Toward a Just City

Researchers in the Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture parse the ways – big and small – that a city supports a sense of equity and social justice.

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ILLUSTRATIONS: TIM MAULE

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The just city. Our old friend Plato is the one who's typically credited with coming up with the concept and coining the phrase, but it's been reimagined and honed over the centuries.

Susan S. Fainstein is the most recent to do so. In 2010, the groundbreaking Harvard University scholar of urban planning described "the just city" as a place where democracy, equity and diversity are the drivers of a city's built environment, from the placement of streets to the type of housing units it constructs.

This definition is the lens through which researchers in UW–Madison's Department of Planning and Landscape Architecture (DPLA) view their work. Approaching the topic from multiple angles – housing, transportation, green infrastructure and more – they're identifying the opportunities and obstacles involved in working toward more inclusive cities. Then, the researchers are working with designers and government officials to turn their research findings into action.

"What makes our department unique is that we're planners and landscape architects – we can bridge both professions," says Gaylan Williams, a new research associate with the department who studies green infrastructure and urban forestry. "If there's a social, environmental or economic issue, addressing them through public policy is what planners do best. And the landscape architects can give those solutions form, understanding how they will look in the built environment. This nexus happens when you have these two disciplines working together, envisioning holistic solutions."

They're doing this by homing in on urban design details and policies that most of us barely notice. But one thing is certain: Once you begin to see well-planned infrastructure as a form of social justice, you'll never look at your city the same way again.

Planting the Seeds

Have you ever walked through a city's streets and noticed the type and placement of the plants and trees? Anna Bierbrauer has.

Bierbrauer, an assistant professor who joined the DPLA faculty this academic year, studies the ways that a city's vegetation reflects not just bioregional and biophysical elements, but also its cultural values.

"What I really want to bring attention to is that plants are an expression of power in many, many ways," she says. "The plants that we see in a place are there for a lot of different reasons."

Before arriving in Madison, Bierbrauer spent years studying, among other things, the type and placement of trees in the city of Denver. Back in the early 1900s, the city's leadership planted non-invasive species that require a lot of water. Today, those early trees have survived only in neighborhoods that had consistent water infrastructure – neighborhoods that were white and wealthy in the early 1900s and remain that way today. To Bierbrauer, they're an example of the way Denver's vegetation has become racialized over time.

"You start to understand how a certain design aesthetic served one small portion of the population, and how the vegetation we continually promote as designers may be serving a smaller portion of the population," she says.

Getting There

When you're driving, walking or biking to work, you might be thinking about the song on the radio or your upcoming meetings. Carey McAndrews, on the other hand, is pondering road designs, wondering why they are laid out the way they are.

McAndrews, a professor of planning and landscape architecture, is concerned about transportation infrastructure – how people travel and why. She's studied the issue in California, Colorado, Mexico and Sweden. One of her many focuses is the competing uses tied to larger roads. In Madison, for instance, a years-long expansion of Verona Road – a multiple-lane road that connects the city to bedroom communities to the south – ended up shuttering several local businesses and creating issues for the neighborhoods that surrounded it.

"It really did overlap with questions of racial equity and social justice because Verona Road was passing through a neighborhood in which residents very likely had less access to cars and everyday mobility and were more reliant on accessing the bus," McAndrews says. "Neighbors had to lobby the state to get protection from pollution and noise, and to have a safe way to cross the road."

McAndrews argues that most people aren't aware of how these key infrastructure decisions are made, from the placement of streetlights to bus transit routes and bike paths, even though they can have dramatic impacts on their lives – especially when the systems break down.

"If you're thinking about justice and fairness and how these systems work, you might ask what that process is like," says McAndrews. "And that's what makes it research-worthy."

New Space = Displaced

As urban density and housing shortages continue to be frontline issues for growing cities, Revel Sims, an assistant professor in DPLA and the Chicano & Latino Studies Program, is paying attention to what happens when shiny new mixed-use apartment buildings are constructed in neighborhoods.

In a lot of instances, lower-income residents in the surrounding neighborhoods end up evicted or displaced, forced to retreat to less-expensive communities throughout the city or region. Sims is currently working on an analysis that draws connections between housing insecurity, evictions and housing quality.

"We've been able to identify three housing sub-markets in Madison, where housing insecurity through evictions and poor housing quality through code enforcement are coming together in a way that affects Black renters disproportionately," explains Sims. "The idea is sort of what happens to the people who get pushed out directly or indirectly. Gentrifying neighborhoods, where do they end up? People with few options are moving into these special housing submarkets that are defined by a lot of housing insecurity and poor health."

In Madison, those submarkets are scattered. In a place like Orange County, California, which Sims is also studying, similar economic forces have created a "donut" of exclusion, where wealthy communities on the coast and in the mountains have driven low-income Vietnamese and Latino immigrants into communities in the "hole" between them.

"We're capturing what we call dual and contradictory displacements – sort of a displacement within, through overcrowding and increasing poor housing conditions, and then also folks who are being evicted and then moving further out of either neighborhood or the city," Sims explains.

Markets Matter

If you're fortunate, you live in a city that has a weekly farmers market – maybe even several. Edna Ely-Ledesma would tell you that's a sign of a healthy city that values social justice.

Ely-Ledesma, an assistant professor in DPLA, came to Madison after spending years researching Latino farmers markets near the Texas border. Four years later, she's the director of the Kaufman Lab for the Study and Design of Food Systems and Marketplaces. She collaborates with farmers markets across the country to help them tell their stories, provide survey toolkits and offer advice as an urban planner.

One of the big recent issues she's been helping to wrangle is making it tenable for farmers markets to accept money from families in food assistance programs, when they often lack the technological infrastructure to do so.

"The market operators are saying, 'We are constantly seen as the avenue for doing the right thing or doing the just thing, thinking about issues of equity and access to food, but the resources aren't being offered,'" explains Ely-Ledesma. "That's what 'the just city' is all about," she says. "Making sure that we don't forget that we are here to help one another." ■

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