

**“Housing Inequality and the Future of Neighborhoods”**  
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## **I. Introduction**

Wow, what is going on right now? I don't know how anyone who has been paying attention to what is unfolding around us recently could possibly speak optimistically about the future of neighborhoods and cities. I cannot help but take recent events into context as a framework for shaping my comments today—which admittedly, are overwhelmingly negative.

And yet despite the weight of our contemporary times, somewhere here through this talk today, I will try to find some hope...however, while I believe that finding hope is necessarily elusive under these present circumstances, any realistic assessment also means that it is a task that requires us to take some uncomfortable positions. Positions that we may not be used to taking, that are inherently risky, and make the uncertainty of our potential actions existentially challenging for many planners because the constraints of tradition that have crippled our field in the face of some of our most pressing societal concerns.

So, with these introductory comments aside, I would like to try and place some recent events into a larger, historical and geographical context, in order to draw out some meaningful ideas on how planners may approach them.

## **II. Rain**

To begin, for roughly the last two months, my neighborhood in Madison has been in a constant state of emergency flood preparation. One exceptional storm in August that brought upwards of 12 inches of rain to the area, sent our local lakes over their 100-year flood levels, and brought the limits of our existing infrastructures into question. Storm water was coming up out of street drains and filling roads, forcing city crews to plug them and close a number of major streets—which, for a southern California native like myself, used to droughts and earthquakes, was absolutely frightening. So, by the time we were told to start sandbagging our homes I took it super seriously. I hit the local sandbagging site at Tenney Park and worked with neighbors and volunteers to fill bags, load them onto cars, and carry them back to fortify our houses against the rising flood waters.

As I worked with folks from the neighborhood throughout the series of storms that hit our area, causing new rounds of fear and preparation, word eventually began circulating that the Tenney Dam might break due to the stress of extreme water levels. Eventually the news was confirmed by city engineers who warned that if the dam failed, the consequences would be devastating,

inundating areas all along the Yahara River, the Isthmus, and the lands surrounding Lake Monona.

Throughout it all, I heard two refrains from my neighbors. Old timers in the neighborhood would tell me something to the effect of: “I’ve been here 40 years and I’ve never seen anything like this.” As a precedent beyond the experience of those around us, we imagined the possible situations and evaluated our different systems for managing water damage. At one point, one neighbor even made a run out to Janesville to stockpile the remaining sump pumps in the southern part of the state which he then distributed to people around the block using handwritten notes on the back of an envelope. In many ways it was a heartwarming experience.

However, throughout all of this, I also heard another, decidedly more miserable refrain about how we were going to deal with what my neighbors were calling the “new normal”—a cynical acknowledgment of persistent heavy rain fall, rising lakes, and the consequences of climate change.

And in many respects, my neighbors were right. The flooding we experienced in August and September can no longer realistically be considered an aberration. Heavy downpours are increasing nationally, especially over the last three to five decades.<sup>i</sup> And while the largest increases in very heavy downpours are concentrated here in the Midwest (37%) and Northeast (71%), increases in the frequency and intensity of extreme precipitation events are projected to increase for every region in the country—“even in regions where total precipitation is projected to decrease.”

As documented in the 2014 National Climate Assessment, from 1958 to 2012, the amount of precipitation occurring in very heavy rain events—the top 1%, or what we might consider extreme rainfall—has increased by 37% in the US Midwest. Wisconsin, in short, is becoming a lot wetter and will likely continue to experience heavy precipitation increases looking toward the future so there must be something to this new normal thing.

### **III. Megafires**

But as some of you may guess from listening to me, Wisconsin isn’t my only home. I am native son to Los Angeles and so in addition to dealing with the threat of rising flood waters here locally, I have been dialed in to climate related events that seem a world away, both literally, and figuratively, from the particular set of dangers we are facing here.

For those us from the Southwest, high temperatures and “heat waves” are familiar phenomena. But climate change is making these events more severe and more disruptive. Scientists who study climate are generally more specific about how they define heat waves.<sup>ii</sup> Heat waves occur when daily temperatures exceed some percentile—usually the 95<sup>th</sup> percentile—of the local daily maximum (or minimum) temperatures from a specific meteorological range in the past like May-to-September and which last at least one day. In

other words, a heat wave is registered when temperatures rise to the level of the hottest 5% of summer days or nights.

Throughout this last summer as heat waves hit southern California, my family and friends in LA were posting photos on social media of ridiculous temperatures from their car dashboards—in some cases reaching to 120 degrees. And when the so-called “heat dome”<sup>iii</sup> descended on southern California in early July for several days, heat records were broken all over the region. The temperature at UCLA’s campus in Westwood by the ocean which usually calms temperatures soared to 111 degrees, Burbank Airport reached 114 degrees. Van Nuys Airport, 117 degrees. Santa Ana, 114 degrees. And Riverside tied its previous heat record of 118 degrees.<sup>iv</sup>

However, nowhere is extreme heat more apparent than in the country’s 12<sup>th</sup> largest metro area just 5 hours east of LA, Phoenix, Arizona. Last year was the hottest year on record in Phoenix.<sup>v</sup> The city’s hot season – when temperatures can easily exceed 100 degrees – now starts an average of almost three weeks earlier than it did 100 years ago and now lasts two to three weeks longer in the fall. The air gets so hot during this time now that planes at Phoenix International Airport can’t get enough lift under their wings to take off.<sup>vi</sup>

Researchers expect Phoenix’s temperatures to continue to climb. Projections now foresee summer days that reach above 122 degrees—the record high for the area—to become the norm. And the hottest days are expected to spike above 134 degrees—hotter than the highest temperature ever recorded on Earth! [Death Valley, California, in 1913].

And it’s not just Phoenix. According to NOAA, 2018 has already seen 75 heat records set across the United States (but zero record minimums). And importantly, this year has also seen 104 all-time record breaking minimum highs.<sup>vii</sup>

The disproportionate increase in these minimum highs that usually occur at nighttime is especially troubling. Night time lows, bring critical respite from the heat. But the intensifying and unrelenting heat has not only made firefighting more difficult due to the loss of fire suppressing humidity, but it is challenging even the tolerance of the entire biota of the Southwest—acclimated as it is to dry heat.

Back in California, the increasing heat facing the region is not unrelated to concern over the state’s more notorious wildfires. Earlier this summer two fires—the River and the Ranch fire—joined into a single Mendocino Complex “megafire” and burned an almost unimaginable 450 thousand acres. The megafire—a relatively new term used by the National Interagency Fire Center for a wildfire larger than 100,000 acres—smashed the state’s wildfire records—the previous one set just one year before in 2017, by the Thomas Fire which burned over 280 thousand acres. The Thomas fire was not only notable for being the largest wildfire in the state’s history up to that point, but it was also the first winter-time megafire in history, hitting in the middle of December during what should have been the peak of the state’s rainy season.

Megafires like the Mendocino Complex fire and those that have occurred throughout the western United States recently from Oklahoma to Washington used to happen every few centuries, but now seem to happen every few years. The product of drought and human mismanagement, these so-called megafires are threatening to dramatically change western ecology in what the Ecological Society of America has termed a “habitat regime change”—or, a permanent shift from forests to brush or grassland.<sup>viii</sup>

This may seem impossibly far off to some people listening here today, but one area where the effect is immediately apparent is on state budgets. California spent an astonishing \$758 million last year fighting wildfires. A sum that has already been broken this year as Cal Fire—the state’s wildfire fighting agency—exhausted its annual budget for 2018 and requested an additional \$234 million to continue combatting fires—it’s earliest such request ever.<sup>ix</sup> And while these figures may sound astronomical, we should remember that these totals are offset by the contributions of 3,700 inmates earning just \$1 an hour, representing a third of the state’s total wildfire fighting force, who reportedly save the state between \$90 to \$100 million a year through their firefighting efforts.<sup>x</sup>

#### **IV. Stationarity**

State budgeting it seems—and not the survival of ecosystems necessary for human settlement or even the injustices of the criminal justice system—may be a more persuasive technique to get people concerned about the future and the impact of climate change. However even from this callous position, in order to start making plans for the future cost of climate change, we need to make projections. And here lies a special conundrum. For skeptics, the uncertainties in scientific calculations and modeling techniques make it impossible to determine with any confidence how bad the future is really going to be for us.

And yet despite their disruptive and ultimately paralyzing intentions, these critics are actually right about something. The problem that modeling presents is indeed found within the level of uncertainty which itself depends on data collected from the past. Scientists refer to assumptions based in past evidence as “stationarity”—or “the idea that extremes of natural systems fluctuate within an envelope of variability” based on prior constraints. It is a “foundational concept that permeates training and practice in water-resource engineering” and has since spread to modeling rainfall, river levels, hurricane strength, wildfire damage, etc.<sup>xi</sup>

Stationarity works of course, as long as the past can be considered a prologue that we can base reasonable projections about the future on. And what is so troubling about all of these recent climate-based events is that their extremities are threatening the usefulness of the past as predictive mechanism all together. The fires burning across the western United States, the heatwaves ravaging the globe, the tropical storms in the Gulf and Atlantic, and extreme rainfall in regions like the Midwest suggest that—as some authors claimed recently—“stationarity is dead.”<sup>xii</sup> The past is no longer the guide it once was and we are sliding into a possible new geological era of Earth’s time scale, the Anthropocene, where human actions dictate global processes, ending the previous era that began almost 12 thousand years ago.

This proposition should give us pause.

## **V. Climate gentrification**

But my concern here today is actually not to provide a depressing tally of increasing natural extremities however that may seem at this point. I will leave this task to the natural scientists. Those of you who are familiar with my work, know that I study neighborhoods through a lens of gentrification and displacement. My field is mostly concerned with neighborhood-level transitions reflected in demographic shifts and changes to built environments and property values. However, I believe that the field of gentrification has two valuable insights to offer urban planners who are concerned over the future of human civilization in cities—these are: (1) the arguments about how to make sense of urban displacement and (2) provocative insights regarding the urban imagination.

Gentrification research generally seeks to contribute to our understanding of how, when, where, and importantly, why people move within urban systems. And even when it has failed to prove the extremity of gentrification-induced displacement, scholarship in this area has nevertheless produced a wealth of data that urban systems provoke an incredible amount of involuntary moves that are considered essentially normal. These include everyday evictions—due mostly to non-payment of rent—which Matthew Desmond recently estimated are experienced by at least 1 in every 50 renter households; as well as other forms of forced relocations resulting from various pressures that provoke households to relocate to alternative neighborhoods.<sup>xiii</sup>

All told, forced moves within urban systems may account for upwards of a 20 to 30% of all moves.<sup>xiv</sup> Gentrification scholars, planners, and demographers understand that these “everyday” forms of displacement are themselves only the subtle variations that exist on the surface of more long-term demographic shifts that have distributed people in distinct patterns across urban space in different periods. Thus, while in a previous era, the poor tended to live in central cities, longitudinal analysis has shown that inner cities are becoming wealthier and, in many cases, whiter as nonwhite populations are pushed further and further out toward the urban periphery.<sup>xv, xvi, xvii</sup>

My own research on eviction in Dane County reaffirms that everyday displacement is a highly racialized process as the most nonwhite neighborhoods experience the most evictions.<sup>xviii</sup> And in fact, all things being equal, when poverty and other factors are held constant, we see that the risk of eviction increases more than 20% the more neighborhoods become racially segregated. The fact underscores that eviction-based displacement arises as much from the increasing difficulties tenants have paying rent as it does from property owners who may be seeking to shape neighborhood demographics or even in some cases, assume a predatory behavior where the inherent scarcity and exclusionary tendencies in housing markets creates the opportunity for a form of housing-based exploitation.

In this new era of climate extremity, the attention to displacement within the field of gentrification research offers a warning about how climate change will exacerbate already existing inequities from the neighborhood scale all the way to the region and back again.

Again, some recent examples may offer a critical springboard for us to think about this.

In August 2016, the almost 600 residents of Shishmaref, a village along a barrier island chain in northern Alaska voted to abandon the island altogether. The loss of Arctic sea ice had left the island vulnerable to coastal erosion. A number of houses had already been lost to storms and it became undeniable that more would soon follow as the sea began to retake the land.<sup>xix</sup>

And across the globe in Louisiana in the same year, the U.S. government agreed to resettle the people of Isle de Jean Charles as 98% of the once 22 thousand-acre island has sunk into the Gulf of Mexico. The resettlement program is the first government-funded climate relocation in the country and it's 99 remaining residents have been dubbed "America's first climate refugees."<sup>xx</sup>

These seemingly isolated events on the geographical edges of the United States should not be easily dismissed due to their relative remoteness. Indeed, one recent study in *Nature*<sup>xxi</sup> concluded that "unmitigated [Sea Level Rise] is expected to reshape the US population distribution" as approximately 13 million people are expected to be displaced by 2100— incidentally, this is about the same number of African-Americans who moved out of the South during the Great Migration of the early 20th century.

Using dynamic modeling techniques that incorporate wealth-based adaptation scenarios, the author of this study found that 86% of US Core Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs) (791 out of 915), and 56% of counties (1,735 out of 3,113) could be affected in some way by net migration associated with sea level rise. Some places will be noticeably more affected than others. Nine states could see net losses in their populations and places like Florida could potentially lose more than 2.5 million residents while Texas might see nearly 1.5 million additional residents under these scenarios.

Thus, while we might debate what infrastructure improvements are needed to deal with rising sea levels to keep human settlements in place—like the almost 2-mile long, \$1.3 billion Lake Borgne Surge Barrier constructed in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina—there is little conversation amongst planners today about the infrastructure challenges needed to accommodate millions of climate migrants in largely unprepared inland municipalities.

And in some respects, the first climate-based migrations are already occurring right before us. For example, after Hurricane Maria hit, 300 thousand Puerto Ricans are said to have fled to Florida. And all told, after a string of climate disasters in 2017—including six big hurricanes in the Atlantic, wildfires in the West, horrific mudslides, high-temperature records, etc.—disasters in 2017 not only caused \$306 billion worth in damage and killed more than 300 people, but experts estimate that these climate- and weather-based events also displaced more than one-and-a-half million people (1,686,000)—a slight contribution to 18.8 million people displaced by

natural disasters across the globe<sup>xxii</sup> and the 200 million to 1 billion people that are expected to move either within their countries or across borders, on a permanent or temporary basis by 2050 due to climate change.<sup>xxiii</sup>

Many of these folks will certainly attempt to return to their neighborhoods. And some will undoubtedly search for higher ground within their affected towns and cities. Yet, regardless of which path individual households choose, this unfolding scenario threatens to dramatically reshape previous lines of segregation in coastal cities across the country as investors shift capital to higher ground and shoreline properties become costlier in terms of insurance and repairs. In this changing climate-based property market, low- to middle-income people will inevitably end up being squeezed out from both areas.

Estimating this scenario was the exact subject of a recent article<sup>xxiv</sup> published in the journal *Environmental Research Letters* which argued that climate change makes “some property more or less valuable by virtue of its capacity to accommodate a certain density of human settlement and its associated infrastructure.” The implication is that price volatility associated with elevation “is either a primary or a partial driver of the patterns of urban development that lead to displacement (and sometimes entrenchment) of existing populations.” The climate induced trend evident in Dade County, Florida, argue these authors, is therefore consistent with “conventional framings of gentrification.”

Reinforcing this point, researchers from the Climate Impact Lab in a groundbreaking paper<sup>xxv</sup> last year demonstrated that global warming will result in severe economic costs. These authors estimate that for each 1 degree Fahrenheit (0.55 degrees Celsius) increase in global temperatures, the U.S. economy is expected to lose about 0.7 percent of its Gross Domestic Product, with each degree of warming costing more than the last. But importantly, the authors find that the distribution of risk will not be experienced evenly. If no changes are implemented, the poorest counties in the U.S. will experience losses of up to 20% of their income by the middle of the 21st century—representing not only “a large transfer of value northward and westward” but a more sobering assessment “that climate change may result in the largest transfer of wealth from the poor to the rich in the country’s history.”

It is no wonder then that Moody’s Investor’s Service, the influential credit-rating agency, also recently announced that it will begin weighing climate risks when analyzing ratings for states and cities, thus making borrowing money more expensive for places that ignore such climate risks.<sup>xxvi</sup>

Thinking about the potential for mass dislocation and the profound reorganization of land value is only one contribution we can draw from the intersection of climate and gentrification research. A second observation from the literature highlights the need for a radical urban imagination capable of projecting the deep ramifications of an uncertain future under new paradigms.

When gentrification first began to emerge over 50 years ago, most scholars believed it was an aberration, a flash-in-the-pan so-to-speak, that would eventually subside against a constant backdrop of ever expanding pattern of suburbanization. Looking back, from our position today, where gentrification has become an almost ubiquitous phenomenon, it is hard for many of us to imagine the severity of the scenarios where gentrification first emerged. During this period, entire neighborhoods in major cities like New York were abandoned leaving tens of thousands of apartment units “in ruin.”<sup>xxvii</sup> In this context, the extent of abandonment was so severe that landlords periodically burned down their own buildings rather than rent them out. In this way, by maintaining a lively debate about the root causes of gentrification the literature reminds us, as Marx once famously observed, that at certain times, everything that is solid can melt into thin air. The cities of today will be radically different tomorrow.

And this brings me back to the concept of stationarity that I introduced earlier. One approach is to say that a new epoch is dawning for industrial civilization. It is one whose precise trajectory can't be known in advance, but which is nevertheless bound to turn a whole lot of familiar assumptions on their heads in ways that are difficult to imagine. A decade ago in a widely-discussed book,<sup>xxviii</sup> James Kunstler termed this period, “discontinuity”—the “long emergency” between the end of the cheap oil age and whatever energy regime comes next. The idea was not that the world was suddenly going to end in dramatic, apocalyptic fashion, but that instead, civilization would teeter on through pragmatic and desperate adaptations to a radically changing world.

Some of Kunstler's wilder prophecies were easily criticized, but I believe his work, like some gentrification scholarship, is important for reminding us about the unstable and constantly changing circumstances we find ourselves in.

For planners, because of our generally informed and special mediating role in the process of urban development, we can *and should* play an important role in shaping the future of cities and neighborhoods. Part of our unique responsibility vis-à-vis other disciplines comes from an awareness of evidence-based forecasting and the ability to contextualize and, importantly, intervene in and change the existing institutional parameters that define both the vulnerability and exposure of sensitive populations.

In this present case, understanding the *existing* institutional and economic mechanisms of property markets is arguably critical for long-term planning in the face climate change. It should also remind us that, just as Jared Diamond warned in his book *Collapse*, it is not because people were ignorant of the changes taking place around them, complex societies collapsed because they were unable to make the necessary changes needed to reduce risk and mediate the consequences of change.

The fundamental feature, of course, in all of these scenarios is power and the ability to effectively shape our world. As we look to the distant past it is easy to see how entrenched power structures committed themselves to systems of inequity regardless of the observed destruction occurring around them. And in our own times, unfortunately, more and more,



current events bring me back to how the most vulnerable among us, those who persistently face the extremes of the normal workings of our world, are essentially powerless to change the circumstances that most impact them. Or said differently, in a way that hopefully doesn't disempower further, another way of looking at this is that the benefits of inequity—real or perceived—engenders enough societal support to the point where when faced with the unsettling facts regarding the consequences of doing nothing in the era of the new normal, moral indignation alone is insufficient to prevent the continuance of injustice.

## VI. Deportation

A couple weekends ago, the Latinx community in southern Wisconsin was in a literal state of panic as word began circulating through networks linked through Facebook accounts and instant messaging services that federal ICE agents—Immigration Customs and Enforcement—were active in the area conducting what ICE referred to as an “enforcement surge.” The surge was designed to specifically target communities such as Madison that have refused to cooperate with ICE and was soundly criticized by Madison’s mayor, police chief, and common council.<sup>xxix</sup> The surge however was not unusual. Using an expanded border enforcement region, it is now common for border patrol officers to work without permission on private property or set up checkpoints up to 100 miles away from the border under a little-known federal law, the Title VIII of the Code of Federal Regulations, that is being used more widely in the Trump administration’s aggressive crackdown on undocumented immigrants.<sup>xxx</sup> All across the country in places as far apart as California, Florida, New York and Washington State, ICE officers are boarding buses and trains to question and search riders — mostly American citizens — about their immigration status—a tactic that the ACLU claims potentially violates 4<sup>th</sup> Amendment protections against illegal searches.<sup>xxxi</sup> ICE data itself shows that rather than catching undocumented immigrants, most searches turn up small amounts marijuana and other illegal drugs from citizens. An estimated 200 million Americans live within 100 miles of the border and at least 11 states are either entirely or almost entirely within the 100-mile zone.

The new administration’s “zero tolerance” policy against immigrants is accompanied by an appalling expansion of private detention camps run by large, private prison corporations like CoreCivic and the GEO group. Yet despite the stated intention of housing migrants indefinitely, recent investigations have uncovered dismal conditions in many of these tent camps where in addition to adults, upwards of 13 thousand migrant children are held—five times the number of children held in custody a little over a year ago!<sup>xxxii</sup>

In an effort to promote “self-deportation” and fear,<sup>xxxiii</sup> *The New York Times* reports that the administration began funneling children into the detention system even “without any apparent collaboration with the officials who oversee the shelter program.” The children coming into these detention centers are consequently “younger and more traumatized than those the shelters were used to dealing with, and they arrived without a plan for when they could be released or to whom.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> One of these children, two-year old Fernanda Davila, was recently featured in another *New York Times* story.<sup>xxxv</sup> Fernanda is the youngest child to come before the bench in this federal immigration courtroom in New York. The description of her day in court is absolutely heartbreaking: “Her feet stuck out from the seat in small gray sneakers, her

legs too short to dangle. Her fists were stuffed under her knees. As soon as the caseworker who had sat her there turned to go, she let out a whimper that rose to a thin howl, her crumpled face a bursting dam.”

And just over the weekend, a referendum on the strengths of the *#metoo* movement was made painfully clear when a judicial nominee, by a president who lost the popular vote, was endorsed by the U.S. Senate despite convincing accusations of sexual assault and protests across the nation.

What these episodes tell me is that any serious attempt to deal the real threats that face cities and neighborhoods requires a that we deal directly and explicitly with the question of power and the structural issues that underlie the creation and exercise of power in social relationships. Unfortunately, most of planning theory assumes that we should deal with urban issues as if power did not exist. Our role has been circumscribed to the provision of objective facts or process facilitation, but never to take sides. Or even worse, planners who were once motivated by the ideals (and trappings) of modernism and developmentalism, no longer tend to rely on any comprehensive theory or strategy at all, but instead base their disjointed actions on “a neoliberal faith in the magic of the real estate marketplace.”<sup>xxxvi</sup>

If we are going to deal with the dire projections of the future, planners must strengthen the normative claims of urban planning. We should seek not only efficiency, but also a distributional equity that supports the full development of human capabilities for all. What united previous visionaries in our field like Jane Jacobs and Norman Krumholz was a similar position. But advocacy and equity planning did not emerge in a vacuum, it was as Tom Angotti writes, “a direct consequence of the engagement of urban planners in the civil rights movement, the struggles against the displacement of low-income communities by the federal urban renewal program, and the opportunities for innovation offered by the federal War on Poverty, including the Model Cities program.”<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Thus, today more than ever, planners must take seriously the urban social movements that are arising around us from *#occupy* to *#metoo* to *#notonemore*. Failure to actively listen to and engage with these struggles allows us to become easily complicit or even tragically irrelevant to the new urban future of increasing inequality and insecurity. If we are indeed listening carefully, we will see in movements like Black Lives Matter both “a cry and a demand”—to use the French urbanist Henri Lefebvre’s famous words. The very name this movement has assumed, “black lives matter,” resonates with the profound experience behind the words on those famous protest signs from the civil rights era declaring, “I am a man.” They shout, I am a human being and I deserve dignity. While at the same time, they demand that we confront the real impact and processes of racial injustice now.

Planners must be at the forefront of these issues as advocates and allies for justice. Introducing the idea of justice, as Peter Marcuse argues, is a major step forward “even without resolving all of its implications.”<sup>xxxviii</sup> “It requires the creation of coherent frames for action and deliberation that bring multiple and disparate efforts of those fighting against unjust urban conditions into

relief [in order to] relate their struggles to each other as part of a global orchestration improvised around the single tenor of justice.”

In sum, if we are to deal with climate change in a way that doesn't reproduce or magnify the deep inequalities our cities already create, contemporary planners, like those from previous advocacy and equity traditions, must first confront the politics of power *within* our cities. Fifty or even 25 years from now, the question will not be whether we knew or not; it will be what we did.

## Endnotes

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