted the word ‘Central’ from South Central Los Angeles, as though that could erase the still simmering causes of the Watts and 1992 rebellions. This time, an alliance of university, downtown and City Hall interests renamed our neighborhoods the Figueroa Corridor, giving priority to a valuable commercial stretch over the 200,000 working-class residents who surround it.

In light of all these events, the coalition decided to co-opt rather than combat the name. We expanded our boundaries, mission and membership and renamed ourselves the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice. In a form of announcement, in 2000,

we published a fold-out map and brochure as a tool to help reframe development conversations and to establish the area as contested terrain (Figure 2).

The map, entitled ‘Power, People and Possibilities in the Figueroa Corridor’, locates our coalition members, the holdings of the area’s 10 largest property owners and ‘hot properties’—the spatial (in)justice targets upon which we had set our sites. We included the holdings of Frank McHugh, the city’s largest slumlord, who you will learn more about later in this paper, as well as what we then referred to as ‘Staples World’, the sports and entertainment district planned by the Anschutz Entertainment Group, who owned the adjacent Staples Center. This project, now called LA Live was the source of the Staples Agreement, a community benefits agreement for which the coalition is best known around the country.

The 5000 copies of the map produced at least that many conversations. The map was

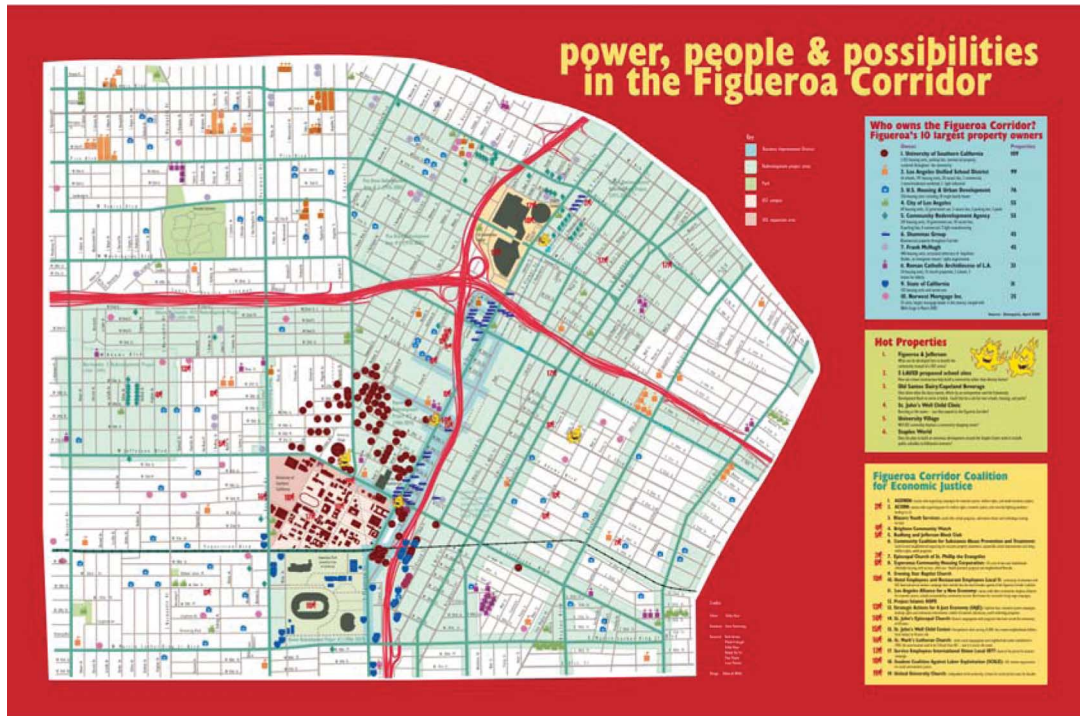


Figure 2 ‘Power, People & Possibilities in the Figueroa Corridor’. Map published by Strategic Actions for a Just Economy in 2000.

used as a tool to tell one story on community doorsteps, another in City Hall offices and another at the bargaining table with the Anschutz Entertainment Group. The stories were different and driven by the position of the storyteller, but they were aligned through shared principles.

By 2005, some of the ‘hot properties’ had been transformed into victories and there were other changes, some hopeful, some disparaging. We were at a different moment in the story of (in)justice. The investment that produced the Staples Agreement in 2001, by now had fueled gentrification and displacement at a speed and ferocity that we could not anticipate. We had begun to organize a people’s redevelopment institution in the form of a democratic community land trust. It was time for the raw material of people, power and possibilities to be refined into a theory of change. It was time for a new story and a new map.

The new map is called ‘The Figueroa Corridor Strategy for Urban Land Reform’

(Figure 3). It includes the boundaries of the land trust field of membership, and it locates our ‘displacement free zones’—areas where displacement will be resisted with concentrated organizing and legal defense. It lists our victories and our new targets. On the other side, it explains what urban land reform means at this particular moment to denizens of the People’s Figueroa Corridor.

Slum empire

In 2002, tenant organizers at SAJE were faced with a dilemma. They had to decide whether or not to take on an organizing campaign around the horrific conditions of the Morrison Hotel in the Figueroa Corridor. There were quite a few arguments in the ‘con’ column, including the fact that we had no experience with residential hotels, which at the time were regulated by a different set of rules and city agencies than the apartment buildings that we normally organized.

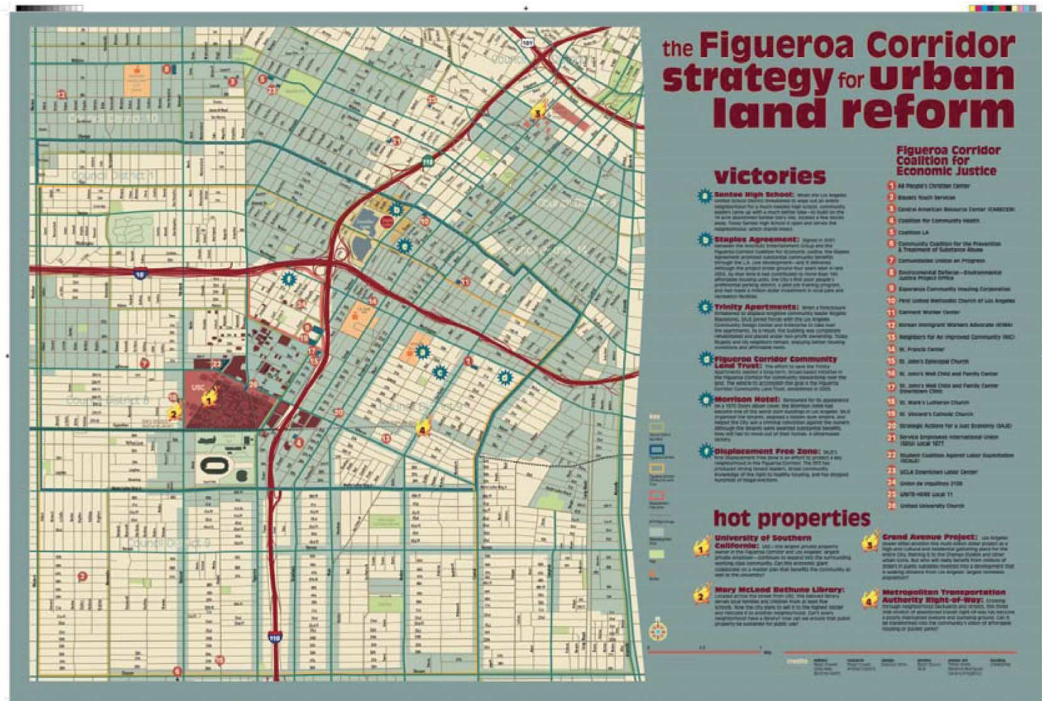


Figure 3 ‘The Figueroa Corridor Strategy for Urban Land Reform’. New map published by Strategic Actions for a Just Economy in 2005.

But at the end of the day, in a decision that would change SAJE forever, we went for it. Andrea Gibbons, who was heading the campaign at the time, pursued her research tasks with a vengeance. The result is illustrated in Figure 4, which builds connections between what once appeared to be singular holdings by limited liability companies, individuals and other legal fictions. What emerged instead was a family-owned criminal slum empire.

Figure 4 includes the family's business partners (in purple), property holding companies (in blue), the properties that they own (in yellow and orange), additional businesses (in green), past lawsuits and city actions (red squares). The black swath represents the mortgage company owned by the family that financed their dealings.

Andrea's slum empire map produced a new story of (in)justice and many new conversations at every level of our power analysis, which at the end of the day led to the first criminal conviction of a slumlord by the City since the 1980s.

This is a good luck story. The Morrison Hotel was featured on an album cover by the world-renown Doors band (*Morrison Hotel*) in the 1980s. Our campaign press releases were picked up by Associated Press, and reworked into an international release with a first line that opened 'Doors Hotel is a slum'. In a flash, our campaign was covered by scores of newspaper articles across the country and the world.

Previously, the hotel management (whose reign of terror included intimidating tenants with a pit bull, turning off the electricity and the elevator, and never making repairs as the building crumbled around its residents) could nevertheless call the police against the organizers, and receive sympathetic treatment, while the police threatened arrest of our staff, who had been invited into the tenants' homes. The unusually bright media light accelerated the production of a new common sense about the hotel in the city—about who were victims (tenants) and who were villains (slumlords) and about who was on the side of

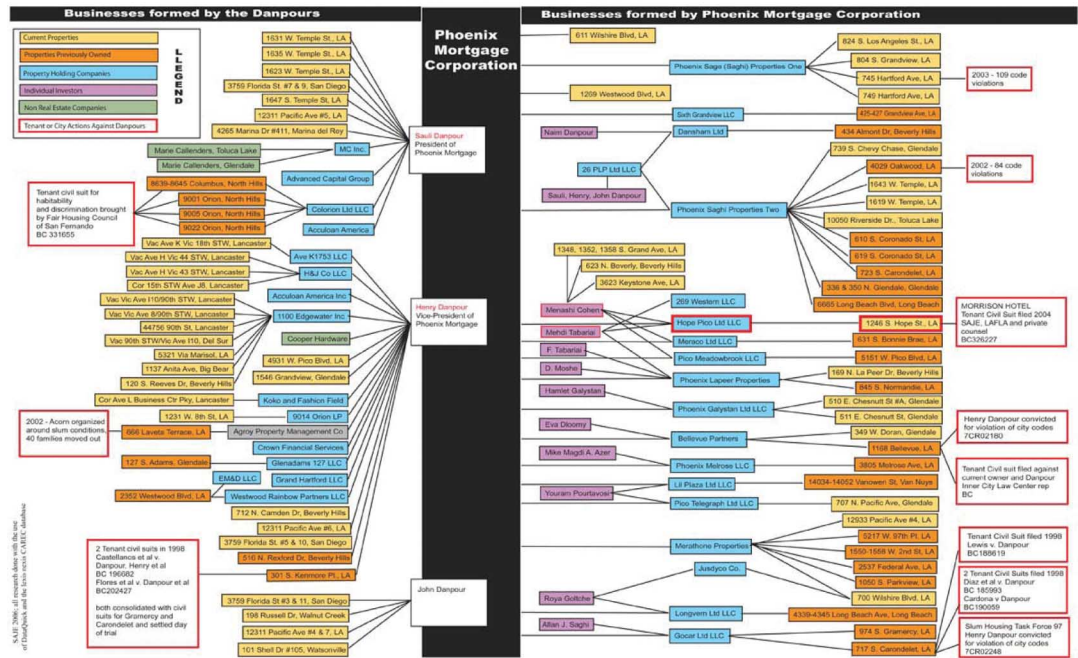


Figure 4 Slum Empire Map. Source: Andrea Gibbons.

right (SAJE). This turn of perception kept the campaign and people's spirits alive through the soul-crushing mechanics of lawsuits, bureaucracies and politics where poor people rarely, if ever, fair well.

Andrea's slum empire map became the prototype for another campaign against LA's most notorious slumlord, Frank McHugh, who owned over 200 slum buildings many of which, like the Morrison Hotel, were in the Figueroa Corridor. We reached out to 60 of those buildings, collected evidence, mapped information and collaborated with a health clinic, health promoters and other organizers. We created a white paper and presentation that posed slum housing as the number one health risk to children in Los Angeles. We re-shaped the story once again.

This past April, the Los Angeles Superior Court sentenced Frank McHugh to 48 months probation, forbade him from managing any residential property in the city, and ordered him to deposit funds into a trust account for the complete rehabilitation and maintenance of all his properties.

Explaining the neoliberal city

At around the same time that SAJE was deliberating what urban land reform might mean in the Figueroa Corridor, I was invited by Manuel Pastor and Martha Matsuoka to participate in a panel about community benefits agreements at a convening in Miami that was hosted by the Miami Workers Center. Soon after we arrived in Miami, we went out to lunch with the Center's Director, Gihan Perera. Gihan and I speed-dated our way through the meal, identifying common interests and some exciting possibilities. A few weeks later, I was introduced to his good friend and ally, Jon Liss, the Director of Tenants and Workers United in Virginia. For the next year and a half, the three of us set about the work of creating a frame that could connect not only our respective work, but the brilliant endeavors of other urban organizations as well, which together,

had yet to have any serious impact on the national scale of (in)justice. Our goal was to produce a call that could inspire a meaningful convening. A critical mass.

Gihan and Jon are great organizers and rare intellectuals who inspire and require theory-making at the base. At the time of our first meeting, Gihan had already been writing a paper about the Miami global/local context called 'RENT: Regional Equity for Neighborhoods and Tenants'. We agreed to begin our collaboration by writing a national version of what Gihan had begun. This effort produced many useful conversations, iterations of ideas and a lot of eloquent pages. At the same time, we needed something that could be digested by others at a glance. I made it my task to turn its salient points into a one-page drawing (Figure 5).

We used this to guide conversations with prospective allies and funders and within our own organizations. Our shared writing adventure was not a waste of time. It was a common experience that helped us name a shared proactive vision.

We started with RENT and spent a moment on Urban Land Reform. We settled on the Right to the City, an idea which resonated with each of us in a powerful and useful way, and had the same effect on our allies who shared our values and experience of (in)justice, colored by their own local contexts and histories.

The one-page flier was elaborated into a PowerPoint presentation that was presented at the 2007 convening in Los Angeles that produced the national Right to the City Alliance. At the end of the meetings, a new group of volunteer leaders committed to refining and expanding the presentation into a Right to the City 101 workshop that debuted at the first US Social Forum in Atlanta to a standing-room-only crowd.

A mobile planning lab

One of the entries in the *Just Spaces* exhibit was a visual response by Camp Baltimore to



Figure 5 'What's Behind the New Gentrification?' Source: Gilda Haas.

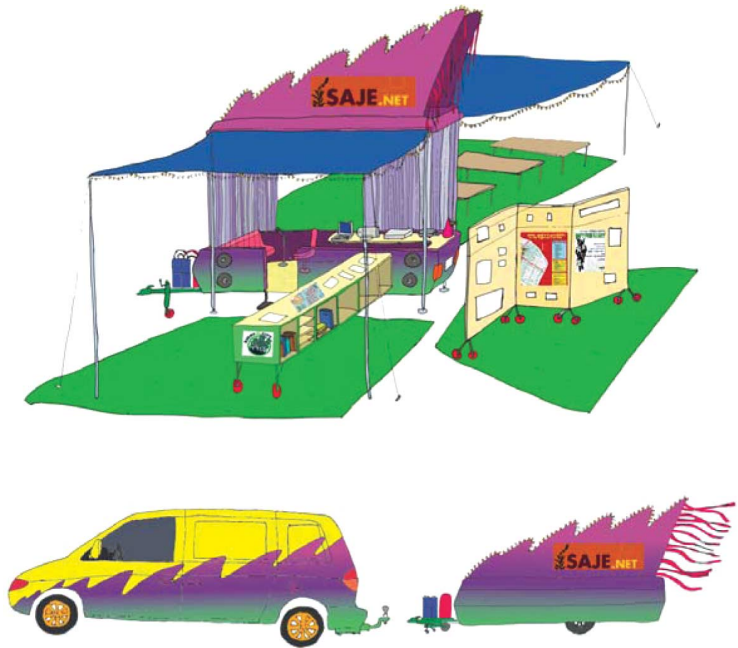


Figure 6 Drawings of a converted bread truck and pop-up trailer by the Camp Baltimore team of artist-activist-planners. Source: Scott Berzofsky, Chris Gladora, Dane Nester and Nicholas Wisneski.



Figure 7 SAJE pop-up trailer. Photo by Ava Bromberg.

the question: What would a mobile planning lab for SAJE look like? Figure 6 presents their drawings of a converted bread truck and pop-up trailer by their team of artist-activist-planners.

I was most taken with the pop-up trailer version on the left, outfitted to take SAJE's People's Planning School out to neighborhood streets. The image was so whimsically compelling and so in tune with our vision of what it takes to produce spatial justice. I was inspired.

Camp Baltimore people came to visit and agreed to revise the drawings to accommodate some practical considerations and to make implementation more simple, and thus, more likely.

I raised the funds and bought SAJE a pop-up trailer (Figure 7). The resourceful Ava Bromberg signed on to manage the project along with other volunteers. It has appeared in parking lots after a city planning hearing, to debrief and educate. It has popped up at a health fair to promote the land trust. Now that (in)justice has wheels, there are many more opportunities for conversations ahead.

The artifacts presented above may be only the ephemera of organizing campaigns, but they were created to give people more power over the story of spatial (in)justice. This is critical to the assurance that another world is indeed possible, because as Salman Rushdie says so well:

'Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.'

Gilda Haas is an organizer, educator, and urban planner who lives in Los Angeles. She was the founding Director of Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE), a co-founder of the Right to the City Alliance, and has helped many communities create economic campaigns and programs over the past 30 years. Gilda teaches community and economic development in UCLA's Urban Planning Department where she also founded their Community Scholars Program. Her alter-ego, Dr. Pop, may be found at <http://drpop.org>. Email: gilda@drpop.org