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Colonial Narratives in Urban Mapping and Dynamics

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This panel brings to light many historical problems and current opportunities within the urban planning sector of America. The United States was formed by colonial settlers that stole land from Native Americans and continued this legacy through imperialism of other countries and segregation within the states. Europeans brought to North America an idea of land as property that was previously nonexistent. Urban planning has been used as a tool by capitalists to keep black and brown people poor and away from predominantly white communities. However, some urban planners are now attempting to change the racist and classist system to correct the damage that has been inflicted. The problems widely experienced in the United States can be seen in various forms throughout the world and are perpetuated by the rich in every country because it keeps the upper class rich and the middle and lower class in a cycle of both impoverishment and poverty.

Discussion

Theme One: *Claxton's Perspective and Path to Studying Urban Planning*

Carbajo - Could give us an overview of your research and experience in UCLA's Urban Planning department while working on your master's?

Claxton - The definition of urban planning is how a space is designed and the subsequent social phenomena that result from that space.

At UCLA, the study of Urban Planning focuses on the interaction between living and nonliving things in an environment. It also focuses on finding the inequities within urban planning spaces, who has access to what, and the challenges that accompany creating equitable and harmonious communities.

Specifically, my research focuses on urban violence and the black diaspora. In my master's program, I studied the "winners" and "losers" of space.

Black communities are still struggling and are subject to much higher levels of violence even though segregation is technically illegal because there still exists much *de facto* segregation. The layout of Los Angeles, California is an example of how legalized segregation in the past still has huge effects in today's world.

My West African heritage helped me to realize that Urban Planning is a way to understand government structures. Because my

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Introduction

The Fiat Lux: Upending Hard Sciences[1] aims to build bridges between hard and soft sciences by discussing topics that are intertwined with both physical and social implications. The connections between these subjects facilitate critical thinking and the direct questioning of scholars enables students to educate themselves on subjects otherwise overlooked by broad undergraduate courses. On Thursday, February 9, 2023, Joshua Claxton discussed colonial narratives in Urban Planning *vis à vis* racism and classism, and how it has constantly evolved in the states.

Joshua Claxton (he/him) is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Science in Urban Planning at UCLA. He discusses the field's focus on the problems of colonialism and segregation that persist in the United States. The discussion is centered around the following five themes: 1) Joshua's Perspective and Path to Studying Urban Planning, 2) The Origins of Urban Planning and its Effects Today, 3) Cultural Perspectives on Land, 4) Technologies within Urban Planning, and 5) Treating Current Urban Planning Issues as an Individual Consumer.

Sergio Carbajo (he/him) is a professor and researcher of Physics and Engineering at UCLA. His research includes topics such as quantum optics, X-Ray free electron lasers, and structured photonics. He is also an equity, diversity, and inclusion officer that leads strategies for enhancing inclusion in all spaces at UCLA.

ancestors did not choose to come to the United States, I have a constant complicated relationship with the land surrounding me.

My time spent living in Jordan gave me a much broader perspective regarding how black and brown people are discriminated against all over the world.

Ultimately, I want to help figure out grassroots movements and changes to make everyone feel safe and seen.

Theme Two: *The Origins of Urban Planning and its Effects Today*

Claxton - Urban planning did not exist as a career or industry until the second industrial revolution in the 1880s. It began when large groups of poor people moved to the city for work and the government did not know what to do with all the extra people given the limited space.

During the time of its original creation, urban planning was a response to growing slums that were viewed as dangerous and ugly in cities. Urban planning was originally created to contain the poor and impoverished working in factories.

These origins show the systems and patterns which lead to someone not having a home and living in the streets, and these patterns still exist today.

In slums, people live with many other families. They are unable to gain or accrue the resources and wealth which result from their work and production which instead go into the pockets of already wealthy upper-class individuals.

People living in poverty do not have access to the resources needed to have a home and build or have wealth. Poor urban planning reinforces itself by preventing people from leaving this cycle of poverty. This type of urban planning also creates an extremely harmful narrative and rhetoric.

This rhetoric pathologies poor people. This means that the narrative is poor people are poor of their own accord rather than as a result of the system within which they exist.

Theme Three: *Different Cultural Perspectives on Land*

Claxton - In Western ideals, police are often expected to protect land, and we view land as a way to gain value and capital. Property creates an idea of those who have and those who do not.

In Western society, property is one of the most important aspects of a person's life and the original creation of law enforcement was primarily for the protection of people's "property."

Sovereignty (public and private ownership) over the land, in some ways, creates a hierarchy of personhood again creating the idea of *those who have* and *those who do not*.

Other cultures have a much more harmonious relationship with property. For some cultures, the idea of property does not exist and land is simply correlated with a person/community's home. For example, Native Americans and African communities often have much more harmonious relationships with the Earth and land in general.

I define property as an invention and property in terms of the idea of "owning" land is a very modern construction. Humans are naturally a very nomadic species in comparison to most other species or even migratory species specifically.

Even today, the unit of measure in urban planning frameworks is property which instantiates power through capital, safety, and protection of capital goods and property. Throughout history, people were able to participate in civics or vote solely based on ownership of property.

Theme Four: *Technologies within Urban Planning*

Claxton - G.I.S. (Geographic Information Systems) is one of the more popular systems or methods of thinking implemented by urban planners. Within G.I.S. there exist a multitude of more specific systems catering to different requirements.

This method of mapping, however, is limited to modern, Western standards of our ideas surrounding urban planning. For example, G.I.S. would not function within Native American constructs regarding land and definitions of property and boundaries due to differences in thinking methodologies.

Counter Mapping offers us the opportunity to view the land we live on from a different perspective. This perspective is more in line with treating the United States as borrowed from various Native American territories.

These boundaries are, however, excluded from mapping tools and software because Native Americans choose not to view the land in North America in partitioning terms. This brings up the question of, "How we can create a technological system that examines urban planning in terms of a continuum, as humans do, rather than a binary?"

This goal is difficult to accomplish because computers as of this day and age operate primarily on conditional execution and selection, or a series of *if-and-then* statements which make it hard to account for multiple correct options and answers to complex and nuanced questions.

For a simplified example, whereas a computer might define a home as a three-dimensional structure containing walls, a roof, multiple levels, ceilings, and floors, we–and especially non-western outlooks such as those of Native Americans–know it to have a much deeper significance and often not even necessarily be correlated to a physical space.

Additionally, the property is not just a physical piece of land or building, but also a physiological expectation of a certain outcome, or a way of relating to everybody else, or the sovereign.

This idea is especially reflected in UCLA Professor Cheryl Harris' *Whiteness as Property*[2] which comments on how property was once based on class until the power structure in the United States realized that in order to maintain itself, it needed to flip and be based in, or focus on, race rather than class.

Queered Science & Technology Center at UCLA ©

For example, consider how owning an expensive home and paying higher taxes on it, as a result, is what makes a school district better and gives the more privileged children of the area access to better public education.

Theme Five: *Treating Current Urban Planning Issues as an Individual Consumer*

Claxton - Migrating responsibly is key. I call on society to start being a part of the solution by avoiding contributing to problems such as gentrification.

Individuals can research the community to which they plan to move and assess whether their arrival will be beneficial or detrimental–not only for themselves but for their future neighbors and the people they plan to surround themselves with.

Discussing topics such as this one is difficult because the people privy to and able to have these conversations are, by definition and nature, entitled themselves in terms of class and privilege, to at least a certain degree. The people spectating this panel discussion in person, for example, all either work at or attend a prestigious public university (UCLA).

Our work, therefore, requires not only collective actions but also direct admissions of how we are a part of the problems we are working against and working to solve.

The truth is many of the problems urban planners are facing now are part of a bigger system that cannot be changed solely on an individual level. For example, there is simply not enough affordable housing built in the United States of America.

To make matters worse, there exist laws in place in the United States that make it so that housing can only be built in communities where housing already exists. Additionally, these communities almost always suffer from being over-policed.

In *Parable of the Sower,* a part of the Parable Series by Octavia Butler,[3] for example, the main character Lauren finds herself in California in the 2030s or 2040s after the systematic collapse of the environment and the totalitarian regime of a misogynistic dictator.

Rather than attempting to overthrow or otherwise destroy the system she exists within, Lauren chooses to instead leave with others so as to start their own society, thereby allowing themselves to have a different relationship with the land on which they live.

Conclusions

Eurocentric views about land ownership have led to problems in housing in America, disproportionately affecting minorities and poor communities. Colonialism continues today in inner cities through the forced removal of minority communities via gentrification and the targeting of lower economic classes. Claxton is a graduate student who is interested in the de facto segregation that still occurs in the United States and the struggles that black and brown communities face. Claxton has studied ways in which to prevent racism from infiltrating the urban planning sector and identifies as a part of the fight for equity. Urban planning, which began after the second industrial revolution as a method of containing the poor population, has since been further expanded on

by people in power to control poor people and keep them poor. Geographic Information Systems offer urban planners different ways to view land based on past populations or the various differentiations between poor and affluent areas.

Claxton defines property as an invention derived by humans. Although we, as humans, have now had this idea of property for a very long time, animals similarly have territory in which they fight–a perplexing statement given the various different behaviors seen within the animal kingdom. Animals, however, typically only have a property related to land that they defend to feed, rather than items or objects deemed unnecessary for survival. In a way, the ownership of land and necessities is not unusual, however, an accumulation of unused land or wealth separates humans from other animal species.

Acknowledgments

Notes and references

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