



## Transformative Talks for Community Resilience

June 2020

# Moving Planning from Colonialism to Liberation

City planning as a profession has contributed to violence and trauma of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC). What is our responsibility as practitioners, particularly those that are BIPOC practitioners, and what can we do to move from colonialism to liberation? This June 2020 conversation provided a space to collectively imagine new methodologies, relationships, strategies, and collective-care as we navigate planning practice during COVID-19 and in support of the uprising for Black liberation and beyond.

## The Violence of City Planning

Violence in planning takes many forms and the resulting trauma is experienced in a myriad of ways by BIPOC. Annie, who is Tongva and lives in Tongvagar, shared that violence perpetrated by the planning practice for her and her community is the erasure that occurs in the planning process.

*"People look at Los Angeles as many things, but it is seldom looked at as an ancestral homeland to indigenous people which makes planning particularly difficult. The particular way that the indigenous people are erased is very consistent with the extractive growth of the City. Planning is the ground zero for this process of erasure."*

She further emphasized that native nations are not just another marginalized group in the United States. They are sovereign nations that should be recognized as such.

Others shared that violence in BIPOC communities looks like conducting a community meeting to receive feedback for one singular project instead of thinking about how planning should be interconnected. Brytane expanded upon this point and

*This recap was authored by Monique G. Lopez of Pueblo Planning with insight from co-facilitators Annie Mendoza; Yanisa Techagumthorn, Brytane Brown, and Brooke Staton; all of whom are practitioners who engage with planning processes and projects; and contributing community panelists: Amy; Ofurhe; Caitlin; Richard Aviles; Cordelia Storm; Kasi; Carmen; Jason; Jan Victor Andasan; Anna; Amar; Alyssa Chung; and Michelle Rolon.*

highlighted a California Senate bill which would streamline bike and pedestrian projects. She provided a critical analysis of this "well-intentioned" bill.

*"What that signals to me is this idea in our field that environmentally sustainable is synonymous with anti-racism. And I don't necessarily see that being the case. Policies and programs like this that bypass community processes are reminiscent of erasure.... It doesn't feel like it honors our experiences to get these quick build projects."*

Richard Aviles, participatory panelist, shared that urban planning from its conception is rooted in settler colonialism and community engagement is the first thing to be cut from the process if timelines or budgets are strained. He goes on to share that planners are not trained in community engagement or they get stuck utilizing outdated public forums.

*"My job shouldn't be in the office. I think planners forget that there are people living in cities. How do we leverage the lived experience to be as worthy as the technical expertise?"*

For Yanisa, violence in planning decisions is something that becomes normalized and little thought is given to the implications that these decisions will have on people. One example of this normalization is cutting Sunday transit service due to budgetary constraints but keeping the 9-5 commuter lines fully operating.

Violence in planning spaces is also inflicted upon planners of color. Amar, a participatory panelist, shared that BIPOC planning staff at public agencies come into the profession with lived experiences of harm, but their voices are silenced and their intellect is questioned. She shared this frustration by stating that many BIPOC staff know best how to engage communities meaningfully, but they are often ignored and othered. It is clear that the main reason for their involvement is to check boxes that engagement has been completed. As a result, BIPOC staff are leaving these positions.

In addition, Jan Victor shared how planning often ignores what is actually happening on the ground in communities and the experiences of the people who are walking the streets. He stated that when they contribute to a planning process feeling that there may be improvement, it often results in pre-made plans that are not a reflection of the effort put in by the community. Community members often spend time at community meetings listening to planners propose ideas and solutions and then share their own ideas and feedback, but none of these ideas are ever actualized. When there are no meaningful results and solutions from the time spent by community members on the project, community members are left feeling demoralized and undervalued.

Another detrimental planning practice is that oftentimes community members are brought into the planning late in the process. Brooke illustrates this point noting:

***“We are asked to bring folks to the table, but are we allowing people to determine where the table is, what it looks like? The way the planning process is set up is when money arrives to focus on priorities that may not be important to community members.”***

This sets up a scenario in which the planner is being asked to facilitate a planning process that does not reflect what the community wants.

## Value Lived Experience as Expertise

An important step on the path to liberation is shifting the planning paradigm away from a preference for technical expertise and instead uplifting lived experience as valued knowledge. As planners we must hold BIPOC communities in the same high regard as you would someone who has more power over you. Planners respond differently to directors of agencies, for example. They ask questions like:

***“How do we get a meeting with this person? How do we respect their time and expertise?” The community never receives that type of approach, nor is the question asked “How is the community benefiting from the interaction as much as the planner or agency?”***

Amy Fong confirmed through her own experience with planning institutions that there is a top down approach in transportation funding. “Funding is distributed by priorities that they set, not the community.”

## Rethink Resources as Relatives

Annie shared that oftentimes land or the liberation of land is erased from this conversation.

***“Human beings wouldn’t be able to exist with mother earth and our reliance on her cannot be denied. When colonization hit this continent it did not impact the people from this and the people brought here to work the land, but it impacted the land itself. It was exploited and extracted for capital gain. If we want to decolonize our thinking we need to stop looking at the land and water as resources and start referring to them as relatives.”***

Moving from “land as resource” to “land as relative” would dramatically change the framework that planners use. Ofurhe Igbinedion, shared a valid perspective particularly in light of the demands of the uprisings. She stated:

***“I feel like I’m experiencing a lack of imagination right now. It is really hard for me to imagine planners thinking about land as a living being, when they can’t even think about black, indigenous, and people of color as living beings who have autonomy and control and things to say. I really want to get there. Where I can see that. But it is really hard for me to see that happen.”***

## Center Local Indigenous Knowledge

Planning must incorporate the local indigenous views of the land that is being planned on. People need to connect with the land that they are working on and making decisions about. We need to be accountable, not only just to us, but to the seven generations. This means we don't just think about what is going on now, but about seven generations from now. Indigenous people are often tokenized in the planning process and their ways of thinking and being are not incorporated into plans. Essentially, we can not talk about decolonization in planning without talking about native land return.

## Be Accountable to BIPOC Communities

A lot of the methodologies we learn and practice as planners actually perpetuate oppression. Even well meaning planners often continue to perpetuate the same oppressive systems. Yanisa has observed:

*"The 'white man planner trope' of the 1950s is still around today. It is just slightly in a different form. How do we challenge who is the expert?"*

Accountability for white allies and BIPOC planners is important. Planning is a toxic field and white allies and BIPOC planners can actually take on some of the language and these oppressive practices. To build in accountability, we need to be in the community and have critical relationships with people in the community so that they can be challenging us as we do our work.

## Abolish the "Planning Profession"

There are contradictions inherent in trying to implement more equitable planning practices in the field as we know it today. What is equitable planning when the profession is based on settler colonialism? Are you even valuing people's bodies, let alone the land? But the timeline and budgets for these processes are created by priorities that are not related to communities and the spaces to do that work outside of the planning field doesn't exist. There is often this coercive dynamic that exists when planners suddenly have a project to work on. Those with good intentions will say that they should engage the community in the project, but usually are not asking what communities are doing already, what they care about, or what their priorities are. The unstated expectation is that community members should jump when planners say jump, or else they will get paved over. Brooke shared:

*"As planners we must think about those contradictions and what it means to reform those oppressive practices and resist tokenization for those of us that are able to access these spaces to a certain degree. What does it look like to do more good than harm because they will use us to rubberstamp things."*

Carmen Kuan, and many others in the space agreed that our goal should be to abolish the idea of planning as a profession and instead do real equitable engagement that will build deep meaningful relationships with the community and redistribute decision making power to the community by centering them as experts