Hanging Planning's Dirty Laundry

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Ducking under the little cards attached to a string tied taut between a tree and the Landscape Architecture building, a young white man asks, "What is this? What are you guys doing?" He stops to read the card aloud:

> 1934 FDR's New Deal:
>
> Urban areas experience widespread slum clearance. Suburban areas grow due to support for homeownership for whites only.

"We're hanging planning's dirty laundry," is our response. One of us attaches the card reading *The Housing Act of 1949* a few feet away. "This is over 100 years of planning history's dirty laundry. We're airing it out to dry." He laughs nervously and looks back at the line. Then he works his way down further, reading each card carefully and taking in the enormity of the critical space that we created.

African American Communities and the Urban Planning Experience (RP651) was a first for the Department of Landscape Architecture and Regional Planning Department at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. This graduate course, inspired by June Manning Thomas's and Marsha Ritzdorf's edited volume, Urban Planning and the African American Community was proposed by annalise fonza, a LARP doctoral student and was designed to examine the relationships between five historic African American communities and the corresponding local planning agents/authorities.[1] We were challenged to gain a critical understanding of how socio-political history and urban systems and structures have worked together to affect local African American communities structurally and spatially. The five communities we studied included: Brooklyn-East St. Louis, IL; Charlottesville, VA; Tulsa, OK; Detroit, MI and Rosewood, FL. For the final project, we chose to hang the "dirty" planning practices and/or planning-related events that have affected the development of African-American communities since the 1850s. The open space in front of the building, surrounded by budding spring trees and concrete benches, persuaded us to create a line (as in a laundry clothesline) to hold the dirty planning practices that we identified in the course. The idea of creating a line where critical thinking and engagement could occur appealed to us as we neared the end of the semester.

The industrial capitalism and urban development of the early twentieth century collaborated to energize the burgeoning U.S. manufacturing sector that exploited land, labor and resources. According to Robert Fishman, the industrial/suburban development of the early twentieth century, which enabled the white laborer to live on the periphery of the American industrial city, signaled that the elite "bourgeois utopia" of the nineteenth century was coming to an end.[2] The pre-World War I era ushered in the growth of the urban/industrial suburb for an emerging U.S. white non-bourgeois middle class. The growing Southern black population migrating north and west was not to be included in this middle class structure until after the passage of the 1965 Civil Rights Act during the post-Civil Rights era.

In America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois 1830-1915, Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua discusses the impact this suburban formation had on Brooklyn, Illinois.[3] Brooklyn began as an anti-slave community. Priscilla Baltimore, who "purchased" her freedom from a Christian owner, is credited with establishing Brooklyn in the swampy "bottoms," across the border from Saint Louis, Missouri.[4] Brooklyn (also known as Lovejoy), was developed as an independent black town that was self-governing during the late nineteenth century. Black city officials accomplished the installation of street lighting but they remained economically dependent upon East Saint Louis and the manufacturing companies of the metro-east industrial region.[5] Cha-Jua alleges that industrial capitalists

Left: In-between spaces, Photos by Lynh Ly
Above: Hanging Planning's Dirty Laundry, Photo by annalise fonza

and manufacturing companies who decided to locate rail and transportation industries in nearby all-white towns contributed to the social and economic decline and/or the fear of possible annexation of all-black towns like Brooklyn.[6] On the other hand, these industrial companies, *i.e.*, the Wiggins Ferry Company, Illinois Coal Company and the Saint Louis National Stock Yards, were more than eager to exploit the labor of black residents over that of white suburban residents.[7] Transportation and employment location strategies took advantage of issues like race, class, and gender, and had a direct impact upon housing, *i.e.*, where a black laborer could live relative to employment.[8]

The destruction of Brooklyn, Illinois [also known as Lovejoy, Illinois] (1915)

Illinois State's Attorney, Charles Webb conducts raids in Brooklyn to shut down illegal sources of white bosses' wealth.[9]

The corruption crisis in Brooklyn keeps candidates for political office effectively off the official ballot.

Sheriff Mellon of East Saint Louis assigns four deputy sheriffs to patrol Brooklyn and declares martial law.[10]

At least one black man is shot dead.

The line we constructed included such local and national events/issues that impacted each of the five communities we studied. We included the 1850 Fugitive Slave Act; the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments (post-Civil War)[11]; Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal Programs (1930s); Urban Renewal programs (1949); and other federally funded programs of the 1990's, like Hope VI. We also made space on our line to highlight the fact that white resistance to black town/community development grew the most violent when it diminished black dependence on white-owned businesses. Angry white mobs, who received the support of the local town/city officials, were often successful in destroying whole sections of black communities in the north and south. Some students and faculty who surveyed our line were familiar with two southern black communities, the Greenwood district in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and rural settlement of Rosewood, Florida. Both areas were tragically destroyed as a result of white mob violence during the 1920s. By contrast, visitors to our line were not as familiar with the every-day efforts of notorious political leaders, such as Mayor Orville Hubbard, who openly used the local political structure to bar blacks from housing in Dearborn, Michigan, during the late 1940s.[12]

We positioned our clothesline display in a high-traffic campus pedestrian location: at the entrance to the LARP Department, which also doubles as the front door to the Social Justice Education Program at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. Having chosen this strategic location we proceeded to hang our line of policies on three-by-five cards. Each card was color-coded to differentiate a particular type of planning technique, *i.e.*, zoning, housing, and community development. One-by-one we attached each of our three-by-five note cards to a makeshift line that ran across the base of the front steps of the building; it was nearly thirty-feet wide. Our line visibly illustrated that various U.S. planning methods and practices have enabled the structural underdevelopment and erasure of black communities, towns, and urban areas. A cyclical pattern of exclusion emerged. Whites, fearful of what it would mean to include blacks in town and city life, used a handful of planning tools and mechanisms to keep blacks "in their place." Blacks were perceived as "stepping out of their place," when they petitioned the local government for basic civil and human rights: decent and equal housing, safe and adequate employment, and equal education and recreation facilities. Local officials unabashedly used the tools and mechanisms of planning to fulfill the "racial objectives of zoning" and to enable local whites to maintain a sense of control over the status quo when population and the economic production modes were shifting.[14]

Baltimore: 1910

Mayor J. Barry Mahool signs racial zoning ordinance into law, December 20, 1910.

Atlanta: 1913

Assigns racial designation to city blocks based on existing majority of the residents, June 16, 1913.[13]

One 3x5 card read:

The destruction of Tulsa, Oklahoma's Greenwood District (1921)

An estimated 5,000 blacks were interned at the Tulsa convention center after "the riot."

Only those with police protection badges and green tags that were granted by white residents were allowed to move about freely.

The city proposed to convert the smoldering Greenwood District into an industrial district to build "the new Greenwood."

The city council enacted a fire ordinance that was cost-prohibitive for blacks.[15]

Many blacks, like A.J. Smitherman, fled Tulsa to other parts of the country seeking protection and a better quality of life (i.e., Springfield and Boston, MA).

Another read:

The Federal Housing Authority (FHA) 1936

The FHA secured loans up to 93% of cost and extended payment for up to 30 years. This policy did not extend to everyone. 80% of the homes were mortgaged to upper-middle class families.

The FHA also systematized appraisal methods nationwide by classifying neighborhoods based on the head of household's occupation, income and ethnicity.

This system clearly favored patriarchal and nuclear family arrangements and discouraged interracial marriage and the growth of socially dense and diverse and neighborhoods.

As our readers followed the line, they saw that whites benefited economically from institutional structures and blacks were denied the same benefits.

The U.S. Housing Act (Wagner-Steagall Act) is passed, September 1, 1937

Senator Robert Wagner (D-NY) restricts beneficiaries to low-income groups; requires demolition of one substandard housing unit for each unit of public housing built.

This has the effect of concentrating and/or rehousing the poor in areas that were previously condemned.[16]

The Servicemembers' Readjustment Act of 1944, commonly known as the GI Bill of Rights (under President Franklin Roosevelt):

At the end of the WWII, this bill was given to many GI's, which helped them secure low interest homes loans, and free college tuition.

Black GI's were often denied the same benefits.

As we turned our attention to the latter half of the twentieth century, we presented similar patterns of federal and state partnership that produced similar socio-spatial consequences for African American communities:

Interstate highway projects made possible by the 1956 National Highway Defense Act - initiated by the Eisenhower Administration (1960's-1980's):

Federal and state highway projects sliced black communities in pieces, displacing people and destroying homes and businesses.

Promotes "leapfrog" spatial logic

It was a sobering moment for each person who witnessed and interacted with the installation of our dirty practices line. Some would ask, "Did this really happen?" or, "Are these things true?" Graduate students in planning, who had not encountered this information or seen it presented to them in such stark clarity, turned to us to ask, "Now what do we do?" We felt that these questions exposed the dark underbelly of U.S. planning history that is rarely examined in planning curricula. A complex web of racial, economic and political relationships has shaped U.S. planning practices. But, "the racial origins of zoning," for example, are treated as if they are a thing of the past.[17]

1990's-Present Day:

The legacy of Urban Renewal is partially responsible for urban America's overabundance of vacant urban land.

The same racial and economic values that rewarded whites with suburban ownership are used to justify development today in the form of business/enterprise development, i.e., Enterprise and Empowerment Zones.

Loans for small business development are not readily accessible to would-be black entrepreneurs due to the prevalence of discriminatory lending practices.

In hanging planning's dirty laundry, we implicitly suggested that U.S. planners/planning have not yet been able to come face-to-face or develop a language for race and urban development. This is especially true when so many planning students and faculty have avoided a critical engagement with urban planning history. Indeed, Chester Hartman's 1994 article, "On Poverty and Racism: We Have Had Little to Say,"[18] is still relevant even though it is more than a decade old. A short drive through any densely populated urban city, such as nearby Holyoke or Springfield, Massachusetts, makes it difficult to ignore the effects of planning on African American communities. Noting the reactions from faculty, students, and staff, however, we found that faculty, students and visitors at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst were uncomfortable with the idea of seeing and/or discussing negative connotations of U.S. planning practices. They preferred a neat, clean exhibit where the history of urban planning is represented in an upbeat, linear fashion, with a clear beginning and an end. The overwhelming tendency to make wishful and faulty abstractions led us to conclude that the planners of the twenty-first century feel professionally and academically legitimized by a history in which the practice has successfully detached itself from an embarrassing U.S. past.[19] Those visiting our line expressed an interest in seeing an enlightened, healthy profession, with a just and progressive evolution. We are far from reaching this noble goal . If planning in the U.S. is going to evolve into a neat, clean, linear story, then we must first be willing to stand at the line and confront the reality that the construction of segregated spaces was the prevailing norm that set our current socio-spatial structure into place.

1. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf, eds. *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*. (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997).
2. Robert Fishman, "Bourgeois Utopias: Visions of Suburbia," in *Readings in Urban Theory*, , 2nd ed. Eds. Susan S. Fainstein and Scott Campbell. (Blackwell Publishing: (1996) 2002), 21-31.
3. Sundiata Keita Cha-Jua, *America's First Black Town: Brooklyn, Illinois, 1830-1915*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000). Dr. Cha-Jua is Director of the Afro-American Studies and Research Program at the University of Illinois at Urbana
4. Cha-Jua, p. 42.
5. Cha-Jua, p. 125.
6. Cha-Jua, p. 43-44, 123.
7. Cha-Jua, p. 156. "…the meat-packers at Swift employed Blacks because they believed, according to Elliott Rudwick, that 'Negroes did not object to performing low-paying, dirty, unpleasant tasks involved in fertilizer manufacturing and hog-killing."
8. Cha-Jua, p. 152. Blacks were excluded from living in certain industrial suburbs like Granite City. Granite City was home to Markel Lead Works, American Steel Foundry, St. Louis Stamping Works and Granite City Steel Works.
9. Please note that East Saint Louis was predominantly white during this time.
10. Sundiata Cha-Jua explains that corruption and vice are structural components of the industrial suburb. See Cha-Jua, 2000, p. 214.
11. These are post-Civil War amendments: the Thirteenth Amendment (1865 - officially abolished slavery); the Fourteenth Amendment (1868 - defined naturalized citizenship and guaranteed due process and equal protection under the law - it also diminished the Dred Scott Supreme Court 1857 decision); and the Fifteenth Amendment (1870 - gave all men the right to vote "regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude").
12. Joe T. Darden, Richard Child Hill, June Thomas, and Richard Thomas, *Detroit: Race and Uneven Development*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987), 119-125.
13. Christopher Silver, "The Racial Origins of Zoning in American Cities" in *Urban Planning and the African American Community: In the Shadows*. Eds. June Manning Thomas and Marsha Ritzdorf (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1997), 23-42.
14. For more examples of racial zoning ordinances, we recommend Christopher Silver's text.
15. The fire ordinance required the use of fireproof materials in the rebuilding of all homes in the Greenwood District. These materials were much too expensive for the black residents to purchase, and many could not rebuild. It provided a legal means for exclusion on the basis of race and class. The Tulsa Real Estate Exchange promoted this maneuver with the following justification: "We further believe that the two races being divided by an industrial section will draw more distinctive lines between them and thereby eliminate the intermingling of the lower elements of the two races." Alfred L. Brophy, *Reconstructing the Dreamland: The Tulsa Riot of 1921, Race, Reparations and Reconstruction*. Foreword by Randall Kennedy. (Oxford University Press, 2002), 93.
16. For more on this topic see, John Hancock, "The New Deal and American Planning: the 1930s," in *Two Centuries of American Planning*. Ed. Daniel Shaffer (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1988), 197-230.
17. Silver 1997.
18. Chester Hartman, "On Poverty and Racism: We Have Had Little to Say." *Journal of the American Planning Association 60*, no. 2 (Spring 1994): 152 - 159.
19. For a discussion of how faulty abstractions have enabled the modernist planning project to be distorted and phallocentric, see Barbara Hooper, "Split at the Roots: A Critique of the Philosophical and Political Sources of Modern Planning Doctrine." *Frontiers 13*, no. 1 (1992): 45-80.

Above: Hanging Planning's Dirty Laundry, Photo by annalise fonza

Above: Vacant Lot Railing (detail) Photo by Lucy Howe