

Another World

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By Shea Howell

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On the eve of the second United States Social Forum being held June 22-26 in Detroit, the New York Times, the nation's newspaper of record, ran another story about the shrinking of Detroit.

The article captured the abandonment of the city and chronicled our ills so effectively that it prompted Bob Herbert, its most sensitive columnist, to use Detroit as a prime example of "When greatness slips away."

On the day the USSF opened, Herbert writes: "As a nation, we are becoming more and more accustomed to a sense of helplessness. We no longer rise to the great challenges before us. It's not just that we can't plug the oil leak, which is the perfect metaphor for what we've become. We can't seem to do much of anything.

"The city of Detroit is using federal money to destroy thousands upon thousands of empty homes, giving into a sense of desperation that says there's no way to rebuild the city; so let's do the opposite: Let's destroy even more of it. Lots more of it.

"There are plans aplenty for demolishing large parts of what's left of Detroit, which in its heyday was the symbol of an America that was still a powerfully constructive force, a place that could produce things and improve the lives of its people and inspire the rest of the world."

Mr. Herbert is horrified at the comment by the Times' Susan Saulny that one of the most popular plans for the city includes urban homesteading or "country living in the city" with "homeowners enjoying an agricultural environment and lower taxes in exchange for disconnecting from some city services like water."

Both reporters need to put down their notebooks and come to the USSF. They also need to put down some very old ideas and ask themselves some new questions.

Virtually every one of the 20,000 plus activists and artists coming to the USSF in Detroit is coming because we believe "Another World is Possible, Another World is Necessary and Another World is Happening in Detroit." These are not just empty slogans. While there will be many differences at the forum, we all know we are entering a very new time on the clock of the world. Old ways are dying. Something new is being born.

Unlike mainstream media, people coming to the USSF recognize that government has neither the will nor the capacity to address the crisis we face. Topdown solutions simply are not working.

We have not come to this belief out of some wild-eyed ideology. We are not blinded by nostalgia for the 1960s. Nor are we what the Detroit News columnist Nolan Finley called a "hootenanny of pinkos, environuts, peaceniks, Luddites, old hippies, Robin Hoods and urban hunters and gatherers," — although many of us recognize that these groups have fashioned much of what is good in the world.

However, we have come to the conclusion that change from the top down is destroying this city, this country and the very Earth we all share. We have come to this conclusion based on

our experience. Any Detroiter, including Mr. Finley, should be able to chronicle the decades of failure driven by the solutions of our business elite. To name just a few: Parke Davis. The Renaissance Center. Poletown. The Incinerator. Enterprise zones. Casino Gambling. Stadiums. FoxTown. The plain fact is that every scheme from the business elite has failed to change neighborhood life and has usually been little more than a way to leverage public money to support private enterprise, lining the pockets of a few.

Meanwhile, the creative and constructive forces that Mr. Herbert longs for have been evolving in Detroit from the ground up, inspiring people from around the country. Detroit has one of the most vibrant and imaginative urban gardening movements in the world. The pain and trauma of city life are being transformed through art, music and social organizations into new ways of living together and into new visions of what it will mean to live in a world where the empires and the me-firstness of the old world have given way to a new spirit of cooperation and care.

This new world has been emerging from the work of women, indigenous leadership and visionary activists in the Global South. It was from the streets of Brazil and the mountains of Chiapas, more than a decade ago, that people learned another world was possible.

Now, in a time when it is clear that another world is necessary, Detroit, Detroiters and the wonderful people converging at the 2nd USSF are bringing this new world into being. Join us.