



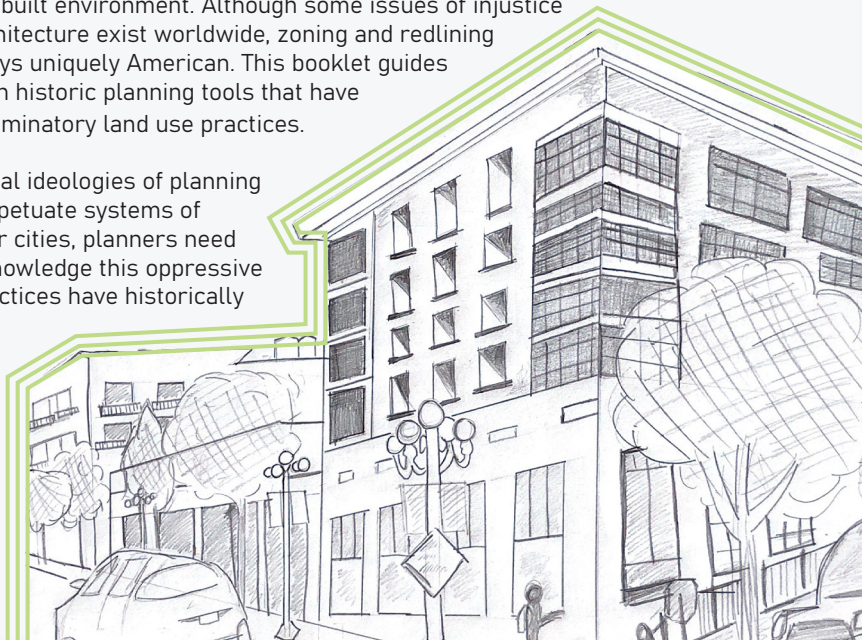
A Planning Lesson: Addressing Racism in Our Built Environment

by Michelle Castro-Pilar

How does planning breed inequality in our cities?

In planning, racial inequality is exposed through local policy and practice concerning the built environment. Although some issues of injustice like hostile architecture exist worldwide, zoning and redlining are in some ways uniquely American. This booklet guides readers through historic planning tools that have produced discriminatory land use practices.

Because residual ideologies of planning continue to perpetuate systems of inequality in our cities, planners need to learn to acknowledge this oppressive past. These practices have historically targeted low-income and minority individuals and families, resulting in patterns of racial housing segregation that divide our cities.



“Barriers to spatial mobility become barriers to social mobility.”

Source: Hunter, M. A., & Robinson, Z. F. (2018). *Chocolate Cities: The black map of American life*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press.

Early **zoning laws** deprived Black families access to housing in predominately white neighborhoods.



Image by Library of Congress via Getty Images, Detroit, Michigan, 1942.

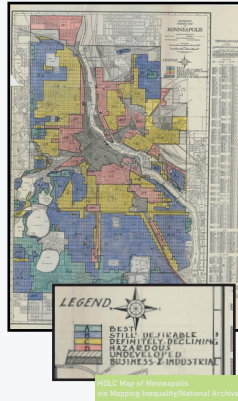
Zoning consists of dividing a region into zones and prescribing what can and cannot be built on each parcel. In later years, exclusionary zoning continues to silo communities.



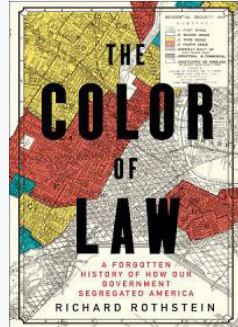
Image by California Newsreel via PBS, 2003.

Redlining

Redlining is the discriminatory practice of systematic denial of providing a service to residents within a certain neighborhood or a community with certain racial or ethnic compositions.



HOLC Map of Minneapolis via Mapping Inequality/National Archives.



In *The Color of Law*, Richard Rothstein explains the history of racial segregation in the United States, via various examples of redlining.

In practice, red ink was used to identify neighborhoods deemed not worthy of investment based on demographics. The deliberate denial of loans has caused a stagnation of economic wealth and investment in many urban areas.



Blockbusting

Real estate agents created a narrative of fear around the idea of integrating neighborhoods. This urged white homeowners, residing in areas adjacent to or near Black communities, to sell their homes at very low prices to agents who would then sell to minorities to profit, Blockbusters benefit from racism by:

- Steering white families away from Black neighborhoods
- Selling to non-whites at higher prices because they already face extremely limited housing options

Racial Covenants

A legal agreement between property owners in a certain neighborhood to forbid the rent or sale of homes to any person other than those of Caucasian descent.



“Zipcode has become one of the highest determinants of health.”

Source: Martinez, Carolina. "Environmental Justice" Case Studies in Health-Care Programs/Poor and Underserved Population. USP 147, 23 May 2019, La Jolla.

Environmental racism is the impact that hazardous and degraded environments have on predominately low-income communities due to outdated or discriminatory zoning practices.

In this case, many families are forced to live in proximity to extremely hazardous spaces associated with higher health risk.



Highways and Suburbs

Freeways are not only responsible for urban sprawl, but also the social (dis)organization of the city.



San Diego Freeway via Google Maps

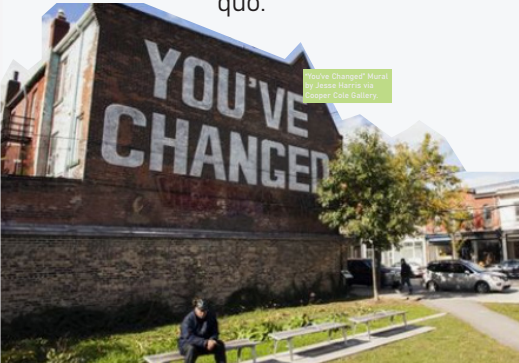
Together, systems of mass housing and transportation have physically separated our communities and has led to irreversible social divides in our cities.

Gentrification

An ongoing process that older neighborhoods undergo when a movement of people or investment rapidly increases land value and displaces the existing community.

Nimbyism

NIMBY, or “Not In My Backyard”, describes the ideology in which residents of a neighborhood react negatively to new development in an effort to maintain a particular status quo.



"You've Changed" Mural by Jesse Harris via Jason Cole Gallery

“The built environment is policy in concrete.”

Source: Lewis, Leslie R. "Health + Wealth", Case Studies in Health-Care Programs/Poor and Under-served Population. USP 147, 9 April 2019, La Jolla.

Hostile Architecture

The design and features of buildings and public space that slightly deters functional use with intentions of maintaining “order and safety”.



"Anti-Homeless Spikes" Image by Maurithuimages via Instagram (hottdesign_syd)



Image by Interboro via Graham Foundation



Image by unknown via Instagram (hottdesign)



Image by Tamar Harris via unknown



Looking Forward

Our streets do not only have to deal with a global pandemic. Our streets are fighting for justice for the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and countless others murdered by police in the United States. The Black Lives Matter Movement is deeply connected to the built environment and has exposed the way cities have become a spatial experience of oppression for Black lives. It is important that planners continue to reflect on what our cities are and reimagine what they need to be through design, policy, and action.

Disclaimer

This project is ongoing and does not tell the full lived experiences of how the planning profession contributes and has contributed to the inequality in our cities.

Inspired by

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All photos are taken by me/public unless otherwise stated.