Making a Difference: Reshaping the Past, Present, and Future Toward Greater Equity

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It is often quipped that history is written by the victors. That same notion is easily translated to urban policy and the development of neighborhoods and cities. Our communities have not necessarily been planned, designed, or built to benefit everyone; and today there are still discrepancies in why and how places develop or redevelop based on race, income, and other factors. Along with urban policy, planning, architecture, urban design, and other fields, historic preservation is a tool for the complex and sometimes messy work of continually remaking our built environment to meet present and future demands and desires.

To do this work, urbanists and preservationists need to understand the complete histories and current contexts of a structure or a place, including its people and uses. Places with multiple legacies and contexts also have multiple meanings and values attached to them, and all of these must be taken into account when shaping the built environment. For example, in a recent *Next City* article, Oscar Perry Abello explores a new mapping tool created by the National Community Reinvestment Coalition using data from the University of Richmond. The tool allows users to identify the impact of redlining policies in the demographic and economic patterns that we find in urban communities today. Basic elements of a city’s construction—housing, transportation, educational facilities, public spaces and services, and environmental health and protection—are often marked by differences dating back to the formative periods of its development. Those differences were frequently shaped by de jure and de facto discriminatory practices against people based on race, class, and ethnicity.

Many communities have been subject to—and even formed under—these difficult circumstances. Nonetheless, a wide range of people have valued these places across generations as homes
and communities; for their cultural roots; and because of their investments of work, money, time, and energy. Some of the zones created by unjust policies and practices—redlining, unfair taxation, highway construction, the siting of polluting land uses, undesirable or substandard public facilities and infrastructure, and other factors—have shifted and blurred across generations of change. But the framework remains: our environment has been designed, built, and regulated based on race and class. The system is not broken, it is operating as intended toward an engineered inequality.

So what can be done about these daunting circumstances, which are nearly ubiquitous in America’s urban environments? In a recent conversation focused on creating opportunity and equity, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, said to New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio, “inequality has been constructed—and the question is, how can it be deconstructed?” Developing tools and strategies for this deconstruction is now a focus for many leaders and institutions, communities and grassroots organizations, academics and practitioners. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has brought issues of social equity into ReUrbanism, its platform committing to the revitalization of cities. Three of the 10 ReUrbanism principles point to strategies for connecting the built environment to larger human needs:

- Cities are only successful when they work for everyone;
- Preservation is about managing change; and
- Every community has stories and places that matter.

People working in the urban fields can take certain steps to move toward building more equitable and thriving communities: “redesign” the designers, change how business is done, and affirm through their work that people and places matter. A project manager in a private planning or design firm, a local government administrator or elected official, principals at a real estate development firm, a researcher or professor, a local community advocate, and many others can all use their work and influence to promote meaningful changes in thinking and process.
REDESIGN THE DESIGNERS

How do we make our cities work for everyone? Many urbanists know the famous Jane Jacobs quote, “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” Today it remains the case that the majority of people who plan, design, and build our communities and cities do not reflect the diversity of those same communities and cities. The demographics of the planning and design fields have improved in the past few generations, but there are still very few people of color or from lower-income backgrounds doing this work or enrolled in the attendant academic programs. There are even fewer in the leadership, resource-allocation, and decision-making positions. Historic preservation, in particular, has had difficulty expanding and promoting diversity, resulting in many missed opportunities to create a multiplicity of ideas, talents, and perspectives among those who influence the constant change of urban and built environments. Imagine if only a small number of musicians, artists, athletes, leaders, and public figures of color had shaped America and its identity. How much would be lost? Lack of diversity in planning and design fields is a big problem that is not being addressed or even taken seriously at the scale necessary to make a meaningful impact.

This isn’t to say that existing professionals cannot develop the skills, sensibilities, awareness, and ethics to work in communities that are not their own. But, even with a history of good intentions and evolving best practices, it isn’t always likely that a place shaped by a select few will fully work to benefit everyone. Improved access for people from more diverse backgrounds, particularly people of color and those from lower-income families, can create pathways into the fields that affect their communities. Efforts to this end should include improving access to the various urban and development disciplines as well as to educational and job opportunities for young people.

My path into the urban design and planning field began with a high school summer internship at an architecture firm. My predominantly black inner-city public school was slated to add a new
gymnasium, and the general contractor and architecture firm that were awarded the contract agreed to hire interns from the school. That internship provided me with the exposure to understand how my interests and skills aligned with a career in the field, gave me access to mentors, and broadened my view of potential options. Creating real opportunities within disadvantaged communities can be a difficult, thankless, and long process without immediately tangible successes, but it plants the seeds for long-term results: more leadership, stewardship, and capacity within communities and greater diversity in the professions.

Providing exposure and opportunity is only a first step: Urban practice also needs to diversify its schools of thought and ways of working by redesigning the designers—and preservationists—by giving them the tools and competencies to work in the diverse communities that they are tasked to serve. Much of the academic and professional training for urban planners, designers, and preservationists is spent building the spatial, technical, communication, and critical thinking skills they need to transform spaces and places. However, they often apply those skills toward results that may not align with the goals or needs of the given community. The built environment fields need to develop a broader range of sensibilities, frameworks, skills, and technologies to include not only social or community engagement but also better understanding and relations.

For example, students in the urban design program at Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation collaborate in groups that cross cultures and disciplines. They are tasked with developing an understanding of

In recent years graduate urban design students and faculty at Columbia University have worked with partners in the Hudson Valley cities of Newburgh, Beacon, and Poughkeepsie. Students learn about the issues and contexts in urban and regional environments through “site interactions.” PHOTO BY JUSTIN MOORE
a site or an issue that considers in depth the social and cultural complexities of urban contexts. The students work in communities—which may be in New York City, upstate in Newburgh or Poughkeepsie, or abroad in Rio de Janeiro or Madurai—to engage the people there and develop their ideas about transforming their spaces. These experiences become as important and integrated into the students’ way of working as the traditional concept, research, and design processes. The program challenges traditional ideas of what “projects” are—and of what is worth doing with, for, or to a place and its inhabitants. As these students develop their skills and enter the professional world, new ways of thinking about and working in the urban context become possible and even likely.

**CHANGE HOW BUSINESS IS DONE**
Along with changing how our practitioners and leaders think and work, we might also shift our institutional, government, and business practices. In New York City various city agencies—led by the Department of Housing, Preservation, and Development along with GOODcorps and Gehl Studio—developed a new urban planning and design framework called the [Neighborhood Planning Playbook](#). It includes tools designed to reveal the complexities of a neighborhood

As a part of the Greenpoint Hospital redevelopment study in Brooklyn, the city’s housing, development, and urban planning agencies held a series of community workshops based on the Neighborhood Planning Playbook.

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and provide a framework for comprehension, communication, education, and exchange with community residents and stakeholders. The playbook aims to help the city better study, develop, and implement plans for neighborhood change—and, most importantly, build public engagement and communication into all stages of the work. This enhances the transparency of community development and creates more opportunities for stakeholders to understand projects and affect their outcomes. To that end, the playbook identifies certain strategies for expanding public involvement, including neighborhood walks; social media and text message campaigns; participatory budgeting and crowdfunding; or tactical urbanism or pilot projects—temporary or low-cost, often small-scale projects aimed at assessing whether a place can be successfully transformed and testing the potential impact of the transformation.

The first of the neighborhood plans to use this more robust community process was the East New York Community Plan in Brooklyn. The 2016 plan has already resulted in neighborhood rezoning for new affordable housing development; infrastructure and public space improvement; and a plan for the adaptive reuse of a former courthouse at 127 Pennsylvania Avenue as the New York City Police Department Community Center, the first such facility of its kind in the city.

At the 2013 National Preservation Conference in Indianapolis, my organization, Urban Patch—along with Leigh Riley Evans from the Mapleton-Fall Creek Development Corporation, Brent Leggs from the National Trust, Anthony Bridgeman from the Children’s Museum of Indianapolis, and India Pierce Lee from the Cleveland Foundation—developed a field session and workshop, “Re-Booting the Inner City: New Partnerships for Community Preservation & Development.” This session focused on a program aimed at developing a citizen-led approach to community change. The community wasn’t just “brought to the table” to give input to some outside actor; people from the community called and organized the meeting. Following a walking tour of the historic and predominantly black Mapleton-Fall Creek neighborhood, the session turned to classroom presentations and a workshop that welcomed community
residents from different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds into a conversation about community and preservation issues. The diverse group of participants identified common concerns, including preserving buildings; protecting heritage and the environment; and improving access to food, services, and employment through neighborhood change. The conversation between national preservation and community development experts; conference attendees from around the region and country; and local Indianapolis community leaders, residents, and youth yielded shared objectives for partnership and preservation strategies. These included prioritizing renovation over demolition and encouraging the use of local contractors and businesses for redevelopment projects. The workshop catalyzed efforts to develop housing, public space, and neighborhood services—and to ensure respect for the heritage and cultural identity of the place—that continue today.

**AFFIRM THAT PEOPLE AND PLACES MATTER**

The ReUrbanism initiative asserts that if places matter, then the people in those places—and their stories—matter too. Contemporary social movements like Black Lives Matter and the Women’s March have underlined the importance of public awareness in demanding necessary change. Activist DeRay McKesson often says that “protests are a means of telling the truth in public.” Similarly, when we say that every community has stories and places that matter, the underlying public affirmation brings value to the people connected to those places. These are things that we collectively
see and experience in the urban context, and something about places experiencing change is public and common to all of us. It elevates the responsibility of change-makers to understand; problem-solve; and realize the value or values of a place and its people before they are changed, exchanged, or possibly taken away.

It can be hard to pinpoint the specific impacts that urban planning, design, or preservation have on the complex social and racial inequities that have been present in our cities for generations. That is why planning, design, and conservation of the built environment are usually not seen as determining factors in social injustice, which makes it easy to avoid the problems or reassign responsibility to others. Advocates and leaders rightly focus on more direct policies and actions like providing better access to education and jobs, criminal justice reform, or food access and health care. But our structures, spaces, landscapes, and places do matter, and they have an impact across the multiple inequities that exist in American society and its spatialized contexts. By shaping built environments, urban practitioners can influence the availability of quality housing, transportation, public spaces and facilities, and healthy environmental conditions. We can contribute to making our cities great, to a more equitable and sustainable future, by making and remaking, designing and redesigning, adapting and re-adapting, and constructing and reconstructing places with and for the people and communities who inhabit them. FJ

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MAP
Use an interactive map to learn about “redlining in New Deal America.”