

## STREETSBLOG

# Transportation planners and advocates: What legacy will you leave for racial justice?

By Courtney Cobbs | Jun 5, 2020 | 3 COMMENTS



A frame shop in Chicago's Andersonville business strip as it appeared on Thursday. Photo: John Greenfield



**I** [n a previous article](#) I asked what legacy you will leave in the face of climate change. Today I ask what legacy you will leave in response to state violence against Black people and racist systems that disrupt and end the lives of Black and Brown people.

I recently had a Twitter exchange with someone who felt that concerns around equity and conversations around the very real factors that lead African-American and Latinx folks to feel unsafe on the streets are a delaying tactic for creating more protected bike lanes in the city. In many ways this line of thinking speaks to the heart of criticism of “white urbanism” by groups like [The Untokening](#). When planning decisions around sustainable transportation and public space projects like pedestrian plazas, car-free streets, and protected bike lanes are made without regard to how people from a variety of backgrounds (race, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, ability, age, etc.) use space and relate to the built environment, harm occurs.

As sustainable transportation advocates pushing for better walking, biking, transit, and public space, we must always be mindful of the many societal issues that are barriers to Black and Latino residents fully benefitting from these improvements. These include housing displacement, low wages, healthcare disparities, overpolicing (which in turn diverts funding from social programs), [and many other factors](#). We cannot discuss ways to make our cities more “liveable” without also talking about all the ways that oppressive systems dictate who can even show up in the streets without fear of violence or death in public spaces.

The mainstream vision of “urbanism” has mostly been defined by white people. When planning or advocating for transportation, traffic safety, or public space improvements, we must listen to the voices of *all* local residents, or at least a sampling of community members who reflect the demographics of the affected area.







A Black Lives Matter tag by the Leland Avenue Slow Street in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood. Photo: John Greenfield

For the most part, white people dictate what public spaces should look like. Due to the history of structural racism in our country, white folks are more likely to have privileges — such as spare time, discretionary income, higher education, and political connections — that enable them to show up for public meetings and provide input through other means to dominate conversations on what projects are approved or rejected.

That is why I was so taken by the approach that Oakland planner Warren Logan outlined in an [August 2019 CityLab interview](#): planning with communities as opposed to planning for communities, and seeing local residents as the real experts on their neighborhoods. (Read more on this subject in [Streetsblog Chicago's interview with Logan](#).)

If Chicago's City Council and Mayor Lori Lightfoot are truly concerned about the rioting and looting that has taken place in connection with protests against the police murder of George Floyd, they need to really examine the root causes of these activities. Riots and looting happen when people feel they have no other recourse.



<https://platform.twitter.com/widgets.js>



Chicago urban planner and [Streetsblog contributor](#) Michael Podgers, discussed the need for the need for planners to help make racial justice a reality in a blog post this week titled, “[Justice in Planning? Start by Defunding the Police](#).” The piece begins with a recognition that planners have historically ignored larger social issues faced by BIPOC and focused solely on changing the built environment. Podgers writes, “Spatial change can lead to positive social outcomes, but it does *not* mean social change is the same as justice. We talk a lot of fancy talk about what our cities can look like, but we need to begin by acknowledging where we really are and using our privilege to demand cities that are just and base our demands on those of Black and Brown advocates. It also means we must now go after one of the institutions that has historically helped secure our privilege: the police.”

It’s a powerful call that I hope many within the planning field and beyond will heed. Numerous lives are impacted by the decisions we make today. I hope that you make choices today that you will be proud to stand by later in the quest for a more just society.

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Filed Under: Beyond Chicagoland, Bicycling, Chicago Policy, Design, Driving, Infrastructure, Neighborhoods, News, Streetsblog Network, Walking, Benji Hart, Black Lives Matter, equity, George Floyd Protests, Michael Podgers, Promoted, Racial Justice, Sahra Sulaiman, Tamika Butler

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## MOST RECENT

Records indicate bicyclist injured by CDOT trucker is a CDOT safety ambassador

Sorry Dickens Greenway NIMBYs, the avenue is slated to become a Slow Street

Today's Headlines for Wednesday July 1

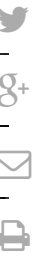
With "overwhelming support" from residents, Rosa approves Palmer Slow Street

Family of Issac Martinez, 13, killed on his bike, were joined by cyclists at vigil

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Signs on the Leland Slow Street. Photo: John Greenfield

And a type of violence that has a more profound impact on Chicago residents is the way our [city prioritizes corporations](#), business interests, and police over everyday people and their needs. Investments have flowed to majority-white North Side neighborhoods for years as the [South and West sides saw far less investment](#) to increase economic opportunities and quality of life.

Black and Latinx Chicagoans know best what their communities need. One demand that has been articulated by Black Lives Matter Chicago is the need to defund the Chicago Police Department, which currently receives about \$1.8 billion, or 40 percent of the total 2020 city budget, and reinvest that money into services that address the harms these communities have suffered.



**BLMChicago**  
@BLMChi



Let's ask for the complete abolition. We know what we need. We need crisis interventionists who are therapists.

doctors, street medics, universal healthcare, increased funding to public education... not cops.

 **Benji Hart** @radfagg

You know we've reached a watershed moment when abolitionists are ecstatic about the LAPD having its budget cut by \$100mil, and non-abolitionists are like, "That's only 8%, CUT IT MORE!"

#DefundPolice #AbolishPolice #PoliceFreeSchools  
#BlackLivesMatter money.yahoo.com/los-angeles-ma...

2:59 PM · Jun 4, 2020



552



192 people are Tweeting about this



There are lots of resources available to educate white people about concrete actions they can take to support Black lives, including books and papers they can read to learn more about structural racism and strategies to undo it. My hope is that white sustainable transportation advocates will listen to the voices of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) mobility justice activists and work with them to decenter whiteness within the field.

I hope white livable streets advocates will ask themselves the hard questions when it comes to their role in creating an anti-racist society. Mobility justice leader Tamika Butler, Toole Design's director of planning for California and the director of equity and inclusion, asks in her essay "[Stop Killing Us: A Real-Life Nightmare](#)," "What are you doing every single day to stop the killing of Black people? What are you doing every single day to make yourself think about race and racism and white supremacy and oppression and colonialism? What are you doing to make change in this revolution towards a more just society?"

I want to end this post by sharing resources that may further your understanding of these issues and hopefully result in you thinking deeper on the issue of race and mobility.

Ariel Ward, who wrote [a great](#) piece on the the need for nuance in discussions of open streets during a time of COVID-19, encourages people to sit in the discomfort of questions that are "hard", "humbling", and "necessary."



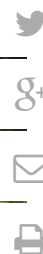
**A. Ward**

@dubonthestreets



It's an active process — sitting with the hard, the humbling, the necessary. This question is all of those things.





## Designing self-policing streets, and other mobility justice strategies

By Courtney Cobbs | Jun 25, 2020

We should be redesigning our transportation system to reduce the chances of Black and Brown residents interacting with law enforcement, and to promote transportation equity.




## Let's stop coddling drivers and prioritize building a citywide protected bike lane network



Sit with it. Let it challenge you.  
Let it make you uncomfortable.

That discomfort is called accountability.

 **sahra** @sahrasulaiman

Replying to @sahrasulaiman

It begs the question: What is the good of putting in a bike lane for people to cut back on car trips if they can't make bike trips to their local amenities because of gang and policing issues?

4:58 PM · May 27, 2020



28



See A. Ward's other Tweets



<https://platform.twitter.com/widgets.js>

Ariel quotes Sahra Sulaiman, the communities editor at Streetsblog Los Angeles who explores “the intersection of mobility with race, class, history, representation, policing, housing, health, culture, community, and access to the public space in Boyle Heights and South Los Angeles,” BIPOC communities in LA. The quoted tweet was from a thread in which Sahra explores the tone-deaf way that transportation advocates sometimes focus on bike lanes and car-free streets to the detriment of other factors that impact BIPOC’s ability to safely use active transportation. I encourage you to check out the thread.



**sahra**

@sahrasulaiman



When you do a lengthy thread replete w/ stories on how/where gang issues fit into the safe/open/slow streets discussion and someone immediately tells you there's no need to read it because the real problem is cars, did you really happen

 **sahra** @sahrasulaiman

I've been working on writing something related to this as I've watched the open/slow streets drum be beat by urban planners/advocates for the last several weeks... [twitter.com/NPR/status/126...](https://twitter.com/NPR/status/126...)

10:35 AM · May 25, 2020



56



See sahra's other Tweets



By Courtney Cobbs | Jan 8, 2020

Getting around Chicago on bike should be as safe, convenient, and intuitive as navigating the city by ca-

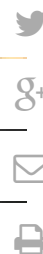


## Untokening Detroit Showed Why Mobility Justice Advocates Need to Think Intersectionally

By Lynda Lopez | Nov 20, 2018

Because racial inequities are so obvious in Detroit, holding the convening there underscored the need for transportation advocates to keep in mind other social justice struggles.





## Talking about Slow Streets and equitable community input

By Courtney Cobbs | Jun 22, 2020

47th Ward alderman Matt Martin hosted a panel on these topics with reps from the Active Transportation Alliance, the Metropolitan Planning Council, and Streetsblog Chicago.



## How do we promote efficient and equitable transportation during and after the pandemic?





By Imelda March | Apr 24, 2020

Audrey Wennink from the Metropolitan Planning Council and Lynda Lopez from Active Trans discuss what needs to be done to promote mobility justice during the pandemic, and prevent a spike in driving afterwards.



## Evaluating Gabe Klein's Chicago Legacy

By John Greenfield | Nov 5, 2013

Not long after Gabe Klein reported for work as commissioner of the Chicago Department of Transportation on May 16, 2011, there was speculation that he wouldn't stick around long. Klein's wife was remaining in Washington, D.C., where he had previously run the DOT. As an ambitious guy who had worked in several different fields, including [...]

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**paulrandall** • 21 days ago • edited

Shared streets & protected bike lanes are inherently equitable infrastructure improvements because they are open to everyone regardless of income, they are non polluting, cost efficient, and they knit the urban fabric together instead of dividing it. However racist policing and gang violence make streets and cars unsafe for BIPOC. The same is true for BIPOC people in cars.

Does equity demand that all shared streets, open streets, protected bike lanes and new cycling infrastructure programs be suspended until the problems of overpolicing, police violence, police harassment, racist civilians and gang violence make them safe for all people in all neighborhoods? Should we suspend all street improvements because BIPOC are in danger of being murdered in their cars at traffic stops by police and by stray bullets from gang drive-bys?

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

**Flatlander** • 22 days ago

I feel like these conversations usually go in circles and don't end up anywhere productive. Take this bit: "The piece begins with a recognition that planners have historically ignored larger social issues faced by BIPOC and focused solely on changing the built environment"

Speaking solely about transportation, it's true that past generations of planners and engineers have done things that severely impacted people of color. By and large, that's far less true today, and if folks can't acknowledge that, I'm not sure what they hope to achieve. More to the point, shaping the built environment is the actual job of planners and engineers in a way that addressing other systemic inequities is not.



Similarly, engineers who have nothing to do with transit might be asked why they're working on signs and striping and not sending more frequent buses. And maybe they can mention that to the transit planners, but then ultimately any action on that front will probably come down to making the pie bigger, which...is again way beyond the scope of most planners and engineers.



And then often a planner or engineer is asked why they are doing planning and engineering and not addressing crime. It's not that planners or engineers don't care or that they're trying to uphold white supremacy. It's just that despite the there's very little that they can do about crime. Meanwhile, people drive far more irresponsibly in poor neighborhoods but unless you're willing to completely overhaul engineering standards and spend billions of non-existent dollars, or deploy much more enforcement (which we all know is problematic on its own) you're not going to change that.



Further, I'd say that almost all the money in planning and engineering is tied to some measurable outcome (e.g 5 community meetings. PS&E at 8 intersections). But if you try to completely open the process and try to give the community exactly what they ask for, the funders have no idea what they're going to get or if it's even achievable. Your average transportation department probably has little jurisdiction over lighting, policing, or bus schedules, so what happens if that's what the community wants? Really, the only way would be to have extremely flexible funds which sounds all sorts of alarm bells in today's political environment.

Almost everyone that i know in planning or engineering is committed to equity. But at some point we need to get real about what they can and cannot do.

2 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



**paulrandall** → Flatlander • 21 days ago

Good points.

^ | v • Reply • Share ›

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