

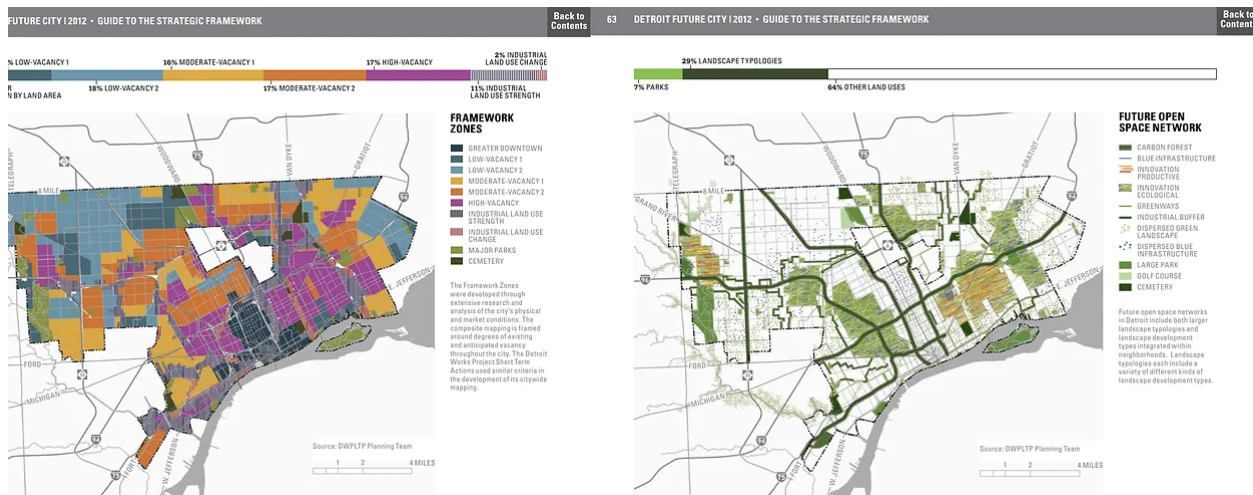
Greenlining: Environmental Infrastructure and Racial Capitalism in 3 U.S. Cities

By Emma Brice

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).

From creating urban forests to curbing the heat-island effect to implementing stormwater swales that can capture and remove contaminants from runoff, cities worldwide are readily investing in ecological infrastructure to address climate change vulnerabilities while beautifying urban space. Though these environmentally resilient infrastructures are widely perceived as positive assets, researchers at the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies found that many municipal Blue and Green Infrastructures (BGI) plans lack clarity beyond coloring certain city areas in blue, green, and/or grey. Blue infrastructures often refer to hydrological definitions, grey is occasionally used to describe stormwater management systems, and green infrastructures are vegetative ecosystem interventions. However, the ambiguous language and definitions of BGI plans can easily obscure the sometimes devastating consequences of green infrastructure development. Despite the fact the BGI developments can increase protection of the built and natural environment, it is often done at the expense of the people living in these vulnerable areas slated for ecological infrastructure who have bore the burden of environmental disaster but will not reap the benefits of the environmental protections without intentional policy to prevent displacement. Considering the racial and class-based inflections of how certain cities implement BGI, I weave together scholarship on green gentrification alongside the current projects being implemented in Detroit, New Orleans, and Atlanta.

Detroit



Detroit, Michigan, is a city infamous for structural racism and is considered among the most segregated cities in the United States. Located along the Detroit River, which connects Lake Huron and Lake Erie, Detroit is vulnerable to flooding due to its aging stormwater management infrastructure. Researchers at Wayne State University found that more than 40% of Detroit residents have experienced household flooding, and renters are nearly twice as likely to experience flooding in their homes compared to homeowners. In a similar construction of precarity, predominantly Black neighborhoods are at a higher risk of flooding than other neighborhoods. Adding shades of blue to critical scholarship on urban greenwashing, Dr. Nadia Gaber focuses on bluelining as an urban renewal strategy that aims to erase the predominantly Black and poor people living on environmentally vulnerable and highly-valuable land with stormwater management infrastructures like water retention ponds and bioswales. As opposed to working with communities experiencing flooding to address pressing stormwater management concerns, Gaber writes that communities experiencing water shut-offs related to foreclosure are those same neighborhoods slated for new stormwater management infrastructure under the Detroit Future City (DFC) Plan. First published in 2012 by a non-profit with the same name, DFC offers a lengthy document which outlines a 50-year plan for the transformation of Detroit into a world-class sustainable city. Though little is known about the proposed funding mechanisms required to implement DFC, the DFC suggests the city rezone nearly "empty" residential neighborhoods for a variety of vague environmental land use designations: community open spaces, ecological landscapes, blue-green infrastructure, working and productive landscapes, and transitional landscapes.

Thinking of Safransky's critique that the DFC plan renders historic Black neighborhoods as urban frontiers ripe for occupation via green innovation, a majority of these new land-use designations operate outside of community efforts and serve to eclipse these efforts with top-down, market-based strategies of contemporary urban renewal. The DFC plan emphasizes that much of this transformation will take place on vacant lots, locating these interstitial spaces as primary sites for the negotiation of citizenship within the urban commons of Detroit. A recent study of Detroit's Lower East Side, a neighborhood with high rates of vacancy, examines the transformation of vacant lots into community gardens as a means to scale up and decentralize urban agriculture. Citing access to permanent land tenure as a primary obstacle to the expansion of urban agriculture, these authors write that municipal "adopt-a-lot" programs and similar initiatives that promote community reappropriation of vacant lots privilege homeowners and white newcomers. Now under the guise of promoting climate resilience, racial segregation in Detroit continues to operate through dominant property regimes that leverage fiscal austerity politics against the city's poorest residents. In many ways, the geography of evictions in Detroit maps onto patterns of neighborhood gentrification.

However, there are many citizen-led organizations committed to protecting the right to housing for people in Detroit. The Detroit People's Platform is a group that formed directly in response to water shutoffs, foreclosures, evictions, and other strategies being used in tandem with green gentrification and bluelining. They call for public officials to increase funding for the Detroit Housing for the Future Fund, adopt an ordinance of a Detroit-specific affordability formula, develop a housing plan that creates permanently affordable housing across a variety of unit types, and greater transparency with annual reporting. Likewise,

Detroit Renter City is an organization committed to securing the right to housing for tenants through the city's oft unenforced rental ordinance that requires the registration and inspection of rental properties.

New Orleans



Gentilly Resilience District

The **Gentilly Resilience District** is a combination of efforts across Gentilly to reduce flood risk, slow land subsidence, improve energy reliability, and encourage neighborhood revitalization.



New Orleans, Louisiana, is particularly vulnerable to environmental hazards due to its location near the low-lying lands bordering Lake Pontchartrain, bisected by the Mississippi River. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina nearly destroyed the city, causing nearly \$125 billion USD in physical damage and devastating communities. Many of the worst impacted areas by this were predominately-Black neighborhoods, namely the Lower Ninth Ward. In "Katrina," New Orleans historian Andy Horowitz (2020) views Hurricane Katrina not as a discrete natural disaster but as a somewhat preventable tragedy that was exacerbated by decades of racist environmental planning policy. The storm's severity was infamously made worse by institutional inaction, as government officials neglected to prepare for a disaster long forewarned by experts.

Since Katrina, the city has been slowly recovering from the material and affective damage. In an effort to reconcile with their failures in mitigating the effects of Katrina, FEMA and other disaster relief organizations are proactively funding the creation of BGI across the city. However, in her analysis of post-disaster New Orleans, Tierney (2015) reveals how neoliberal policies support disaster risk management strategies in sites where green infrastructure serve as vehicles for circulating wealth. In conversation with critics of resilience discourse, she argues that the structural mitigation strategies championed by governments and private real estate developers in post-disaster coastal cities can redevelop poor, Black neighborhoods decimated by natural disasters into new, trendy eco-resilient zones which advantageously benefits developers and the wealthy, rather than those impacted by the disaster.

In "Over Priced or Under Water", Eloise Reid researches the ways in which planning for climate resilience perpetuates the displacement of lower-income residents and tenants in the neighborhood of Gentilly, New Orleans. Surrounded on three sides by water, this racially and economically diverse neighborhood is being redeveloped with disaster-resilient infrastructure and branded as the Gentilly Resilience District (GRD). The GRD proposal, funded through \$141.2 million appropriated by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the development plan consists of seven public work projects designed to address the neighborhood's environmental vulnerabilities while encouraging landscape revitalization. This neighborhood-wide ecological infrastructure project includes integrative blue and green stormwater that reimagine wetlands and canals as community green spaces. However beneficial these new infrastructures may be in reducing flood risk and slowing land subsidence, Reid states that residents were not meaningfully consulted in the initial phases of this project and argues that the absence of consensual planning practices as part of the development of the GRD will impact the levels of displacement among long-term Gentilly residents.

Despite this lack of procedural justice, many of these projects under the GRD are nearing completion of design and the city is planning to break ground this summer. Among the new neighborhood improvements funded by federal hazard mitigation grants is the Mirabeau Water Garden project which is predicted to raise median home values in the neighborhood by 49%. Though this increase is by no means surprising, there are no programs or policies implemented as part of the GRD designed to preserve affordability and mitigate displacement through gentrification among residents with precarious tenure. Instead, the Community Adaptation Program (CAP) was developed to grant between \$10,000 to \$25,000 to 200 owner-occupied single-family homes with household incomes at or below 80% of Area Median Income (AMI) within the GRD for the purpose of retrofitting residential stormwater management infrastructure. Despite the purportedly progressive nature of green infrastructure developments, this discretionary federal funding for homeowner amenities reveals the multi-scalar investments to protect the interests of private property over responding to

crises of affordability and displacement that are caused by environmental disasters and their aftermath. However, there are local organizations working to promote equitable ecological infrastructure. The [Data Center](#) of Southeast Louisiana offers independent analysis to make informed decisions on blue-green land use developments in Southeast Louisiana. Their wealth of information on disaster recovery, regional economic activity, workforce development, racial disparity indicators, and coastal population movements allows for municipalities to assess the opportunities and risk of BGI improvements and climate change mitigation.

Atlanta



"BeltLine" by [Daquella manera](#) is marked with [CC0 1.0](#).

Green infrastructure development practices in Atlanta, Georgia, offer salient lessons on how zoning can be a tool for both generating displacement and promoting equitable, sustainable place-making. In 2017, Atlanta's city council adopted the [Green Infrastructure Strategic Action Plan](#), which outlines the municipality's approach to creating a more sustainable and equitable city. Their strategy involves new watershed

improvement plans alongside the development of natural green infrastructures like nature preserves, stream restoration projects, and stormwater swales. In a city cursed by sprawl, among the city's more controversial green infrastructure investments is the BeltLine, a historic 22-mile-long railroad corridor being transformed into a robust green network of public parks, multi-use trails, transit, and housing developments. However, concerns about the lack of protections for housing affordability have risen since the plan was originally published in 2005. More than halfway through the project's timeline towards the estimated completion date of 2030, housing advocates argue that the public-private partnership has moved too slowly in implementing programs to protect nearby residents and the goals for constructing additional housing stock to mitigate displacement are too conservative for the relative impact expected.

As of April 2022, the Atlanta Beltline Partnership reported that the corporation has surpassed its annual affordable housing goal of 320 units. They attributed much of the below-market development to the City of Atlanta's Inclusionary Zoning Ordinance passed this year which set aside a certain number of rental units for renters making 60-80% of the AMI in neighborhoods covered by the beltline. In the interest of preserving affordability among legacy homeowners, the Atlanta Beltline, Inc. launched the Legacy Resident Retention Program in 2020, aimed at preserving the ownership of homes that have been owner-occupied since at least 2017 and where household income is less than 100% of AMI. Redefining the threshold for affordability, this program is designed to cover the increases in property taxes until the BeltLine is completed in 2030. The Beltline corporation has yet to put forth any programs aimed at reducing the gentrifying impacts to tenants, and the inclusionary zoning they boast in their affordability goals were put in place at the behest of the city.

Upset by the lack of protections for legacy renters, the Housing Justice League (HJL) has developed a robust policy package they advocate should be adopted by the Atlanta city council in order to prevent the displacement of long-term residents, particularly precarious groups like tenants and unhoused people. Many of these recommendations are based on policies implemented to prevent gentrification in other cities across the U.S., some of which are already active in Atlanta's battle for affordability with the BeltLine. Specifically, their *BeltLine for All* campaign calls for the implementation of policies like the Tenant Opportunity to Purchase Act (TOPA) based on the law passed in D.C., which gives tenants of renter-occupied properties of 5+ units the first offer of sale and gives tenant associations the freedom to convert the building into a co-operative land trust (CLT). Similarly, the HJL wants the city council to pass a property tax abatement for low-income households, as well as a tax abatement for landlords of Naturally Occurring Affordable Housing (NOAH) which would incentivize landlords to lease apartments at affordable rates along with new BeltLine developments. Additionally, the plan advocates for the creation of loan funds to offer financial support for legacy community development and CLTs. Likewise, the HJL encourages the city to reclaim vacant properties for the development of affordable housing, and extend the length of the affordability period before properties are listed at market price. Though not outlined in their policy package, anti-speculation laws and right to return policies are used in similar contexts to prevent displacement of long-term residents. However, some advocates argue it's "about ten years too late" for these measures to mitigate gentrification along Atlanta's Beltline.

Many of these techniques and recommendations for mitigating the displacement of residents in neighborhoods designated for new BGI can have wide applications for other kinds of projects like transit-oriented development. Reflecting on the term greenlining as a spatial management strategy that promotes ecological land use developments in diverse, low-income residential neighborhoods, this practice is

emboldened by legacies of orchestrated negligence and environmental mis-management. The idea that climate change doesn't discriminate is false; racial capitalism and settler colonialism are inexorably linked to climate change. The areas in cities slated for a new blue and green corridors are often racially diverse, lower-income, renter neighborhoods. From looking at these case studies, it's clear that municipalities must foreground the voices of residents in these discussions and incorporate comprehensive anti-gentrification policies alongside the development of ecological infrastructure in an effort to meaningfully redress the legacies of environmental violence.

Emma Brice is a BA student in the Department of Geography - Urban Studies at McGill University, graduating in fall 2022. Her perspective on green infrastructure is shaped by participating in urban agriculture initiatives in both Baltimore and Montreal.

Climate-displaced labor, waste work, and environmental (in)justice in Tiruppur, India

By Nidhi Subramanyam

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



“I came to Tamil Nadu just before the *duṣkāḷa*,” recalled Rani in Marathi when I asked her when she migrated. Rani was referring to the *duṣkāḷa* (or drought) of 2014 that had gripped the Marathwada region in central India for nearly three years. News of farmer suicides grabbed national headlines. The situation had become so dire by 2016 that the Maharashtra State administration dispatched ‘water’ trains to the region. Meanwhile, Rani and hundreds of other men and women from her Dalit caste community started traveling to other states in search of work and wages, leaving aging parents and small children behind. “Not like the situation had been better before,” clarified Rekha, another climate-displaced worker, whose family had sunk further into debt. “We’d get work for one day on someone’s field and then nothing for the next eight days. We’d barely make 15 or 20 rupees a day. Here, we make about ten times as much and get work for about 25 days a month.” I looked around the workers’ informal settlement and struggled to picture Rekha’s situation back home. Dozens of tiny tarp sheds stretched as far as my eyes could see. A few electric wires dangled over my head, but the settlement had no drinking water and only a handful of toilets. Moreover, the settlement was cut off from the rest of the city, unlike any other settlement I had visited during my six-year-long research in Tiruppur – a medium-sized city in Tamil Nadu state in southern India. This brief essay provides an overview of the economic and environmental injustices that climate-displaced laborers like Rani and Rekha confront

as they seek livelihoods in distant cities. I also discuss how progressive planning can identify and address these growing injustices to build sustainable, climate-resilient futures.

Rani, Rekha, and every one of the 500-ish adults in that informal settlement was a municipal sanitary worker in Tiruppur, a city famous for manufacturing over half of India's annual t-shirt exports. Sanitary workers like Rani, Rekha, and their kin members were recent additions to the city's essential (sanitation) workforce. In 2014, Tiruppur's municipal government entered a public-private partnership (or PPP) with a private waste management company to collect, transport, and dispose garbage from thirty of the city's sixty municipal wards. A severe sanitary worker shortage prompted this move. Prevailing municipal staffing norms dictated that the city have at least 3000 full-time sanitary workers to service its population. Still, it had just 726 workers on its books. Neoliberal statewide hiring freezes had curtailed the municipal government's ability to fill this gap even as the population (and garbage) kept growing. Privatization was the lower-cost alternative for Tiruppur and many other cities aspiring to be clean for business. In Tiruppur, private contractors employed out-of-state 'climate migrants' like Rani, who were desperate, cheaper, and easier to control than the in-state sanitary workforce. The latter was organized because of a rich history of statewide struggles for Dalit workers' rights. Whereas the private companies charged the city 663 rupees per worker per day in 2021, workers reported receiving only 300 rupees a day. They also received no benefits except for employee quarters in the form of tin sheds. In contrast, temporary in-state workers earned 400 rupees daily and permanent municipal staff received over four times the daily wages with additional employee benefits.

Migrant workers slogged for their meager wages. Each morning, they reported for duty at 5 a.m. sharp. They walked door-to-door in assigned neighborhoods, collecting garbage in small pushcarts or battery-operated tricycles, and dumped it in large bins or designated points on the city's main streets, from where it would be picked up and transported to disposal sites by the city's garbage trucks. These workers labored till about 2 p.m., after which they returned home to make lunch, eat, recuperate, sort trash, and sell the recyclables for *chai-paanee* (incidental expenses).

Saravanan, a Tiruppur-based union leader, who had been organizing in-state sanitary workers for decades, reflected on these demographic shifts in the city's sanitary labor force. He explained that out-of-state migrant workers were mainly introduced to "discipline" any organizing by local labor (and unions) for fair wages and just work conditions. Saravanan noted that sanitary workers in general (all Dalit across Tiruppur) faced multiple environmental injustices since they handled trash, suffered occupation-related health impacts, and experienced social untouchability. However, he found the conditions that migrant workers labored in especially dehumanizing. "Unlike permanent-locals, migrants quietly bear multiple injustices. They neither receive fair wages nor does the contractor pay them on time. Have you seen *where and how* they live? Their kids are also denied their right to education in local schools. In short, they do essential work but go socially unrecognized." He and other activists found it extremely difficult to organize migrant workers and build solidarities not only because of language barriers, but because the contractor swiftly fired anyone who tried to unionize.

As Saravanan noted, sanitary workers confronting environmental injustices is neither new nor a Tiruppur-specific phenomenon. However, the environmental injustices faced by migrant workers reveal that the extra dehumanization of the climate-displaced 'other' is central to Tiruppur's cost savings goals and efforts to build a clean city for textile business operations. Moreover, these injustices and the migrant workers' experiences reveal an insidious local operation of global racial capitalism, which profits through the devaluation of particular bodies, identities, and the labor associated with them. Recently, geographers Pallavi Gupta, Malini Ranganathan, and their colleagues have argued that global racial capitalism gets furthered in India through the exploitation of Dalit-Bahujan caste and tribal labor. Similarly, Tiruppur's brand of racial capitalism

creatively seeks new ways to profit off migrant labor as the local, Tamil-speaking Dalit workforce becomes unavailable and intractable thanks to statewide anti-caste struggles for welfare provision and affirmative action. Here, climate displacements aid racial capitalism, compounding environmental injustices.

I argue that climate crises like the droughts in central India present opportunities for progressive planning praxis just as they do for racial capitalism. They prompt radical activists to learn new languages and forge radical, cross-ethnic Dalit solidarities so that climate-displaced workers are not 'othered' to serve racial capitalism in their destinations. They also force activists and progressive planners to question the pervasive but ultimately racist/ caste-ist - logic of cost-savings that drives municipal service planning and demand contracts that ensure fair wages, housing, and working conditions for all essential workers regardless of their geographic origins or caste. Since labor exploitation is a key dimension of environmental injustice, environmental justice struggles are ultimately labor struggles. Therefore, a progressive planning praxis confronting climate crises must also leverage decades-long anti-caste mobilization in the region to organize and demand legislative reforms that extend state welfare to out-of-state, Dalit essential workers if it hopes to realize a sustainable *and* environmentally just future.

Nidhi Subramanyam is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Geography and Planning at the University of Toronto. Her research investigates how planning, policies, and governance intersect with and enhance water security and adaptive capacities for socially marginalized communities in rapidly urbanizing regions.

This Island is Hot

By Ian Van der Merwe

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



A shaded street in Salt Lake City. Photo by Ian Van der Merwe.

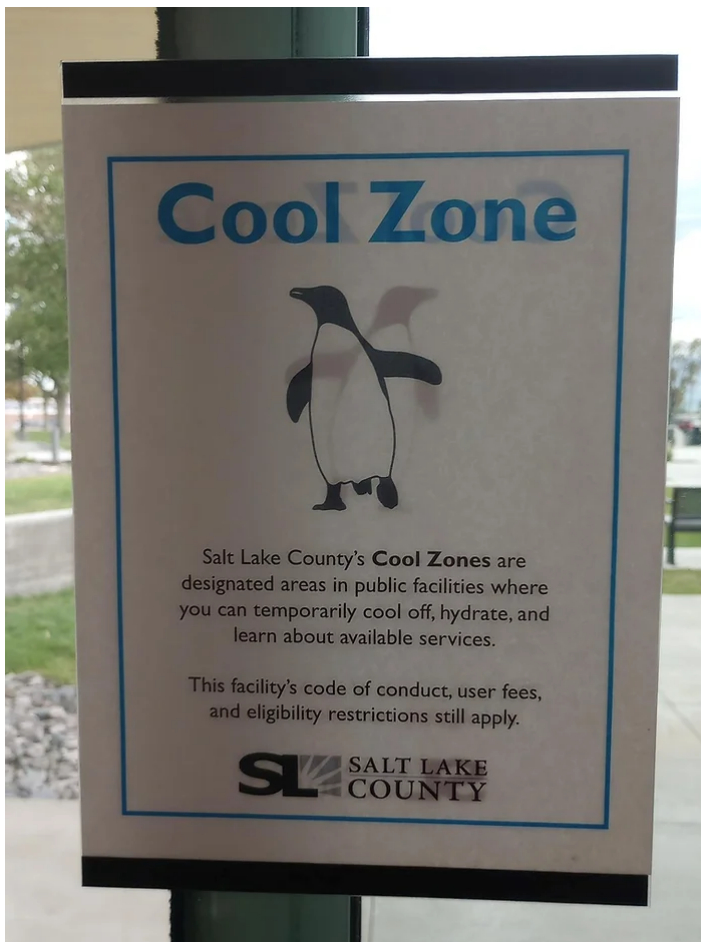
Many planners learn about the Urban Heat Island (UHI) effect in university, but even if we had not we all still would have known about it by now. Global warming has joined with UHI to deadly effect in urban spaces all

over the world. According to the Environmental Protection Agency, “heat island effect results in daytime temperatures in urban areas about 1–7°F higher than... in outlying areas,” and where each passing summer brings new record-high temperatures, every degree matters, and combating UHI can make the difference between life and death in the face of already rising temperatures.

Many municipalities have turned to trees as the obvious solution, and in many ways they are on the right track. Trees and other vegetation can do a lot to combat heat at the local level, and the proliferation of urban forestry and other measures like daylighting rivers and streams can bring about a city that is both cooler and more inline with its surrounding and internal ecology. But planners would be remiss to not understand the ways that urban greenery has, and threatens to affect the social fabric of our cities. Green gentrification, where urban greenery is used to further gentrification, remains an ever present threat. The stage is already set for this vulgar approach to addressing urban heating; previously redlined neighborhoods already suffer higher temperatures than their non-redlined counterparts and recent work done by academics and community members in New York City found that some of the cities lower-income neighborhoods were up to 8°F hotter than “some of the city’s richest neighborhoods, just a few miles away.” Efforts to confront urban heating in these neighborhoods will inevitably come up against the ever present logic of the real-estate industry. Real estate and capitalist urban development is, above all else, committed to using every nicety, benefit, and amenity a neighborhood has to offer to extract higher and higher rents, sales costs, and profits from land. Ultimately, the real-estate industry sees land as both a commodity to be bought and sold, and as a means of accumulating capital itself. Caught in a market catering to urban-bound middle- and upper-class professionals, the urban and even suburban working-classes seem doomed to be replaced by those ready to spend more in rent on LEED-certified, redeveloped, apartments and shop at new upscale, greenwashed shops.

But urban heating has massive implications for the working class outside of green gentrification too. Following the death of 24 year-old, UPS driver, Esteban Chavez Jr. in California, UPS workers and their union are pushing for better conditions for their drivers, namely air conditioning and better heat protections. Across the United States, the Bureau of Labor Statistics recorded 62 “extreme- temperature” related workplace fatalities in 2020, up 17% from 2019. Alongside these increases, the share of Latinx worker fatalities is also on the rise, growing from 20.4% in 2019 to 22.5% in 2020 (the total number of fatalities dropped from 1,088 to 1,072, but still shows a 22% increase from 879 fatalities in 2016). With workers of color being over represented in occupations susceptible to urban heating (landscaping, construction, etc.), rising temperatures threaten racialized and class-specific consequences. As temperatures continue to skyrocket, we can expect more and more fatalities, making the actions of the UPS Teamsters union an incredibly important and necessary step to mitigating the harm to workers in the face of climate change.

Recently, some municipalities and local governments have created “Cool Zone” programs, advertising public spaces like libraries and community centers as designated, air-conditioned, places to cool off. While these programs have no-doubt saved lives, and show the important role public spaces can play in tackling societal challenges, some issues with this approach have emerged. In an article covering Phoenix Arizona’s massive increase in heat-related emergencies, the Guardian found that heat-related 911 calls spiked after 6pm, when the city’s cooling centers closed. This finding shows both the success of the city’s Cool Zones while they are open and their failure to stop preventable heat-related emergencies occurring after the zones’ doors close.



A poster in a library in Salt Lake City. Photo by Ian Van der Merwe.

While staffing and maintenance of such zones to cover more areas for longer-times will require additional resources, expanding such zones to more equitably serve neighborhoods in need and populations like youth who might not have many accessible places to go, seems to be one of the most effective and practical ways to provide life-saving cooling in the summers to come. It needs to be clearly stated though that these Cool Zones work because they are public spaces and free, any future attempts to privatize or otherwise restrict access must be fought if they are to truly be a part of our response to urban heating.

But it is not enough to simply explore and critique the often racist and classist measures taken by the ruling-class and the planners who support them, progressive urbanists and planners must also undertake the difficult task of constructing visions of alternative urbanisms fit for human flourishing. Urban heating has massive implications on the ways people move around. As if the argument against car-oriented planning was not strong enough already, the seas of asphalt demanded by widespread car-usage in the form of roads and

parking lots are major contributors to urban heat (not to mention the other impacts from car-exhaust). Recent research has tied contiguous development to worsened urban heating effects. A simple park strip is not enough to reduce the negative effects of cities full of parking lots, roads, and buildings. If planners are to take this finding seriously, then greening our cities needs to occur on a scale far beyond what is currently imagined by planners and environmentalists alike. Reconstructing urban space to facilitate more ecological and equitable living must include not only a reduction in cars, but more fundamentally, a reduction in the construction of new roads, and the transformation of existing roads into something unrecognizable to the current day traffic engineer; replacing cars with public and active forms of transportation and replacing exposed roads with covered urban trails fit for all sorts of health, safe, environmentally friendly, and social ways of moving around. In re-imagining our cities, planners and architects can draw inspiration from traditional architecture cultivated in societies which have long had to deal with scalding summer heat. The North African/Middle-Eastern covered bazaars and passive-cooling architecture embodied beautifully in wind-catchers show potential design elements of an ecologically healthy city. Covered streets, whether with trees, tarps, or both, would provide much-needed protection to pedestrians while passive-cooling retrofits to existing structures would cool urban buildings without resorting to energy-intensive solutions like air-conditioning.

Urban heating is the result of cities that were built against the ecological systems that they exist within. Planners are uniquely positioned at the point of spatial production, tasked with overseeing, managing, and

contributing to the very spaces that are currently contributing to urban heating. The only way for cities to adequately confront and address urban crises like heating is for planners to develop liberatory, radical solutions which critique the existing systems of oppression and exploitation manifest in our cities and seek “a clear break with the practices that dominate the profession and posits a set of actions in direct contradiction to the norms and values that rule the day.” I do not know what these new actions will look like, but planners, organized in their workplaces and allied with similar efforts in architecture and other industries involved in spatial production, collectively working to confront the reproduction of harmful urban practices will have a shot at discovering those actions. Such an alliance between planning and architecture, already brought together in many university departments, could also create the space for new experiments in spatial production and design, freed from private clients and developers, and given the opportunity to imagine and begin constructing the building blocks of a better city. Alongside this, supporting the efforts of other groups struggling against urban, space-based issues, like workers’ fight for better heat protections and community activists confronting inequitable heating in their neighborhoods, will allow us to connect their struggles with larger concerns over the production and design of space, the ultimate cause of many of the inequalities being confronted. The actions of past planners, architects, and policymakers led to the cities we live in today, and it will take breaking with the current order of things to ensure our work becomes a part of the solution to urban heating, climate change, social inequality, and the fight for a better world.

Ian Van der Merwe is a recent graduate from the University of Utah’s undergraduate Urban Ecology program, a prospective graduate student, and an aspiring planner in the Salt Lake Valley.

Popular Transportation: Where Planning For Environmental Justice Hits the Pavement

By William Boose and Benjamin de la Peña

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



Source: William Boose, taken during his work in the Independencia district of Lima.

To “plan for environmental justice” we must reckon with the historic and ongoing damage wrought by colonialism and neocolonial approaches to planning. This is especially evident in transportation planning, and it is an urgent task as we are confronted by the climate crisis and strive to decarbonize the sector.

Neocolonial approaches to planning are pervasive in the treatment of “informal transportation,” which Jacqueline Klopp more appropriately calls **popular transportation**. Popular or informal, these modes move hundreds of millions of people daily. Despite neglect or even active opposition from planners and officials, *colectivos*, *matatus*, *tuk tuks*, *auto-rickshaws*, *trotros*, *trufis*, *robots*, *mototaxis* and more keep the majority of the world’s cities moving. As Klopp puts it, popular transportation is “strongly present on the street, (but) is often absent from planning, policy, and projects.”

A cursory tour of even a few places gives a sense of the massive size of these systems. More than 74% of all public transport trips in Mexico City are served by *colectivos*. There are 8 million registered *okada* drivers in Nigeria, 1 million *mototaxis* in Perú, and 500,000 *ojek* drivers working for a single app in Indonesia. Uganda's *boda* sector employs 1.7 million people and is estimated to be the single largest sector of male employment outside agriculture. Based on these statistics, we estimate that there are hundreds of millions of popular transportation workers in the world. They in turn serve billions of commuters. Despite their crucial work, popular transportation workers and the masses who depend on them in their daily lives are mostly ignored in global and national approaches to decarbonizing transportation. Listening to their perspectives is a productive starting point for *environmental* justice, which must be intricately tied to *mobility* justice. In short, we call for more planners to hit the pavement and engage with the people at the center of this massive sector.



Source: William Boose, Iquitos, Perú in 2019.

In her foreword to Re-Thinking Mobility Poverty, edited by Tobias Kuttler and Massimo Moraglio, Mimi Sheller suggests that working towards mobility justice requires an “understanding of the historically uneven impacts of infrastructure (...) that have created contemporary splintered urbanism, racial and class segregation, lack of accessibility and automobile dependence for those who can no longer afford the right to the city.” A brief gesture to the historical trajectory of popular transportation helps illustrate why this humanistic move is so urgent.

As Robert Heinze notes in Daniel Agbiboa’s edited volume Transport, Transgression, and Politics in African Cities, colonial planners organized major African cities in ways that privileged the movement of white elites at the expense of Indigenous people, “save for the work commutes to factories and white households.” Such “masterplans” did not provide sufficient transport for the majority of people living in cities in Africa—and across most of the world.

Kenda Mutongi, in her book Matatu: A History of Popular Transportation in Nairobi, similarly illustrates how *matatus* in Nairobi provide transportation for 60% of the city’s population. *Matatus* are a homegrown solution that emerged without foreign aid or investment. They help the majority of people move about in a city that

British colonizers wanted to be for “whites only.” Colonial planners exploited and marginalized the Black majority—so the latter made their own mobility by adapting discarded or secondhand vehicles and transforming them into de facto public transport.

Despite their fundamental contributions that respond to marginalization, popular transportation modes are often treated by planners and officials as nuisances or obstacles. Such planning approaches see “modernization” and “formalization” as necessary moves to “solve” or eradicate these vernacular transportation modes. At best, plans say something like: “we acknowledge that these modes move millions of people, but they are inefficient and they pollute, so we will replace them with more ‘modern’ transportation systems.”



People ride in a jeepney in Metro Manila. Photo by Yannes Kiefer on Unsplash.

Informed by similar logics, officials have banned or are attempting to ban popular transportation modes in many contexts: okadas in Lagos; mototaxis in Bogotá; and jeepneys in Manila. Examples abound. Such moves eliminate vital livelihood and mobility opportunities, especially for working class people. Economic impacts reverberate up the chain of businesses that support popular transportation, from mechanics, to the artists who ornament these vehicles, to the food businesses that cater to the drivers and riders. There is also a brutal irony in these bans: the authorities often fail to implement their designs for “modern” transportation even after criminalizing the popular methods.

Crucially, we do not seek to romanticize popular transportation: these systems are driven by hypercompetition. Wages are precarious, and governments omit popular sector workers from social benefit programs. Safety is fraught for drivers—traffic is their workplace—and passengers. Furthermore, like most transportation modes, popular transportation has typically run on dirty, planet-killing internal combustion engines (ICEs). And yet, even in the absence of any high-profile, global effort to drive electrification in the sector, the [World Bank](#) and the [Global Partnership for Informal Transportation](#) note that as much as 90% of electric vehicles in the world are two- and three-wheelers. [Auto rickshaws and cycle rickshaws in India began electrifying though D.I.Y. technology](#) even before the state enacted its decarbonization policies.

Scholars and activists are increasingly understanding popular transportation as a response, “from the ground up,” that meets demands for livelihood opportunities and affordable transportation in cities that were not designed for the majority of their residents. Based on our years of closely watching this sector, we believe that collaborative planning with popular transportation workers would also generate vernacular approaches to decarbonization and environmental justice. We further believe that if planners want to decarbonize transportation, they *must* coordinate with popular transportation workers. Leaving them out of these conversations will lead to a continued failure to decarbonize the sector with the urgency that the climate crisis demands.

Planning for environmental justice in the face of ongoing climate disaster requires that we valorize popular transportation. It requires privileging the experience and local knowledge of popular transportation workers in crafting policies and solutions. It requires decolonizing our approaches by acknowledging the histories and contexts from which these modes emerged. So yes, environmental justice means unburdening local communities from the pollution impacts of popular transportation. It also means decarbonizing the sector while securing livelihoods and mobilizing local skills and knowledge to generate climate and clean technology solutions.

William Boose is a doctoral student in anthropology at Emory University, and has researched with mototaxistas (motorcycle taxi drivers) in Iquitos and Lima, Perú since 2017.

Benjamin de la Peña is the chair of the Global Partnership for Informal Transportation, the CEO of the Shared-Use Mobility Center, and writes [Makeshift Mobility](#), a newsletter on innovations in informal transportation.

Mobility Efforts in Mexico City

By Jenn Hendricks

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



Paseo de la Reforma

Latin America's incredible urban growth has outpaced city planning and infrastructure. As a result, close to one-fourth of the urban population lives in informal housing. Like any sprawling region, Latin American cities often experience fragmentation in social and physical aspects of society, resulting in disparity and inequity. For instance, workers in Lima and Bogotá spend half as much time commuting as they do at work. A lack of public transit has morphed into an overreliance on cars, in turn creating some of the most congested cities in the world. When car culture dictates the movement of a city, efficiency, space and air quality are negatively impacted. Data shows that cycling has the potential to save cities \$25 trillion, while reducing transportation-related CO₂ emissions 10 percent by 2050. Introducing infrastructure that supports and encourages biking is a complex and sustainable solution that eases congestion and pollution while promoting public health and equity.

Dialogue surrounding sustainable mobility options has largely focused on major European cities like Amsterdam and Paris. Exploring biking initiatives in

Latin America offers nuance to the discussion of urban planning and policy. As the second most urbanized region in the world, Latin America faces unique challenges while offering insight into repurposing street space for recreation. Closing streets to cars offers the chance to explore more complex ideas of public space. Communities can begin to examine how they want to use public space and showcase their values through thoughtful urban planning.

Bogotá's much acclaimed Ciclovías has proved a template for the region and the world. In 1974, the movement toward a car-free city was started by 5,000 Bogotáns who were tired of a car-centric city. What

initially started as a protest, with demonstrators fighting to alleviate pollution and reclaim public space for recreation, turned into a weekly event in which streets are closed down exclusively for pedestrians or cyclists. Not long after, many other Latin American cities developed their own urban experiment in non-motorized transportation.

One of the places to follow Bogota's example was Mexico City. Famous for its smog and sprawl, the mountainous metropolis is the twenty-third most congested in the world, and drivers lose 67 hours in traffic per year. Mexico City is situated in the crater of an extinct volcano and has an altitude of 7,349 feet, this particular geography causes incomplete fuel combustion in engines resulting in higher emissions of carbon monoxide. In addition, smog levels can reach higher than normal levels with increased sunlight. Mexico City's toxic mix of an older vehicle fleet, geography and growing populace led to the United Nations naming the city the most polluted in the world in 1992. Air pollution in the city contributed to thousands of hospitalizations and roughly 1,000 premature deaths a year. Since then, city leadership has been proactive in curbing pollution, emphasizing car-free mobility.

The city has sponsored a surge in bike-sharing systems, e-bikes, and other forms of micro-mobility. The citizenry is starting to take control of their public space by embracing alternative urban mobility. One example of this is EcoBici, which helps establish alternative forms of transit. EcoBici is the largest bike share system in Latin America, covering over 13.5 square miles and with extensive growth expected. It serves 100,000 registered riders and is accessible everyday. According to official city statistics, 54% of Ecobici users substituted another form of transport for cycling.



Food delivery on an Ecobici

The city is also host to free bike lessons and a massive Sunday Ciclovía, during which major roads are transformed into an enormous pedestrian and bicycle corridor. Mexico City's Sunday Ciclovía weaves through close to 250 miles of streets including through Paseo de la Reforma, sections of the historic center, and various streets in the southern part of the city. The current administration, under Mayor Claudia Sheinbaum, seeks to expand the route to 373 miles by 2024. In addition to the expansive network, free bikes are available for use from various loan stations throughout the route. By providing free bike lessons and bike use, the program runs on a democratic system that allows an inclusive group of people to participate.

A multifaceted transit network is not complete without protective measures for cyclists and pedestrians. The Mexican government has also been actively trying to improve road safety through legislation. This May, it successfully passed legislation called the General Mobility and Road Safety bill, which creates a legal framework for cyclists and pedestrians in response to the high numbers of road traffic deaths. The law addresses vehicle safety standards and recognizes the rights of crash victims.

Car-centric cities isolate and push people apart, ultimately threatening citizen health and safety. According to a study on the Ciclovía pedestrian zone in Bogotá, people felt safer in these zones compared to those that did not use car free streets. People also reported that they felt more trusting of others in the shared space. The objective of developing a sustainable transportation system relies on creating a different system for motorized vehicles, but in decreasing traffic and moving toward collective modes of transit. Thriving and sustainable cities are successful when they bring people together. Infrastructure that supports biking and walking reflect an inclusive and safe space for the public to coexist. Ciclovías have taken root across the Latin American urban landscape, demonstrating that a people-first approach to public space improves quality of life. Accessible public space encourages socialization and gives communities a feeling of connectivity and safety.

Jenn Hendricks is a Brooklyn-based freelance writer and urban researcher. She is a graduate of Hunter College Department of Urban Policy and Planning. Her work focuses on comparative urban policy, with a specific interest in regional understandings of community development and public space. She can be found [here](#).

Pandemic Responses and Mutual Aid Are Building Climate Resilience and Justice

Pandemic Responses and Mutual Aid Are Building Climate Resilience and Justice: Learning from Community Responses in the Boston Area

By Penn Loh and Neenah Estrella-Luna

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



Photo credits (left to right): Gabriela Cartagena, Dan Jackson, Said el Mennaouy

In early 2020, [GreenRoots](#), an environmental justice group in Chelsea, Massachusetts, was organizing residents to challenge a proposed electrical substation that would add yet another threat among the

multiple environmental hazards already in this predominantly working-class Latinx community. Two days before the pandemic shutdown in Massachusetts, GreenRoots convened a call of about 15 stakeholders to begin coordinating an emergency response amongst community, nonprofit, and governmental partners. That call, the first of 65 consecutive daily calls, created the Chelsea Pandemic Response Team, which grew to 75 people in 10 working groups and included city staff, state elected officials, and leadership of the two major health clinics. These early actions helped Chelsea transform from one of the communities hardest hit by COVID-19 to a model for pandemic response, achieving some of the highest rates of vaccination amongst working class immigrant communities in the country.

This community-led response is an example of social resilience in action. Though GreenRoots was not a service agency, they catalyzed city-wide action because they understood that structural racism and other systems of oppression would leave their community disproportionately impacted. They drew on their deep relationships and collaborations to quickly respond to and connect those in need to resources.

This resilience can be activated in many types of crises, including climate. Community-based organizations (CBOs) like GreenRoots show that building independent community power and strengthening social and civic infrastructure are the most effective ways to protect the most vulnerable in the age of climate (and other) disasters – and transform the systems producing these injustices.

Across the Boston area, resident-led CBOs immediately pivoted in the pandemic to meet urgent needs of their communities. Groups that had not previously done mass distribution of aid, such as [La Colaborativa](#), [Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative](#), and [VietAID](#) turned their buildings into food pantries, serving thousands of families each week. [Mutual Aid Eastie](#) delivered 5,000 meals a week at the height of the shutdown. The Black Economic Justice Institute distributed \$20,000 in gift cards and laundry cards. New relief funds were created, including the [Mass UndocuFund](#), channeling more than \$1.5 million to 3,400 undocumented workers and their families, and the [Mass Redistribution Fund](#), raising almost \$1 million for 27 grassroots relief efforts across the state. CBOs provided hands-on multi-lingual support to assist residents and businesses to access government aid.

The trust and deep relationships that these groups have within their communities also helped residents access COVID testing and overcome vaccine misinformation and skepticism. The Black Boston COVID-19 Coalition brought out 1,200 people to the first weekend of mass COVID testing in Roxbury. In Chelsea, La Colaborativa and GreenRoots mobilized health ambassadors to do door-to-door and on-street outreach.

These responses stretched these organizations beyond their regular capacities. They took on these challenges because they are rooted in an ethic of care for and solidarity with their communities. In addition to meeting physical needs, they conducted wellness calls and visits, letting people know their mental and emotional wellbeing was cared about. These responses were saving lives and showing how institutions and resources might be shifted to address systemic inequities.

Progressive planners can learn much from community COVID responses to prepare for future climate (and other) disasters. Fundamentally, resilience should be reframed from a social justice perspective. Climate resilience approaches that focus on capacity to “bounce back” from a shock are rightly critiqued for fixating on physical infrastructure and ignoring existing inequities. Marginalized communities are not interested in returning to normal; they want to build back better and transform the systems that produce vulnerabilities

and injustice in the first place. Resilience should be understood as primarily a social capacity of people to respond collectively with care and equity. This is exactly what grassroots CBOs have been building in “normal” times to address persistent intersectional inequities.

The pandemic has spurred the innovation of new social infrastructure. Mutual aid efforts sprouted in many places, driven by an ethic of solidarity, not charity. Mutual Aid Eastie rejected a culture of “service-ism” and brought their neighbors into a WhatsApp group where they could access what they need (such as food or housing) and also offer what they have. Neighborhood stewards of the community’s Little Free Pantry alert each other through WhatsApp about what is available and when it is running low. Neighbors also use the chat to share information about resources and events knowing that it is moderated to ensure reliability and safety. According to one neighborhood leader, “we had to redefine it as reciprocity and being in relationship with each other. ... folks say I don’t have anything to give, yet our people were saying I made tamales and can sell or give it.”

New organizing models were created that integrate services. New England United for Justice (NEU4J) developed a “wellness-to-organizing” approach where they reach people first through services and then use those opportunities to engage them in campaigns for change. For a NEU4J leader “it’s not just about getting the service. If they sign up for rental assistance, they hear about housing justice. If filing for unemployment, they hear about worker’s rights and the struggles. This is a vehicle to continue our organizing.”

Grassroots CBOs became more widely recognized and valued during the pandemic as critical bridges to vulnerable communities. Government, larger service providers, and funders came to CBOs to channel aid to those most in need, even if they had been in conflicts before. A consortium of nine CBOs used resources from the City of Boston Resiliency Fund to assemble wellness kits for families with COVID-positive members. Instead of buying commercially available masks, they sourced 2500 masks from a new sewing cooperative in East Boston, leveraging public resources to build the local solidarity economy.

An overarching lesson is that strengthening our capacities to care for one another is the foundation of resilience. This social resilience is also a form of community power necessary to transform the systems that create vulnerabilities in the first place. As one Boston leader put it, “groups who are doing democratic organizing or building community leadership ... are, in essence, building capacity for people to survive climate change.”

Planners in government, funders, and service agencies should partner with and invest in grassroots CBOs as a major resilience strategy. They should continue to build the relationships and trust that were advanced during the pandemic. They should provide longer-term core funding to support CBO infrastructure and sustainability. Community organizing should be seen as a primary strategy for improving services and building overall community resiliency.

Most crucially, planners should listen to and follow the lead of communities most impacted. Grassroots CBOs do not want to be heroes in the next crisis, and they are not a substitute for public programs and resources. They are building resilience that is people-focused, intersectional, institutional, and rooted in anti-racist/ anti-oppressive ideology and practice. This is what we need to “bounce forward” towards more just and sustainable communities.

Penn Loh is Senior Lecturer and Director of Community Practice in Tufts University's Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning. He has extensive experience working in a community-based environmental justice group and partners with various base building organizations in the Solidarity Economy Initiative, Right to the City Alliance, and Center for Economic Democracy.

Neenah Estrella-Luna is a researcher, educator, advocate, and consultant focusing on issues related to social justice, social relations, and democratic governance. She has co-led a variety of community based and participatory action research studies as well as traditional research addressing questions related to social resilience, environmental justice, community development, education, and public safety among other topics.

This article draws on the authors' 2021 report "Opportunities to Invest in Community Resilience for COVID and Climate" (sponsored by the Barr Foundation).

Planning For Environmental Justice in the Age of Climate Disasters: Energy Justice

By: Summer Sandoval

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



“关灯!” (guan deng) was a phrase I often heard yelled from my first generation Chinese mother growing up. This Mandarin phrase translates directly into “close the lights.” This was my first lesson in energy conservation. My mother was not an outspoken or self-proclaimed “environmentalist,” as her teachings were rooted in daily financial concerns, which played a major role in shaping my view of energy. Since I was five years old, or tall enough to reach the lightswitch, I saw energy as something precious, expensive, and in many cases, as a luxury. I never imagined that these early parenting lessons on turning off the lights and opening windows to avoid costly air conditioning bills would ultimately plant the seed for my passion for energy justice—to make clean energy accessible, affordable, and community-owned especially for people of color and low-income communities, the same communities that have suffered the largest burden from fossil fuel extraction, pollution, and energy cost burden for generations.

Climate change is the biggest threat of this era. The climate crisis is not an impending fear, but a present crisis—and we are not ready. The root causes of climate change and racial injustice are roots of the same poisonous tree. They stem from a long history of colonialization, white supremacy, slavery, and patriarchy. These systems of oppression created the foundation of environmental and climate injustices and no amount of turning off the lights or changing light bulbs will fix this crisis—we need deep systemic change. For generations, Black, Brown, Indigenous, and low-income communities have borne the brunt of not only pollution but also redlining, gerrymandering, disinvestment, and other legal efforts to disempower communities from building long-term wealth. We're stuck in a system of working our whole lives away just to realize how much we can't afford—holding ourselves over with novel joys like band-aids that keep us from a true diagnosis.

Like many people of color struggling to raise a family and make ends meet in the U.S. under the illusion of a “middle class” fantasy, growing up, my family often chose to be in physical discomfort if that meant saving money on our monthly energy bills. In the hotter months, my mother would open all of our windows, turn on the fans, and pour us iced tap water to keep cool. While in the colder months, we had to layer our clothes and do our schoolwork with cold hands as we looked forward to snuggling under our discounted electric blankets at night. As a woman of color of Asian, African, Indigenous, and Hispanic descent, I am deeply committed to racial justice in my life and in my work in energy. It is my life's pursuit to support all my people—past, present, and future—through energy justice, an integral part of realizing a true Just Transition. What is a Just Transition if not a world where people don't have to choose between comfort and cost?

Energy is as necessary as food, water, and air to sustaining life and human wellbeing, and the collaborative work of PEAK Coalition—a comprehensive effort of environmental justice organizations and partners to replace polluting peaker power plants in NYC's most overburdened communities with clean energy and energy storage solutions—is an example of a successful model to dismantle generations of energy injustice and local pollution. The inequitable siting of peaker power plants predominantly in communities of color is an example of inequities in our energy system. Peaker power plants are the oldest, most inefficient, costliest, and most polluting fossil fuel burning plants on the energy grid. They turn on when energy demand in the city is high, which makes poor air quality conditions even worse for the frontline communities where these polluting plants are located.

We must ensure the clean energy transition away from fossil fuels is a Just Transition, and that environmental justice and frontline communities who have suffered a legacy of health disparities are prioritized, meaningfully engaged, and part of decision-making in clean energy development like solar, offshore wind, and battery storage. It won't be easy and it won't happen overnight. It will take innovative partnerships and real collaborations like PEAK Coalition to remediate generations of systemic inequities and barriers for impacted communities to have access and ownership over their own clean energy infrastructure. Energy justice is no small feat. The issues are as complicated as they are confusing and there's no “one size fits all” answer. But it's time—time for us to forget “Business As Usual”, reject False Solutions, and be problem oriented.

Being “problem oriented” means recognizing the root causes of problems in order to have a clear understanding of how to address them. Lived experience is arguably the most valuable expertise as it provides a granular and holistic understanding of issues that can never be taught in a classroom, found in a

syllabus, or come with letters of prestige after a name. Communities most impacted by these issues are the experts in creating the solutions, and must be treated as such.

In New York City, longstanding environmental justice leadership has been passing legislation, facilitating community-based planning, and creating innovative climate justice solutions for decades. Community-based organizations like UPROSE in Sunset Park, Brooklyn and fellow member organizations of the New York City Environmental Justice Alliance are at the forefront of community-led and cooperatively owned solar projects in communities with multiple peaker power plants. These are examples of how impacted communities are centering equity and building new models of clean energy technology like solar to create long-term community wealth by sharing economic savings and creating local employment opportunities. We must support frontline communities and environmental and climate justice leadership to create new systems grounded in redressing generations of harm.

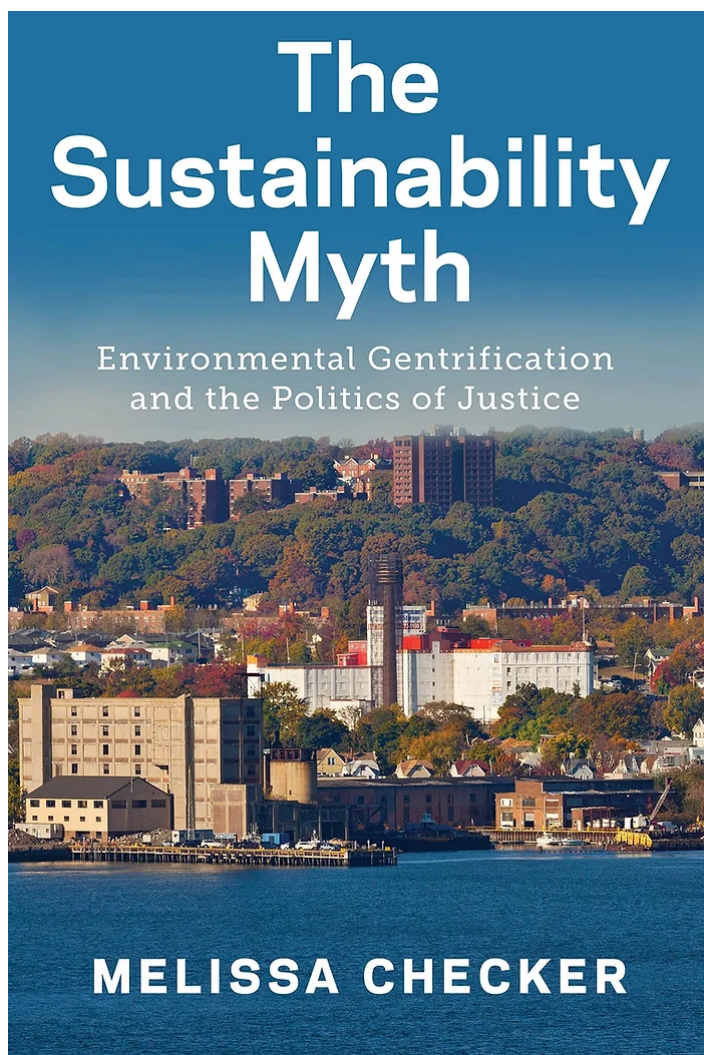
The processes that caused the injustices we reckon with today cannot be the same path we walk down to find real solutions. The way energy infrastructure gets sited, paid for, and overseen must all significantly change to incorporate the voices, concerns, and leadership of impacted communities. We have all the tools and resources to create equitable solutions, but we don't have the time to wait for the political will to do so. We don't need saviors, we need allies—allies who will help the environmental and climate justice movement build a Just Transition by creating new decision-making and development processes that center equity, because environmental and climate justice *is* racial justice. This can start with simply asking, "what do you need?".

Summer Sandoval is a multi-racial woman of color who works on energy justice issues in New York City. She lives in Brooklyn and is passionate about working with others to center equity in clean energy efforts. Summer believes meaningful change must come from building trust and being accountable. Summer enjoys spending her free time in New York City parks, creating games, and cooking for her friends. Summer went to New York University for her undergraduate degree and the Graduate Center for Planning and the Environment at Pratt Institute for her graduate degree.

Review of The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice

By Lacey Sigmon

The following piece is part of Progressive City's Planning for Environmental Justice series. Contributions reflect on this theme through a variety of lenses, such as environmental justice, combatting green gentrification, and exploring radical approaches to climate change. Read more about this series [here](#).



The Sustainability Myth:
Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of
Justice

by Melissa Checker

NYU Press

280 Pages, paperback

\$30 USD

This review of Melissa Checker's book "The Sustainability Myth: Environmental Gentrification and the Politics of Justice" closes out Progressive City's latest series: Planning for Environmental Justice. It bookends a few months of exploration of climate disaster in our communities and the tools and ideas that have emerged to address issues such as transportation, gentrification, displacement, community trust, and the protection of workers' rights. Checker's book, in many ways, aligns with the conclusions of our authors who have identified and are attempting to grapple with the contradictions that make environmental justice so confounding.

Checker's book delves deep into arguably one of the biggest markers of climate disaster:

sustainability. While sustainability can have many definitions, Checker explores its use in the context of New York City, where the term became popular under Mayor Michael Bloomberg who used it to garner public support for otherwise controversial redevelopment efforts (Checker, 2020, pp. 37-38). Bloomberg used "sustainability" to steer the narrative: not just a boon to wealthy developers, these projects would allow New Yorkers access to a "healthier and greener lifestyle" (Checker, 2020, pp. 39).

Checker uses NYC, and specifically the North Shore of Staten Island, as a primary case study to demonstrate and frame the myth and false virtues of sustainability; from its role in gentrification to its inability to meaningfully address climate disaster within the context of American capitalism. Checker uses the term “sustainaphrenia” to capture the “inherently contradictory promise of urban sustainability,” whereby economic growth and combating climate change go hand in hand, environmental justice and affordable housing are complimentary, and civic engagement meaningfully affects decision making (Checker, 2020, pp. 7). In reality, Checker outlines how sustainability often does not bridge the gaps in these contradictions, and is instead used to fuel economic development and the continued consolidation of wealth.

Environmental Gentrification

The Sustainability Myth does an excellent job of illustrating the ways in which sustainability has been used to further a capitalist agenda. Checker examines three types of environmental gentrification, each fueled by notions of “sustainability”: green gentrification, industrial gentrification, and brown gentrification. In the book, these terms are defined respectively as the development of green spaces to leverage the construction of high-end development, the targeted location of manufacturing away from “high property value” areas, and the incentivization of private brownfield cleanup in order to leverage future high-end development (Checker, 2020, pp. 50, 86-87, 117).

NYC is an especially fitting case study for these three types of gentrification because growth, often at environmental and human expense, has been foundational to its identity (Checker, 2020, pp. 27). One obvious example of green gentrification cited in the book is Central Park, previously the city’s largest settlement of free Blacks. After displacement and redevelopment of the land, Central Park increased the tax base of adjacent property owners significantly (Checker, 2020, pp. 53-54). Robert Moses used industrial gentrification to achieve his urban planning goals when determining the location of transportation and waste management infrastructure. In one example, Moses convinced city leadership to locate a sewage treatment plant, originally to be located in the west sixties near Moses’s Lincoln Center urban renewal project, at 137th street in West Harlem which had already borne the brunt of previous industrial zoning decisions (Checker, 2020, pp. 58-59). To see brown gentrification in action, look at a [map of New York City’s brownfield clean up projects](#), which shows that almost half are located on the Brooklyn waterfront, representing the most gentrifying areas in the city (Checker, 2020, pp. 128).

These three types of environmental gentrification provide the reader a framework with which to better understand and question the motivations of capitalist-driven sustainability. While the construction of green space, the logistics of industrial zoning, and the cleanup of toxic sites are necessary in the pursuit of environmental justice, the motivations behind these decisions matter.

The author uses the example of the Green Guerrillas to demonstrate the full trajectory of “sustainaphrenia”-fueled environmental gentrification. The Green Guerrillas are a group of gardeners who transformed underutilized vacant lots in NYC into community gardens, which served as green community gathering spaces (Checker, 2020, pp. 64). However, in 1998, then-Mayor Giuliani announced that these vacant lots-turned-community gardens would be available for purchase and development by private interests, announcing, “Welcome to the era after communism” (Checker, 2020, pp.66). In response, the gardeners took direct action and, in the end, approximately 300 gardens were preserved through purchase of land rights or negotiating leases with the city. The future of the remaining 800 gardens was left uncertain. The city’s role in removing access to green community space in order to cater to private interests is one element of the story. Another element is how the remaining community gardens, despite their community-based non-monetary origins, have had a gentrifying effect within their neighborhoods. While community gardens cannot be

considered the sole contributing factor to gentrification, NYU's Furman Center found that property values increased significantly within a 1,000 foot radius of a community garden, especially in neighborhoods with lower-income residents (Checker, 2020, pp. 67). The Green Guerillas and community gardens in NYC demonstrate that even neutral or progressive interests to increase community access to green space can become fuel in the machine of capitalism.

The Politics of Sacrifice

The Sustainability Myth demonstrates that the outputs of sustainability in a capitalist society extend beyond the physical form of development and displacement. In the second half of the book, Checker explores the ways activists and community members are churned through the process of civic engagement in the pursuit of environmental justice, a process that often involves great personal sacrifice.

Becker argues that civic engagement can be a form of "citizenship as consumerism." (Checker, 2020, pp. 47) She goes on to say:

"Participating in this facade has extracted a heavy cost—it has sucked up activists' time and energy and diverted them from their original goals for environmental justice even as it co-opted some of those goals to service environmental gentrification. But refusing to 'take a seat at the table' means being ostracized and characterized as being uncooperative or self-serving." (47)

While engaging the public is necessary in order to ensure decisions are not made in a bubble, the reality is that many or most practitioners do not go far enough to garner feedback. Many times a narrow set of predetermined outcomes is already identified before community engagement begins, or the process is so opaque that meaningful feedback cannot be provided. Additionally, this already flawed process relies heavily on the sacrifice of activists' time, money, and energy. Throughout the book, and particularly in this section, Checker follows an activist named Beryl Thurman, a founding member of the North Shore Waterfront Conservancy whose dedication to environmental justice on the North Shore of Staten Island has placed her squarely in confrontation with the reality of sustainphrenia. For example, Thurman was invited to a day-long forum that invitees would not be paid to attend, would take hours to commute to and from, and was likely to be fruitless. However, Thurman "felt compelled to attend the meeting in order to be able to 'accurately project' a sense of urgency on issues facing the North Shore, and to make sure those issues were not ignored." (Checker, 2020, pp. 165).

In the final chapter of the book, Checker explores the contradictory politics of environmental justice on Staten Island. Registered democratic voters outnumber registered republicans, yet Staten Island regularly elects republican candidates (Checker, 2020, pp. 179). Checker sees environmental justice, and in the case of post-Sandy Staten Island, climate disaster, as a means for solidarity among politically divergent groups. Specifically, Checker notes, "[t]hese findings urge us to rethink the significance of consensus as a basis for collective action and of dissensus as a stumbling block. More generally, I contend that shared experiences of precarity, disillusionment, and betrayal muck up political binaries" (Checker, 2020, pp. 180). While Checker seems optimistic that increasing public skepticism of "sustainaphrenia" and the realities of climate disaster can and will unite communities, America's polarizing political environment makes this seem more impossible with each passing day.

Final Thoughts

The Sustainability Myth ends with the author helping Thurman pack up her home on Staten Island to move back to Cleveland, Ohio. While Thurman's move away from the city can be seen as symbolic of the environmental activists' plight in America, the reasoning for the move is more complex and human than metaphorical, an element of the book I appreciate. While the book is filled with information, data, and references, the human element of this work is not lost. Checker ends the book on an optimistic but warning note, stating:

Rather than being lulled by sustainaphrenia, I hope that readers will be inspired by the activists depicted in this book to build political solidarities based not on partisanship but on opposition to our shared environmental and economic precarity. Then we can set to work assembling new sets of tools that can build a raft sturdy enough to carry us all. (Checker, 2020, 214)

The *Progressive City* series: Planning in the Age of Climate Disaster is intended to do just this. Progressive planners and activists must work within the context of climate disaster. There is no hiding from it or planning around it. Planners must face the reality that work towards environmental justice or “sustainability” may actually cause harm if the consequences of these solutions are not considered. However, there are tools and mechanisms for community building that can and will reduce harm in our communities and provide the foundation for a future that we cannot currently fathom. *The Sustainability Myth*, along with the articles released as part of this series can hopefully prove useful for our readers to critically and creatively think about our roles in the future of our communities. We hope that you will continue to share your ideas and examples of progressive and environmentally just planning with *Progressive City*.

Lacey Sigmon is an Urban Planner who works in storm recovery in New York and Texas. She received her Masters Degree from the University of Michigan in Urban Planning with a focus on housing and community development. She received her undergraduate degree from the New College of Florida in Chinese Language and Literature and International Studies.