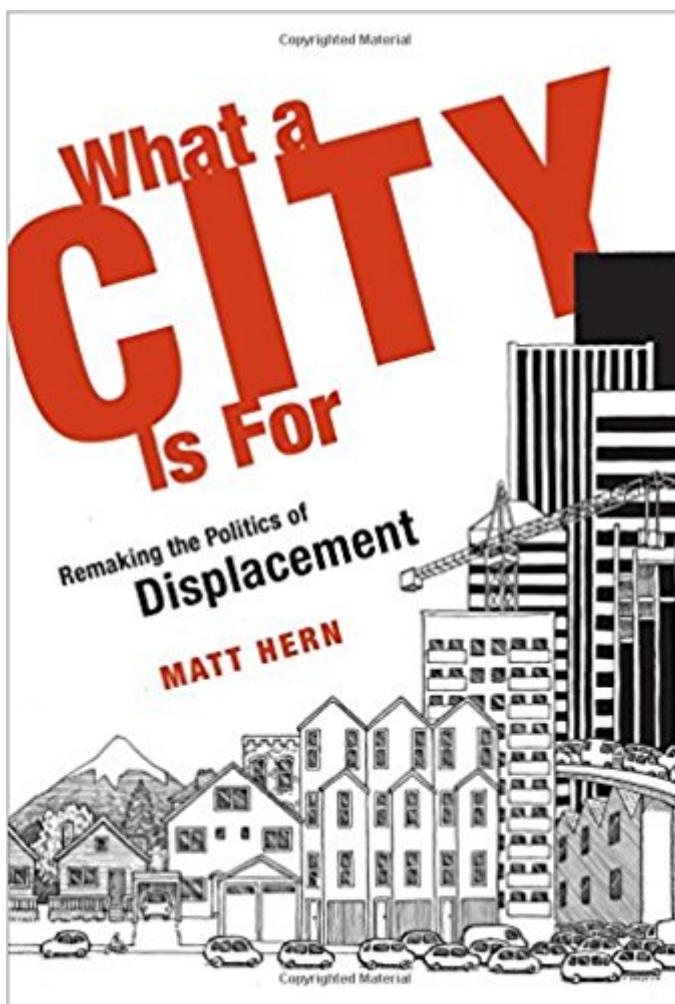


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# What A City Is For: Remaking The Politics Of Displacement (MIT Press)



## Synopsis

Portland, Oregon, is one of the most beautiful, livable cities in the United States. It has walkable neighborhoods, bike lanes, low-density housing, public transportation, and significant green space -- not to mention craft-beer bars and locavore food trucks. But liberal Portland is also the whitest city in the country. This is not circumstance; the city has a long history of officially sanctioned racialized displacement that continues today. Over the last two and half decades, Albina -- the one major Black neighborhood in Portland -- has been systematically uprooted by market-driven gentrification and city-renewal policies. African Americans in Portland were first pushed into Albina and then contained there through exclusionary zoning, predatory lending, and racist real estate practices. Since the 1990s, they've been aggressively displaced -- by rising housing costs, developers eager to get rid of low-income residents, and overt city policies of gentrification. Displacement and dispossessions are convulsing cities across the globe, becoming the dominant urban narratives of our time. In *What a City Is For*, Matt Hern uses the case of Albina, as well as similar instances in New Orleans and Vancouver, to investigate gentrification in the twenty-first century. In an engaging narrative, effortlessly mixing anecdote and theory, Hern questions the notions of development, private property, and ownership. Arguing that home ownership drives inequality, he wants us to disown ownership. How can we reimagine the city as a post-ownership, post-sovereign space? Drawing on solidarity economics, cooperative movements, community land trusts, indigenous conceptions of alternative sovereignty, the global commons movement, and much else, Hern suggests repudiating development in favor of an incrementalist, non-market-driven unfolding of the city.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Matt Hern's *What a City Is For* not only offers a brilliant analysis of the violence of urban dispossession and displacement in settler-colonial contexts, but envisions a radically alternative view of the city grounded in a decolonized conception of land and sovereignty. (Glen Sean Coulthard, author of *Red Skin, White Masks*)Hern has an entirely unique voice and approach to writing that seamlessly braids incisive intervention with sharp analysis and a phenomenal capacity to tell stories that makes him one of my favorite subversive intellectuals. With a beautiful commitment to the politics of embodied and critical action, *What a City Is For* takes us through a rethinking of the politics of cities by carefully dismantling the root -- capitalism, settler colonialism, and anti-Blackness. This book is a raw, honest, and brilliant analysis delivered with the fire of someone who cares very deeply about the world we share. His words fly off the page and into my life as he invites me to envision a different way of living in a different world, and in doing so, he makes me feel less alone. (Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, author of *Dancing on Our Turtle's Back*)What makes a neighborhood particularly 'gentrifiable'? Why do displacement and dispossession continue to be such central aspects of capitalist urbanism, and how do they operate at present? In this eminently readable, personable, and honest book, Matt Hern focuses his perceptive bifocal activist-theorist lens on these questions with incredibly rich results. Readers will find in this book the seeds of a dissenting urban imagination, one that credibly construes attachment to land as a source of radical resistance, urban design as a technology of freedom, and place-based activism as a means to a new ontology of dwelling. (Arturo Escobar, Professor of Anthropology, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill) *What a City Is For* is a scholarly look at Portland made accessible to general readers. Matt Hern's work is essential reading for anyone interested in urban studies and the politics of Portland generally. This text will stand the test of time. (Judson L. Jeffries, Professor of African American and African Studies, The Ohio State University, coauthor of *The Portland Black Panthers*)This book is a timely and critical study of the devastating consequences of unbridled speculative real estate forces and their disproportionate impact on the lives and livelihoods of the African American community in Portland, Oregon. It offers a shocking portrayal of the deliberate process of displacement and subsequent impoverishment of the black communities. *What a City Is For* is an eloquent cry for the de-commodification of housing and land as perhaps the

only way to truly build cities where all the residents have equal rights to everything that cities have to offer. (Miloon Kothari, former Special Rapporteur on Adequate Housing, United Nations Human Rights Council) His study of the cleansing of [Portland's] black-majority Albina neighbourhood makes for a thoughtful, first-person book... (Times Higher Education)

Matt Hern is Codirector of 2+10 Industries, teaches at multiple universities, and lectures widely. He is the author of *Common Ground in a Liquid City*.

### Overly theoretical

I had high hopes for this book. I live in Portland near the Albina neighborhood, a once affordable and heavily African-American neighborhood which is a focus of the book, and walk through it several days a week. I was hoping for some sort of concrete suggestions on how Portland and other cities could deal with housing affordability, and instead found a hash of ill-researched lefty economics. I suspect Mr. Hern's politics led him to read and select sources that agreed with his pre-conceived ideas, and that's too bad. For example, there was a large housing complex just north of Portland called Vanport built in WWII to house shipyard workers. It was never meant to be long-term housing, but because of closed-minded and racially discriminatory policies by the city and its realtors and banks, it still had about 15,000 residents in 1948, about half of them African-American. It was destroyed by a flood in 1948, and there was an immediate housing crisis in the city, as these folks had no where to go. This was especially true of the African-Americans, who were pushed into the Albina neighborhood. Hern covers that reasonably well, but then gets sloppy. He writes (p 37) "these new Black arrivals were welcome in Albina only, but almost immediately upon their arrival the neighborhood was furthered constricted. The construction of a new sports stadium at the south end of the community...[pushed] Black people and Black-owned businesses further north." Here is his sloppiness: Memorial Colosseum was built 12 years after the flood, hardly "almost immediately." The book has numerous sloppy errors like this, and when Hern finally presents a jumbled proposal for reshaping cities (something to do with a tax on land values) he had lost all credibility with me. If I did not live in Portland and know its history reasonably well, I might have thought this book accurate, and the proposals in it based on facts. Too bad it isn't, as the cities in the United States could use some fresh ideas in this area.

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