

Creating a Crisis in Urban Planning Practice and Pedagogy

Diversity Curriculum Group

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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.**

References

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