

Burning Questions: On Land, Property, and Other Issues

Uncommonwealth — №4



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This article is part of [Uncommonwealth](#), a series of articles that discuss housing affordability, economic justice, and inequality in the United States.

In previous articles within this [series](#), I have argued that the [driving force behind the housing affordability crisis](#) is our housing system itself, one based on the commodification of land, the private appropriation of public value, and the accumulation of wealth through land. Additionally, I have discussed that [profiting from land is ultimately immoral](#) and unjustifiable. Finally, I have also explained that [no one, not even people who have already bought into this system, is in the clear](#); we are all going to pay the

consequences for embracing this destructive system sooner or later.

Many questions have arisen from these articles and the claims therein, so at this moment I want to address three questions whose clarification is critical to understanding this perspective:

Question 1: What is the alternative to the current housing system?

Frankly, I don't have concrete answers for you (...yet). As I've mentioned before, my purpose is to spark the conversation, to help others recognize the inequity and unsustainability inherent in our existing housing system, and to join others in creating new paradigms and models for housing that are more equitable and sustainable.

Again, a good point of departure would be to explore, experiment with, and evaluate existing alternative arrangements, models, and policies like [community land trusts](#) and other [shared equity housing](#) models, [land-value taxes](#), and other [land-value capture](#) strategies that, to varying degrees, eliminate perverse economic incentives and increase the supply of housing to promote affordability.

As I continue to research these solutions and to carry out conversations with the experts, I will share my findings and will

offer concrete examples of what is being done in the United States and elsewhere. For now, let it suffice to say that the alternative we ought to seek is a system that promotes the private tenure of homes, on the one hand, and community / public ownership and stewardship of land, on the other; a system in which all of us have an equal stake and an equal voice in determining how we use land as our common heritage and right.

Question 2: Are you opposed to the private ownership of property?

No. I am not proposing that we do away with the private ownership of *homes*, the physical structures built on the land. Rather, I am questioning the exclusive and private ownership and stewardship of land, meaning that individuals who possess land unilaterally and exclusively dictate how that land is to be used, often at the expense of others and usually against the interests of society as a whole.

Question 3: Are you saying that I should rent rather than own?

This question stems from a misunderstanding of what I have written and I think it is very important to address it again now: if you already purchased a home, I am not suggesting that you should necessarily go back to renting. As already mentioned, [I do not think enriching landlords is the answer either](#). My point is *not* that renting is morally superior to owning or vice versa; from a practical perspective, there are arguments to be made for

both approaches, depending on a wide variety of circumstances and preferences.

The point I am making is that no one should enrich themselves through land, period, whether they live in it themselves or rent it out to others: (1) no one should accumulate wealth from owning land by appropriating the windfall value that accrues to their home, value that is created not by them but by society; and (2) no one should profit from land by renting it to others at a price that exceeds the costs of running such rental operations.

If you, like me, have already bought a home then what I am asking is that you look at it carefully and remind yourself that it is your home, a place in which you and others live, work, play, learn, and thrive; it should not be seen as an asset, an investment opportunity, a retirement plan, a commodity to be accumulated, traded, and disposed of for profit. What I am arguing is that the latter perspective that commodifies your house is one that is detrimental for all of us as a society. Land is limited and we all need it fundamentally, so a system based on the the commodification of land necessarily leads to exclusion, an endless appreciation of land values, and a lack of affordability.

In practice, what I am asking of you is to recognize the problems with this system, how it will impact you and others, to challenge it, and to act accordingly by working with others to create a new housing system in which you ultimately are willing to see your

house as a home and nothing more and willing to relinquish the valuation that accrues to your house. Why? Because you didn't earn it.