Environmental Justice Educational Series

Urban Resilience and Sustainability (URS)
Environmental Racism in the Built Environment

Picture Link: Bridge Park for Washington, D.C.

Introduction:

Reflecting back onto the first EJ post, the Environmental Justice movement initially gained traction in the 1970s due to discriminatory environmental practices in urban planning

- Toxic waste dumping, municipal waste facilities, and factory sites often near communities of color and had negative health impacts.

Over a century of housing and financial discrimination have led to communities of color having a higher proportion of cancer and other health problems

- This post will outline how this came to be

“Right now, your ZIP code is the most important predictor of health and well-being”

- Robert Bullard, Ph.D.

In the early 1900s, there were racist zoning laws and restrictive racial covenants:

- Restrictive covenants are clauses inserted into property deeds that prohibit the purchase, lease, or occupation of a property based on race, color, religion, or national origin.
- These covenants were most frequently used to prevent people who were not white from buying or occupying land.
- In many cases, racial covenants were created by developers when building on a particular tract of land and preserved by HOA’s to exclude black people from moving in.

Picture Link

Then, in the 1930s, the Federal Housing Administration furthered segregation through the New Deal

Picture Link

- The New Deal offered homeownership programs that offered government-insured mortgages for homeowners
    - A form of federal aid designed to reduce foreclosures in the wake of the Great Depression
- The government added parameters for appraising and vetting properties and homeowners who could qualify
    - Color-coded maps ranked the loan worthiness of neighborhoods from least to most risky, or from “A” through “D.”
    - The most risky neighborhoods, or the “D” neighborhoods, were marked in red on the map.
- This is now known as “redlining,” of which the ramifications are still felt today

Picture Link

1930’s-1968 (Fair Housing Act)

- The Fair Housing Act, signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson in 1968, is a civil rights law that protects people from housing discrimination based on certain factor

Redlining was outlawed with this act, but has led to systemic inequities in housing, business opportunities, and lost generational wealth

- Legacy impacts continue today: higher air, water, and noise pollutants as well as other health problems.
    - 2022 study found that residents in previously D-graded neighborhoods lived in proximity to nearly twice the density of oil and gas wells as A-graded
    - This proximity exposes residents to numerous pollutants that can cause cardiovascular disease, impaired lung function, anxiety, depression, and preterm birth.
- Over 60% of previously D-graded communities remain nonwhite
    - These areas continue to suffer from less green space
        - Study shows that green space declined along Home Owners’ Loan Corporation (HOLC) grades; “less desirable” neighborhoods lack trees and parks and **have more asphalt** that “more desirable”

Picture Link

Urban heat island effect

- Heat islands are urbanized areas that experience higher temperatures than outlying areas. The increased levels of buildings and asphalt, paired with reduced natural landscapes, result in temperatures that are 1-7 degrees higher than outlying areas.
    - Heat islands have been linked to demographic factors such as income and race.
    - This has been correlated to redlining
        - Examples: For example, one study explored the link between historic redlining and present-day temperature, vegetative cover, and demographics in Baltimore, Maryland; Dallas, Texas; and Kansas City, Missouri.ii The study found that in all three cities, past redlined areas have lower vegetative cover, higher temperatures, and greater proportions of residents with lower incomes than other areas of the cities. In addition, formerly redlined districts of all three cities had higher percentages of residents that were Hispanic, Black, or both.

Picture Link

One solution is increasing urban greening

Urban Greening: The incorporation of green spaces and elements into urban environments and infrastructure, such as streets, cities, roofs, and walls.

Urban greening:

- Offsets carbon emissions, improves wellbeing of inhabitants, improves air quality, reduces noise pollution, mitigates the urban heat island effect, reduces flood risks, and more.

But, when urban greening is not planned properly, with the input of local residents, it can result in green gentrification:

- “The process in which environmental greening leads to increases in perceived local desirability that result in higher property values and rents.”
    - This results in new wealthier residents and businesses that cater to their tastes and leave lower-income, longer-term residents with rising costs of living, vanishing community culture/institutions, and ultimately physical displacement.

Solution: inclusive design process

To mitigate green gentrification, urban planners can include 3 building blocks for the future of their cities:

1. Spatial inclusion: providing affordable housing, water, and sanitation
2. Social inclusion: equal rights and participation; stakeholder engagement
3. Economic inclusion: job creation and economic development chances for citizens

This sustainability-focused infrastructure should be developed citywide instead of in a piecemeal fashion, and leveraged to “lift and and respond to community concerns”

A great example of this can be found in Bozeman

- For a new project in Bozeman, Montana–the creation of a 60-acre multi use park–to grapple with the rapid growth of the area, the Trust for Public Land helped set aside a plot of land.
    - This plot is adjacent to the 60-acre Story Mill Park and is regulated for 62 additional units of affordable housing.
    - TPL also focused on providing resources, guidance, and grant writing assistance for local community groups, enabling them to better utilize incoming federal dollars.

Solution: equitable transit oriented development (eTOD)

Transit oriented development is a planning and design approach that seeks to create compact, mixed-use, pedestrian-oriented neighborhoods around new or existing public transit stations.

- Many have embraced TOD as a strategy to create more vibrant and connected neighborhoods, increase transit ridership, expand opportunity, and reduce GHG emissions.
- However, there is high demand adjacent to transit which can make TOD homes inaccessible to people with lower incomes.

So, eTOD:

- Dedicated strategies when planning TODs to ensure low-income residents and residents of color benefit from–and are not displaced by– the new development.

Example in Boulder:

- Boulder Junction Link

How do we move forward?

The first step of dismantling systemic injustices within the URS specialization is education. While this post highlights a couple key strategies being used today, further research and experience is necessary to move forward.

Be vigilant and engaged with your local community. Attend city planning meetings and don't be afraid to speak out if something does not feel right to you. Change is not comfortable.

If you own a home, or know someone who does, check the deed to see if you have a discriminatory covenant. While it will not affect you or your home, this acknowledges terrible mistakes made in US history and rectifies them as much as possible.
