



Challenging Crisis Through Change

Student Groups at Luskin

UCLA's Department of Urban Planning has a variety of student-led organizations. Students are encouraged to take an active role in guiding the future of the Urban Planning program, as well as participating in initiatives that challenge injustices by promoting positive and equitable planning practices in UCLA's neighboring communities, and in cities across the United States and abroad. Student organizations are integral to fostering leadership and political acumen, and engaging students directly in the governance of the Department and the Master's and PhD programs. Below, three of these groups offer a short discussion of their engagement with "crisis"—broadly defined—highlighting some of the challenges we face as scholars and practitioners in the field of urban planning.

Built Environment and Public Health Council Student Group

Ana Bonilla M.P.H/MURP 17

Jeff Loi MURP 16

The way we design and build our communities has profound effects on our health, as well as on the sustainability of our environment. Walkable and bike-friendly cities with good food systems help us prevent and address chronic diseases like diabetes and obesity (Cannuscio and Glantz 2011; Sallis, Millstein, and Carlson 2011). They also decrease our dependence on oil and help us minimize the emission of greenhouse gases that lead to climate change. Oftentimes, the same populations that suffer from economic inequities are the first to be displaced from their homes when a neighborhood gentrifies, and these vulnerable populations also endure the worst health outcomes, thanks to both environmental factors and stress induced by these economic and social inequalities (Wilkinson and Pickett 2006). The fields of urban planning and public health are inextricably intertwined, and finding solutions to many of our most vexing present-day challenges (like climate change, the obesity epidemic, and health inequity) requires knowledge and understanding of both fields. Innovative initiatives like complete streets (streets that enable safe access for users ranging from pedestrians, bicyclists, motorists and transit riders for all ages and abilities (National Complete Streets Coalition 2015)); healthy, sustainable food systems; and a focus on the social determinants of health represent a new zeitgeist in the way we plan cities. The increasing adoption of health elements in General Plans by municipalities (e.g., the Los Angeles Department of City Planning's Plan for a Healthy LA 2015 and the Santa Clara County General Plan Health Element 2015) acknowledges the correlation of well-designed, livable cities and improved health outcomes. The growing movement of Vision Zero policies recognizes

that motorist, pedestrian, and bicyclist deaths can be prevented with automobile technology, well-planned roads, and safe human behavior.

Of course, this work in the built environment and health cannot be done without recognizing the inequities that are systematically perpetuated by policies and practices that have produced unequal outcomes for low-income people of color. This can be seen in the devastation and recovery of New Orleans, one decade after Hurricane Katrina (White 2015); in the social unrest following the multiple cases of African Americans being shot by the police (“Tracking the Events” 2014); in the drastic difference in average life expectancy between families living in neighboring wealthy and poor communities (“Unnatural Causes” 2009); and in the latest example of mass displacement of communities by the process of gentrification (Lin 2015). New policies and changes to the built environment must be comprehensive and interdisciplinary, and have a true understanding of the economic, social, cultural, and health impacts, or risk repeating mistakes of the past and perpetuating inequitable outcomes.

These are some of the challenges faced by young urban planners and public health professionals today as they become leaders of these increasingly interdisciplinary fields. Today’s most complex issues must be tackled with broad, multi-sector partnerships and intimate knowledge of the built environment and public health.

Entering its third year, the UCLA Built Environment and Public Health Council (BEPHC) emerged out of a need to merge urban planning and public health in practice and to prepare the next generation of leaders and professionals. Currently, the Council represents a diverse group of students, faculty, and staff who work to facilitate discussion and further develop members’ knowledge and their ability to address issues related to the built environment and health through programs, events, and leadership development. The Council recognizes the need to provide a space for conversation around issues of health equity and the built environment, and to advocate on behalf of students and organizations to increase the visibility of the research being done on health and the built environment. The role of the Built Environment and Public Health Council is to educate, put knowledge into action, develop leadership skills in its members, and play a part in helping make the dream of well designed, healthy, equitable, and just communities a reality.

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Creating a Crisis in Urban Planning Practice and Pedagogy

Diversity Curriculum Group

Sam Appel MURP 16

Stephanie Tsai MURP 16

We need a CRISIS in urban planning pedagogy. A situation is not a crisis in public discourse until enough people—enough of the right people, with the power and influence to do something about it—acknowledge it and give it their attention.

The disproportionate number of Black people being killed by police was not a crisis in American society until recently. Black people in America have always faced police violence in disproportionate numbers, but only now, after over a year of televised and tweeted protest following Mike Brown's death in Ferguson, is it coming to be considered a crisis in public discourse. DeRay McKesson, an articulator of the #BlackLivesMatter movement, has said, "I think the movement has been successful so far in *creating a crisis* that helps people understand the terror of police violence" (Datoc n.d.).

As activists are creating a crisis in popular media around police violence, we must create a crisis in planning for a similar we-obviously-should-have-dealt-with-this-long-long-ago set of reasons. Planning practice and planning education are deeply implicated in American *structural* oppression—its historical development and its ongoing practice. Many in the profession are still too colorblind, too gender normative, too deeply entrenched in the status quo, and too accustomed to benefiting from it to acknowledge that role, whether in academia or the workplace, and to turn towards a more just approach.

What would it mean to acknowledge the planner's role in American inequality? It's a frighteningly large question. In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn starts by suggesting that "the historian has been trained in a society in which education and knowledge are put forward as technical problems of excellence and not as tools for contending social classes, races, nations" (Zinn 1980, 8). As a first step, we could teach planning's political history—how planning has been used to reinforce power and privilege in our country—and dispose of the "history of technical expertise" narrative.

We should probably start this task by reconsidering *American City Planning Since 1890* by Mel Scott as the de facto history of our profession. The American Institute of Certified Planners exam tests on this book, and therefore our planning department, like all accredited planning schools, teaches to it. Written in 1969, the book, as you might imagine, does not teach how planners and governments created racial ghettos, relegated communities to decades of entrenched poverty, displaced millions of people of color, contributed to a system of mass incarceration, perpetuated a white-male-dominated economy and political system, and made public spaces hostile to queer and transgender people—all issues that we are seeing the effects of continually. It teaches the history of techniques of the profession.

But the book's content is not the only problem; it's not just that Mel Scott lets the various misguided white guys of American planning yore off the hook. It's that the perspective of the people being planned for is completely absent in his narration. We have no idea, as aspiring planners, what it was to experience American urban change from the receiving end, how people resisted, and how they planned for themselves. And that's important. As Patricia Hill Collins suggests, "[although] offering subordinate groups new knowledge about their own experiences can be empowering...revealing new ways of knowing that allow subordinate groups to define their own reality has far greater implications" (Collins 1990, 221).

Planning history centered in subordinated group knowledge asks the question, "How was it for people?" (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). It shifts the emphasis of planning pedagogy from clever tools to individual integrity and group wellbeing. It insists on spelling out the gentlemanly designs of central planners and theorists, and then privileging the personal descriptions of what those designs did to families, of how individuals resisted oppression, and of how communities planned for themselves without the aid of planning institutions. After all, it was the Black Panthers who policed the racist police department and provided child-care in Oakland while planners were building stadiums and towers in the park.

A people-centered planning history has great implications indeed. With previously marginalized voices at the center, our pedagogy can move towards teaching strategies that reverse the processes of domination. We need to know, and should be teaching, how to meaningfully communicate across our different identities and backgrounds, how to empower historically disempowered groups to plan for themselves, and how to connect privilege to oppression. There are dangerously few courses in the urban planning department at UCLA—one of the most progressive planning programs in the country—that meaningfully include these lessons.

We are hopeful that our program is turning towards a more just pedagogy. Last year, the Student Diversity Curriculum Working Group partnered with core course professors to jointly rethink their curricula. We built on years of previous student activism that had produced the Critical Race Studies course, Luskin diversity reports, and direct petitions to the department.

Yes, we are pushing hard for core course material to reflect a commitment to telling the whole history of planning, centering the stories of people of color, women, queer, disabled, and the poor. Yes, we want a deeper analysis of inequality and white supremacy in economics and case studies in statistics. And yes, we want these changes to be durable.

But we also desperately need professors to be trained in facilitation and capable of creating safe classroom spaces. What is the point of learning about oppression or empowerment in a classroom where female students' comments are drowned out by their male counterparts? Why bother talking about racial injustice if students continue to face racially based microaggressions during class discussion?

We need the widespread acknowledgment of this crisis. It's time for change in urban planning practice, theory, and education. It is up to us as students, professors, and practitioners to feel a sense of personal connection to these problems in our pedagogy **and to act in response.**

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Community and Urban Resilience in New Orleans

UCLA Student Travel

Contributors

Diana Benitez MURP '16
Dylan Sittig MURP 16
Abraham Nunez MPP/MSW 16
Owen Gorman MURP 16
Marlene Gonzalez MSW 15
Yessenia Chaiu MPH 15
Rachel Brady MSW 15
Takahiro Asaoka MPP 16
Jazmin Roque CSUN URB 14

Introduction

In March 2015, UCLA graduate students in urban planning, public policy, social welfare, and public health travelled to New Orleans to study efforts around resilience in social justice, public health, economic development, and environmental sustainability. New Orleans offers a rich and diverse cultural heritage, yet its citizens are severely divided by socioeconomic disparities. The city's unique topography and deeply rooted multiethnic population pose both significant challenges and opportunities to the region's ability to recover and thrive in the wake of devastation from Hurricane Katrina, the BP oil spill, and potential future disasters. Our group's multidisciplinary experience allowed students from the Luskin and Fielding Schools to examine these features of the city and its historic resilience efforts through a critical lens focused on both government and community organizations.

For the New Orleanians we spoke with, the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina was a man-made disaster, not solely a natural disaster. The majority of damage was caused by breaches in the improperly engineered and inadequately maintained levee systems. The social and political histories leading to these events are riddled with socioeconomic injustice and segregation. However, opinions varied on the treatment of and response to the events. One camp, composed of city promoters such as the economic development agency, redevelopment agency, and local government, believes that the city is ready to move forward; this group is vigorously promoting a new path for the city as a place for outside economic investment and growth opportunities for businesses. A second camp, composed of place-based community groups and newly founded nonprofits, is struggling to return home and rebuild communities while fighting disinvestment and exclusion in an attempt to chart a new path towards a future without continued systemic injustice. While these differences in perspective may seem to present an insurmountable roadblock, they may help to hold all groups accountable in their actions going forward and positively contribute to the future of the Crescent City.

Charting a New Path: Development-Focused Groups and Government

We visited many groups involved in promoting New Orleans as a place for economic investments that would unabashedly plow forward on new projects, plans, and policies for the city. This perspective became apparent during multiple roundtables at City Hall, a tour of Crescent Park (a new waterfront park), a meeting with the New Orleans Redevelopment Agency—home of the Chief Resilience Officer for the City—and at our discussion of regional economic development strategies with Greater New Orleans Inc., a regional economic development alliance. In the first years after Katrina, new projects focused on increased safety and the opportunity for an equitable city with updated levee technology, stormwater treatment systems, citizen returns, vacant lot activations, targeted community crime prevention, and redesigning public spaces, creating new parks, and reorganizing city management systems. By creating a safer city with more services and a more cohesive populous, New Orleans may be better able to cope with issues of poverty and injustice.

But ten years later, many government-sponsored projects are increasingly geared towards bolstering economic investment, updating oil drilling technology and collaboration, clean technology, and blight control. For example, Greater New Orleans Inc. is pursuing an aggressive agenda of business development by traveling around the world to talk with international businesses to assure them that

the new and improved sixteen-billion-dollar floodwalls are in place and that New Orleans is a prime place for business expansion. These and other similar efforts we encountered are not focusing on the needs of pre-Katrina citizens. Instead, focus has shifted to attracting younger populations interested in starting nonprofits and other ventures in innovation and sustainability. As we toured the city we came across countless post-Katrina nonprofits and new ventures; this painted a picture of a city making strides towards a future of better planning and response to disasters, but not always grounded in the community context.

Grounded in History: Community-Based Groups and Nonprofits

Community groups are approaching New Orleans's history with a different perspective. From our conversations with staff at groups such as the Village de l'Est Green Growers Initiative (VEGGI) Farmer's Cooperative, and the Kingsley Settlement House, these organizations maintain vivid memories of man-made disasters and historic segregation. These memories inform their current work in improving the built environment and halting historic socioeconomic disparities.

VEGGI's project consists of clearing land in New Orleans East as part of a place-based strategy to increase local healthy food access and take back land that had remained vacant in a community that has faced exclusion and lack of services in the Katrina recovery efforts. East New Orleans is predominantly made up of African American and Vietnamese populations. This community was the last to be granted official re-entry after Katrina, yet it was one of the first to return and begin rebuilding. Its members returned out of necessity because they had nowhere else to go and did not want to lose their homes. VEGGI's work to build a local food system and secure jobs for community members helps to recirculate investments in the community and fight unjust and unhealthy food systems.

The Kingsley Settlement House, a nonprofit organization focused on strengthening families and communities in thirteen Southeast Louisiana parishes, has served New Orleans's changing communities for 120 years. Historically, settlement houses formed the origins of modern social work as well as place-based policies and services. Kingsley's broad services, including education, nutrition, elder care, and physical activity, are successful due to its clearly defined community service area and quick adaptation to changing demographics, needs, and environmental disasters. The Kingsley House is directly responding to disinvestment from its community by providing services and deeply engaging itself in the fight for justice in the Crescent City.

Conclusion

Our trip to New Orleans provided the group with powerful and much needed on-the-ground context for learning from the perspectives and actions of government agencies and community organizations. We saw some groups looking to chart new, ungrounded paths forward after a cursory rebuild of existing infrastructure and systems, while others focus on rebuilding paths grounded in history, potentially ignoring entirely new opportunities. Learning from the past is just as important as not being inhibited by it. The mix of perspectives and strengths of the community groups and governmental organizations in New Orleans will guide the city on the best path forward if the groups learn to listen to one another and work together.

The group wishes to thank all of the people and organizations that met with us and we hope that, in some form, UCLA graduate students will normalize the practice of multidisciplinary, student-initiated study trips and that our respective schools will see the worth in providing formal paths for supportive funding.

Lead Photograph

New Orleans, Louisiana. In the Lower Ninth Ward, cement foundations of homes that washed away or were torn down due to mold infestation hold back lush wild grasses, indicative of a community simultaneously trying to move forward while retaining its history. Photograph by Diana Liduvina Benitez