

Katrina vanden Heuvel: The US Should End the Cuban Embargo



Housing: An LA Story

Two years after a tragic accident, activists are celebrating a major victory.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele March 28, 2002 | This article appeared in the April 15, 2002 edition of *The Nation*.

Like 0 Tweet 0 TEXT SIZE SUBSCRIBE

On December 8, 2000, just after 8 am, 31-year-old Juan Pineda, a father of two children from Guatemala, was crushed to death when a two-story slum apartment building in Los Angeles's Echo Park neighborhood collapsed. Another thirty-six low-income tenants--mainly immigrant garment workers, day laborers and their children--were injured. More than 100 residents were left temporarily homeless.

This article is part of the "What Works" series, which explores effective strategies for improving people's lives through progressive social change.

About the Author

Kelly Candaele

Kelly Candaele is a writer, a founding member of the Peace Institute at California State University, Chico, and a...

Peter Dreier

Peter Dreier is E.P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics and chair of the Urban & Environmental Policy...

Also by the Author

Hall of Fame Shut-Out (Sports)

A conspiracy of management cronies is blocking 91-year-old union pioneer Marvin Miller from the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele

Reform Comes to the Boardroom (Corporate Responsibility, Society)

Corporate America needs the discipline of democracy to help rid it of some very bad habits. And shareholder activists are pushing the SEC to shore up their rights.

Kelly Candaele

Also by the Author

Shut Down the Merchants of Death (Guns and Gun Control)

It's time to end the sale of military-style assault weapons to civilians.

Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen
Obama Won. Now It's Time to

For years, tenants had complained about the building's numerous health and safety violations, including a faulty foundation, but city housing inspectors allowed the absentee landlord to get away with only minor repairs. The tragedy put a human face on the city's severe housing crisis and the failure of the city's political leaders to address the problem.

The outrage inspired by the Echo Park building collapse helped to galvanize a movement for decent affordable housing that had come together the previous year, spearheaded by Housing LA, a broad coalition of labor unions, community organizations and housing groups. On January 17, 2002, when Mayor James Hahn announced plans for a \$100 million annual Housing Trust Fund--the largest in the country--to expand the city's supply of affordable housing, it was the crowning achievement of Housing LA's two-year grassroots campaign. State Assemblywoman Jackie Goldberg, a former LA city councilwoman, called the fund "the most important progressive victory in the city since the living wage law was adopted" in 1997.

During the past decade, as the federal government cut funds for construction of low-rent housing and as housing prices spiraled upward, LA has faced a deepening shortage of affordable housing. In a city of 4 million people--more than one-quarter of them below the poverty line--the median house costs more than \$249,500. The city's homeownership rate--39 percent--is the lowest in the country except for New York City. But unlike New York, LA has few government-subsidized apartments.

Rents are so high that a family needs to earn almost \$20 an hour to afford the typical apartment. About one out of seven apartments--more than 125,000 units--is substandard. Many families live in overcrowded housing, and an estimated 40,000 live in garages. Just to keep pace with population increases, LA needs to add at least 5,000 affordable units a year, but last year the city added only 1,200 units.

Change the System (Barack Obama, Campaign Finance, Labor, Voter Rights, Activism, Citizens United, Corporate Lobbying, The Left)

In the next four years—and beyond—progressives must create the political space for the president to represent the majority of Americans.

Peter Dreier and Donald Cohen

During the eight-year regime of Mayor Richard Riordan, a moderate Republican who was term-limited out of office last year, tenants groups, nonprofit housing developers and homeless advocates had little success getting city officials or the local media to make housing a priority. The city used none of its own funds to subsidize affordable housing.

How did activists manage to produce a dramatic turnabout in the city's political priorities?

"We knew we had to broaden the coalition for housing beyond the 'usual suspects' of housing developers and tenants groups," explained Jan Breidenbach, executive director of the Southern California Association for Non-Profit Housing, the campaign's key strategist. "We had to engage the unions, especially those that represent the working poor, who bear the brunt of the housing crisis, as well as the building trades, whose members would build some of the housing. We also reached out to the religious community and to community organizing groups."

Breidenbach recognized that the June 2001 municipal elections--the open mayoral seat attracted six candidates and the six open seats on the fifteen-member City Council attracted several candidates each--provided a strategic opening to inject housing issues into mainstream political debate.

Cardinal Roger Mahoney and LA County Federation of Labor head Miguel Contreras agreed to serve as Housing LA's co-chairs, solidifying a labor-community alliance forged by the city's key activists over several years. Labor, religious and civic leaders agreed to serve on the steering committee but, more important, to raise the issue among rank-and-file members and make affordable housing a key part of candidate endorsement interviews. Housing LA distributed 10,000 copies of a pamphlet summarizing candidates' views on housing. Its constituents showed up regularly at candidates' forums sponsored by unions, churches, the Progressive Los Angeles Network and such community organizations as ACORN, Coalition LA, LA Metro Strategy and POWER, to ask officeseekers their views on housing policy ideas.

To gain the support of LA's fragmented business community, the coalition pointed out that many major employers faced problems recruiting workers because of the region's high housing costs. Two influential business lobby groups endorsed the general idea of a trust fund but opposed the coalition's proposal to fund part of it with a "linkage" fee on commercial developers.

Peter Dreier and Kelly Candaele March 28, 2002 | This article appeared in the April 15, 2002 edition of *The Nation*.

Like 0 Tweet 0 [Email icon] TEXT SIZE [minus] [plus] SUBSCRIBE

Print | Web Letter (0) | Write a Letter | Single Page

Suggested for you

- [Puzzle No. 3288](#)
- [Natural Born Killers](#)
- [Ground Zero Sum](#)
- [Distortions and Divisions](#)
- [Shelf Life](#)
- [Letters](#)

From around the web

Advertisement

- [Snoring can be a sign of a serious health issue, and can drive your pa... My Snoring Solution](#)
- [Find out the confidential lowdown on getting discounts the public does... Vacations To Go](#)
- [Los Angeles : New trick allows California drivers to get auto insuran... Wholesale Auto Insurance](#)
- [Los Angeles arrest records. Who do you know? You may be surprised! Se... InstantCheckMate](#)
- [Billionaires Dump Stocks After Prophetic Economist Issues Dire Warning... newsmax](#)
- [The FDA has approved a solution for snoring & sleep apnea that does no... American Sleep](#)

— Nation —
BUILDERS **Your Voice. Your Values. Your Nation.**
 Confirm your commitment to The Nation's groundbreaking news and commentary, driving progressive values into our national conversation.

Like

Add New Comment

Login

Before commenting, please read our [Community Guidelines](#).

 Type your comment here.

Real-time updating is **paused**. (Resume)

Showing 0 comments

Sort by newest first

[Subscribe by email](#) [RSS](#)

Trackback URL

More Politics


Tom Paine, Nelson Mandela and "The Birth of a New World." (Colonialism, Congress, Government, Activism, Politics, World)


Sequestration Watch: Hunger by the Numbers
 (Budget Wars, Public Policy, Poverty)

Oh, Right, the Jobs Crisis
 (Congress, Government, Economic Policy, Politics)

A New Strategy for Voting Rights (Voter Rights, Activism)

Nation Media

 **WATCH: NYC Mayoral Forum**

 **WATCH: Netroots Nation, Live From San Jose**

 **Sal Albanese: Poverty Is New York's Main Issue**

 **John Nichols: Data Mining American Voters**

Also From The Nation

Top Ten July 4th Songs (Music)

Lesbian Husbands and Gay Wives: The Gendering of Gay Divorce (Feminism, Supreme Court, Sex and Sexuality)

Tom Paine, Nelson Mandela and "The Birth of a New World." (Colonialism, Congress, Government, Activism, Politics, World)

Will Crossfire 'Hurt America' Again?

[f](#) [t](#) [s](#) [RSS](#)

- Home
- Blogs
- Columns
- Current Issue
- Magazine Archive
- Multimedia
- E-Books
- Puzzle
- Community
- Educators
- Students

- Politics
- World
- Books & Arts
- Economy
- Environment
- Activism
- Society

- Advertise
- Subscription Services
- The Nation Builders
- Newsletter
- Nation in the News
- Store
- Spanish Translations

- Help
- About & Contact
- Digital, Mobile and E-Reader
- Community Guidelines
- Work for Us
- Privacy Policy
- Terms of Use

Copyright © 2012 The Nation

