

# **Back to the Roots: The Challenge of Black Urban Planners**

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The great African leader, Kwame Nkruma, once said, “Every generation, out of the obscurity of reality, must discover its destiny, and then fulfill it or betray it.” As black urban planners, we too must discover our destiny and then fulfill it or betray it. My presentation explores the challenges black urban planners face in the quest to realize their destiny. The argument is this: black urban planners are members of a college-educated elite, whose destiny is to not merely to earn a living, but also to build a world worth living in.

June Manning Thomas and the late Marsha Ritzdorf, in *Urban Planning and the African American Community*, put it this way. The primary focus of planners today should be on *finding* and *advocating* for solutions that will end the urban crisis. Such solutions, Thomas and Ritzdorf stress, must be grounded in a thorough understanding of race, gender, and class inequalities in the United States. My presentation will be divided into three parts. The first part places black urban planners in historical context, while the second part outlines the challenges facing such planners today. The third segment discusses the relationship between academic planners and practitioners.

## **The Black Planner in Historic Context**

Black planners are part of a college-educated elite that has always played an important role in the struggle of African Americans. In 1903, when W.E.B. DuBois published his classic, “The Talented Tenth,” he was calling on the college-educated elite to fulfill their destiny. At the dawning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, DuBois noted that black college graduates were concentrated in professions that were critical to the development of the black community: *teachers, college professors, physicians, lawyers, and ministers.*<sup>1</sup>

These professionals provided critical services to the African American community and some of the most important figures in 20<sup>th</sup> century African American history were members of this group. Think about it. Black physicians played the decisive role in delivering health services to blacks during the Jim Crow and legal discrimination era. Black preachers turned their churches into liberated zones where blacks planned and eventually launched the Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Carter G. Woodson and an army of black scholars turned their pens into lethal weapons that attacked the intellectual foundations of racism and Jim Crow segregation.

The legendary black lawyer, Charles Hamilton Houston, led a battalion of legal soldiers into heat of battle on the Civil Rights front, where they engaged in hand-to-hand combat with the elite legal troops of the racist demons of white supremacy and the Jim Crow regime. Undaunted by superior forces, Houston<sup>1</sup>, Thurgood Marshall and other black lawyers fought valiantly, winning victory after victory until they finally brought down the citadel of Jim Crow with the 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka*. Then, in the 1960s, a new core of students, trained by a generation of black elementary, high school, and college teachers, appeared on the scene. Under the banner, “We Shall Overcome,” these young people became the storm troops

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<sup>1</sup> Charles H. Houston died on April 22, 1950.

that led the Civil Rights Movement to its ultimate victory over Jim Crow segregation and legal discrimination.

The point is that in 1900, three years before DuBois published “The Talented Tenth,” only about 156 blacks graduated from college. They were an elite, whose status stemmed from the reality that few blacks obtained a college education. Given the strategic location of these graduates in the occupational structure, DuBois believed their participation in the black struggle was key to the advancement of the race. To be effective, however, DuBois said this group also had to develop insight into the powerful socioeconomic forces shaping the black experience and that they must also be willing to fight for the just distribution of wealth and the building of a society that would allow African Americans, *as a group*, to realize their full human potential.<sup>2</sup>

Referring to this college-educated elite as the *talented tenth*, DuBois called upon them to become more than white-collar workers and professionals. You must become “leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among [our] people,” he stressed. “No others can do this work.” However, to realize their destiny, DuBois said that college educated blacks must develop a thorough understanding of the masses and their problems and must be willing to sacrifice for the good of others.

DuBois realized that the college-educated elite did not have to follow this *path less traveled*. They could betray their destiny by becoming “selfish, self-indulgent, well-to-do men [and women], whose basic interest in solving the *Negro Problem* was personal...” That is, elements of the *Talented Tenth* could join the legion of those *mis-educated* Negroes, who wanted to abolish racial segregation in order to pursue their individual interests and seek unfettered enjoyment of the world, but who had little concern about what happened to the black masses. To this group, the *Negro Problem* was not their issue. Thus, for the *Talented Tenth* to emerge as a driving force in the struggle

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<sup>2</sup>W.E.B. DuBois, “The Talented Tenth Memorial Address,” in Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Cornel West, **The Future of the Race** (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996): 163

of African Americans, they not only had to possess knowledge, but also they had to possess character and commitment to the advancement of the race. This is the creed bequeath to our generation by the black icon, W.E.B. DuBois.

Today, black urban planners, because of their location in the occupational structure, can be a major force in the fight to transform and rebuild black neighborhoods. Like the teachers, preachers, doctors, and lawyers of yesterday, they now occupy a strategic position in the black community, which provides them with an opportunity to play a significant role in the struggle of African Americans. Why is this the case? Over the past 50 years, black neighborhoods have become the *place* where structural racism and social class 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 distressed urban neighborhoods as the new epicenter of structural racism and social class inequality. William Julius Wilson's **Truly Disadvantage** (1987), Massey and Denton's **American Apartheid** (1993), and Paul A. Jargowsky's **Poverty and Place** confirmed that the socioeconomic problems facing blacks and people of color were intensifying.

In essence, the bundle of contradictions most characteristic of structural racism and social class inequality are flourishing in black neighborhoods. Here, you will find an overrepresentation of economic marginalization, low-wages, unemployment, poverty, bad schools, dilapidated housing, decaying infrastructure, abandoned buildings, unkept vacant lots, single and no-parent families, along with crime, violence, and a sense of hopelessness. Moreover, in this world of decay and limited opportunities, incarceration has become the new method for oppressing African Americans. According to the Center for Prison Studies, the United States is the world's leading jailer. America imprisons people at a higher rate than other nation in the world, including the most totalitarian and oppressive regimes on earth. The majority of people being incarcerated are African Americans, whose incarceration rate is more than doubled that of Latinos. In 2000, about

47% of the prison population was black, and together, blacks and Latinos, comprised over 65% of US prisoners.

The point is racism, low-wages, poverty and the urban land rent structure place African Americans in harm's way and construct a Hadrian's Wall that forces them to live on the most undesirable residential lands in the urban metropolis. In these distressed neighborhoods, institutionalized socioeconomic problems are not only self-perpetuating, but also they spawn other socioeconomic problems that continually produced havoc in the lives of residents. The harshness of life in black communities caused the Neighborhood Movement to replace the Civil Rights Movement as the focal point of struggle among African Americans. *This happened because the urban crisis and the problem of black people cannot be solve without the radical reconstruction of distressed neighborhoods and the metropolitan region of which they are apart.*

This view is based on the notion that black community development is shaped by powerful structural forces and that metropolitan regions are composed of a complex, interactive network of social and economic linkages among discrete neighborhoods and community places, including distressed inner-city neighborhoods. Regional development in the U.S. produces poles of *development* and *underdevelopment*. The prosperity of the suburban hinterlands cannot exist without the misery and distress of the inner cities. In many localities, distressed communities have wealth producing institutions, such as factories, high technology centers, hospitals, and universities that contribute significantly to the regional economy, but the beneficiaries of the economic multipliers and catalytic agents generated by these inner city wealth producing institutions are the suburbs.

In Buffalo, New York, for example, the heart of the region's health care and bioinformatics and genetic engineering industries are located in the city's third poorest neighborhood. Although there are 10,000 jobs in this neighborhood and another 30,000 jobs in nearby communities, the unemployment rate is still 26%, less than half the workers are in the labor force, and 50% of the residents live below the poverty line.

Concurrently suburbanites hold 60% of the jobs, and earn about 75% of the wages produced in the neighborhood. In Buffalo and elsewhere, the city and regional building process counterposes economic development to social development, while a system of triage planning places black community development at the bottom of the list of regional priorities. So, then, black communities cannot be radically transformed without dismantling the structural forces undergirding the prevailing system of development in this country.

In essence, the existing approaches to urban planning and community development will not turn distressed black neighborhoods into great places to live, work, and raise a family. *The reason is that traditional methods of planning and community development do not account for structural racism, power, and social class inequality in their approach to city and regional building.* Powerful structural forces, which locate African Americans at the bottom of the economic order and continually reproduce dilapidated physical environments, inadequate schools and other socioeconomic problems, *create and perpetuate* the conditions of life found in distressed black communities. Therefore, unless these structural forces are identified, attacked and destroyed, the problems facing African Americans will persist, becoming increasingly complex and difficult to solve with the passage of time.

### **The Challenge Facing Black Urban Planners**

This is where the black urban planner comes in. Planners are that one group in the African American community that possess the knowledge, technical skills, and insights to drive a radical neighborhood movement that will transform fundamentally the conditions of life found in black communities. No other strata in the African Americans community can do this. Brilliant scholars like William Julius Wilson, Henry Louis Gates, Cornel West, Manning Marble, Robin D. G. Kelly, Nell Irvin Painter, Bell Hooks, and Darlene Clark Hine can generate life-transforming ideas and provide deep insights into the black experience, but they cannot plan a neighborhood, design an effective

transportation system, create public spaces that will encourage social interaction and community development, nor can they build a cross-class, multi-cultural neighborhood. They lack the knowledge and technical skills required to become architects of the new society. They do not know how to transform their ideas into refashioned cities and physical neighborhoods and communities. They cannot plan and rebuild neighborhoods and formulate strategies that will integrate such communities into the broader metropolitan region. This task falls to the black urban planner. This is our destiny.

Black urban planners must forge a neighborhood approach to regional development, neighborhood planning, and community development. Such an approach must account for structural racism, power, and social class inequality and have the capability to identify these racist structural barriers, attack, and remove them. The first step in this process is to formulate a new vision for the metropolitan region.

An old African proverb says, “A person without a target cannot miss. And neither can he or she hit anything.” We must have an image of the type of society we seek to build, if we are to successfully construct it. Today, the dominant vision of the metropolis is rooted in the celebration of race and class segregation and is reinforced by a racist image of the city. The concentration of blacks and Hispanics in the urban core has turned the city into a metaphor for black, dangerous, and poor. Consequently, many whites want to distance themselves from the core and forget about its problems. Such thinking informs urban sprawl and the suburban way of life. The American ideal of an Auto World, where NIMBYs live in low-density, poverty free communities, dotted with detached single-family homes, and governed by municipalities independent of central cities and regional authorities, is informed by racial hatred, class prejudice, and white skin privileges.

The black urban planner must work tirelessly to change this vision of the metropolis. This task must be linked to a revisioning process that seeks to replace the dominant vision with an alternative one that is based on the principles of economic and

racial justice, social equity, celebration of cross-class, multi-cultural communities, regional governance anchored by a system of neighborhood control, along with the building of a seamless web of neighborhoods extending from the inner-city to the ex-urbs, which are linked together by an advanced multi-modal transportation system. Such a vision would include urban growth boundaries that reflected development back toward the inner core and that celebrated high-density residential settlement.

Currently, the black urban planner should take the lead in developing and implementing new approaches to neighborhood planning and community development. Such an approach should be based on the principle of resident leadership and control and the construction of a social infrastructure capable of creating a sustainable movement to radically transform the community. The approach should attack the elitist triage method of central city planning and development, the systemic under funding of inner city development projects, and it should refashion the urban land rent structure so that its market-based, gentrifying elements are exorcised.

Moreover, neighborhood plans would be formulated that knocked down the barriers that keep inner city wealth producing entities from unleashing multipliers and catalytic agents that contribute to the redevelopment of the resident community and the generation of jobs and opportunities for the people living there. Lastly, such an approach would link the neighborhood movement to the school reform movement and build a network of *community schools* where students, teachers, and administrators participate in the community development process and where children are taught that the purpose of education is not only to prepare one to earn a living, but also to create a world worth living in.

The development of such an approach to neighborhood and regional planning and development demands to forging of a partnership between black academic planners and practioners. Building a bridge between these two groups of planners will lead to the

creation of synergy that will strengthen the bond between theory and practice and create a force that will enable us to transform our dreams into reality and that will hasten the day when we will be “Free at last, free at last.”

In closing, I want to stress that the road ahead is long and treacherous and the tasks confronting us are exceedingly difficult. Yet, I truly believe that one-day we will create a society based on fairness and social and racial justice; a place where people will become the best that they can be and where they will have the best that humanity and technology have to offer. A place where the racial paradigm has been shattered and where class divisions exist, but are no longer meaningful. And a place where distressed neighborhoods can only be found in the history museum.

*Some will say that this is an impossible dream. And I reply, Yes, Yes, it is. But the history of our ancestors teaches us that impossibility only defines the degree of difficulty involved in a achieving a task.*

*So, we must dream the impossible dream; we must fight the unbeatable foe;*

*We must run where the brave dare not go; we must be willing to fight for the right  
without question or pause;*

*We must be willing to march into hell for a heavenly cause,*

*And no matter how hopeless it seems,*

*No matter how weary we get,*

*We must remain true to this glorious quest.*

*And if not us, then who? And if not now, then when?*

Peace and Power.

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<sup>i</sup> W.E.B.Du Bois, *The College-Bred Negro American*, (Atlanta, GA: The Atlanta University Press, 1910), p.66.