Structural Racism and Inequality and Struggle Over the Inner-City Built Environment: Rethinking Community Development and Neighborhood Revitalization

By
Henry Louis Taylor, Jr.
Professor, Department of Planning, School of Architecture and Planning
Director, Center for Urban Studies

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This presentation represents the first effort by the Center for Urban Studies (CENTER), University at Buffalo to reconceptualize community development and neighborhood revitalization. This essay grows directly out of the applied research and neighborhood planning activities of the CENTER, and our efforts to understand more deeply the issues we confronted. Professor Sam Cole, a Senior Research Associate at the Center for Urban Studies, and professor in the Department of Planning, developed the concept, *Turning Point Scenarios.* Many other concepts in this paper were shaped by discussions with Professor Alfred Price, Department of Planning. Please feel to circulate and share this concept paper with your friends. I only ask that proper credits be given if you choose to cite it, or use the concepts so spur additional research or practical activity.

Introduction

I want to discuss the importance of conceptualizing community development and

neighborhood revitalization as facets of the effort to radically reconstruct the inner city

built environment, by which I mean the totality of the physical and social environment

that comprise that part of the central city where racial minorities and low income groups

are concentrated and over represented in the population. [1] I refer to these marginalized

urban spaces as the inner city.

The paper will focus on the importance of understanding the relationship between struggle over the inner city built environment and the fight to dismantle structural racism and inequality, and democratize the United States. The presentation will be divided into two major parts. The first part outlines the issue, while the second deals with the role universities can play in reconstructing the inner city.

What is the Issue?

My argument is this: Over the past 50 years, the inner city built environment has become the place where structural racism and inequality are most sharply reflected. In 1965, when the black scholar, Kenneth B. Clark, referred to Harlem as a *Dark Ghetto*, he was talking about the emergence of the inner city built environment as the epicenter of racism, structural inequality, joblessness and poverty. William Julius Wilson's **Truly Disadvantage** (1987), Massey and Denton's **American Apartheid** (1993), and Paul A. Jargowsky's **Poverty and Place** spoke of the growing intensification of socioeconomic problems among blacks and people of color, and their spatial concentration in the inner city built environment with the passage of time.

In essence, the bundle of contradictions most characteristic of structural racism and inequality are *flourishing* in the inner city built environment. In this setting you find an overrepresentation of economic marginalization, low-wages, inadequate schools, bad housing, abandoned buildings, dilapidated neighborhoods, blight, poverty, poor health, crime, violence, and family instability.[2] Racism, the lack of money, and the land rent structure of the urban region combine to create a Hadrian's Wall that forces low income groups to live perpetually on the cheapest and most undesirable residential lands in the metropolis.[3]

The harshness of condition of life in the inner city has caused struggle over the built environment to replace the Civil Rights Movement as the focal point of struggle among blacks, people of color, and progressive Americans. [4] *Built environment struggles have come to the forefront because the urban crisis cannot be solved without the radical reconstruction of inner city neighborhoods.*[5]

Within this framework, it is important to view community development, neighborhood revitalization, community economic development, community policing, community wealth production, neighborhood-based politics, community schools, faith-based initiatives, affordable housing, neighborhood-based judicial systems, community building, citizen participation, social capital, community empowerment, participatory research, and university-community partnerships as mere facets of struggle over the inner city built environment.

These are just aspects of the fight to transform inner city neighborhoods and make them great places to live, work, play, and raise a family—urban villages that will give people the best that humanity and technology have to offer. However, to feel the power of these disparate efforts, first we must understand how the elemental parts fit together, and how they relate to work place struggles and the fight against racism, structural inequality, and anti-democratic forces.[6] The big idea is to get these separate activities, which have devolved into discrete specializations, to merge into one comprehensive movement to radically transform the inner city built environment, and the metropolitan region of which it is a part.[7] To achieve this objective, I believe it is necessary to move struggle over the inner city built environment to the next level.[8]

How do we get to this next level? The first step is to gain deeper insight into way inner-city neighborhoods operate, how they are linked to the larger region, the structural barriers that hold back their development, and the way racist attitudes are interwoven into these structural impediments. This suggestion is based on a belief that metropolitan regions are composed of an interactive, functional network of neighborhoods and that inner city neighborhoods are complex places made up both of a resident community and a wealth producing community, which consists of businesses, offices, factories, and big public institutions like universities and hospitals. *Inner city wealth-producing communities often make major contributions to regional growth and development, but seldom do they contribute significantly to the growth and development of inner city resident communities. They are in the community, but not of the community.*

Understanding this contradiction is key to formulating effective strategic plans and action agendas that attacks the structures of inequality and intensifies efforts to transform the inner city built environment. The reason is that traditional approaches to urban development assume that increased financial investments in commercial activities will have a multiplier effect on inner city communities, which will spawn jobs and opportunities, bolster property values, and improve housing and neighborhood conditions.

Theory is one thing, and reality is another. The inner city experience in Buffalo, New York cast doubt on this notion of urban development. Wealth-producing institutions have not triggered a renaissance in their inner city host communities. For example, the heart of Western New York's health related industry is located in the City's third poorest community. Although there are 10,000 jobs in this neighborhood and

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another 30,000 jobs in nearby communities, the unemployment rate is still 26%, less than

half the eligible workers are not in the labor force, and 50% of the residents live below

the poverty line. Concurrently, suburbanites, hold about 60% of the jobs, and earn about

75% of the wages produced in the neighborhood.[9]

Powerful structural and attitudinal forces combine to keep these wealth producing

industries from spawning multipliers and catalytic agents in their inner city host

communities. As a result, when it comes to inner city community development and

neighborhood revitalization, simply making investments, locating business and industry

in the community, and tapping into the lucrative neighborhood retail market will not lead

automatically to a radical reconstruction of the built environment.

One reason is that urban regimes and heads of inner city wealth-producing

communities, for the most part, are not interested in developing and revitalizing the inner

city. They want to placate the residents, but not to radically transform the neighborhoods

in which they live. This means that elected officials, corporate heads, presidents of

universities, hospital CEOs, or their *official representatives* cannot lead the movement to

radically transform the inner city built environment. **They can participate in it, but**

they cannot lead it. Thinking about community building this way transforms the benign

idea of *citizen participation* into the radical notion of *citizen leadership and control*,

which carries us back to the future. That is, without citizen leadership and control, the

Civil Rights Movement would never have been successful, and neither will the

movement to transform the inner city built environment.

Why is the leadership question so important? Leadership is a critical issue

because operation of the money economy and urban land rent structure runs counter to

efforts to radically reconstruct the inner city.   In the United States, housing and neighborhoods are commodities, and the machinery of the money economy and land rent system sorts and sifts the population by population and income, and then concentrates those with limited resources on cheap residential lands. So, a person's earnings and access to mortgage capital will determine the quality of housing and neighborhood conditions they can purchase. This interplay of race and class means that most African Americans and Latinos are forced to live in the worst housing and neighborhoods in the metropolis. Poor conditions endure in these neighborhoods, and seem immutable to change, in part, because of the interplay of three elements.

First, the private sector is reluctant to make substantial investments in the development of inner city neighborhoods. Corporate investment decisions are based on the perception of a probable rate of return. Normally, if risks are high and the perceived rate of return low, entrepreneurs will not invest in a venture, regardless of its merits or social benefits. Because the risk factors associated with doing business in the inner city are high, many entrepreneurs do not consider investment in these communities prudent, and when investments are made, attempts are usually made to maximize the return rate, regardless of the social consequences. For example, absentee landlords defer maintenance on their rental property and rarely upgrade the units. New housing construction is often plagued with shoddy workmanship, poor design, and cheap construction materials. Supermarkets and retail establishments are reluctant to pursue inner city locations, and when the do, they often sell inferior products at inflated prices.

Second, the development activities of most urban regimes are informed by *trickle down economics*.   Elected officials believe stabilizing inner city neighborhoods and

creating jobs and opportunities for low to moderate-income residents involve using most public dollars to leverage and stimulate investments by big business and big public institutions. The economic benefits produced by the private sector and big public institutions, they hypothesize, will eventually *trickle down* to inner city residents. In other words, a rising tide will lift all ships.[10] Against this backdrop, making public investments in the reconstruction of inner city neighborhoods is not considered a high priority. On this issue, the views of private and public sector leaders are the same.

Another reason inner city development is a low public sector priority is that many cities get big economic benefits from having a poor population. Each year, millions pour into central cities for use on ventures that will benefit low- to moderate-income families. The problem is that urban regimes usually deflect most of this money from inner city development to big economic development projects. For example, since 1974, Buffalo, New York has received about 23 million yearly, or about 598 million over 26 years from the HUD Community Development Block Grant. We believe that less than 20% of these funds have been spent on inner city development projects. [11] In other words, city leaders have turned the *Robin Hood thesis* upside/down. They rob from the poor to give to the rich.

Given the dynamics of urban development and city building I have outlined, it seems naïve to believe that elected officials or official representatives of the wealth producing community can lead the movement to radically reconstruct the inner city. Their interests, and the interests of inner city residents, are simply not the same. The two groups can work together; they can be allies, the relationship does not have to be a

contentious one. But, the movement to transform the inner city must be led by neighborhood residents.

Community leadership is also important because inner city neighborhoods must be recreated from the inside/out. This process of radical reconstruction must include a transformation of both the physical and social environment. Individual self-realization, interconnectedness with other neighborhood residents, and a spiritual transformation will happen only if resident are deeply immersed in the redevelopment process. Thus, if radical reconstruction of the inner city built environment is to be a truly empowering and transformative experience, neighborhood residents must lead it.

Turning Point Scenarios

The importance of leadership, notwithstanding, it is still not the only issue that must be addressed in built environment struggles. Poor conditions in the inner city also endure because of inadequate approaches to community development and neighborhood revitalization. In many cities, reconstructing the inner city is a *developer and opportunity driven process*. So, initiatives tend to be project-orientated, focused only on site-development, and evolve in a piecemeal fashion, with little or no coordination, and without guidance from a comprehensive neighborhood development plan. One consequence of this disjointed approach is that millions are spent on various inner city community development projects, but the conditions of life in those neighborhoods do not change.

Also, the project orientated approach to inner city redevelopment the real cost of developing and revitalizing the community. Radical reconstruction of the inner city is a

very costly venture, which to succeed will require a (1) reordering of central city and regional priorities, (2) creative reuse of existing financial tools, and (3) the writing of new legislature. Unless the total cost of reconstructing a particular neighborhood is fleshed out, and an adequate finance package obtained, the quest to transform that neighborhood will fail.

To avoid this situation, and make the fight for adequate financing part of built environment struggles, the Center for Urban Studies developed a concept called *Turning Point Scenarios* to guide our strategic planning activities. *Turning points* is a concept based on the belief that investments in an inner city neighborhood must rise above a *turning point threshold* before that neighborhood can be transformed. If investments do not reach the *turning point threshold*, then the neighborhood's physical and social environment will not be altered significantly. In other words, if the money spent on housing rehabilitation and construction, infrastructure development—streets, sidewalks, and curbs—landscaping and streetscaping, workforce development, educational development, and service delivery is not enough to rise above *the turning point threshold*, the conditions of life in that neighborhood will remain basically the same.

Turning points scenarios require that one looks at the comprehensive development of an entire neighborhood. Within this framework, the task is to formulate a comprehensive strategic plan and action agenda, develop a detailed cost analysis and investment rationale, and construct a financial strategy to fund the restoration. The power of a *turning point scenario* is that it enable residents to find out what is actually required to radically reconstruct their neighborhood, it spawns a struggle over funding of the project, and it forces city and regional leaders to grapple with the priority question.

Neighborhood governance and democratic institution building should also be made part of the *turning point scenario*. Turning points cannot be realized with neighborhood leadership and control, and this is where governance comes in. The governance strategy should map out the way neighborhood residents and their allies come together to build democratic institution to lead the reconstruction process. At this level, neighborhood residents also must fight to acquire the responsibility, authority, and power to control the development process in their community, including the powers of eminent domain, the ability to issue bonds and assembly property. In essence, neighborhood development authorities, controlled by the residents, must be developed.

The University's Role in the Radical Reconstruction of the Inner City Built Environment

Universities can play an important role in the struggle to radically reconstruct the inner city built environment. First, universities can play a significant role in assisting communities determine the magnitude of public and private investments required to rise above the turning point threshold. This process would include the development strategic plans and action agendas that outline the specific projects and initiatives required to push the neighborhood beyond the turning point threshold.

Second, universities can help develop new methods of urban finance. It is clear that existing methods of financing urban development are inadequate and new ones are needed. Many tools, such as tax increment financing, must be adapted to residential development strategies before they can become useful. Academics can help resolve their

issues and map out a set of tools with the potential to finance the radical reconstruction of inner city neighborhoods. Academics can also play a role in developing strategies for dismantling the urban land rent structure. In particular, they should explore the feasibility of land value taxation and forms of progressive taxation as vehicles for stimulating inner city development, which is not accompanied by gentrification.

Lastly, university staff, students, and faculty members can work with neighborhoods to develop the type of governance systems that will allow them to build democratic institutions, while developing programs that will assist in the development of community building programs that are linked with the physical reconstitution of neighborhoods. Theory and praxis should be the guiding principle of this approach to research. As new knowledge is unearthed and insights into structural racism and inequality are gained, the information should be distributed through a program of public education and discourse.

Conclusion

Today, the central problem facing African Americans and communities of color is the radical reconstruction of the inner city built environment. Structural racism and inequality is most sharply reflected in US inner cities. Consequently, only the radical reconstruction of the inner can lead to the dismantling of structural racism and inequality and the transformation of inner cities into great places to live and work. The problem is that current approach to community development and neighborhood revitalization are inadequate because they do not take into account structural racism and inequality and do not seek to fundamentally change conditions in the inner city. To accomplish this loftier goal, it is necessary to fashion a community development approach based on the idea of

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radically reconstructing the inner city built environment, developing new methods of financing urban development, and fundamentally altering the urban land-rent structure. Also, this means that to change the inner city, regional priorities must change, and the current methods of metropolitan building fundamentally altered.

Accomplishing this task will not be easy. So, cast away our illusions. It will take struggle to radically reconstruct the inner City built environment. Obtaining victory on this front will not be easy, but it can be accomplished. The history of African Americans teaches that all things are possible if you dare to dream impossible dreams. For example, black history has moved through two great periods of struggle, and is now entering a third one: the struggle against slavery; the struggle against Jim Crow segregation and legal discrimination, and now the struggle to radically reconstruct the inner city built environment.

Three lessons emerge from this reflection on African American history: First, we can win. Second, it will take a long time, and third, African Americans will find allies as the struggle unfolds. The American people won the battle against slavery. They won the fight against Jim Crow segregation and legal discrimination, and they will win the struggle to radically transform the inner city built environment. It will take a long time; the fight will be will be difficult, but victory is inevitable. The task before us is to launch the movement to radically reconstruct the built environment immediately. And if not now, when? And if not us, who?

[1] The physical environment includes the totality of physical structures in the inner city—houses, roads, factories, offices, sewage systems , parks, cultural institutions, educational facilities, etc. Likewise, the social world includes the people and their social organizations and institutions. This definition, then, views the built environment through the lens of place and the social life of a people, including the relationship of people and their relationship to each other and with the physical world.

[2] **The State of Black America: Blacks in the New Millennium** (The National Urban League, 1999).

[3] Hadrian's Wall is a continuous Roman defensive barrier that guarded the northwestern frontier of the providence of Brian from barbarian invaders. The wall extended from coast to coast across the width of northern Britain. Unlike Hadrian's Wall, racism, lack of money, and the urban land rent structure have built a wall that function as a barrier keeping communities of color and poor people living on cheap, undesirable residential lands. Http://www,britannica.com/

[4] The idea is to tear down this postmodern wall by reconstructing the inner city built environment and transforming it into a wonderful place to live, work, play, and raise a family.

[5] Rebecca Stone and Benjamin Butler, **Core Issues in Comprehensive Community-Building Initiatives: Exploring Power and Race** (Chicago: Chapin Hall for Children, 2000)

[6] David Harvey outlines in detail the relationship between living place and work place struggles. See **Consciousness and the Urban Experience**, pp. 36-62. For a historical analysis of this issue, see Earl Lewis, **In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia** (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 1-7; 8-28.

[7] Comprehensive community initiatives represent an important step in this direction. The major problem with these efforts is that they are not ideologically driven, have not sense of structural inequality, and do not conceptualize the problems of the inner city through the lens of radical reconstruction of the inner city.

[8] I am using the concept synthesis in the sense of a chemical synthesis in which complex compounds are constructed from simpler ones to create a new entity.

[9] Neighborhood residents earn less than 5% of the wages produced in the community and hold less than 10% of the jobs.

[10] A rising tide does lift all ships, except those with holes in them. The problem with trickle down economics is that the inner city ship has holes in it. Unless the ship is radically rebuilt, the rising tide will not lift the ships.

[11] Millions more come into the central city in other forms of federal assistance, including economic development initiative grants. These resources are typically used for big economic development projects, rather than inner city initiatives.