

## Audio Transcript: Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin interviewed by Mahdi Sabbagh

This audio transcript has been substantially edited for clarity and flow.

**Mahdi Sabbagh [MS]:** [00:00:00] How are you feeling, Brother?

**Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin [LKE]:** [00:00:18] Well, pretty good, you know, for an almost eighty-year-old man.

**MS:** [00:00:24] Good. It's such an honor to speak with you. William Anderson is a friend of mine. We met in this gathering a couple of years ago, and so when he asked me to interview you, I immediately said yes! So I'm very happy that we're talking.

**LKE:** [00:00:52] Right. I'm the same way. It really intrigued me when he said something about the Palestinian struggle being involved in a discussion about Anarchism. Yeah, interesting.

**MS:** [00:01:04] I grew up in Palestine. My parents still live there. So I try to go as much as I can. The reason I got into architecture and urban planning is because I grew up in a place where we didn't have basic amenities. But then our neighbors if we can call them that, the Israeli settlers up the road, had everything. They had water, electricity, parks, gardens, and good roads. We didn't even have a sewage system at the time. So this is what got me interested in this practice. I was really interested in your work and ideas on urbanism, so I would love to hear from you. What got you interested in urban planning, and in the idea of Black Radical urbanism? And I think people in Palestine will want to learn from you, too.

**LKE:** [00:02:44] Yeah. Well, at one point, I was a political science major at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. And you know, the path that I chose was related to urban planning. At some point, I got a weird assignment to go to City Hall and serve as an intern. And it was while I was there at City Hall, that I started understanding how the local political system, deprived Black people of any democratic rights, as well as stripped them of any ability to have financial resources or any kind of basis of decent social service programs and infrastructure. So I started looking at this. I became a sort of "secret spy" for the people. You know, I started finding out the stuff about how much money they were stealing and giving to the rich white people. Yeah. And one of the things specifically I found out was in relation to community development. They were supposed to have rebuilt one of the largest Black communities there, but instead of doing so, they had subverted this money, which came from the federal government and subverted the money and had given it to the rich bankers, developers, and private businessmen. These business forces downtown desperately wanted to rebuild the downtown area, and so they just allowed the Black community to continue to deteriorate, while they schemed and used the money to rebuild the entire area downtown, where the bankers were and where City Hall was located. I started to learn from these government documents. Now I also started, like I said, to put files aside, copy files, and gradually put these things out in the community. Eventually, they found out someone was pilfering their files. But it had gotten on Black radio stations, and people on Black community talk shows started to talk about it. And they were pissed off, you know? Yeah. And they were angry enough to let everyone know about it. This uproar allowed me to meet some activists who had been fighting there for years against city government racism and against the kind of police state terrorism that they use in Black communities, just as they do in Palestinian communities controlled by the Zionists. This was around the time that it was exposed that several American police forces were being

trained by the Israeli settler state. So all of these things came together, and it, of course, radicalized my thinking. I was never going into the conventional urban planning field anyway. You know, I never really saw myself doing that. But I was a student at the time. I was trying to get credits and so forth to graduate, and also took advantage of the opportunity to get into City Hall. At the time, they did not even know who or what I was as far as some type of political threat. Yeah. And so I was able to, as I said, to obtain massive numbers of documents and use that to hold meetings in the Black community to talk about what the government was doing and all these sorts of things. And so I joined a radical activist movement called the Concerned Citizens for Justice. (CCJ).

Originally, CCJ was created over the cases of police killings of Black people in the city jail and beatings by police patrol officers. But we expanded the agenda to also look at how the government was oppressing the Black community and impoverishing the Black community in other ways.

**MS:** [00:06:49] That it was oppressing the Black community, using urban planning, using (racist) zoning, using the kind of structures of...

**LKE:** [00:07:03] Absolutely. Absolutely.

**MS:** [00:07:05] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:07:06] That's right. All the structures of the local government were used to beat down the Black community to impoverish us, and they had done it on a long-term basis. I mean, this didn't just happen in 2 or 3 years or something when I got in there. This had been happening for years, decades really, and I had files going back a long way. We exposed this, and ultimately, as I say, we built this movement, and we had protests and so forth. After many years of protests, one of the most important things we did in the city where I lived was to file a federal civil rights lawsuit. And in the federal civil rights lawsuit, all the stuff that I had begun to find out about, as well as the stuff that had been covered up for years, we were able to get all those files exposed as a series of civil rights violations. We were able to force the government officials to testify under oath as to what their people had been doing with the money; how the funds that were supposed to deal with poverty and underdevelopment--conscious underdevelopment in the Black community--that money, as I said, had gone to the business sector downtown. But we were able to file this lawsuit and find all this stuff out and force people to testify under oath. Now, none of these people went to jail. But what did happen is that we were able to win that lawsuit. We won that lawsuit, and they had to change the entire structure of the government, and all these racist officials that had been in power for so many years, they had to step down. They never achieved government power again. It was a brilliant move by local organizers, but of course, you know, we were still living under capitalism. It's not like it was a revolution, but it was an important grassroots opposition movement, you know, finding a way to organize the people besides just street protests alone? It set us up for a form of dual power against city politicians, but it wasn't permanent. A different set of parasitic politicians took over under a new government in 1990.

**MS:** [00:09:23] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:09:23] To be quite honest, the protest movement itself was most important.

**MS:** [00:09:28] It's incredible that you were able to hold people accountable. Yet, it's such a rare thing to happen. But from what I understand, none of this would have happened if

you hadn't worked there, noticed the issue in the files and brought them to the public. People might have never found out had you not!

**LKE:** [00:09:59] They wouldn't have found out. If I had come in and done like a lot of the other interns--or exactly like the other Black people have in these civil rights groups and all that--if I had just kept quiet, they would have just rolled over and covered it up and continued to cover it up. Yeah. And by me getting these files and stuff, and making copies of it and everything, they tried to claim they were going to prosecute me in retaliation. They said they were going to do different things to try to scare me. And all that did was fire the righteous spirit of the people up that much more, you know? Eventually I had to leave, though. I had to leave out of the intern position. They didn't want me there, obviously. But by that time, I had so much information and so much knowledge. I was able to just hold meetings every week. And that's what we did--hold meetings every, almost every week. You know, with these documents in hand, talking about what they meant and why we, why our communities were so poor, why we were subjected to police terrorism and the cops would get away with everything, and officials would get away with stealing money and all that.

**MS:** [00:11:14] It's incredible.

**LKE:** [00:11:15] And it had an impact. I mean, it shook the city structure. Like I say, it wasn't a revolution, but it was something that never happened before, in terms of Black activists being able to get as much traction as we were able to get.

**MS:** [00:11:30] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:11:30] At that time.

**MS:** [00:11:31] ... And to have access to knowledge that by design you were not supposed to have access to.

**LKE:** [00:11:39] Right. Well, I was going to say that, you know, as a result of that campaign, more radical forces came out of the woodwork from other cities, and people started hearing about what we were doing, and they united with us. Even the attorneys from Atlanta--they would never have heard of this stuff-- and didn't believe it at first. At first they didn't. In fact, the Tennessee ACLU, (the state Civil Liberties Union affiliate)--they'd been down with all this stuff with the city authorities. They'd been covering up for the city officials for years. And so we had to go outside of the city, and went to Atlanta, Georgia. And we got with the ACLU Voting Rights section there. They didn't know anything about police and municipal corruption in Chattanooga. You know, their hands were really clean in relation to this place. So they jumped on the case. They handled the case for us for free and we filed a class action lawsuit. And it shook the city to the bone. I think that that opened the door then for more radical organizing in the streets. That's what I was saying, you know?

You had people fighting against police brutality. People who had fought for years, especially one lady (and her family), Maxine Cousin, whose father was murdered in the city jail in 1983, and started the Concerned Citizens for Justice group when they couldn't receive justice in the local courts. They wanted me to work with them, and finally I did. We used to have frequent meetings and protests, resulting in large numbers. Before I came along, they were having meetings, but their stuff was being undermined by these cops and police informers posing as civil rights leaders. Undercover pigs. And so when I came in, we organized not just the people in the city as a protest movement. We organized people on

the outside (other cities) in advance, so that the stool pigeons didn't know what was coming. The cops and fake leaders didn't know who the people were that were marching with us and all that. Doing it that way, there were a lot more people showing up than they thought there would be. For years they had broken up demonstrations. Yeah. You know, they arrested and shoved people around and all this kind of stuff, and isolated people. We exposed and stopped that right up front.

**MS:** [00:14:07] That's incredible to hear about, that there were undercover cops, that there were people who infiltrated communities or spied on their neighbors. That reminds me of the structure of the military rule in Palestine, all the different iterations and versions of it. There, it wasn't just the cops or the folks with the guns that you could see. There was simultaneously a kind of invisible hand at play in everything: a network of people collecting data, knowledge, names, who knows who, really any kind of information on the Palestinian people. What you describe sounds very familiar. You were not just fighting an oppressor that's visible or even a structure that's visible, but it had many different arms and some of them were hard to fully grasp.

**LKE:** [00:15:20] Well, you know, it's actually this thing of internal colonialism. It's not identical to Palestine, but it's very similar. It's got many similar aspects to Zionist colonialism, you know?

**MS:** [00:15:36] Definitely.

**LKE:** [00:15:37] And so once, you know, once people started understanding-- because, you know, people had to go through a process of radicalization and political education. And once that started to happen, then they were able to build an autonomous radical movement that couldn't be stopped through conventional means, even with the spies and all the other stuff. They weren't able to stop us, you know? People got arrested, people got beaten up. And maybe somebody was beaten down, was killed. But people weren't intimidated by that. In the past, they might have been. They might have backed up. They might have felt that they couldn't win. But they started seeing the the city officials tremble and also be replaced. And the whole structure started collapsing. They saw that, and even though it didn't last forever, it had a real impact on political consciousness. You know, if you've never seen that happen and you've always believed that the city government and officials were all powerful, "almighty" or whatever... You know, it made a difference. It was like the Zionists. Until people started resisting, they had this persona that they were all powerful. You couldn't defeat them in battle. You couldn't do this. You couldn't, you know what I'm saying? Yeah. And so now all that stuff is crumbling, the same kind of process. This stuff is crumbling. And if a war breaks out, then they might be wiped out completely.

**MS:** [00:17:23] I think there's a crumbling of the narrative that these people the colonizers, the Zionists are invincible. And that they are superior to the rest of us or rather that we Palestinians are subhuman. This is the narrative that was accepted, that has for some in the west continues to be accepted. And that's precisely what is no longer holding. This was always clear to us and to colonized people everywhere, but the narrative of supremacy is only upheld through the deeply unequal allocation of resources and weapons. As devastating as the last few years have been, it has also been fascinating to see the naked face of fascism and to see fascists realize that their racist structures, and the hoarding of resources they rely on, can only be upheld through more and more bloodshed.

**LKE:** [00:18:44] Right. That's right.

**MS:** [00:18:46] I wanted to ask you about movement building. Because it seems to me that all movements at some point inevitably change, or I don't believe that they die out but they kind of transform into something else. I still think that it's important to remember the history of how it all unfolded... there are lessons there. Clearly you identified a structure and you all decided to move away from it to build something else that made sense to you, that represented the communities that you live in. What do you think made that transformation? Was it just that once people knew more, they became more politicized? What was at the core of this change?

**LKE:** [00:19:56] Well, it was also at the ending stages of the the Civil Rights Movement. You know, you're talking about '78. Well, no, no, that would have been '80, '85, I think it was 1985. Okay. So that would have been around the ending stages of the Civil Rights Movement. And so a lot of people already had knowledge of cops. They weren't mystified by the propaganda about cops being this, that, and they know about about the white government. You know, white people being superior, as you were saying about the Zionists.

All that had had broken down okay? So they were at a stage where they wanted to move. They wanted some kind of program. They'd heard people for years talking about these things, and different groups came along and all that, but a lot of them died out or were or were killed by the FBI, you know?

**MS:** [00:20:57] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:20:58] Some of the leaders of these organizations. And so the people themselves were saying: we need to find out what we can do, how we can build a movement, how we can be the leaders that we've been looking for instead of waiting on some leader that has been to college or comes out of the upper classes and all that sort of thing. So there was a level of class consciousness that came into existence at that time about working people. That's why the stuff happened in Memphis, Tennessee, where those workers were killed that were garbage men. And the mass movement broke out. But the way it broke out is it broke out among the poor and the workers. It didn't break out necessarily among these upper crust political figures and so forth. And so people were influenced by that as well. They'd become radicalized. They built new kinds of movements in the late 1960s and even in the 70s and 80s, they built new kinds of movements. And so they were not afraid. They were looking for alternatives, even alternatives just on the level of their community, you know? They refused to continue to live under the conditions they'd been living in, you know what I'm saying? And so this is why the idea originally came into vogue with Black Radical Urbanism as a political idea to restructure and rebuild the community.

**MS:** [00:22:54] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:22:54] And to liberate the community, I guess, to liberate the community, you know? The core goals of Black Radical Urbanism had nothing to do with urban planning, architecture or community development as strict fields of study. It was about combating racist and colonialist city government central planning, by dismantling oppressive structures, fighting gentrification, fighting redlining by banks, and dealing with the erasure of Black communities by corporations, the government, and other business institutions of the white power structure, in addition to community control of the police.

**MS:** [00:23:42] What was it like? When I hear you speak about Black radical urbanism, I think about the idea of architecture by the people, from the people, and for the people.

What would it look like if we lived in a world where the structures around us, both physical and in terms of organizations and institutions, were truly representative of the people, if their main mission was to care for them?

**LKE:** [00:24:19] Okay. I got you. I think, first of all, we have to talk about unfolding conditions of oppression and even unveiling types of commercial and other spaces that are taking and robbing from the Black community, from working class communities, period. And building a different kind of structure, you know? Like you said that it isn't dependent upon banks or banks providing the resources to build. It's not dependent upon the state and the state building, because what the state builds is prisons, police stations, and other commercial, capitalist spaces. And so that's the first thing. We have to identify the sources to attack and how capitalism functions in our communities and so forth.

We have to look at that and then we have to talk about it and use pressure. We have to have the ability to pressure those in power always, and push them to where the resources that they have, that they mishandle, and so forth and so on. Like I was saying previously: we must force them to put those resources for the people. Strip them of social funding. You know what I'm saying? What do they call it? Expropriation.

**MS:** [00:26:09] Yes.

**LKE:** [00:26:11] Just take that money from them, you know, with a mass movement. The ultimate result and plan is to take the funds from them and use that to rebuild the community. And until you recognize that you have an enemy in this situation and that the enemy is making these things happen, you are limiting your approach. This is not happening naturally: poverty, substandard housing, crumbling schools, and so forth in our communities, as well as high levels of unemployment. It's structured. It's structured to be that way and so we need to be able to fight it.

We need to be able to politically charge them with creating these conditions and then we have to fight. And one of the things I wrote in my book "Anarchism and the Black Revolution," that really some of these people who are in architecture, radical urban planning, and other fields focus on, is about the idea of a movement building and having a battalion of grassroots organizers affiliated with architects and others. They have the ability to create, but the people have the ability to pressure the State, and force them to come up with the money and other resources needed to rebuild the community. Because we're in a battle. We're in a fight, in a war really, you know? It's about dual power, all power to the people, as opposed to central government and bureaucracy.

**MS:** [00:27:55] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:27:55] And so yeah, the ideas of Black Autonomy, which go back to, I don't know, maybe '94, right before the Atlanta World Fair. World Fair (laughs)-- I mean Olympics.

**MS:** [00:28:10] Yes.

**LKE:** [00:28:10] It's 1994, I was living in Atlanta at that time, and I was working with some other organizers, grassroots organizers and one of them had the idea: he said, listen we can fight these people in government, but we have to have an ideology, and we have to have a program, and we have to have a way of reaching the masses of people and making them the source of movement pressure. Consistent grassroots pressure, you know? Otherwise, we're no different from politicians. He was saying that we have to build an Black autonomous movement that's able to do whatever is necessary, and is independent

of conventional politics and the old line civil rights establishment. So we started doing various things: Because of the historical importance of the Black Student movement in Atlanta, we started meeting with a group of Black students at Clark College of the Atlanta University Complex on their campus, and after months of political education, we eventually created a formal group, the Black Autonomy Collective. It was a small group, but we were able to tap into the frustrations of the community at large, who were fighting the transit fare hike of the Metro Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, whose officials wanted to unite with suburban white planners with the coming of the 1996 Olympics. We organized poor and homeless advocates, churches, and students, along with folks who rode the system daily, to confront MARTA board leadership and beat back the fare. They signed a community benefit agreement which prevented any fare hike for 3-5 years, that we forced on them through street protests, mass meetings, public tv, news media interviews, cable tv, and sit-ins at their corporate offices.

In fact, we fought the Olympics itself. The Olympics were going to destroy whole neighborhoods in the Black community. They were going to subject whole neighborhoods to police stop and frisk tactics, summary arrest of poor and homeless people. We called our campaign "Olympic Games, Olympics Shame!"

And so we started fighting the entire white elite plan. We started fighting the bank redlining and all these attempts to erase the Black community and bring in these white people from these well-to-do suburban areas. They were in the suburbs. They wanted to come, and they wanted to use the Olympics as a way of taking over the politics of the city so that it would totally benefit the rich. You know what I'm saying? Atlanta was a majority Black and working class city, but the white elite business plans would build a new political consensus for the rich.

The plan would have totally benefited upper-crust whites, suburban rich white people, bankers, businessmen, and all these kinds of politically connected people living in the suburbs. They paid no taxes, fees, or fares, but they would given preferential treatment throught the period of the Olympics. And so this is how **our** fightback ideas came into shape and we created a group there, a mass campaign affiliated with Black Autonomy, "The Poor People's Survival Movement" we called it at the time. And through it, we also created the Atlanta Transit Riders Union, a mass campaign of riders and poor people, which was trying to stop the government from raising the transit fares to an unreasonable degree so that the working class Black people wouldn't be able to ride the transit system. Public transit was a key issue

**MS:** [00:30:36] This is an important Oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

**LKE:** [00:30:42] That's okay.

**MS:** [00:30:43] Yeah. Something you just said struck a chord here. Another question I have has to do with mobility. In any kind of healthy city, let's say a healthy city with healthy communities that are thriving, that are safe, there has to be mobility, where people are able to move around freely and safely. And so what you just mentioned about the fares, I'm curious what else, what other limitations to mobility did you see and fight against?

**LKE:** [00:31:29] That opened the door for us to fight the actual agency and the people who were running the transit system. In fact we had a mass demonstration there at the office of the Atlanta Transit Union, you know, Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Union, and when we got there, we were able to take over the building and push the cops out, push the security guards out. We took over the building where the hearings were being held by the

administrators and we bum-rushed them, you know what I'm saying? Yeah, we took over the building and we forced them to sign an agreement that they would not raise MARTA fares, and that they would not turn the transit system over to the suburban areas where rich white people were. But, you know, they weren't paying any tax money and never have paid any tax money to run the transit system in the city of Atlanta. And so we, you know, we were able to beat that back. And then we were able to raise the entire issue publicly about poverty in the city anyway, you know? And we exposed how people were suffering -- you know so much Black unemployment and some of the jobs were being sent out intentionally to the suburbs. And we demanded that the transit system not be given ownership by the suburbs. You know, it did not go to the suburbs, and they were not paying any tax money or anything for its upkeep. They didn't want Black people out there anyway! The outrage is that this Olympic moment they were going to try to take over anyway. They were going to take over even though they weren't paying the taxes or anything. They were not just going to take over the system. They were going to change the transit fare structure so that ordinary working class people in the city wouldn't be able to afford it.

**MS:** [00:33:41] It's... it's really incredible that something as basic as the right to movement can be taken and transformed into a tool to oppress people even more when it should really be a non-negotiable fundamental right. You have the right to move around your city. This is where you live and eat and work. And everything you were fighting for, everything we all continue to fight for is fundamental to our communities survival. Mobility is exactly that. And I continue to be shocked at the structures of transit systems around the country. They sometimes remind me of the bus systems in Jerusalem, in Palestine, where there's a bus system that goes only to Jewish neighborhoods and not to Palestinian ones. And then there's another bus system that goes to Palestinian neighborhoods, and of course it's underfunded, understaffed, and subject to random stops by the police and the army... but the fares are the same. The fares are exactly the same. So we're both paying the same fare for very, very different services.

**LKE:** [00:35:15] Well, this is not what they wanted to do. They wanted to make the working class Black areas continue to pay, an even higher rate. And the people living in the suburbs would either pay a lesser rate or pay nothing.

**MS:** [00:35:33] Pay nothing!

**LKE:** [00:35:35] Yeah. Pay nothing. That's right. Either that or pay nothing. You know, at one point, this is what somebody came out and said on the board, the transit board. It was clearly class and race motivated. Yeah. And this is one of the things we recognized. Atlanta's a majority Black city, 68% at the time. I don't know what it's like now, frankly. But at that time ordinary working class people were still living downtown. Now, I think I've been told that only the elite are living downtown.

**MS:** [00:36:25] They're gentrifying it. This also reminds me of what you said earlier about unbuilding. I found it to be really important because when you're speaking about resources, about the idea that what you're unbuilding is certain structures that hoard resources. You're taking back resources from them. The unbuilding is a form of building as well. You're sort of unbuilding and building at the same time, right?

**LKE:** [00:36:58] It's a stage. That's right. Yeah. It's a stage. You force the officials to provide resources to the people. You force them to improve the system, you continue to do that, force them to do what you want. But also, you put yourself in a position where,



overall, the impoverished community can get resources to rebuild housing. And they're not given to us as a gift. It's being forced out of them. As I said, expropriation is being forced out of their hides. So this is what we started to recognize there, and at that time we built a fightback movement. And you know, the first movement was a mass movement. And then later that's when we created the first Black Anarchist movement. In fact there in Atlanta, Black Anarchism was born. And that was in 1994. And in 1996 they had the Olympics. But we were fighting for a lot of things they were trying to take. If you were homeless or if you were poor in the city of Atlanta during the Olympics, they were going to put you in a special prison. They built stuff like that. You know, they were telling people they couldn't sit on their porches in their neighborhoods anymore because they didn't want these upper-crust white people to see them. And so we had to fight a lot of abuses of the system.

We had to fight a lot of stuff at that time. And we won a significant amount of victories in that battle, you know, especially with the transit agency. Even the cops. We stopped the cops from throwing people in jail just because they were poor, you know? Yeah, they used to just look at you and say you're poor and you're homeless, and then they'd just throw you in jail. Yeah, they'd do stuff that ICE is doing right now.

**MS:** [00:39:04] Yes. They're criminalizing poverty.

**LKE:** [00:39:09] That's right.

**MS:** [00:39:10] The capitalist social structure is the reason why people remain poor. And then they both make you pay for it with, with your own...

**LKE:** [00:39:18] That's right.

**MS:** [00:39:19] Yeah. it's really... I mean, a word you said earlier: it is fascist. The way that capitalism enacts itself is using tactics that are fascist but they call them whatever they want. But at the end of the day, it is fascist.

**LKE:** [00:39:39] Well, yeah, it is. I mean because you know the government is doing this. They're doing this to people as part of a program. It's not an accident. It's not a person or a grievance or something that they have towards individuals. They're trying to destroy the workers, and they're trying to rob them of all resources that they could get from them.

**MS:** [00:40:06] Yes. And this is exactly the point I'd love to hear your thoughts on some more--one of the resources that I'm thinking of is the very idea of public space, of being able to be outside in public, right?

**LKE:** [00:40:24] Right.

**MS:** [00:40:26] Just to give an example from Palestine: sociologist Azmi Bishara wrote about why Palestinians in certain areas have no interest in public space. If they see a public space, they'll use it for something else. And he explained that they cannot see public space as theirs because they know that fundamentally they're not equal citizens of the state, and anything that the state manages cannot possibly bring them any good. And so they see public space almost as a threat to their lives. Which is very interesting right? Because we often hear about fighting for public space, wanting more public space. I'm wondering if you can tell me a bit about how you and the movement was thinking about public space. Did you see it as something, as a resource that you needed to take back? Or was it safe to even be in public?

**LKE:** [00:41:40] Well, you know, you've got to realize that with the Black movement against racial segregation, which was a policy and program of the Southern states, (especially in the cities of the South, Atlanta being one example), Black people saw, as you said, they saw the public spaces as a threat because they didn't own it. And every time they would have these so-called race riots and so forth, white people would say: "Well, they're tearing up their own communities and tearing down their own race. We'd say: "No, they're not. They're tearing up the rich man's property and the homes and businesses of the white racists. Their resources were not ours, because those resources didn't serve Black people. Just real estate profiteers. And you know, it was already understood that, even in the South at the time of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power, we owed very little. The people understood that, and that's why, when they were having these rebellions back in the 1960s, people didn't feel personal loss in a lot of the major cities. And they didn't see the end of the things that the government had put into their so-called "public space" or whatever. They didn't see that as being of service to them. They saw it as something that they would use against them. Against them, against us, you know. And so it's very similar in that respect.

**MS:** [00:43:10] Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:43:10] And it shouldn't be a surprise. It just shouldn't, because we're an oppressed people within a so-called government that claims to believe in freedom, you know. So they shouldn't be really fooled because, like I say, it's just internal colonialism. That's what it is. It's internal colonialism. And if it's understood that way, then you can understand why it would be a threat to us. You know, people would say that we're not fighting to preserve this system. We're fighting to overthrow it. That's why Black Power came and replaced the Civil Rights Movement. It was much more radical and militant, more willing to directly confront the authorities by any means necessary, instead of pacifism

**MS:** [00:43:57] And because it was necessary. Because when the authorities hold on to power, they're not gonna give that away without a struggle.

**LKE:** [00:44:09] No. That's the whole thing. Yeah.

**MS:** [00:44:15] Let me ask you--I have so many questions--but I'm trying to keep our time short and sweet. But I do want to ask you another question about how you were gathering or meeting. And this is an act I'm very interested in because of the research I'm doing on the history of collective movements in Palestine. I often saw that people were meeting in each other's homes. So they were using the home as a space for political gathering. And part of it was to protect each other and to protect themselves. But another reason was that I think the home was always a political space, in our culture at least, that the home always had many different uses, that it wasn't just a place where you go to sleep, you and your nuclear family, but it's a place of community. And so I would love to hear a bit about the meetings that y'all had. What were they like? Did you ever meet in homes or did you have spaces to meet in? That's the other reason why folks meet in homes. It's because they have no access to any other space.

**LKE:** [00:45:37] Yeah. You needed to meet in someone's home. One obvious reason is that they may not have any facilities for you. If you tried to hold a meeting outside a recreational space or church, for instance, the cops would come almost automatically and break it up. Many people thus met outside.

They would increase the level of surveillance by the police, especially when they started a counterintelligence program to spy on you. You know, by the FBI and the local police. So yeah, it was mostly people meeting in someone's home. And they would take turns, so cops wouldn't be able to come in knowing where someone was going to be, and then being able to break in at someone's house. It was harder to do that. And it was also a more covert means to be able to meet at someone's house and then plan, you know, you plan for the next meeting as well so that you knew that the next meeting was going to be somewhere else, was going to be in someone else's house.

And so this went on all the time. I mean, that was a constant feature of both the Civil Rights phase and the Black Power phase. During the 1960s and 70s, you know that people would be meeting locally, and that was the case for many years. And that was because--you would think a school or a recreational facility or some place like that would be the place to go. The authorities stopped it. Even up until I can remember in the 90s, the authorities in Tennessee wouldn't allow people to meet in public spaces unless you were a politician or were part of the establishment. But if you were a working class or a mass-based movement, you would have difficulties meeting anywhere else but in somebody's house.

**MS:** [00:47:49] That's so interesting. I mean, it's also another reminder of the political dimension of public space. The very idea of repressed public space in a state that is conducting itself in a colonial fashion reminds us that there really isn't public space: it is instead space allocated for the needs of the state and its elites. And so everyone else has to build their own. And I wanted to ask you this question of what might a city designed entirely through ideals Black Radical Urbanism--I dare call it a tradition. I believe it's a tradition. What might a city designed according to this tradition look like? But I actually think you started to answer it: a city of people coming together and taking the resources that they need and using space as they see fit, right?

**LKE:** [00:49:12] You'll have to fight for it is the point we always made, and understood we would have to fight for it. But we could do that. And we did win that victory on more than one occasion. We would go to meet in those spaces that are already supposed to be a democratic space. For people and so forth. That's what they claim. But we had to fight for it. And, you know, that was fine. We did it. We had to at that time, we had the forces to do it, and we were able to be victorious in a lot of our efforts in terms of that.

But we also at the early stages had to have a network where we met in people's houses. And that kept the state and police and all them out. They couldn't just come to someone's house.

**MS:** [00:50:06] Yeah. It kept them out of your business.

**LKE:** [00:50:11] Exactly. But a certain stage was reached, and the movement became strong enough, that we were able to force them to allow us to use public facilities.

**MS:** [00:50:21] Yeah. Yeah. Incredible. Incredible that there's actually a role for the invisibility of certain networks, depending on how many resources you have, but also what stage you're at in the struggle, right? That at some point it's more strategic to be invisible. But then there comes a time where you've got to go out there and fight, fight more visibly. Yeah.

**LKE:** [00:50:51] Exactly. What happened in the 1960s--I like to explain to a lot of people--was the high stage, the high stage of a radical struggle. It didn't happen immediately. You

know, in the early stages it was much more conservative and much more controlled, you know what I'm saying? But as time went by, then the movement got stronger. They were able to demand things they were forced to ask for earlier. They were asking for things earlier and being denied. And as the movement got stronger, they were able to demand and get what they wanted or even take it and just started using it without permission from anybody. Even the American government is so willing to use the idea of an illegal meeting or illegal assembly to stop you if they can. To come in with riot police and all that kind of stuff. And I've seen them do it. I've been in there when it happened, you know? But at the same time, when you have a movement strong enough, it can stop it.

**MS:** [00:52:10] Of course.

**LKE:** [00:52:11] It can neutralize it. Neutralize it from happening, you know? And then the community will unite with you and not unite with the cops or unite with the racist government. And so we were able to do some things to build up the movement. And as I said, it hadn't been done before because it was at an earlier stage of resistance. When you're at the early stages of something, you may not be powerful enough to pull certain things off.

But anyway, if you go back to what you were saying in terms of Black Radical Urbanism and what a city would look like, it would be a city that did not have commercial spaces dominating the landscape. It would not have prisons and police stations and all this other stuff dominating the landscape. People would be building housing and building whatever they needed in terms of social programs. To benefit the community and the community alone. And not to have to beg the government for resources that the Black community is entitled to, you know what I'm saying? And so there's a struggle always underneath everything. But the idea is that radical urbanism, Black Radical Urbanism, was supposed to be a form of liberation struggle around housing, around community development, and around oppressed social conditions. That's what it was supposed to be, you know? And it became part of the Black Power movement as a whole, generally speaking. People started accepting it. And even to this day, they still accept it, Black activists do, younger ones. But the thing is, there's the radical expression of resistance and building a movement and building the community. And then there's the cultural aspect of saying that we're going to work with the authorities to build something. And I know people, I know groups that call themselves oppositional movements that work in building alliances with the police, and with the police having their headquarters right there, because you have collaborators who transformed the idea of struggle into cooperation with the authorities. That was one of the ways they subverted the movement, subverted the movement with the police spying and the Black collaborators and all this kind of stuff.

**MS:** [00:55:31] These are movements that do not adhere to the tradition of Black Radical Urbanism, I would say. But that goes back to your point about it being a process, a structure of internal colonialism. There was a saying in Palestine during the military rule of 1950s to 60s that's in the north of Palestine at least. The saying was: "be careful, the walls have ears." That's what people would say.

**LKE:** [00:56:05] I've heard that before. I heard that in the community.

**MS:** [00:56:10] Yeah. I'm sure! I mean, it's a way for folks to remind each other, just because you think that no one else is in the room doesn't mean that they're not listening. The point was that there's spies amongst us, right?

**LKE:** [00:56:26] Yeah.

**MS:** [00:56:27] That was their way of saying it, that without pointing their fingers at anyone or getting themselves in trouble. The way you spoke about the different phases of the struggle was really inspiring because there's a point where that stops working, right? Where this sort of intimidation stops really being effective against people. They no longer care that the government knows because they're shouting. I mean, they're shouting it on the streets. So.

**LKE:** [00:57:07] Well, they retain so much power on the grassroots basis that they don't have to worry about being intimidated by the authorities. And that's, that was the stage that they reached, I suppose.

**MS:** [00:57:25] Incredible.

**LKE:** [00:57:26] You know, that's really important. Now I was really excited about talking to you, and comparing these kinds of movements, these struggles by oppressed peoples, and then coming to an understanding of how much in common these struggles have: the Black struggle and the struggle of the oppressed people in Palestine. A lot of people think because of this Americanism and this other garbage that they brainwash people with, that those struggles.. they're just not understanding it. But those struggles in Palestine all along were the same kinds of struggles that we were involved in: internal colonialism in the USA. And it's just that the enemy stole their land and was working with international capitalists to create a dictatorship. That's what we have today.

**MS:** [00:58:41] And the financial capital. This is why urbanism and thinking about resources is so important because the capital that was brought to Palestine to build the settler state and to then oppress us came from the West. It came from England, from Germany, from America, right? And there's a world in which Israel couldn't have built itself or survived without that. To this day, it cannot survive without its links to the West. It cannot sustain its endless wars or its regime of apartheid. It would crumble. Pointing to resources, to where they come from, to how they're allocated, and to how they're taken away from us, allows people to understand also how fragile the structures that oppress us are. I always think of Algeria, of Vietnam, and of South Africa to a certain extent.

**LKE:** [01:00:21] Right. And this one would have crumbled, as you said, were it not for the United States particularly, but the Western powers giving military aid, financial resources to the Israeli Zionist regime. Were it not for that, this thing would have collapsed a long time ago. Succumbed to its own contradictions, frankly.

**MS:** [01:00:50] Yes.

**LKE:** [01:00:50] You know, so they're being ...they're being sustained by the bankers. By the bankers and the governments of the West. There's no question about it. And so there's a lot of things in common when you look at it like this, and when we talk about how, as I said, in the United States, it's internal colonialism, but it's a very, very similar process of oppression.

**MS:** [01:01:28] Absolutely. And I think that the structures of oppression are similar. They use the same tactics. They experiment on us and then send it over to the US. They experiment in the US on Black people, on Indigenous people, and then they send the results to Israel, and they teach each other these tactics. We must learn liberation tactics and share them as well.. I think sometimes that what we need to do is build better networks between the Black struggle in America and the struggle in Palestine. I think there's a lot that we can teach each other, including ways in which our struggles and

traditions differ. Even if things don't feel like they're exactly the same. People often like to point to that, to say, well, they're different. They're not [the same]. But you don't need to have tons in common to stand in solidarity with each other, to work together in tandem towards a liberated future. You know, working together to crush the same structure of oppression from both ends.

**LKE:** [01:02:57] Yeah absolutely. Yeah. I agree. So what else did you want to ask me?

**MS:** [01:03:06] We covered everything. I think this is great. I think there's a lot to work with, and I love that you brought up the Olympics. Because I had just been thinking about this too, that this is another way in which all these forces of policing, surveillance, transport and gentrification come together around this seemingly cultural event when in reality it's this perfect way for cities to do the kind of evil deeds that they don't have an excuse to do otherwise.

**LKE:** [01:03:53] That's what I'm saying, you know? Yeah. Yeah. They did exactly that in Atlanta in 1996, you know? We called our campaign Olympic Games, Olympic Shame. That's what we call it because it was political repression.

**MS:** [01:04:07] Amazing.

**LKE:** [01:04:09] And because of the stuff they were doing, they were driving people off the streets. They were illegally arresting people and throwing them into this jail. And it was all kinds of craziness going on. They were putting the communities, Black communities, inner-city communities, putting them under military occupation more or less. And it was something that we were able to fight against. But because there were so many forces at that time that didn't understand what was happening, it wasn't as powerful as it could have been, but we did stop some things from happening. A lot of crazy stuff, you know, like telling people they can't sit on their own porch and having the police come to somebody's house and all this kind of stuff. We stopped a lot of that kind of stuff. Yeah, we would do that. That was a victory in itself.

**MS:** [01:05:06] It is. And that's the story. That should be the main story of the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta, right? It's the way the people of the city survived it through their grassroots movements. It's incredible. Yeah. Thank you so much. Brother Lorenzo, for speaking with me today. I've learned so much. I don't want to take more of your time. Because I could keep going, you know, for hours at this point!

**LKE:** [01:05:46] Well, I appreciate it. You know, the interest from you as a young Palestinian activist in what I am saying, and that we were able to talk about this in solidarity, and the idea of universal liberation is which really intrigued me. Placing it in the context of the Palestinian liberation struggle and Black Autonomy, takes our talk about solidarity to a new level. Those are really important things, and I don't think I've really had anybody do that, you know, to be quite honest. So I thank you.

**MS:** [01:06:12] For me, it's important that whatever I learn here, whatever I learned from you, and whatever I learned from struggles on this continent, to always bring it back to the folks back home because there's another aspect of the condition we live under: that we're quite isolated. People feel very isolated.

**LKE:** [01:06:35] Right. But the whole world is now uniting with Palestine.

**MS:** [01:06:36] Sometimes people there don't know how much folks are talking about them around the world. They don't know that people do care. So sometimes they need to be reminded of this... This conversation we had, I'm gonna write something on it. And then I'm gonna try to translate it into Arabic so that I can maybe publish it over there too. I really want people to learn about your legacy, and your struggle, and to see that what they're doing is part of this much larger world tradition of communities fighting for themselves, right? That we're not isolated. We're not the only ones, that there's a lot of people out there, you know?

**LKE:** [01:07:25] Right. Yeah, yeah. I think I'm with you on that. That's extremely important because [if] you feel like you're isolated, your tactics are not as militant as they would be otherwise. They're much more able to control you, you know, and you think you're by yourself and nobody else in the world can see what you're doing. I've gone through that before, to be quite honest. You know, gone through years of that isolation, and still was able to break through and go to the other side. But it's hard to do it. It's hard to struggle in isolation. If you think that you're by yourself, and nobody's paying any attention, you can feel that you're just being wiped out. You know, it's hard. It's hard to think that you have supporters all over the world.

**Mahdi:** [01:08:17] I have been going through a lot of old newspapers in from Palestine, from the 1950s up until the mid 1970s. Even in, say '55, '56, '57, folks were writing about anti-imperialist struggles in Africa. They were talking about Black people in America. They were paying attention. They were trying to educate Arabic readers to understand themselves as part of this bigger movement, that a lot of nations in the world are shedding their shackles. And they're saying no. And so there's an article about Cameroon. There's an article about South Africa. It is really beautiful to see how much they made a point to try to connect their struggle to other struggles, and to cast a wide net.

**LKE:** [01:09:51] Frantz Fanon had a lot to do with that as well, though. Frantz Fanon.

**MS:** [01:09:57] Yes.

**LKE:** [01:09:59] He was able to reach Black activists and other oppressed peoples all over the world and raise the idea of having the anti-colonial struggles be international solidarity events. And his writing was extremely important. I was just watching a documentary this week about some things. I didn't even know some of the things that they had done to him, specifically to try to kill him or isolate him or whatever. So that's what makes me think of -- you know when people are fighting an anti-colonial struggle and they think that they are isolated and that people all around the world aren't looking at what they're doing. And so when he wrote "The Wretched of the Earth," he raised it to a real high level of consciousness. In fact, it was required reading in the Black Panther Party. It was. And you know, it's probably one of the best books that's ever been written.

**MS:** [01:11:17] I've read it twice at this point, because every time you read it, you learn something new. It's really incredible.

**LKE:** [01:11:26] Absolutely. Yeah, I've read it. I've read it several times over the last, you know, 50, 60 years to be quite honest. I've done it because there's something there that I needed to revisit, something I saw or something I heard or whatever. Or something that's happening right now in the world and the way he explained it and the stage to go and fight, that's what builds the consciousness of a movement, of a people actually, you know? That's really important.

**MS:** [01:12:07] Yeah.

**LKE:** [01:12:07] Well, I'm going to have to go, man. Yeah, I wanted to call to talk again, actually. Sometimes hopefully in the future, we can talk again and stay in touch about the things we talked about, in terms of the solidarity between the Palestinian struggle and Black liberation.

**MS:** [01:12:27] Yeah.

**LKE:** [01:12:27] And, and that of internal peoples in the United States, oppressed people, Blacks and others who are oppressed and other countries. You know, we need to be talking to each other.

**MS:** [01:12:43] That's true.

**LKE:** [01:12:43] One of the things I'm really convinced of, we need to be talking to each other on a worldwide basis.

**MS:** [01:12:48] Yeah.

**LKE:** [01:12:49] To be able to fight this particular stage of capitalist imperialism, you know?

**MS:** [01:12:56] Yeah.

**LKE:** [01:12:58] It's really important.

**MS:** [01:12:58] Absolutely, absolutely. It is. Yeah. Yeah. Thank you. Thank you very much.

**LKE:** [01:13:04] Well thank you. Thank you for even thinking about me.

**MS:** [01:13:07] It was honestly my honor. Anytime. I learned a lot. And Take care, Brother Lorenzo. We'll talk soon.

**LKE:** [01:13:18] Okay. You too.

**MS:** [01:13:19] Bye bye.