

# Up, Down, Inside, Outside: (New) Directions for Progressive Planning in the U.S.

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Finding ourselves in a hostile political environment, progressive planners in the U.S. can learn new strategies for social change by looking in new directions. Looking *up* to Canada and *down* to Latin America can demonstrate *what else* is feasible now and possible later. Looking more closely at the experiences of our geographic neighbors can also reveal new ways of working both *inside* and *outside* the structures of government, as illustrated in the two examples below. I use “new” with a caveat since these directions are not entirely distinct from existing approaches, but neither are they standard practice.

## Participatory Budgeting in Toronto Community Housing

Originally developed in Brazil, participatory budgeting is a democratic process for deciding resource allocations. Participatory budgeting is best known for its use with municipal government budgets, but the process is increasingly being applied in other institutions, such as regional government bodies, schools, and public housing companies. One example of these new applications is the Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), which has been allocating \$9 million (CAD) of its capital budget per year through a participatory budgeting process.

Starting in 2001, the 164,000 public housing tenants of the TCHC have been deciding how the Corporation’s discretionary funding is allocated for building improvement projects. Through a series of facilitated meetings over the course of several months, tenants decide on local (building), regional (building cluster), and city-wide spending priorities. TCHC staff provide technical support and guidance as tenants identify, learn about, and vote on the main community housing issues and priorities.

Ultimately, elected tenant representatives and staff integrate the different community spending priorities into a single participatory budget, using equity criteria that focus funding on buildings with the greatest needs. The participatory budget is then approved by the TCHC’s Board of Directors and implemented over the course of the following year. Tenant delegates disseminate information about the approved budget and oversee the implementation of approved projects through a monitoring committee.

What are the results? The first participatory budgeting cycle provided funding for 237 new local infrastructure projects, such as playgrounds, building heating, and accessibility ramps. Tenants and staff also gained a greater appreciation of the needs of different public housing communities in Toronto, partly through bus tours to different buildings. Although most tenants started with a “me me me” approach focused on their own problems, after a few admittedly difficult meetings they often began to appreciate the interests of other participants. Realizing that other tenants had graver needs, many participants voluntarily gave up their funds to support more disadvantaged communities. One participant explained this as a natural result of such an intense deliberative process: “once everybody gave a little bit, we all came together as a community.”

## Autonomous ‘Caracols’ in Chiapas, Mexico

Continuing a long tradition of indigenous resistance, the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in 2003 established a new system of autonomous municipal and regional governance, called *caracols* (snails). Assailed by the military and neglected by the state government, the Zapatistas have attempted to build their own governments from the bottom up. The resulting caracols are independent government bodies that function as an alternative to the Mexican state and a space for more participatory planning and governance.

Each caracol consists of roughly seven rural municipalities radiating out from a central administrative and community core (the center of the snail). Residents in each community elect their own community council

and two members of the caracol's 14-member *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (Board of Good Government). The community councils are responsible for maintaining lines of communication with and between village residents and the Board. The Board is responsible for responding to community problems, safeguarding against corruption, resolving legal disputes, and communicating with international Zapatista supporters. As the Zapatistas explain, however, neither the community councils nor the caracol Board make decisions independently. Rather, both operate according to the principle that "the people command and the government obeys."

The Zapatista caracols function both alongside and in opposition to Mexican state government. While the state government is largely inaccessible in the remote Chiapas villages, the caracols maintain community offices in each municipality and in the caracol center. The Mexican government has not provided funding for these government services, but Board members claim that they can maintain the caracols through volunteer community labor and foreign donations. The Zapatistas have also established their own legal code, and caracol residents can now seek justice from either Zapatista or Mexican laws.

What have the caracols accomplished? Village residents have used them to build free health clinics and autonomous community schools. Through the caracols, many municipalities have established cooperative agricultural and handicrafts-producing programs. According to the Zapatistas, these new systems are more responsive to the needs and cultures of the region's predominately indigenous population, in contrast to the neglect and inefficacy of the Mexican state.

### **Looking Inside and Outside of Government Planning**

Unfortunately, neither widespread participatory budgeting nor autonomous revolutionary governments appear to be looming on U.S. horizons. So what can we learn from these experiences of our neighbors to the north and south? Amongst other things, perhaps they can illustrate ways of opening up new spaces for progressive planning both *inside* and *outside* of existing power structures in the U.S.

In Toronto, progressives have found a niche for participatory budgeting despite a lukewarm municipal government. While lobbying the City, participatory budgeting advocates have also sought out more receptive and strategic institutions to democratize. By promoting participatory budgeting in public housing, schools, and unions, they are working to establish a more organic base for participatory planning in the demographic communities that need participation the most. In the U.S., we might also benefit from searching out and focusing more on the niches of the existing government where change is most possible and our efforts most productive.

In Chiapas, Zapatistas are learning to work around the unresponsive Mexican government and build their own alternative governance systems, in order to better meet the basic needs of indigenous communities. By working outside of the state power structure, the Zapatista caracols have been able to establish communal agricultural systems and design their own school curriculum (which now includes humanism and systems of production as core subjects). The Zapatistas claim that they would have been unable to achieve these changes by working through traditional state channels of lobbying and advocacy, and the past actions of the Mexican government seem to support this claim.

All of this is not to suggest that we ignore the current government and move to autonomous rural collectives (although there are certainly worse options), but rather, that we seek out news ways to delve deeper inside and farther outside the problematic government that we are stuck with. Looking up, we can see progressive programs that are already feasible in a society similar to the U.S. Looking down, we can see how, when confronted with extremely unjust regimes, people have created their own spaces for participatory democratic governance. So what are progressives in community development and planning to do when faced with the Bush regime? Let's start by looking for inspiration in new places.

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