

# SPATIAL JUSTICE:



*A FRAME FOR RECLAIMING OUR RIGHTS  
TO BE, THRIVE, EXPRESS AND CONNECT*

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# foreWORD

As one of my heroes, boundary buster and cultural provocateur Sun Ra would say, “Space is the place.” Ra transformed space as a way to break way out of the confines of stereotypical Blackness and claim the cosmos as his home. The Design Studio for Social Intervention and this work on spatial justice is an heir to that freedom/that imagination without borders. Their work provides what George Clinton, another heir of Ra’s, would call “our chance to dance our way out of our constrictions.”

Perhaps our most tangible, tactile understanding of freedom, of liberation is in the physical space to move about as we please. Maybe because freedom at its most basic level is experienced in doing and, conversely, oppression/repression is experienced in what we are made to believe we cannot do. You would think that given the critical importance of space to just about all the justice work we do, space and spatial justice would be “the place” where more intentional organizing would happen in the US. But it’s not. Many of us have a hard time understanding what this frame requires

of us. We can get stuck at the single issue level, like housing policy or gentrification, relegating space to the narrow place where we reside.

As ds4si clearly lays out here, it is so much more. Space is a place of intersecting struggles/oppression/opportunities. How we move or not move through it, adapt to it, monitor it, buy or borrow it, claim or cut it off shapes everything we do and big parts of who we are.

I think what I like most about this work is that it encourages us to explore our relationships to space, power and justice with our whole selves – body, heart, mind, memory. It walks us through practical ways of understanding and engaging work that goes from analysis to storytelling to step by step “how.” So, don’t think of this as a report, a study or a white paper. It’s more of a weapon/ windows/ windows into and out on the many ways spatial politics shapes our work, our bodies, our psyches and how organizing to listen to/reclaim and transform space is a game changer. I hope you’ll come outside and play.

In fellowship,

Makani Themba  
The Praxis Project



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THRIVE, EXPRESS AND CONNECT*

Design Studio for Social Intervention

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## INTRODUCTION

### *WE ARE IN A SPATIAL MOMENT...*

Starting in December, 2010, Arab people from all walks of life started to take over town squares and city plazas across the Arab world. We now know this phenomenon as the Arab Spring. Citizens took to public space to show their demands for radical political change in leadership, leading to the overthrow of the long-standing rulers of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya.

Starting in September, 2011, people set up shop and started living in Zuccotti Park, across from Wall Street in New York City. We now know this phenomenon as Occupy Wall Street. This quickly led to hundreds of other Occupy gatherings across the U.S. and the world. Participants took to creating new kinds of space, ones that simultaneously stood watch to the exponential inequality being produced globally through forces at play on Wall Street and modeled practices of democracy as the number of people grew and began to make temporary communities.

Space is currently functioning as one the most important resources for the expression of disapproval and outrage in this political moment. And although we are incredibly excited to see space being used as it is for political expression and change, we are convinced that we can use it even better. This paper outlines our ideas for that, as well as putting them in the historical context of spatial justice and injustice.



*Occupy Oakland, Justin Warren / jsight.com*

## HISTORICAL SPATIAL INJUSTICE

Spatial justice, most simply, is the intersection of space and social justice.<sup>1</sup> As Henry Lefebvre first pointed out forty years ago, human societies organize spaces, and when we inspect these spaces, we can see how justice and injustice are played out in the visible and invisible structural arrangements of space. (An example of a visible arrangement would be looking at the history of a town and seeing who got to use the most and best land areas. Researching further, we might find invisible arrangements like the fact that women weren't allowed to own land or the richest land owners also owned slaves to work their land.) With a stronger understanding of the relationship between space and justice, we can create counter-moves to fight spatial injustice and also begin to answer the question, "How can we create spaces that promote equity, access, health, and justice?"

Historically, there were many ways in which different peoples made sense of space. Some people saw space and place as opportunity, and they

created practices for moving through space. Some people saw space as an anchor, settled down and developed roots in place. But what happens when one set of people want to determine and create grids of truth for everyone about what space is and isn't?

Practices of domination, subjugation, and resource depletion have been historically honed and brought to bear through space. The taking of land, the massive capturing of bodies and taking them from one space to another, environmental exploitation, forced movement through economic deprivation; all of these practices of injustice tend to have a fair-

ly clear spatial dimension to them. Most wars, conflicts and genocides have at their core spatial claims and have resulted in distinct spatial power and consequences. In fact, it is clear that any and every marginalized group has had space itself used as part of the terrain through which they experience injustice in their day to day lives.

**In fact, it is clear that any and every marginalized group has had space itself used as part of the terrain through which they experience injustice in their day to day lives.**



Tahrir Square, Ahmed Abd El Fatah

## SPATIAL JUSTICE AS STRATEGY

*“Thinking spatially about justice can uncover significant new insights that extend our practical knowledge into more effective actions to achieve greater justice and democracy.”<sup>2</sup>*

- From The City and Spatial Justice  
Edward J. Soja

Part of our jobs as activists in this moment is to make strange, even ridiculous, many of the norms of injustice exacted in space. Why should any of these things look normal?

- Spatial property is more important than the people who occupy it, so families can be forced out of their homes.
- Dollars are free to move across constructed borders of nation states, but bodies are hunted down, terrorized and labeled “illegal” for the same movement.
- Vehicles for traversing space are so important that our cities and nations are arranged around their needs at the expense of people’s physical health and safety and the health of the environment.

If we demand the reworking of spatial arrangements, we are demanding the reworking of all other arrangements—those of nation, ownership, class, race, gender, etc. This document is primarily meant to support activists in thinking more expansively and boldly about ways in which we can use space as a platform for achieving justice and see spatial considerations in ways that can help us imagine new strategies and points of leverage.

We also believe that spatial justice can function as a lens that can help diverse social justice struggles find common ground and offer a way of thinking across traditionally silo-ed sectors. A spatial justice perspective allows us to recognize links between cultural rights, housing and economic rights, rights to a public, and rights to health. This connecting between threats of removal across physical, social, cultural, and economic realms can allow for a more scale-able and organized response.

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*“Borders: Scars on the Land”, Nogales, gringarusamexicana.wordpress.com*

# PART 1: DECIPHERING SPATIAL INJUSTICE THROUGH A FRAMEWORK FOR SPATIAL JUSTICE

If we are going to say “spatial justice”, we must have a sense of what rights belong to this frame. What does spatial justice—and injustice—look and feel like? We are putting this framework out as a way to create a short hand for recognizing spatial attacks. We’ll introduce the frame with short, real-life examples, and then use two longer case-studies to look deeper at how it plays out in two cities. Later in this paper we will offer more ideas about developing spatial counter-moves that can build power towards demanding and creating spatial justice.

## **1. Spatial Claims - The right to be and become.**

Getting to be and become in space as individuals and groups is one of the ways in which the spatial is negotiated. This includes the ability to dwell or stay in a given place, as dwelling and anchoring aren’t always the same. In modern capitalist societies, ownership (of space and resources) is considered the dominant spatial claim, often at the expense of sovereign struggles, squatters’ rights, autonomous zones, nomadism and other alternate forms of spatial claim. To us spatial claims also include rights to be safe in space regardless of gender, race, sexual-orientation, and other aspects of identity.

*Spatial Injustice:  
Denying the right to BE for poor people.*

- Gentrification has swept through countless cities, forcing families to move even if they’ve lived in a neighborhood for years, decades, even generations.

Thousands of foreclosures in cities, suburbs and rural areas have underlined that people in the U.S. do not have the right to be.

*Spatial Injustice:  
Denying the right to BE for GLBT people.*

- Spatial injustice for queer folks can feel like fear. GLBT people are frequently victims of violence in their neighborhoods and schools, with things made worse at times by homophobic law enforcement. Not being able to live or travel without fear denies your right to be.

## **2. Spatial Power - The right to thrive and express.**

Power is defined as the “capability of doing or accomplishing something.”<sup>3</sup> Spatial power then is about how a given place creates the conditions that allow or deny that ability. It can also be the allowing or stripping of the rights of groups to prosper in space.

*Spatial Injustice:  
Denying the right to THRIVE in public school.*

- Youth within historically racially and economically marginalized groups have a fifty percent drop out rate inside of public schools. Could spatial injustice be contributing to this failure to thrive? It’s clear that the spatial and temporal structuring of school is very similar to the spatial and temporal structuring of prisons, with students being held in certain rooms, allowed to move only at certain times, fed institutional meals, etc. We believe this current formation of school is an everyday form of spatial injustice.

*Spatial Injustice:  
Denying the right to EXPRESS in New Orleans*

- In New Orleans, the tradition of the Second Line parade emerges from the jazz funeral and has deep historical and cultural roots. Rather than feeling “funereal,” it is a lively musical parade that gets visitors and locals alike out into public space, regularly reconfirming the right to the public, to cultural traditions, and to enjoy a good time. The large boulevards of the city of New Orleans, with tree lined islands down the center, are constructed as the ideal space for hosting parades and marches. Since Katrina, as space and affordability have become contested, we have seen new restrictions and militarization of Second Lines through a restricted permitting process,

increased police presence and even arrests of jazz musicians.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, many other cities have limited and militarized Caribbean Carnivals, parades, celebrations, public protests, and other opportunities to gather and express in public.

### **3. Spatial Links - The right to access and connect.**

Spatial justice is integrally linked to whether a place has access to critical public infrastructures and services. Can residents get to jobs with accessible public transportation? Is healthy, affordable food available nearby? Are there spaces to play and gather? Is there public access to water and waterfronts? When spatial links are torn out, blocked or divested, residents lose connection with the rest of the city or the larger ecology, and spaces become cut off and left behind. This aspect of spatial justice is about being able to connect to the assets and resources held within a given place as well as link to the surrounding areas and the rest of the city or region.

#### *Spatial Injustice: Denying the right to ACCESS land for Native Americans*

- Spatial injustice is deeply embedded in the founding of this country, which began with a clearing of Native American populations and forced relocation to reservations. Today, Native Americans who live on reservations remain incredibly impacted by spatial injustice, as the land they are relegated to is some of the most isolated and tough land to live on, cultivate and utilize. To make matters worse, reservations are often disconnected fragments of land, with little or no public transportation. Both historically and presently, the reservation system is a tremendous violation of spatial justice, particularly in the right to spatial linkage.

#### *Spatial Injustice: Denying the right to CONNECT across the digital divide*

- Another dimension of spatial linkage now is the internet, with a growing digital divide separating rich and poor communities, as well as leaving many rural communities cut off and left behind. When communities do not have affordable access to the internet it is a spatial injustice.

## **“Trespassing” on Their Own Land**

Another way that spatial injustice plays out is when two forms of spatial categorization clash. A classic case of this happened in Hawaii. Kumu Hulas, master teachers of Hawaiian indigenous dance and story telling, often require the collecting of particular flowers, ferns, and other plants in order to construct the lei, hula skirts and traditional costumes and adornments. Gathering is also done for native Hawaiian medicines. The particular plants are part of the indigenous wisdom passed down with great responsibility. The halau (the school of traditional knowledge), learn just which particular parts of a mountainside or beach offer the most fertile land for gathering along with their other cultural teachings.

Typically, the gathering rights of these traditional cultural practitioners have been protected even as notions of property and ownership have changed. Yet recent conditions have increased the conflict between these two perspectives of space and rights to access. Under the Western conception of property and ownership, these places have become more and more privatized. More than once, the Hawai'i State Legislature has considered legislation that would criminalize native gathering rights. Therefore what should be an indigenous right has become a property owner's privilege. In this case the 'Aina (the land in the indigenous frame), is now property in the capitalist sense, leading to a direct clash over rights to be, thrive and connect in space.



*Hawaii Ilio Ulaokalani Gathering by Daniela Minerbi*

# TWO CASE STUDIES OF SPATIAL INJUSTICE: ATLANTA AND LOS ANGELES

We assert that it's no accident that when communities of color thrive and develop local power bases, they are frequently targets of aggressive spatial injustice! Spatial attacks can include large scale spatial moves (highways being put through thriving business districts, mass relocations like housing project removal, etc), and they can be intertwined with social moves (aggressive policing of public spaces, decreasing public transportation, etc.) Spatial injustices end up embedded in both physical and social infrastructures that are shaped through decades of such intentionally uneven development, segregation and forced upheaval. Here are two examples that demonstrate how the displacement and fragmentation of communities not only have detrimental affects to physical and environmental health, they also dismantle political and economic bases.

Despite the fact that the two case studies that follow are urban in nature, it is important to recognize that spatial justice is not just an urban issue. The spatial isolation and poverty of rural communities, the plight of small farmers losing their land and viability to big agriculture, and the proliferation of Federal prisons located in rural communities are some examples of spatial injustice outside of our city centers. As

we develop more discourse on spatial justice it will be important to recognize the way spatial injustice plays out in different landscapes and scales, as well as the just and unjust relationships between urban, suburban, and rural spaces.

## Case Study 1: "Sweet Auburn" in Atlanta, Georgia

### Before...

Auburn Avenue, the main thoroughfare of the neighborhood known as Sweet Auburn, was a thriving main street that served as the epicenter of Atlanta's African-American economy and political organizing. It is not a coincidence that places like Sweet Auburn and Treme in New Orleans became important hubs for the civil rights movement and organizing efforts that ultimately changed national legislation and transformed realities. Martin Luther King Jr.'s home church of Ebenezer Baptist lies along Auburn Avenue alongside Wheat Street Baptist Church. Both formed foundational spaces for civil rights era organizing and democracy building. It is said that when the sit-ins began, pastors would walk up and down the block and collect bail and then go down and bail out the demonstrators. In this way, the street literally and symbolically served as the backbone for the civil rights movement. In the context of space, we can say that the health of a public street provides a social network of relationships and contact zones that provide for community members in times of peace and as well as crisis.

### Spatial Attacks

#### The Highway

During urban renewal, over 1,600 African American neighborhoods across the country were ravaged by large scale redevelopment, massive infrastructure and highway projects.<sup>5</sup> In Atlanta, Sweet Auburn (with its close proximity to downtown and reputation as the power base of Black Atlanta), was a prime neighborhood that bore the brunt of urban renewal. In the early 1950s, the construction of the "Downtown Connector," highway 75/85, bisected Auburn and Edgewood Avenues. Now its massive lanes of speeding traffic race overhead, as residents are forced to travel under a dark bridge that interrupts the flow of the street and disconnects the



*Ebenezer Baptist Church on Auburn Avenue, Atlanta*



neighborhood from downtown.

## The Removal

As the physical fracture of highway 75/85 took its toll on Auburn Avenue, the area lost many businesses and much of its political base. With an increasingly economically and politically vulnerable population, and the nation's wealthy returning to its cities, Sweet Auburn was ripe for the next wave of physical fracture: removal and redevelopment. The public housing projects on the other side of Auburn Avenue, Castle Homes, were torn down for loft developments, and hundreds of residents were displaced.



Credit: Mari Cowser

## The Wall

*"Walls are put up in the mistaken notion they will make a space feel safer. They make it feel isolated and gloomy."*<sup>6</sup>

—William H. Whyte

Another significant physical fracture is the enormous wall that runs adjacent to Sweet Auburn, separating it from neighboring Cabbagetown. The wall largely encloses Cabbagetown (a neighborhood of Atlanta that was originally a factory town), with remarkably few openings for cars or foot traffic. Over the years it has effectively kept the communities of Cabbagetown (largely white) and Sweet Auburn (largely African American) both segregated and enclosed. (Later in this paper we'll look at interventions on the wall as a possible organizing strategy and spatial counter-move!)

## Impact

In Atlanta, we see the three elements of spatial injustice at play:

### 1. Spatial claims

The ability to be is the power to remain in a given area, avoid forced displacement or the more subtle removal of gentrification and being slowly priced out of an area as it improves. Both during urban renewal and the current era, residents of Sweet Auburn were forced to move as areas were razed for the construction of the highway and the elimination of public housing.

### 2. Spatial power

Historically Sweet Auburn was a place known for its thriving Black business district and expression of culture. This spatial power was hard hit when highway 75/85 tore through Auburn Avenue, and further reduced with the elimination of affordable housing close to downtown. Some of the entertainment venues, businesses and churches remain open, yet the street does not retain the regal status it held in an earlier era. Despite the notable Sweet Auburn Festival held annually, the area has lost much of its power as a center of cultural expression.

### 3. Spatial links

The ability to connect and access is obstructed by the difficulty in navigating in and around the highway and the wall that abuts Sweet Auburn and encloses Cabbagetown. The connections between Sweet Auburn and its neighbors--downtown and Cabbagetown--are all fractured. With an animating of the points of access, the area could in fact be perceived differently and the access and openings made more visible.

Sweet Auburn has been hit hard by aggressive spatial attacks, causing both physical and social fracture. With a spatial strategy based on its physical and social assets—great location and powerful history—Sweet Auburn could be the home of Atlanta's fight for spatial justice.

## Case Study 2: Watts, California

Los Angeles is full of juxtapositions. Within a few minutes drive you can move between the extreme wealth of Hollywood and Beverly Hills and some of the hardest neighborhoods in the country, from the natural beauty of the beach or the mountains to areas of resource extraction and polluted waste. Within LA, Watts is a small 2.5 mile area with a big reputation. The historical construction of the neighborhood's spatial realities has not been without deliberate design. Between 1941 and 1944 most of



*Jordan Downs Housing Project, Watts, CA*

the public housing projects were constructed, coinciding with the influx of 10,000 new residents to Watts.<sup>7</sup> The main ones—Knickerson Gardens, Jordan Downs, Imperial Courts and Hacienda—form the basis for affordability within the center of Los Angeles. However, rather than making the most of this central location, the projects are each constructed with an internal-facing layout. To further their spatial isolation, their construction coincided with the removal of the “redrail cars.” Removing the main public transit access to the area at a time of growth and changing demographics served to contain people within the geographic area. The connection between this place and other places surrounding it—how well it is linked into the fabric of the city—dictate a great deal in the struggle for spatial justice.

Once a place of political and cultural power, Watts became a place where prominent Black leadership was murdered, incarcerated and removed. Gangs emerged in the void left from the systematic dis-

mantling of Black political leadership and militarization of the geographic area. With enclosure of the area—geographically, physically, socially and politically—people began to look inwards for solutions. The introduction of guns and drugs offered economic generation with few other options, and gangs provided a way of asserting spatial power to be, thrive and express.

Today, Watts is a place of many truths. On the one hand, a full scale conflict has claimed lives for decades. On the other hand, Watts has great building blocks for the realization of spatial justice. Many families have lived in the area for generations, and it is a place where people still know each other and hold community ties. There are many cultural and community organizations, a rich political, social, and cultural history, and a deep local capacity for vision, mobilization, and organizing. Many of the amenities we would advocate for in other neighborhoods are more than plentiful here. In addition to plentiful affordable housing found in the public housing projects, there also lots of small family homes, yards, tree-lined streets with sidewalks, parks and playgrounds, shopping areas, grocery stores and banks.

Despite these noticeable assets, Watts continues to face a most devastating form of fracture: one of violence, fear, death and incarceration. Police harassment, surveillance, and violence create one kind of fear and control. Gang life contributes another level of place-based conflict, violence, and trauma. The disappeared and the dead survive in collective memories of the living. The physical infrastructure of the place is full of assets and sound



*Watts, CA*

structures, but the scars are palpable in the people and the invisible structures that proscribe movement across neighborhoods and sometimes even across streets.

## Impact

In Watts, the combination of physical fracture of enclosure and the social fracture of removing Black political leadership had real implications. What followed was the shaping of an internal facing community, with block-vs-block violence, lack of safety to move freely about, and an intense police control and brutality.

### 1. Spatial claims

Police surveillance and gang activity are two forms of spatial claims that have limited people's ability to be in the space. Their ability to be is challenged by fear and the likelihood of death and/or incarceration. In order to negotiate claims to be, the community must determine ways to create a sense of peace, safety and freedom of movement for all community members.

### 2. Spatial power

It is nearly impossible to discuss the possibility of thriving and expressing within an ongoing conflict of this scale. Physical and mental health are severely affected by the trauma of living life in a conflict zone where life is not safe, kids can't be kids and play outside, and family members are removed for decades at a time through systematic incarceration. Gang life offers a pathway to expression, pride in oneself, one's block and one's community. Community efforts at intervention are also focused on building alternative ways to express pride in oneself and one's community that don't replicate fear and violence.

### 3. Spatial links

The geographic area of Watts is positioned in a prime location: Central Los Angeles, lying between the largest port of San Pedro and Downtown LA, directly along the railroad track, easily accessible by many freeways as well as public transit. But somehow it does not seem to activate the connections

## "Root Shock": Critical Links Between Space and Trauma

Conflicts in domestic cities are rarely recognized on the scale of global conflicts around the world. Yet a 2003 comparison of psychological studies by the Lancet and Rand corporations indicated that children in South Los Angeles were exhibiting greater levels of post-traumatic stress disorder than children of a similar age in Baghdad, the war-torn capital of Iraq<sup>8</sup>. Whether through violence and fear, isolation and exclusion, or the constant disorientation caused by dislocation and displacement, trauma is impacting our communities, and its deep and longstanding effects on health are only beginning to be fully discovered.

Dr. Mindy Fullilove, a Professor of public health and clinical psychiatry at New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University, has studied for decades the critical links between spatial justice, redevelopment and trauma through her concept of "root shock."<sup>9</sup>Root shock is the traumatic stress reaction to the loss of some or all of one's emotional ecosystem. Root shock can follow natural disaster, war, development-induced displacement, and changes that play out more slowly, such as those that accompany gentrification.

It is easy to see how root shock and on-going violence are a cyclical experience of spatial injustice: When our relationship to space is fractured, we experience the trauma of root shock. And when much of a community is experiencing such trauma or PTSD, it impacts the physical space of the community. We describe it as the space "humming" with tension. This affective cycle of trauma and tension creates more incidents where traumatized people meet in tense spaces, setting off violence, adding to trauma, and on it goes.

The concept of root shock has helped people conceptualize both the prevention of displacement and its recovery. As we begin to heal spatial injustice in our cities, it is critical to continue to seek strategies that can heal trauma of people and places together.

and links. The insular nature of the public housing development and the economic, political and mental isolation do not allow these realities to be fully harnessed. In addition, the fractured spatiality created by mass incarceration is a tremendous splintering of families and community. The question of how to create spatial links from inside to outside, and from outside to behind the bars of incarceration remains one of the greatest community challenges for many places that face realities similar to Watts.

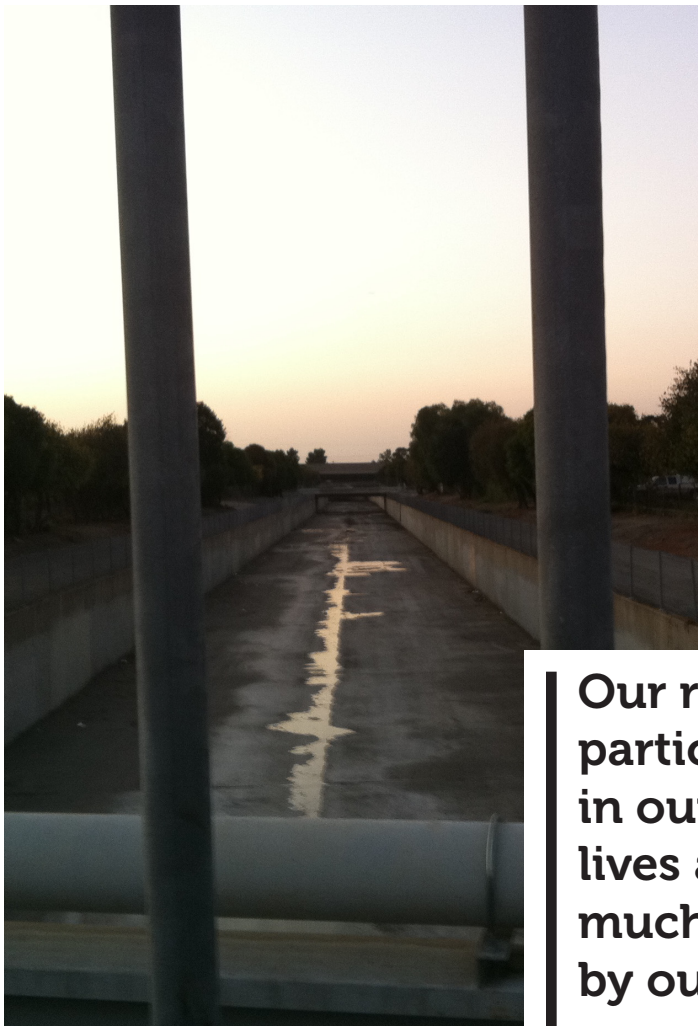
Someone immune to sensation might look at Watts' single-family homes and central location and miss much of the spatial injustice. The lines carving up neighborhoods are invisible, the missing friends and family members not seen, but all of it felt deeply in both the past and present of residents' lives. A fight for spatial justice in Watts will have to take on the psychic fractures that tear through the neighborhood and address trauma and healing as central to both urban and human development.

## PART 2: SPATIAL APPROACHES TO JUSTICE

Our rights to participate in our daily lives are very much shaped by our spatial experience. The spatial construction affects how systems function within that space, and therefore local transportation, education, health, and economy are all critically affected by spatial justice. Community organizers, who have long led struggles for equity and access, have a particular interest and contribution to spatial justice. By exploring the spatial aspects of justice in particular places, we can link together across multiple issues and connect different actors.

We can also begin to unlock injustice at its roots as we develop capacity to protect our rights to a spatial public. Interestingly, we can look at Occupy here: the growing action around the world in solidarity around "Occupy" is about rights to a public realm. Emerging more than tactical, this movement is saying we are going to be in public and many things are possible. The small stories: guerrilla farmers replanting the shrubs, Tahrir Square marching for Occupy Oakland, thousands of people every day participating in public assemblies – this is a movement that is connecting our rights to public space and public discourse.

So how can we take a spatial approach to justice that increases our spatial claims, power and linkage? First we'll use some examples from activists around the U.S., and later in the paper we will set out particular tools organizers can use to increase their own use of space towards social justice.



Watts, CA

**Our rights to participate in our daily lives are very much shaped by our spatial experience.**

### **1. Spatial Claim: Increasing the right to BE for queer youth in Boston**

In 1981 the Boston Alliance of GLBT Youth (BAGLY) hosted the nation's first queer prom. Since the 90s, this prom has taken place

in Boston's sprawling City Hall. The large stone building heats up with drag queen performers, shy couples in love, and over 1000 youth dancing the night away, all surrounded by signs for paying taxes and parking tickets. To us, this is a brilliant example of using the symbolic power of a particular place to make a statement about spatial justice. Boston is saying to all GLBT youth in and around the city, "You belong here."

## **2. Spatial Power: Reclaiming the right to thrive and express for indigenous Hawaiians**

When the Hawai'i State House sought to pass legislation that would limit gathering rights for native Hawaiians in 1997 (see page 5), Hawaii's cultural workers stepped in. The Kumu Hula, master teachers of Hawaiian indigenous dance and story telling, gathered at the state capitol with hundreds of dancers and drummers. After drumming and dancing for 24 hours, they were successful in killing the legislation and asserting their cultural and spatial rights as political power.<sup>10</sup>

## **3. Spatial Linkage: Re-activating the right to access sports fields and connect across Watts**

In Watts and throughout South Los Angeles a simple yet effective spatial strategy has been implemented called Summer Night Lights. The gym, sporting fields, and community spaces within the housing project developments are open and lit up every Wednesday through Sunday, partially staffed by 1,000 local youth. Summer Night Lights invites participation from all generations: adults and youth play basketball, kids skateboard, older folks play cards and listen to music, and there is food for everyone. During Summer Night Lights it is actually possible to travel between projects to participate in different activities. Since the program started in 2008, homicides have tumbled by more than half and violent crime has dropped by 40 percent.

Our next case study takes a geographical lead from the many parks that thread through Upper Manhattan, imagining what would be possible for residents, neighbors and local businesses if all the parks were connected...

## **Risking Their Lives on the High Bridge**

The High Bridge is a stunningly beautiful pedestrian bridge that connects Washington Heights (in Northern Manhattan) to the Bronx. High Bridge is a New York City Landmark, but it has been closed and fenced off since the early 70s. When the youth of Manhattan's CLIMB Summer Program (see page 12) were researching how to connect the parks of Northern Manhattan, they realized they might have to go further. They found that Bronx youth, faced with a far inferior park on their side, often scale the fence to access the nearby Manhattan pools in the summertime. After learning that these young people were regularly risking life and limb to scale the High Bridge fence (overlooking six lanes of the West Side Highway below), the CLIMB youth decided to join the fight to re-open the bridge.

As a result of youth and others calling attention to this public asset and the potential for spatial links that could result from reopening the bridge, a coalition formed and successfully advocated for the bridge. At this point \$65 million has been allocated to repair,<sup>11</sup> renovate and reopen the High Bridge. This project is part of the PlaNYC initiative to provide a park that every New Yorker can walk to within ten minutes.



*Bronx youth scaling locked gates to access public pools.*

## Case Study 3: CLIMB, Re-knitting Neighborhoods in Northern Manhattan with a Walking Trail

### Before

The parks of Upper Manhattan tell the story of their surrounding neighborhoods. As the neighborhoods became sites of disinvestment, starved of public resources, businesses closed down and the parks became places of marginality and disrepair.



View from the CLIMB Trail

*“Ten years ago people in Northern Manhattan stopped going out in their neighborhoods. They were afraid to linger on the street talking to neighbors, take their children to the parks, or window shop on busy streets. These security measures seemed a good way to keep safe from random bullets, but it was purchased at the price of outdoor life, physical activity and neighborhood socializing .”<sup>12</sup>*

- Mindy Fullilove, M.D., professor of public health and clinical psychiatry at New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia University, who helped launch the CLIMB trail

### Spatial Counter-move

City Life is Moving Bodies (CLIMB) was founded on the belief that safe parks and neighborhoods are essential to community health, and that all communities, regardless of socioeconomic background, are entitled to access to safe parks and neighborhoods. The idea was to create a hiking trail that links the parks of Northern Manhattan from Central Park to the very top of the island with a path that is paved and walkable year round. By activating a walking trail connecting over 80 city blocks through the parks of Harlem and Washington Heights, CLIMB could increase physical activity among residents of Northern Manhattan, promote local economic development, increase neighborhood safety and build community relations.

Inspired by the geographical grid of New York City and the nature of the fracture between neighborhoods and parks, the CLIMB trail incorporated the idea of re-knitting fracture on both an east-west and north-south axis. Each park has a path that runs north-south and the paths almost touch between parks. By linking them together the path could

emerge that connects more than 80 blocks through historically African American and Latino communities, connecting them to one another and linking them to the rest of the city. The east-west linkages were to connect surrounding neighborhoods with access to nearby park facilities. They also provide park walkers with access to local businesses at multiple sites, invigorating the economy as well as social and historic organizations along the trail. The connections are intended to break segregation of people and resources, and create new ways of living together in the city.

### How they did it

Young people are some of the most obvious champions for spatial justice. They use space every day, they are often marginalized, and they are currently offering some of the most powerful contributions to spatial justice and the health of cities. CLIMB Summer began as a summer youth program that each year designed and produced a project aimed at connecting people to the parks and activating a trail throughout upper Manhattan parks and neighborhoods. The youth produced

a film called Road to Recovery, created treasure hunt routes for younger children, and participated in city meetings to advocate for the trail and a re-opening of the historic High Bridge pedestrian bridge to the Bronx (see pullout, page 11). By beginning with youth, CLIMB gained momentum and grew to include more and more partners and excitement around the idea of connecting and working together to activate the space.

Today the CLIMB effort engages local youth programs, organizing groups, students, businesses, city parks and public works and is an example of the potential of working collaboratively with many stakeholders to make spaces that are just and healthy. It is kept vibrant with events like the annual “Hike the Heights” Festival, which engages hundreds of neighbors each year. Festivals are a critical cornerstone to creating a healthy public. When people come outside to participate, eat something delicious, see something and meet each other – such is the stuff of life. Festivals allow us to keep alive cultural and historical traditions, rights, and roots.

## Impact

The CLIMB Trail has impacted northern Manhattan in a variety of ways. Its annual festivals and community events bring thousands of people out into the parks, and its north-south and east-west trails have created opportunities for residents of all ages to walk regularly and safely. Even these individual rituals are a powerful force for transforming spatial realities. The CLIMB trail opened the space for people to be, thrive/express and connect/access.

### 1. Spatial Claims

By reclaiming the parks in their neighborhoods and using the parks to reconnect neighboring ‘hoods, people were able to travel more safely in their neighborhoods and beyond. This also allowed people to use the full assets offered in the local environment.

### 2. Spatial Power

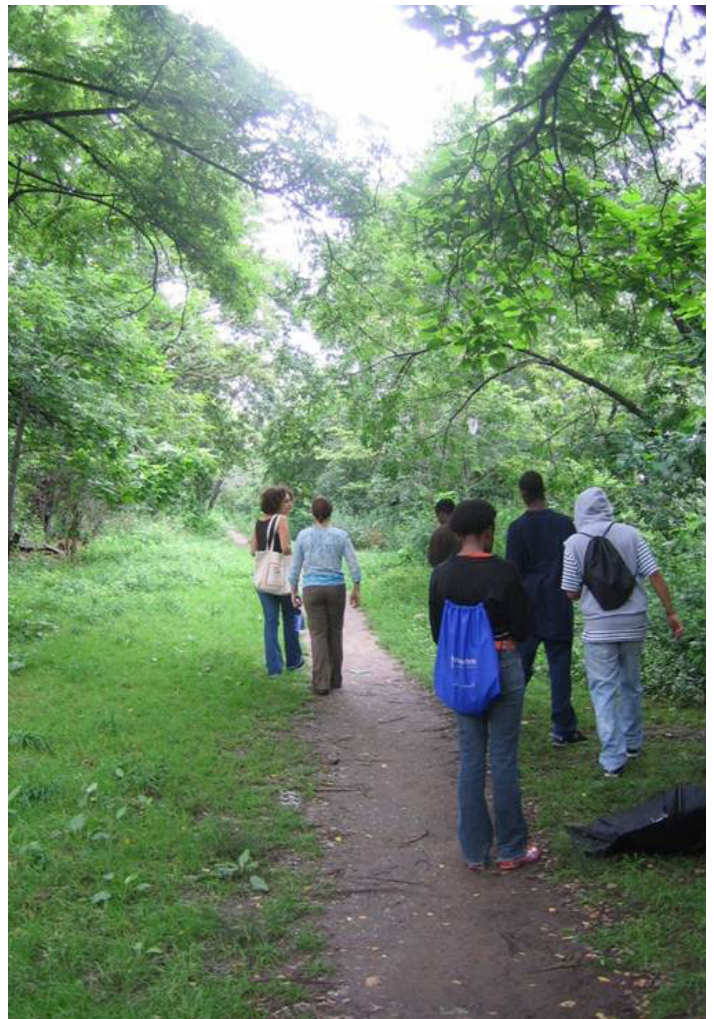
With the spatial power offered by better utilizing the parks and increasing access to public resources,

people were able to thrive more fully, become healthier and more engaged. Businesses are finding increased foot traffic contributing to their success, and festivals and trail-based activities are offering additional opportunities for many actors to express themselves in the space.

### 3. Spatial Links

At the heart of the CLIMB trail is the idea of connecting the parks together and creating spatial links. By physically and psychologically connecting northern Manhattan neighborhoods, CLIMB not only connected different parks and neighborhoods, but also connected people (both youth and adults) with businesses, schools, organizations and institutions.

The story of CLIMB offers an opportunity to witness what can happen when people come together to address spatial justice, heal from fracture, and awaken the potential of people and place.



CLIMB Trail

# PART 3: STRATEGIES FOR WORKING TOWARDS SPATIAL JUSTICE

In Part One of this paper we laid out a framework to help us understand spatial justice and recognize spatial injustice. In Part Two we looked at some existing examples of “spatial counter-moves”—communities coming together to use space in ways to further justice and increase their quality of life. Since it’s clear we can’t simply undo the spatial problems from the past and call it done, we are faced with needing to imagine new spatial arrangements to achieve justice. Part Three is meant to leave the reader with some techniques to do that work. We have broken it into two sections: Developing Spatial Competency and Imagining New Spatial Strategies.

## *DEVELOPING SPATIAL COMPETENCY - GETTING OUT IN SPACE*

The most important first step to thinking spatially is to get out in the space. Walk the area, drive, bike, hang out, whatever you must do to experience the place. It is best if you explore a place repeatedly over time, inviting different likely and unlikely partners to join you and discuss ideas and what you see. If you are extremely familiar with a place, it works best if you explore it in new ways (walk if you usually drive, bike if you usually walk, etc) and if you explore it with folks who experience it in different ways than you do.

The process of considering community development and social change initiatives with a spatial awareness is a process of placemaking. When people become active and aware in their places in a way that is open and inclusive, it can function as an orienting and healing practice that results in better places and healthier people. Here are two quite different tools to help you get out and take a closer look at the spaces around you.





## 1. Spatial Assessment Guide

*The following guide is meant to help you jump start your inquiry into spatial justice by assessing the terrain with a spatial lens. You can use the set of questions for personal reflection or small conversations throughout your community. They have also been used for strategic processes in organizations, initiatives and even across whole cities for developing a plan or process for change. Similarly you can choose any question individually to consider or take the whole set. The process could take an hour or several years to complete. Ultimately, the Spatial Assessment Guide can be scaled up or down to meet whatever needs you may have.*

### **Materials:**

*List of questions printed out for each participant  
Pens or pencils*

### **Spatial Claims: The Right to Be**

As in basic community building and organizing efforts, in spatial justice work we begin with those most affected. Those who live, work and play in a particular place should experience a sense of their right to exist in that place. They should be central in telling the story of that place, working to understand that place more fully, and offering clues into what is possible for that place to realize. These questions help you uncover and continue to return to the social and cultural gifts of a given place and work to ensure spatial claims for those most affected or at risk for spatial injustice and removal.

- 1. Who uses the place, who does not, and why?*
- 2. How is the space used?*
- 3. What talents and gifts do people have here?*
- 4. What is unique about the history and culture of the area?*

### **Spatial Power: The Right to Thrive and Express**

Spatial power is evident across political, social, cultural and physical realms. It is about how a given place creates the conditions that support or curtail its people's efforts to succeed. Furthermore, people's ability to shape, decorate, celebrate and contribute to their spaces increases their spatial power. These questions help you look deeper into the right to thrive and express both publicly and privately, individually and collectively.

- 1. What qualities would you use to describe the place?*
- 2. How are people able to practice, contribute and create here?*
- 3. What messages and behaviors does the space suggest?*
- 4. What prevents anyone from full participation in personal or public life?*

## **Spatial Links: The Right to Access and Connect**

Many clear elements of spatial injustice—as well as opportunities for justice—lie in plain sight, easily visible in our physical environment. We encounter the physical environment every day, and yet we have not always had practice in learning to see and assess the impact and possibilities for intervention. The right to access and connect requires two specific elements: understanding fracture and working with the existing ecology of a place. These questions help you consider what realities exist in your spatial environment, what assets and challenges it may offer, and how to align your interventions with principles of spatial justice. By understanding fracture and the natural ecology of a place, we can begin to heal both the fragmentation of our places and our efforts for change.

### **Understanding Fracture:**

A key component to spatial justice lies in taking the time to fully understand what the nature of fracture is that you are dealing with. All communities suffer from some sort of fragmentation. Some fractures lie in the history and legacies of development in that given place. Some lie in social conditions, impacting the culture of the people and the place. Through discussions with a range of stakeholders, the fracture can be illuminated, offering the opportunity for multiple efforts to work at reknitting and healing the fracture at different levels.

- 1. What barriers exist in the physical environment?*
- 2. What breaks and obstacles can be found in the system?*
- 3. What invisible, historical or social barriers divide people?*
- 4. What historic memory exists in the place and the people here?*

### **Ecology of Place:**

You also want to pay attention to what natural ecology already exists in a place. This way you can work with, rather than against, what wants to exist in that place. These questions ask about spatial links and connections. The ecology could be natural, like an environmental ecosystem, or it could be more of a social ecology about how people like to live there and what's important to maintain.

- 1. What connects this place to other places?*
- 2. What natural and social flows exist in the place?*
- 3. What institutions relate to and affect the place?*
- 4. What dreams and aspirations exist for the place?*

## 2. Space Bingo

*This is a great exercise to get participants and stakeholders to simply talk about space. It also forces them to look at spaces in new ways. It works equally well with an enclosed space (like a school and its outside facilities), or with a larger space like a neighborhood or entire town or city.*

### Materials:

3 large home-made Bingo boards (see below)  
 Camera phone  
 Printer (color printer is ideal)

Make three poster sized bingo boards (or more if your group is particularly large). It's fun to have each board have some shared and some different descriptors.

Write different place descriptors on the board. We like to use ones that are subjective and metaphorical in nature, as we feel those kinds of descriptors make the conversation livelier. Here are some of the descriptors we've used:

Hopeful Space	Repellent Space	Sacred Space	Gendered Space	Cut-Up Space
Space in Identity Crisis	Space for the Desired Public	Permitted Space	Possibility Space	Public Space as Private Space
Corporate Space	Queer Space	Free Space	Space in Decline	Tacky Space
Hangout Space	Sanitized Space	Temporary Space	Enclosed Space	Dangerous Space
Undesirable Space	Proper Space	Contested Space	Appropriated Space	Sexy Space

Place these descriptors along the boards like a bingo board, five spaces across vertically and horizontally, with the center space labeled as FREE.

Break the group into 3 smaller groups. Assign each group an area, depending on the kind of terrain the exercise is happening in. (We like having groups go to different spaces because we find that it enriches the listening when people report back.)

Send the groups out for a period of time commensurate to the size of the space they are covering and their modality for getting around. (Space Bingo on foot inside of a small school could be a shorter exercise than doing Space Bingo in three parts of a small town.) Have teams get out and take photos of spaces they find that they feel match the descriptions. Groups can aim for a simple "Bingo" (5 across) or try for the whole board, depending on time or ambition!

Have each team come back to print their pictures and place them on the spaces they represent. Then have groups present back, sharing their choices of photo and how they think it represents the descriptors on the board.

We typically give each team a prize.



# IMAGINING NEW SPATIAL STRATEGIES

So how do we imagine just spatial arrangements in the midst of places scarred with existing forms of spatial injustice? First we have to acknowledge that it's quite difficult. Imagining new possibilities is harder than it seems, and the process often underscores how hard it is to un-imagine something that already exists, physically or psychically. Let's take Atlanta as an example. How might we re-imagine Sweet Auburn and the space that the highway cut through? One way to approach that would be to stage a family reunion of all of the displaced neighborhoods ravaged by the highway. Have them joined by Cabbagetown folks from the other side of the wall. Have everyone speculate how their collective lives might have played out if these spatial attacks hadn't torn through their communities. What might their lives look like, the spaces look and feel like, and what might be possible for Atlanta as a whole?

An exercise like this could feel useless. The highway and the wall are a fait accompli. Those neighborhoods can't be rebuilt. But we'd argue that these kinds of spatially focused imaginings could lead to strong solidarity between people, leading to scales of action typically only imagined by regional planners. What if the gathering turned into a multiracial movement to tear down the wall? It is just one example of the sort of creative imagining we can do to come up with alternative spatial narratives as a power building strategy.

Here are 2 exercises that can help us think about ways to interrupt current spatial arrangements and imagine new kinds of spaces (or rebirths of old ones!) that move us towards new forms of spatial power.

## 1. Erase and Replace! An exercise for decolonizing capitalist spaces

### Materials:

*Flipchart or 2 for each small group  
Pencils and erasers*

*Optional: You can go with 3-D with materials like clay, straws, pipe cleaners  
You can use markers and cover over sections with additional paper and tape for "erasing"*

*Regardless of the kind of geographic environment you find yourself in—rural, suburban or urban—the commercial strip is the center of our social lives. With Barnes and Noble as the new library and malls the new town commons, space is dominated by consumer and other forms of capitalist space. And these spaces appear permanent and durable. The message is both loud and subtle: if you can't consume, you can't really participate in the primary point of our social centers. Here is an exercise to both highlight and challenge this spatial injustice and help us think about decolonizing capitalist spaces.*

Take a diverse group of participants—constituents, art and design types, community organizers, planners, business folks, etc—out to your "main drag," whatever that constitutes.

Look at who uses it and how. (You can use some of the questions in the Spatial Assessment Guide if you want.) Spend time working together (or in small groups) to make an informal representation of it. Sketching is the easiest, but 3-D models or collages with various supplies can add a different perspective and challenge.

Either on site or back at your home base, erase (or cover or remove, depending on what materials you used) half of the consumer spaces in your main drag. Imagine what you would put in the spaces you erased. Try to figure out what spaces your main strip can't really do without collectively and what spaces it needs collectively.

Fill in the spaces you erased with new ideas. If you have multiple groups, have the groups present their new designs to each other.

Next, erase and redesign half of the spaces again. This time erase half of the ones your team came up with and half of the remaining commercial spaces. Keep discussing what spaces the group believes you really need for the strip to function and remain the center of life for your place.

Once done, it's great to hang your final designs somewhere visible. They can be a great visual reminder of what's possible in reclaiming commercial spaces and making them viable, vital centers of life for all.

## 2. The 200 Year Timeline

### Materials:

Flipcharts or roll paper

Markers or pens

2 different colors of stickies (post-its)

*This exercise can help a community look both backward and forward with the kind of temporal scale to truly speculate about significant spatial changes. When we start by realizing how much of what we assume about space has been true for less than a century, we can begin to imagine and plan for fundamental shifts towards spatial justice in the future.*

Begin by drawing your 200 year timeline. It can be made on a long roll of paper or with many flip chart papers side-by-side. It should be at least 15-20 feet long! Put the current year smack in the middle (horizontally), and draw the timeline through the middle of the page, with space for ideas above and below it. (Above the timeline is the space that participants will use to put their ideas about space usage, and below the timeline will include their ideas about relevant policies.) Put indicators to show every 10 or 20 years.

There are 4 parts of this exercise:

- looking back at spatial usage
- looking back at space-relevant policy
- looking forward to imagine desired spatial usage
- looking forward to imagine necessary space-relevant policy

*(We recommend doing them all, but you can decide to do them all as one exercise or do them in 2 parts, or even focus on one element and not another.)*

### 1. Looking Back at Spatial Usage

In small groups (intergenerational ones if possible), have your participants begin by looking backward. Hand out the same color sticky to all, and have them brainstorm as many different ways that space was used in their neighborhood/town/city over the last century. (You may want to put some initial ones up to demonstrate.) If you're not sure how much of this is common knowledge in your group, you can support the

groups with historical books or photos, or with questions like:

- Where were factories or farms?
- Do you remember where parks or open spaces used to be?
- Did there use to be different shops?
- Were neighborhoods or travel patterns different?
- When did highways, malls or other large infrastructures come in?
- What did public transit look like? When did it arrive (if at all)?

After groups have had 10-15 minutes to come up with some examples on their stickies (remind them to also put the year or decade on it), ask all the groups to send representatives to place their stickies onto the timeline in the appropriate decades. Then you can have all the groups come up to browse the timeline so far. You can stop and discuss (what didn't you know? What do you miss? What surprised you? Etc...)

### 2. Looking Back at Space-relevant Policies

Here is a chance to look at how our policies influence how space usage changes over time. Policies can be about physical structures (highways or paved roads, housing projects, manufacturing districts, subways) and social structures (who can own property? Where does the public transit go?)

This time have your groups use the second color sticky, so that everything above the line will be one color, and everything below the line (policies) will be the second color. If you don't think your group has enough knowledge about space-relevant policies, you can do this section as a teach piece or discussion, or do it the same as above but without expecting participants to know exactly when each policy came into play.

### 3. Looking Forward: Space Usage

Now that your participants have had a chance to see how much change can take place in an area over a century, it's time to truly imagine the changes we'd like to see in the next century! Remind them that they don't need to consider their ideas "realistic" at all. (Who would have expected the things going on

today if they'd lived 100 years ago?) The important criteria are that they are desired uses of space that further spatial justice and quality of life.

Using the same or different small groups, give them 15-20 minutes to come up with at least 15 ideas per group for new uses of space in their neighborhood/town/city. Remind them to think big!

After groups send a representative to post their stickies, have the full group come and browse all the new ideas. Some may need to be explained by the author group! Use this as a chance to ask participants what inspired or delighted them, if they have more ideas inspired by what they see (add them!), etc...

#### 4. Looking Forward: Space-relevant Policy

The last small group brainstorm will be to come up with creative ideas for policies that could yield the types of spaces we're looking for. You might start this section by giving some examples or having the large group brainstorm together. For example, if one idea posted above the timeline was for bikes to replace cars, a policy below the timeline could be a prohibitive gas-tax or a ban on using cars within cities.

After your small groups have brainstormed new policies (again, think big!), and your whole group has browsed the new policies, it's time to look at the timeline as a whole. Here are some questions you can use for a large group conversation.

- What did thinking backwards 100 years make you realize about space?
- What were the policies over the last 100 years that really seemed to impact our use of space today?
- What did thinking forward over 100 years help you imagine?
- Which ideas would you most like to see actually happen?
- What ideas does this give you for policies we could be working on or other strategies we might use?

A good follow-up activity to the 200 Year Timeline is having groups create small ways to embody some of the ideas they have about the future. These "probes" can be one-day activities that put ideas out into space and get more people excited about them, and about their own ideas for spatial possibilities!

## CONCLUSION

*We are in a spatial moment.* From Tahrir Square to Zuccotti Park, hundreds of thousands of people have used space to assert their right to spatial claims, spatial power and spatial linkage. We are on our way to a future that could value people's rights to be, thrive, express and connect over the rights of cars, private property and exploitive governments.

*In this spatial moment...* A spatial justice lens can offer new possible solutions to the complex social justice issues at hand. For example, it reminds us of the multiple potentials of public space—for protest, dance, occupation, and play. Rethinking our assumptions about who gets to use space can help us imagine new types of space, like pedestrian-first roads, queer-friendly parks, and community-owned business districts. It can challenge us to think into the future about what laws will enable these uses of space, or remind us of traditional laws that have respected rights to gather plants, share land, and protect the environment.

*In this spatial moment...* We must recognize that the powers that be will not give up space or power easily, and that they have the experience and government infrastructure to carry out massive spatial attacks (like the highway through Sweet Auburn and the social fracture of Watts.) We must learn to increase our durability in space, whether Occupy spaces are under attack or homes are being foreclosed. We already know our efforts in space are always subject to police interrogation due to our counter narratives and tactics. We must learn to use space in ways that baffle the powers that intend to thwart us.

*In this spatial moment...* We hope this paper serves as a helpful tool as you fight spatial injustice and work towards spatial justice. We are just beginning to explore the possibilities of what that work might look like in the current era. As you explore possibilities for spatial justice at the scale of the school, community or nation, we invite you to share your outcomes with us and with each other. Together we can reclaim our rights to be, thrive, express and connect.

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