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A Letter to White Urbanists

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Protestors in San Francisco on May 30, 2020. Photo by Sergio Ruiz (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/sirgiuous/49955439252/>).

Fellow white urbanists and policy professionals, I know that so many of us right now are grappling with grief and rage over George Floyd's murder. So many of us want to see an end to racist violence and the killing of black and brown people in this country. And many of us struggle to know what to do to be effective allies in the fight to end racism, particularly given the racist history of policy and planning in the United States.

From my perspective, there are two key things to acknowledge if we are to be effective allies:

First, white America, we must understand that we are the aggressors. We must end our aggression — both in our actions and in our thoughts — if we want the violence to end.

Second, we must understand that we disproportionately hold the power. Therefore, it is on us to fix this.

Since the days of slavery, white people have been taught to fear blackness as a means to justify the immoral ownership of other humans. And since slavery, we have held power. What we have failed to see — over and over and over again — is that our fear of blackness and our hold on power has meant that we are the aggressors. Our learned response to blackness — danger! — means that we kill black people, whether they are jogging or driving or struggling for breath. And we largely do it with impunity.

If we simply look at the patterns that play out repeatedly, we should recognize that it is not white people who should be afraid of black people, but black people who should be afraid of white people.

For those of us in the planning and policy worlds, this is critical to understand. The most basic need we have as human beings is for safety. But the presumption of safety that we as white people enjoy is not one that extends to our brown and black neighbors. Far too often, this manifests in the actual death of black and brown people. But it can also show up in being trailed at a retail store because, as a person of color, you've been profiled as a shoplifter. It can show up as kids on the playground chanting "dirty Mexican" (source:

Donald Trump). It can show up as a white neighbor stopping you on the street and asking what you're doing "in this neighborhood." And as the viral videos show, it can show up as phone calls to the police when you gather with your friends for a barbecue.

All of these are experiences that my friends, neighbors and family members have shared, right here in Oakland. My biracial children started experiencing discrimination at the age of five, as soon as they entered a predominantly white school environment. It is everywhere and it is frequent and it is indiscriminate in its application. Because people of color are surrounded by white people — and because white people hold internalized bias — there is no place for people of color to be truly safe in our communities.

As planning and policy professionals, understanding this dynamic is central to our ability to disrupt systemic racism. We tend to focus on policies and planning approaches aimed at making people feel "good." A high-quality of life. Ease of commute. Active and well-used public spaces. But before people can feel good, they must feel safe. And as white policy professionals, it is time for us to establish as our first question, "What will allow all members of our community to feel safe?" In this space, in this city, in this region, in this system.

When we focus on safety, we can see that our spatial policies have long been used to marginalize and segregate, and that our social norms have long been used to discriminate. Because of this history and because of our current-day bias as white people, displacement is not just the physical movement of communities of color from one geography to another. It is the decimation of the safe spaces that communities of color have carved out in the face of institutionalized segregation. For many people of color, being with people who look like you is one of the few ways that safety can be secured: Black shop owners are less likely to see blackness and read "shoplifter" than are white shop owners. Disrupting these spaces is therefore a threat to safety.

Similarly, when we use a safety lens, we can see that while slow streets are a benefit to public health (<https://www.spur.org/news/2020-04-27/close-some-streets-health-public>), they can also become expanded spaces for racism to play out (<https://www.curbed.com/2020/5/20/21263319/coronavirus-future-city-urban-covid-19>). So when we advocate for slow streets, we must consider how they can be designed to signal belonging for all of us (<https://medium.com/at-the-intersections/a-tale-of-two-truths-transportation-and-nuance-in-the-time-of-covid-19-9bc99ff8c005>). Those of us who are white women know that well-lighted public spaces give us a stronger sense of safety. Do we as white people know what designs are required for people of color to have a sense of safety and belonging? Who needs to be invited into the space — whether it is street vendors (<https://nyc.streetsblog.org/2020/05/19/op-ed-city-must-include-street-vendors-in-any-outdoor-dining-push/>) or culturally specific retailers?

When we remember that we are the ones disproportionately holding power, we also place the responsibility for ensuring safety for all on ourselves. We have a responsibility to understand safety as shaped by racism. And most importantly, we have a responsibility to understand and work to reverse our own internalized biases and the harms our people have perpetrated over generations. We cannot "run with Maud" (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/08/us/run-with-maud-ahmaud-arbery.html>) and pat ourselves on the back as allies. We must eliminate our own bias, and then we can be allies.

That process is a personal one. It requires that we examine our own instincts, our own first thoughts. And if what we see when we do that honest assessment is fear, we must — absolutely must — find a replacement thought and practice it over and over again (<https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2017/05/unconscious-bias-training/525405/>). Because if we do not, it will not end with George Floyd, just as it did not end with Ahmaud Arbery or Trayvon Martin or Michael Brown or the countless reported and unreported deaths before theirs.

When we are the aggressors — fearing and killing black people — and we hold the power, it is on us to end this. We can only do so when we demand better from ourselves and from the institutions and systems we lead and influence.

As we consider our pandemic recovery, we must hold front and center the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 and associated economic collapse on black and brown people. When we frame the pandemic as an opportunity (as, admittedly, SPUR has done (<https://www.spur.org/news/2020-04-08/crisis-opportunity-build-stronger-and-more-affordable-region>)), we not only belittle the real and deep grief of those who have

lost loved ones from the disease. We also ignore the extraordinary injustice of all of the myriad systems that have created a situation in which black and brown people are more susceptible to death from this disease in the first place: the segregation, the lack of economic access, the blaming poverty on the poor rather than on our economic system, the suppression of voting rights, the denial of equal education, the denial of opportunities to build wealth and, most of all, the denial of basic humanity. These are things that our people have done. We have to own this and we have to repair it and it starts with deciding that we will work first to correct the deepest harms.

White America, so many of us wish to be allies. So many of us are deeply outraged and experiencing grief and pain in the face of yet another lost life. We want to help. But if we want to help, we have to take responsibility for our part in perpetuating the systems that have led to these outcomes. We have to undo our own racism, and we have to be deeply focused on undoing racism in our spheres of influence going forward.

There is promise here, but only if we are willing to be humble in the face of what we don't know and brave enough to try. There is harm in standing on the sidelines, and we cannot let the perfect be the enemy of the good. As an individual and as a leader, I am constantly learning and evolving in this work, as is my organization. We will make mistakes and we will learn, but we can only be part of the solution if we take the proactive steps needed. We have to roll up our sleeves, accept our responsibility and create space for — and shift power to — those from whom we've withheld it for so long, and with such tragic consequences.

We can do this, white America. And it is ours to do.

Read previous SPUR articles on race and police violence:

- **A Plea to End Racial Bias: A Mom's Response to Police Violence in Our Cities** (<https://www.spur.org/news/2016-07-18/plea-end-racial-bias-mom-s-response-police-violence-our-cities>)
- **What's Going On: Tensions, and Solutions, in a Changing Oakland** (<https://www.spur.org/news/2016-07-14/what-s-going-tensions-and-solutions-changing-oakland>)
- **Violence and the Urban Commons** (<https://www.spur.org/news/2016-07-19/violence-and-urban-commons>)
- **Building an Inclusive Community in Times of Fear and Distrust** (<https://www.spur.org/news/2016-07-20/building-inclusive-community-times-fear-and-distrust>)