

The City is Not Your Laboratory

The following piece is part of Progressive City's series [The Future of Planning: Insights From Emerging Planners](#), in which current or recently graduated Planning students reflect on the state of the planning profession and how our activities as planners can be oriented towards justice as opposed to perpetuating ongoing racial, colonial, economic, environmental, and ability-related injustices. More information on this series can be found [here](#).



In December of 2020, after the strangest academic semester of my life, I experienced my first finals week in urban planning school. This bi-annual tradition sees planning students handing in bold research projects seeking to solve pressing urban problems, often through visually dazzling policy memos and pamphlets. If your program, like mine, is nestled within a design school, its Instagram will be blanketed with glossy renderings of student projects in architecture and urban form -- many of which will veer into fantastical, idealist abstractions.

Since planning programs in urban universities tend to extoll the “city as classroom” outlook, the subject of students' work will often be their respective neighborhoods and communities. Because my program is in upper Manhattan, many students focused on topics like the historically fraught relationship between Morningside Heights and Harlem, or environmental racism in the nearby South Bronx. What struck me most about this process was just how much of Uptown was under our microscopes, with new infrastructure, public spaces, and transportation schemes being proposed left and right. The massive scope of these projects, if actually implemented verbatim, stood to affect hundreds of thousands of people, dramatically

altering some of the most intimate spheres of their lives from their neighborhoods, to their streets, to their doorsteps. Unfortunately due to COVID-19 precaution, many students had, through no fault of their own, not even been able to physically visit the neighborhoods they were reimagining. This all led me to wonder, *what do these projects actually have to do with the people of Uptown?*

To be clear, there is nothing inherently wrong with these exercises. One of the joys of our field is helping people craft and imagine better futures, and these thought experiments are excellent means of formulating and articulating such visions. Yet, as we are implored by our professors to find answers to urgent urban questions, we must constantly situate ourselves in the realities and struggles of the people and places we seek to help improve. This entails an acknowledgement that we are far from the first people to consider these issues, and a commitment to solving existing problems rather than inventing our own for the purpose of academic exercises. Most importantly, because we usually cannot fully comprehend the personal stakes of issues for city residents, we should look to tenant union meetings, labor strikes, and mutual aid campaigns (to name a few), as critical extensions of our research and participate in civic life more broadly. This ultimately entails a detachment from what I call “urbanist auteurism” -- the vain and often subconscious desire to reshape the built environment in one’s own image.

It must be noted that, in this regard, urban planning has improved significantly over the years. Two summers ago, I spoke to a family friend about her experience at M.I.T.’s urban planning program in the 1960s. Embarrassed, she said that she was educated “before the enlightenment” of urban planning, and told me how the program tasked students with paternalistically “fixing” the “black ghetto” of Roxbury in Boston. If we compare this to contemporary pedagogy, where courses about racial equity, community engagement, and environmental sustainability can be found across the country’s planning programs, such progress is refreshingly evident. Despite these improvements, though, such paternalism lives on in planning education in a subtler, more insidious fashion. In 2017, Monxo López, a community organizer at South Bronx Unite, described the parasitic dynamic that planning programs have historically established with his community:

“There are 40 years of design plans, renderings, and sketches of urban design ideas for our neighborhood from elite schools — and very little has ever come of them. Our neighborhood is used by some educational institutions as what I call a ‘credit farm,’ when they need to look as if they’re doing socially responsible work. Over the decades, people in the neighborhood have gotten jaded from helping these institutions and not getting anything real back. Typically, students would come, talk with a few people for a couple of hours, and then disappear for the duration of their design process. They’d come back in a few months and present everything they’ve ‘done for the community...’ Other proposals have this science fiction quality because they’re all about letting the student’s creativity flourish.”¹

Here, López provides a crisp and scathing critique of the city and its vulnerable communities as “laboratories.” The problem with this approach is that no matter the purity of one’s intentions, the results will almost always be self-serving rather than mutually beneficial. While scientists who work in actual, enclosed laboratories must maintain a detached, analytical relationship with their test subjects, planners do not operate in such a vacuum. Because our “test subject” is the world and people around us, an approach of active and productive solidarity is therefore necessary. In short, we must, to the best of our abilities, work to understand and *feel* the conditions on the ground, rather than retreating further into our academic bubble.

The increased importance placed on informatics, data visualization, and GIS mapping in modern planning programs poses great risks in this regard. To be clear, I in no way wish to advocate for Luddism. These technologies are immensely powerful and can be used as potent tools for highlighting injustices and formulating possible remedies. Yet, as we sit in the Ivory Tower and use dot-density maps to visualize data as sensitive and complex as poverty and infant mortality rates, we run the risk of flattening the city, its problems, and most importantly its people, into abstractions. The great CUNY Geography Professor Neil Smith addressed this phenomenon in 1984, saying “I always advise students that you should only use statistical manipulations when they’re absolutely at a loss to know what’s going on in the world that you’re trying to investigate.”² Without deep engagement outside of the classroom, most of what “the city” is will be invisible to the planning student.

For planning education to progress, students (and our professors) must not view the city as some sort of docile laboratory to test our theories and ideas. Instead, we must treat the city like an ongoing political project and ourselves as one of countless actors within it. This vision of the city imagines urbanism as a constellation of individual struggles -- those of tenants, workers, immigrants, the elderly, youth, families, those most vulnerable to public health crises, and those experiencing poverty and/or homelessness -- that predate our planning interventions and will outlive them as well. In order to plan with integrity, we must involve ourselves in these struggles to the greatest possible extent, so as to feel a greater stake in their outcomes than in our own personal solutions.

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¹Bagchee, Nandini. "Design and Advocacy in the South Bronx." Urban Omnibus. November 02, 2017. <https://urbanomnibus.net/2017/05/hearts-studio/>.

²Neil Reads *USA Today: The Flip Side of the Weather Is the News*. Performed by Neil Smith. Vimeo. 1984. <https://vimeo.com/50446009>.

Holistic Planning for Climate Justice

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Save

"Stand with Standing Rock SF Nov 2016 11" by Pax Ahimsa Gethen is licensed under CC BY-SA 4.0

The dangers presented by climate change make it clear that planning has performed spectacularly poorly over the past few centuries. The planet is rapidly approaching tipping points that will make it uninhabitable: sea level rise threatens coastal cities, extreme weather endangers lives and taxes infrastructure, and shifting seasonal patterns complicate food supply. The unequal distribution of risks and resources along lines of race and class further amplifies the problems, as some will find themselves vulnerable to these changes sooner than others. Future (and present) planning practices must decarbonize society and ensure that it is drastically more equitable.

The broad conceptualization of planning required to make this shift is not the one that has been taught in traditional planning classes for my Master's program thus far. The scope of the climate crisis requires

planning by all levels of government across all sectors, alongside the planning done by community organizations and activists. Cities need major alterations, yes, but so too do the economy and immigration policy. Non-governmental actions, from mutual aid to advocacy, also play a vital role in determining what the future will look like. All of these are planning, and yet only a fraction of these processes are considered in the curricula I have encountered.

The reification of *planning* as the profession of city planning inhibits a full understanding of the interconnections between planning and climate change. It is straightforward to note how resource-intensive suburban development and car-centric transit harm the environment. Patterns of environmental racism, such as the siting of toxic waste facilities near communities of color and the disparate aid in cases of catastrophic weather,¹ also are clearly traceable to city planning. However, higher-level government policies such as decisions about fossil fuel subsidies,² for example, are also a form of planning. The decisions made by the US government and by corporations to push forward with the Dakota Access Pipeline, furthering settler colonial dispossession of the Standing Rock Sioux,³ were planning, too.

The power dynamics of racial capitalism that determine whose plans get implemented are obscured when we focus solely on municipal governance. The plans that will help communities survive the effects of climate change are already written; for example, they exist in the Green New Deal and in the Giniw Collective's protests against Line 3 in Minnesota.⁴ When we envision future directions for planning, these are the types of plans we need to include. To actualize climate justice, these plans need to start winning. They need to win over oil companies' plans to keep drilling and also over "climate-friendly" development that contributes to gentrification and displacement.⁵ In order for these plans to win, we need to strengthen relationships of solidarity between progressive legislators and government planners, Indigenous leaders, community organizers, and climate activists. The last two centuries of planning in the service of racial capitalism have gotten us into this mess and breaking the silos between different ways of planning is part of what will get us out.

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¹ Bullard, R. D., & Wright, B. (2012). *The Wrong Complexion for Protection: How the Government Response to Disaster Endangers African American Communities*. New York University Press.

² Nuccitelli, D. (2018, July 30). America spends over \$20bn per year on fossil fuel subsidies. Abolish them. *The Guardian*. <http://www.theguardian.com/environment/climate-consensus-97-per-cent/2018/jul/30/america-spends-over-20bn-per-year-on-fossil-fuel-subsidies-abolish-them>

³ Estes, N. (2019). Siege. In *Our History is the Future: Standing Rock versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (pp. 25–66). Verso Books.

⁴ Tigue, K. (2021, February 16). Urging Biden to Stop Line 3, Indigenous-Led Resistance Camps Ramp Up Efforts to Slow Construction. *Inside Climate News*. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/16022021/biden-line-3-minnesota-enbridge-pipeline-indigenous-resistance/>

⁵Anguelovski, I., Connolly, J. J. T., Pearsall, H., Shokry, G., Checker, M., Maantay, J., Gould, K., Lewis, T., Maroko, A., & Roberts, J. T. (2019). Opinion: Why green “climate gentrification” threatens poor and vulnerable populations. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 116(52), 26139–26143.
<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1920490117>

Cycling in Scarborough? Think Again. A Question of Transportation Equity in Toronto's East End

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Active transportation is now all the rage in Canada and for good reason. Whether walking, cycling, skateboarding or rollerblading, human-powered locomotion is beneficial for the body, mind, and the environment.

Cities across the province of Ontario have been releasing their cycling master plans. These include the City of [Hamilton](#) and the City of [Mississauga](#), with the latter claiming a cycling network of 897 kilometres to be built over the next 27 years. Similarly, the City of Toronto has also been hard at work updating its cycling infrastructure, with an additional 120 kilometers planned as of 2021. While the City of Toronto proudly displays its many different types of cycling infrastructure around the downtown core and along the waterfront from Long Branch to Cliffside, one quick look at the cycling map reveals an oddity. While their cycling Infrastructure is scattered throughout the city, there is a cycling desert located in Scarborough, shown in Figure 1.

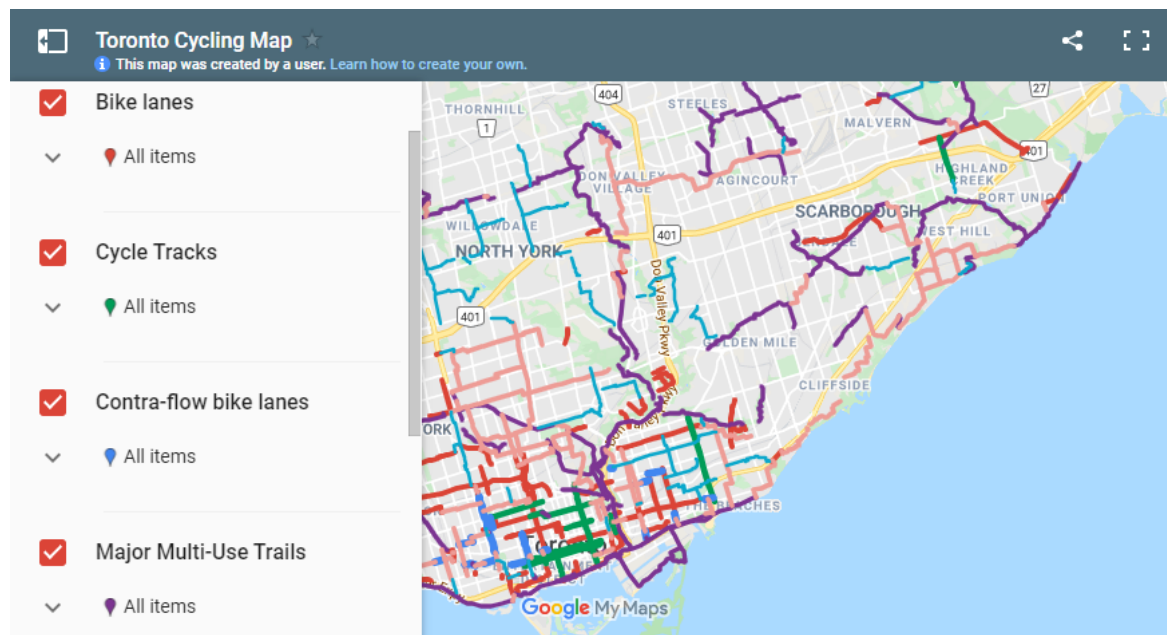


Figure 1: City of Toronto Cycling, Notice the Cycling Desert in Scarborough (shown in red) ([City of Toronto, 2021](#))

A significantly large area, from Victoria Park Avenue in the west to Midland Avenue in the east and Lawrence Avenue in the South to Sheppard Avenue in the north, has no cycling infrastructure at all: not bicycle lanes, trails, or even shared lane markings (see Figure 2). There is a similar story in the Malvern area as well.



Figure 2: City of Toronto Cycling Dead Zone

Now that we know where the cycling dead zones (areas with no cycling Infrastructure) exist, we must ask ourselves why? Perhaps a glance at a map of incomes in Toronto might shed some light.

Average Individual Income, City of Toronto, 2015

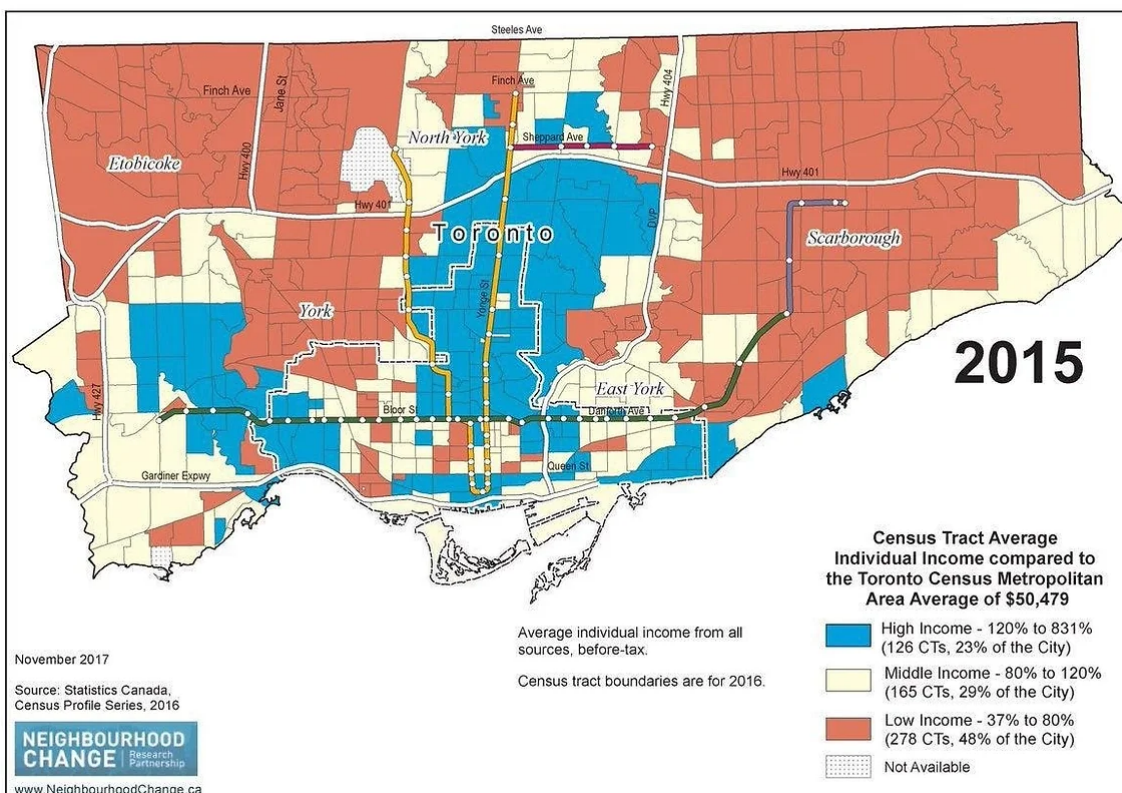


Figure 3: Income Map of Toronto CITATION Sta17 \I 4105 (Statistics Canada, 2017)

As we can see in Figure 3, the area of the cycling “dead zone” lies in a low-income area of Toronto. More specifically, the area in question is known as Wexford-Maryvale. This neighbourhood has among the lowest median income in Toronto. Why is it that the city has failed to offer the residents of Wexford-Maryvale the numerous benefits that accompany cycling infrastructure?

The City of Toronto in its infinite wisdom has failed to provide cycling infrastructure to a community that needs it. Communities of lower-income face significant challenges when they are not provided with reliable transportation infrastructure, specifically with their health and access to employment. Known as the Transportation Barrier, low-income residents must have access to several different modes of transportation, as their existing transportation options might not be reliable (transit, personal vehicle, etc.). Without adequate transportation options, residents will face barriers to healthcare access, leading to missed appointments, delayed care, or missed medication. In the long term, this can lead to chronic illness and poorer health care outcomes. Thus, the implementation of cycling infrastructure can lead to overall improved health. This is essential for a community such as Wexford-Maryvale which has 2400 unemployed, 9450 low income and 8910 residents living in unaffordable housing.

Also, a low-income community such as Wexford-Maryvale should be given an equitable chance to obtain long-term high paying employment. Studies show that the availability of multi-modal transportation possibilities is associated with increases in median household pay and a decrease in the unemployment rate. Therefore, the failure to provide a separate mode of transportation in the form of cycling infrastructure, in turn, leads to barriers in the ability to obtain higher-paying jobs.

Another barrier towards bicycle lanes in Scarborough and Toronto as a whole, is the issue of safety. A recent accident in Scarborough left a cyclist in the hospital following a collision with a vehicle. Incidents like these are far too common in areas where bicycle lanes are available. The decision-making regarding bicycle lanes in Scarborough reached a bewildering junction during the summer of 2020 when the City of Toronto decided to remove safer/separated bicycle lanes that were placed along Brimley Road just 5 months after installation, at a cost of \$160,000. Staff proclaimed the decision was based on “ongoing data collection, monitoring and analysis” as well as “feedback from constituents and other stakeholders”. This move eliminated a safe space for cyclists in the area, as these bicycle lanes include dividers from the vehicular traffic. Toronto is full of unprotected bicycle lanes and in the first half of 2020, there were 63 accidents where cyclists or pedestrians were killed or injured. Figure 4 below showcases one such bicycle lane, where there is no protection from larger vehicles and where large vehicles frequently drive in or park on the dedicated bicycle lane.



Figure 4: An obstructed bike lane in Toronto

As planners, we need to measure and identify the strengths and weaknesses in our communities and understand the requirements of said communities. The planners at the City of Toronto should have identified that the residents of Wexford-Maryvale required bicycle infrastructure, as this is an at-risk community. As a lower-income neighbourhood, Wexford-Maryvale would have benefitted greatly from bicycle lanes, trails, or even shared lane markings as these would have provided increased access to greater employment and better access to healthcare. One could argue that it is at-risk communities such as these that require the greatest amount of planning interventions. It is essential that good planning practices be implemented if we as a city plan to reach an equitable future.

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It's Time to Ditch the Stakeholder Discourse

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A 2019 community planning meeting hosted by Strategic Actions for A Just Economy through their People's Planning School, an example of the work of CBOs in enacting democracy. Photo by Josh Cantong.

The idea of the stakeholder is fundamental to participatory planning practice rooted in liberal-democratic understandings of citizenship and property.

Moving from the stakeholder to a new conceptualization of urban citizenship is imperative if progressive planners want to realize a renewed practice. While planning theorists like Leoni Sandercock and Mark Purcell

have raised issues with stakeholder-based planning for some time, it's time for justice-minded planners to ditch the term stakeholder and start working towards a new form of urban democracy in practice.

The problem with the stakeholder as the fundamental agent in the participatory planning process is that the idea of the stakeholder itself is not a representative or value-neutral concept. The depoliticization of planning and its construction as a technocratic and deliberative process hides the relations of domination that are contained within the participatory apparatus. Such is the case with the stakeholder, which collapses differentiated subjects with complex relations into merely interested parties.

One example of the exclusionary nature of the stakeholder discourse is the comparative marginalization of renters and people who are houseless versus homeowners, landlords, or business owners in planning contexts dependent on stakeholder participation.

Renters, and more so unhoused persons, are already disadvantaged in exercising any agency in the occupation and reconstruction of urban spaces by virtue of their lack of control over land, which is the fundamental ingredient of space-making projects on the urban scale. Within the formal venues of democratic decision about the production of space, those that are property-less are likewise dispossessed. It's a common refrain from homeowner groups opposing the construction of new rental housing, from neighborhood associations, business improvement districts, and other place-based constituencies that represent mostly property-owning interests that renters have relatively little or no stake in the community.

Renters and houseless persons in a sense, are thus doubly dispossessed in contemporary participatory planning practice. Once by the very real barriers to participation in any form that exist for low-income persons, and again by the stakeholder discourse, which legitimizes the recursive claims that non-owners are less invested in their neighborhoods than other groups. In allowing for the construction of the stakeholder in such a way, planners legitimize an antidemocratic, elitist, and racialized conception of the urban community, in which property ownership is a necessary precondition of full citizenship.

This tradition is deeply rooted in the structure of this nation's political history, with both radical and reactionary thinkers insisting on the necessity of property ownership as the basis for autonomy, and autonomy as a precondition of citizenship, as legal thinker Robert Hockett uncovers succinctly in his portion of [this talk](#). Property and participation are also both deeply racialized from the root, and regardless of their position with regards to property ownership, People of Color often stand on unequal footing with Whites in participatory systems.

The marginalization of renters and houseless people, both more likely to be People of Color, in planning and land use decision making is a pressing socio-spatial justice issue, as renters are uniquely affected by the outcome of planning processes. Similar and more violent is the way in which the condition of property-lessness is used as a justification for the direct spatial disenfranchisement and removal of unhoused persons, often carried out at behest of property-owning associations through policing. Renters, likewise, are similarly subject to violent state enforced displacement through eviction. The always racialized nature of property and its relationship to policing presents yet another barrier to the realization of spatial justice.

At present, to ensure the equal participation of disenfranchised groups within the planning system, individual rogue planners and community-based organizations must go to exceptional lengths. While their

efforts have produced some incredible victories, we cannot be reliant on such practices to serve as a band-aid to a fundamentally unjust system, and cannot be satisfied with requiring that popular movements subordinate themselves to doing the work of democracy that the state should already be carrying out.

In order to produce a more democratic planning apparatus and to take a step towards the realization of the Right to the City, it is necessary that we first move towards a new, more inclusive and universal understanding of urban citizenship. The demand for a responsive universalism by anti-capitalist and abolitionist scholars, which recognizes the inequality of differently positioned actors in advancing a universalist politics that is “not colorblind... but weighted so that racial equity is pursued by means of universal benefit,” provides an excellent starting point. In order to realize the equitable participation of persons who are differently positioned in relations of racial and economic domination in the planning process, we must be attentive to this difference and put in place formal structures that recognize and address it through prioritization. We cannot leave this to be the work of organizers alone.

Alexander Ferrer is a movement based planner and researcher focused on how increasingly financialized housing impacts tenants. He is currently studying for a master's degree in urban and regional planning at UCLA, where he helps organize PRAXIS, a student organization dedicated to advancing socialist and abolitionist planning in practice.

Like a Good Neighbor, Stay Over There: Lessons from COVID on Active Transportation and Park Access

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Photo by Author

The COVID-19 Pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated a number of shortcomings of public infrastructure in the United States. US public transit agencies saw ridership fall between 45-95% in the wake of COVID-19, and many still offer reduced services today. Despite major disruptions to public transit, walking and biking remain as viable options for transportation, especially for those who rely on public transit for essential services. Just as we've seen the importance of active transportation access throughout the pandemic, parks have also been recognized as an essential service. Trail use skyrocketed by 193% at the onset of the pandemic. Multimodal access to parks supports community resiliency during crises in which public transportation services are disrupted, as we've seen not only throughout the pandemic, but also for other events, such as the occasional snowstorm. Yet 100 million Americans, including 28 million children, do not live within a 10-minute walk (~1/4 mile) of a park today.

The lack of both multimodal transportation and park access stems from the historic, forced displacement of communities of color. One of the best examples of this displacement and its relation to park access can be found in Eugene, Oregon (ancestral homelands of the Kalapuyans). The Ferry Street Village, Eugene's first Black community, was forcibly removed and resettled on the western outskirts of town in 1949 when the City built a bridge to expand city limits to the other side of the Willamette River. The land on which this community once resided on is now one of Eugene's most popular parks.

Planners continue to fail communities of color because they plan without these communities in mind, beyond looking at some census data, if they even do that. Despite the well-documented relationship of multimodal transportation access to socioeconomic status, a national survey of pedestrian plans found that only

30% of those plans noted any socioeconomic characteristics. What is more startling from this study is that not one of the planners surveyed listed socioeconomic characteristics as an “important” consideration for pedestrian planning. Similar research can also be found on bicycling access. Furthermore, access is not just about whether a person can physically get to a park. Several studies found that parks in communities of color also lack access to basic facilities like benches, playgrounds, and lighting. One of the newest parks in west Eugene—named after a Ferry Street Village community member—is an open field that floods throughout the winter, just how the Ferry Street Village flooded seasonally. The shared multi-use path leading to this park also floods and becomes dangerously inaccessible.

Restorative justice in planning means authentically engaging diverse communities, and allowing those communities to lead in local planning practices. Planning is much more than land-use designations but more often than not, planning only looks at land, which leaves many communities out. Planners must evaluate not just access to space, but access to amenities in that space, which can look different based on diverse socioeconomic factors. We must evolve our planning practices to truly include those displaced on the basis of race if we are to engage in a just planning practice moving forward.

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From Cities of Separation to a Common Urbanism

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Gosprom Palace of Industry, Kharkov. Photo taken by Robert Byron, late 1920s.

City planning has long been a tool of control and domination exercised by a ruling class over the working and lower classes. From overt instances of urban reconstruction for the rich such as the legacy of Haussmann in Paris and Robert Moses in New York City, to the more subtle legacy of exclusion manifest in the practice of Redlining across the United States, the construction and reconstruction of the urban environment has been the dominion of the ruling classes. The cities created by these groups have tended towards displacement, poverty, and inaccessibility for the multitude of workers it requires to function, all the while providing convenience, leisure, and myriad services for the wealthy and elites. This dual character of the capitalist city has proliferated across the world from the slums of Cape Town to the urban renewal programs of Baku. It seems as though I am destined to work within a city built by capital. But even though urbanism has long been the playing ground of the capitalist class, it isn't doomed to remain as such.

As the political left envisions the creation of a better society we must also contend with the shell that society is to exist within; the reconstruction of cities currently built for capital accumulation into cities built for human flourishing is paramount to the success of any socialist project. The planning of such cities, however, must not be left to a class of technocratic planners. Capitalist urbanism has separated the city-dweller from the construction of their urban-life, and it is the resolution of this separation which must be the goal of socialist urban planning. For urbanism to serve as a positive force in society it must be the product of the collective self-determination of the urban populace. With this as the goal, the role of planners can begin to shift from being the accomplices of capitalist developers, to organizers of a collective planning process, the product of which is a city built by and for the community which lives therein. The implications of this sort of socialist urbanism are immense, ranging from the democratic reorganization of the investment of economic surplus to an ultimate dissolution of the current way of things in favor of a society built around free-association and self determination.

Urbanism has been complicit in the capitalist project for too long, the cities it has built have poisoned, alienated, and cursed the working class to rely on poverty wages to pay the ever-increasing costs of life under capitalism. It is not enough to fight for healthcare when it is the lives we have been forced into that are making us sick, and it is not enough to fight for the reorganization of the political and economic spheres of life alone, the environments we live within must change as well.

The left front of the planning community should continue to engage with these questions now through critical analysis of the contemporary role planning has in our cities, all while working to construct planning processes and organizations today which can prefigure such a future planning process. While many attempts at participatory planning have done little more than create an illusion of a democratic planning process, the radical democracy of the Spanish municipalist movement (pioneered by Barcelona En Comu) can offer a model of public, direct democratic decision making which planning could learn much from. Furthermore, projects such as Cooperation Jackson, a network of cooperatives in Jackson, Mississippi that aims to improve conditions for the city's poor and racialized communities, have implemented Community Land Trust (CLT) programs as a way to hold land in common. While neither the municipalist movement nor CLTs are ready-made solutions to the challenges outlined in this article, they do represent some of the first attempts to actualize a new form of common urbanism.

Ian Van der Merwe is a student researcher and a recent graduate from the University of Utah's undergraduate Urban Ecology program. Currently a prospective graduate student, he hopes to contribute to the body of work surrounding socialist urbanist thought and engage with leftist urban-based social movements.

Planning for Solidarity: The Case of Brazilian Catadores

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"[Marcha dos Catadores](#)" by [Midia Ninja](#) is licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#)

Brazil's waste pickers, known as *catadores*, constitute one of the most indispensable and exploited workforces in the country. By collecting, sorting, and re-selling discarded materials, this historically informal workforce provides ecological and sanitary services that improve the quality of urban life, ease the burden on landfills, conserve raw resources, and create employment for almost 1 million people.

Despite their environmental and social contributions, catadores endure social stigma, dangerous working conditions, and criminalization. Municipal governments, the public entities responsible for waste management, often choose to contract private waste collection services, citing these enterprises' technical capacity. As private companies monetize waste into profits, catadores find themselves shut out of a livelihood.

In response to this economic exclusion, catadores have formed diffuse but networked social movements with workers' cooperatives as the primary unit of organization. Beginning in the 1980s under sympathetic local governments led by the leftist Workers' Party (PT), these organizing efforts have culminated in the National Movement of Waste Pickers, the largest movement of waste pickers in the world, which unites cooperatives across the country in joint struggle for class solidarity, self-management, and mutual support.

Catadores gained acclaim from PT leaders and planning departments for their self-organization models, which have become an emblematic example of the solidarity economy. The solidarity economy is characterized as an "alternative economy generating work and income, as response to the demand for social and labor inclusion". Embodied by worker cooperatives, the solidarity economy model rejects logics of profit in favor of meeting people's basic needs and overcoming poverty and unemployment.

The solidarity economy became a national project in 2003 under PT president Lula, who appointed Paul Singer, São Paulo's former secretary of planning, as head of the newly created National Secretary of the Solidarity Economy (SENAES). Singer used his office to bolster catador cooperatives, which he viewed as "an expression of democratic socialism" connected to a project of social transformation in Brazil. SENAES helped form cooperative networks through the Cataforte program, dovetailing with the federal government's official recognition of the catador profession in 2002 and the creation of an inter-ministerial committee for catador inclusion.

The PT government's explicit commitment to the solidarity economy is a unique case that informs radical planning futures. Researchers argue that Brazil is one of few countries to design waste management policies that "bring the social aspect of waste management to the center of the discussion" by promoting the advancement of catadores. The fact that initial groundswells of catador coalition-building that catalyzed this agenda occurred during a twenty-one year military dictatorship is all the more meaningful in the face of right-wing resurgence under president Jair Bolsonaro. It should remind planners worldwide that re-imaginings of capitalism are within reach, often spurred by social movements of those most excluded by the market economy. The planning profession is well-positioned to support and advance their goals.

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Fund the Bus, Abolish the Police

The following piece is part of Progressive City's series [The Future of Planning: Insights From Emerging Planners](#), in which current or recently graduated Planning students reflect on the state of the planning profession and how our activities as planners can be oriented towards justice as opposed to perpetuating ongoing racial, colonial, economic, environmental, and ability-related injustices. More information on this series can be found [here](#).



In a world of Elon Musk megaproject dystopia and flashy ribbon-cutting transit projects, the humble bus is often left out of the equation. Buses often transport more people during a given day than heavy rail or light rail in a city, and buses also transport more Black and Latinx riders than rail.

Operations funding has often been neglected since before the pandemic and if cities are serious about addressing racial injustices, permanently increasing bus service is a good place to start. Better bus service can be achieved by diverting funding away from sources that harm marginalized communities.

A great step in ensuring that bus operations stay funded is abolishing transit police. Transit agencies across the United States spend a lot of money on hefty policing contracts, while neglecting to provide high-quality transit service. Data shows many Black and brown riders do not necessarily feel safe with excessive police presence. Meanwhile, money that could be going towards increased frequencies or hiring more operators is going towards officer salaries, overtime, and fare enforcement. Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) has been a leader in the industry by starting a transit ambassador program where 10 non-armed personnel trained in de-escalation ride the trains between 2pm and midnight 7 days a week in the busiest parts of the BART network. This model could be expanded until there is no need for transit police. Los Angeles County is exploring alternatives to policing and adding social workers on transit as their massive \$645 million multiagency police contract expires in 2022. LA Metro contracted with PATH to deploy outreach professionals to assist those who are unhoused and connect them to services and housing.

If transit systems eliminated fares through sales tax revenues or had a permanent federal operations fund, the need for fare checking and farebox maintenance would be nonexistent, greatly reducing the need for law enforcement. Abolishing police from transit systems is a small step in a greater fight to abolish the police, abolish ICE, and ending the carceral state.

It is important to have personnel on the transit system who will protect riders from harm, however that work can be done by individuals employed by the transit agency without a badge and a gun. We have seen many instances of Black and brown teenagers being harassed and manhandled by law enforcement on transit - one horrifying incident involved a police officer using excessive force to pull a teenager off the Metro Red Line in Los Angeles for the crime of putting her feet up on the seat. No one feels safe in a system where those who are sworn to protect are the aggressors. The time has come to ask transit riders what sort of protection they would like to see on their systems instead of defaulting to the affluent suburban response of adding more cops.

American cities have neglected transit funding for decades, however with the pandemic pushing agencies to the brink of collapse, now is the time to put a historic amount of funding into bus operations. Frequent bus service across the city will prevent buses from being overcrowded and allow Black and brown people, people with children, immigrants, and the elderly to travel across the city without fear of missing the last bus home. That funding can come in multiple forms, however if transit agencies are serious about racial justice, they would divert funds from policing their riders to providing a more frequent system, especially for bus riders.

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Planning for Decarbonization: Building a Low Carbon Urban Commons

The following piece is part of Progressive City's series [The Future of Planning: Insights From Emerging Planners](#), in which current or recently graduated Planning students reflect on the state of the planning profession and how our activities as planners can be oriented towards justice as opposed to perpetuating ongoing racial, colonial, economic, environmental, and ability-related injustices. More information on this series can be found [here](#).



New York City. Photo by Arielle Lawson.

The science is clear: to reduce the most catastrophic impacts of climate change, we need drastic and immediate action to cut emissions and radically decarbonize. Beyond the depoliticized narrative of “technological fixes,” this ultimately necessitates a reckoning with the political, economic, social and material structures of our society and current catastrophic (mal)distribution of resources. As Naomi Klein writes, addressing the climate crisis requires “changing everything.” Yet as a recent urban planning graduate, the

urgency, scale and reality of this necessity seems almost entirely missing from our current models of planning and planning education.

Beyond a “niche” focus on environmental or social concerns — too often pitted against each other as a “choice” between community gardens or affordable housing, or used to “greenwash” new luxury development — planners rarely talk about what the “norm” of an actual framework of planning and built environment based on the demands of a just transition would really mean and look like in practice. Situated within its full social, political and economic context, a focus on decarbonization could broaden our understanding of “environmental” urbanism, the scale of change needed, and the urgency of resource redistribution. Decarbonization needs to be materialized in the infrastructures of our everyday life. Cities provide a tangible and demonstrable scale through which to imagine the “concrete” and transformative dimensions of these changes.

Yet for planners to engage this true scope would require a fundamental conceptual reorientation that *unapologetically* breaks from the limits and rationale of the current neoliberal status quo and the market-driven logics that have gotten us into this mess. We would need to build from and for the real social needs and social functions of our cities, prioritizing and investing in the “foundational” infrastructures that make up the building blocks of equitable and collective low-carbon urban life.

While decarbonization is the baseline, any form of an equitable transition fundamentally depends on a broader political project of decommodification, democratization and decolonization. Without confronting the deeper roots of the climate crisis and the broader forces at play, we will continue to perpetuate the same systems of speculation and crisis. In a landscape shaped by centuries of racist exploitation and extraction, any change must be *redistributive* and realized materially in the world around us. At its heart, this must be a process built around reclaiming and democratizing “the public.”

Mike Davis calls the “cornerstone of the low-carbon city... the priority given to public affluence over private wealth.” Building public affluence requires investing in the *collective* infrastructure and associated public goods and services of the city as well as an explicit shift away from “public-private partnerships” to building new relationships and forms of democratized governance and accountability between the public sector, civil society and the grassroots. As Daniel Aldana Cohen notes, “It’s by expanding collective consumption — in housing, transit, services, and leisure — that we can democratize and decarbonize urban life.” This foundation aligns the struggles for the right to the city, especially around the core pillars of shared urban infrastructures and services, with that of a low-carbon urbanism.

Focusing on the built environment provides an opportunity for embedding and embodying systemic transformations across sectors on a collective scale. As planners, we must invest in the social and physical infrastructure that is critical to this transition. Rebuilding, expanding and democratizing our public infrastructure — from schools and libraries to swimming pools and housing to solar and energy grids — provides not only thousands of new jobs, but also represents the building blocks for a low-carbon, high quality of life that is accessible and meets the needs of everyone, but particularly those most marginalized and vulnerable. By embracing and leveraging the framework of the urban commons, we can advance a transformative model of decarbonization.

Drawing from and building upon the many place-based community demands and efforts already underway, a framework for equitable decarbonization must include the following core principles for “public” planning for a just low-carbon future:

- Redistribute resources to prioritize community health and wealth, not corporate profit;
- Collectivize resources to unleash new forms of cooperation and shared abundance beyond the scale of just the individual;
- Invest in our public (social) infrastructure to meet people’s needs and essential human rights, advancing a model of “universal basic services” as a fundamental right to the city;
- Address historical and ongoing injustices and center the most vulnerable and marginalized as core and defining members of the public.

By considering how societal transformation, particularly decarbonization, can take place concretely within our cities, we can open up new possibilities and imagine alternatives that represent real opportunities to reorganize our everyday life and address historic and ongoing spatial inequities. We need to build from the bottom up and the top down to reshape our priorities, institutions, and distribution of resources. More broadly, decarbonization, as intertwined with a larger project of democratization, decommodification, and decolonization, provides us the opportunity to rearticulate what cities are for, how they function, and whom they serve.

Read the full article in the *Urban Review*: [Planners for a Green New Deal: Planning for Decarbonization](#)

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