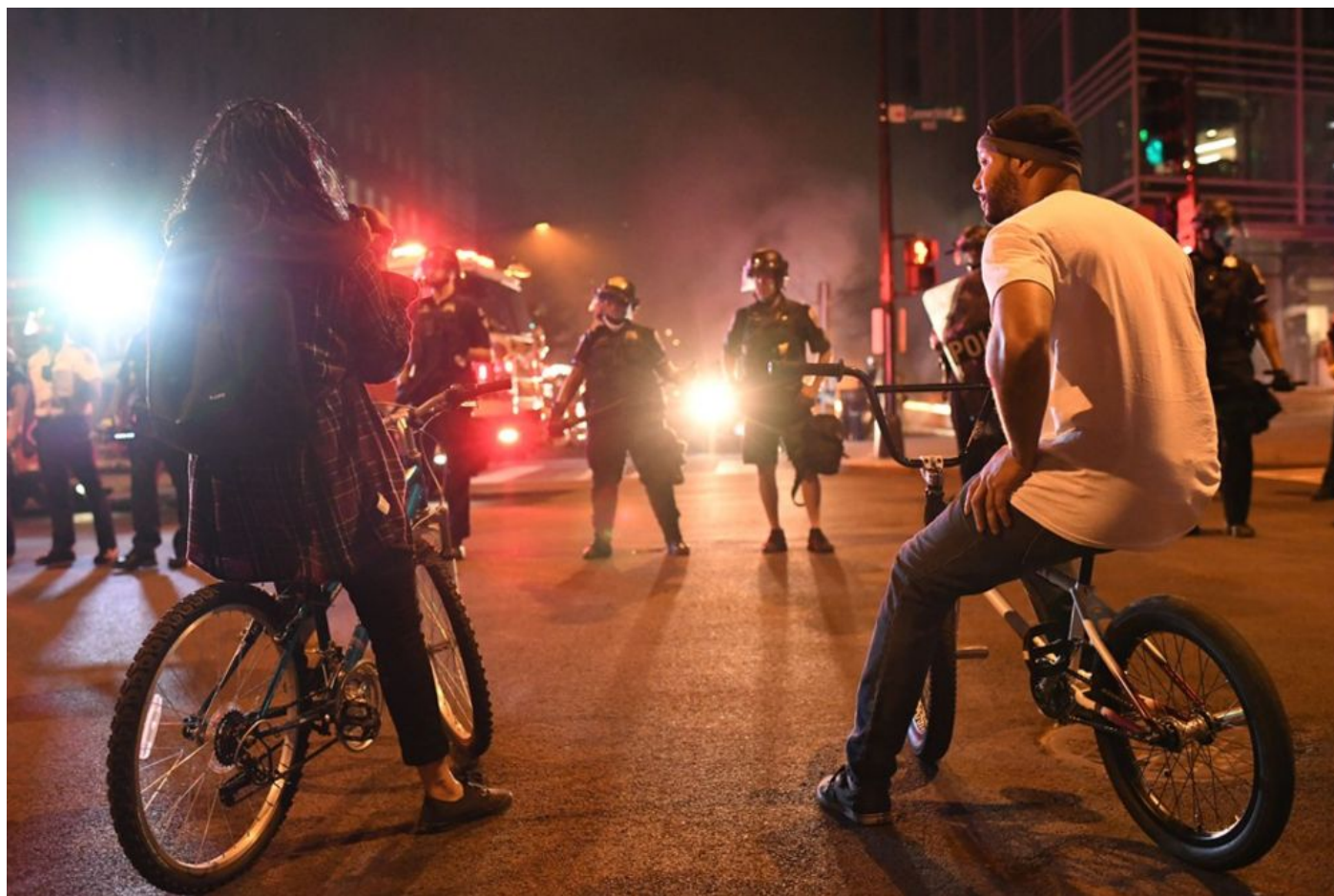


'Safe Streets' Are Not Safe for Black Lives

A transportation planner warns pedestrian-friendly street redesigns that happen without diverse public input can end up harming the communities they serve.

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Demonstrators on their bikes face police officers outside of the White House on May 30 in Washington, D.C. *Eris Baradat/AFP via Getty Images*

This spring, a pandemic cleared cars from the streets. Many U.S. cities seized the moment by announcing new bike lanes and networks of “slow streets” that limit vehicle traffic. It is a transportation planner’s dream to hear that thousands of miles of streets are being reorganized to make room for more walking, biking and playing.

But to me, as a Black planner and community organizer, the lack of process and participatory decision-making behind these projects was an absolute nightmare. Pop-up bike lanes, guerrilla-urbanist playgrounds, and tactical walkways have been notorious for being politically crude for as long as I’ve been in the field: By design, their “quick-build” nature overrides the public

feedback that is necessary for deep community support. Without that genuine engagement, I feared that pandemic-induced pedestrian street redesigns would deepen inequity and mistrust in communities that have been disenfranchised and underserved for generations.

Today, after the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd, the open streets that drew cheers of victory in the “war on cars” a few weeks ago are filled with the blood, tears and bodies of Black people who are tired of being killed in the intersection. The signature features of long-fought battles for “complete streets” infrastructure – the beloved Elmo-red bus-only lanes and green-carpet bike lanes – are now littered with rubber bullet fragments and tear gas canisters used to suppress the voices of those bodies that were qualified as low-income enough, Black enough, and asthmatic enough to justify the funding for these features in the first place.

We didn’t need the murders of Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd to know that something was wrong with our approach to transportation planning. In fact, their deaths are two of the countless symptoms of the rotten (lead-pipe-filled) underbelly that has gone unattended to in Black and Brown communities nationwide. Yet urbanist responses to Covid-19 seemed to ignore the inequities that cause this illness to be several times more deadly to Black people in the U.S.

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The announcement of open streets from Oakland to Minneapolis to New York City left me wondering how advocates for them would respond to data showing Black people make up 87% of those who are being criminalized in the name of “social distancing” in Brooklyn, where Covid-19 is still largely uncontained. Similarly, I thought about the ways Black, Brown, Indigenous People, people of color, as well as trans people, are regularly policed, harassed, and killed in the built environment. That violence could be heightened in spaces where the main understanding of personal safety centers on vehicle traffic, as opposed to valid concerns about racism, transphobia and xenophobia and the territorial entitlement to space that often shows up in newly gentrified communities.

Meanwhile, Indigenous People are virtually excluded from data analysis and relegated to the remnants of urban space. Planning processes tend to dismiss their existence and the impacts of these projects on their communities as being statistically nominal.

To make these structurally racist matters worse, just as the coronavirus exacerbates cardiovascular and respiratory issues among Black people, quick-build and open streets programs fail to address the environmental factors at the root of these health disparities. Encouraging Black residents to go outside without addressing the environmental crises that lead to Covid-19 complications is a tell-tale sign that Black well-being was a secondary (at best) intention of these projects.

If you want to ban cars, start by banning racism.

Every week in America, people like Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd have their lives stolen because their visibility in public space goes against the ways we've come to understand who should have access to “outside” and how they should be allowed to access it. Without a plan to include and protect Black, Brown, Indigenous, trans, and disabled people, or a plan to address anti-Black vigilantism and police brutality, these open streets are set up to fail.

While many people have just begun their journeys to unlearn racism and walk in allyship, quick-build equity won't pull us from the grips of structural racism that got us here. In April, when cities offered miles of road closures as a policy response to the pandemic, many Black planners – women in particular – spoke up about the dangers of excluding entire communities from public processes, and interrogated the open streets narrative for exploiting Black, Brown and

Indigenous death to justify entitlement to recreation. But we were written off as the champions of “the enemy of progress” – that is, equity.

Earlier this week, the open streets in cities like Oakland and San Francisco were filled with militarized police brutalizing protesters. Racial equity statements released by urbanist organizations, architecture groups, and mobility tech startups, while unprecedented, lack policy-based backing and display no plan for true accountability moving forward. If we want to see streets filled with joy and true low-stress access to quality of life, we have to be willing to disrupt what has been the default mode in urban planning – one that centers whiteness and silences Black and Brown people and low-income communities. This dynamic plays host to white supremacy by imposing pilots and experiments on low-income communities that deserve long-term planning and participatory processes.

Every day, people across the U.S. navigate transit systems that rely on the criminalization of poverty as a primary source of revenue and walk through streets soaked in toxic industry. If we want to prevent unintended impacts as a result of our planning practices today, our solutions and responses to these crises (and the interlocking systems of oppression that they exacerbate) must be rooted in collective decision-making, with a special emphasis on those who experience and access “outside” from a disadvantaged position in society.

In an ideal world, the response to the question of “Open to whom?” would be “everyone.” But in this climate, where there are so many variables that undermine that ideal, our responses and processes should read more like “Open, particularly for...” As we evolve our understanding of the different impacts the built environment has on different people, we should think about how our response to Covid-19 and civil unrest could atone for how hostile our urban spaces have been for so many. We must listen intently to those who’ve long studied and advocated for climate justice in communities where urban heat islands, toxic industry, blight, and air and water quality make being “outside” dangerous regardless of roadway configuration.

There are other concrete ways to truly lean into the notion of a future where Black life is possible.

1. Public works and transportation agencies should produce and publish a concrete plan for divestment from police agencies. This includes both fiscal and values-based components: Enforcement should be replaced with accessibility and accountability, and funds to police should be redistributed to community-based organizations, direct service providers and behavioral health specialists that are equipped to uphold dignity and care for everyone within the built environment.

2. Quick-build projects don't solve the disparities caused by the legacy of racist planning and disinvestment. In order to be transformative, infrastructure projects should have a comprehensive environmental justice plan as a prerequisite, and basic public works should be up to date prior to implementation. This includes proper drainage and floodplain planning, addressing pavement heat indexes, upgrading underground utilities, reducing toxic industry in the vicinity, accessible curbs and crossing opportunities, adequate shelter and shade, and dignified support for curbside residents.
3. If you want to ban cars, start by banning racism. Planners should make an intentional effort to address scarcity across all modes of transportation so as to empower freedom of movement and choice in mobility. This should include free assistive devices, bikes and bike accessories, free transit, subsidized rideshare, and economically equitable access to zero-emissions vehicles. Until Black people are no longer being hunted down by vigilantes, white supremacists and rogue police, private vehicles should be accepted as a primary mode of transportation.
4. Design low-stress street networks that specifically center the safety of and joy-filled travel by Black people. These routes, networks, wayfinding elements, and reparations-centered policies should derive from a participatory process that includes the voices of Black people, people living with disabilities, trans people, elders and youth.
5. If your leadership can't speak to racial equity, you should not be releasing a statement. If your organization, agency, or firm is/has released a racial equity statement in solidarity with the Movement for Black Lives, you have an obligation to ensure that your workforce is reflective of those values and the treatment of your Black employees is consistent with these values. Stop asking your one Black employee to write your equity statement overnight.
6. Employee agreements for transit and transportation agencies need to be modified so that no one is forced to serve the needs of law enforcement. No one should face retribution or punishment for opting out.
7. Bikeshare operating agreements should include mandatory long-term anti-displacement and equitable distribution plans to ensure bikeshare as a mode choice is equitable across the geographic region.

What is at stake here is not the probability of safe pedestrian or biking infrastructure: Based on the speed with which open streets programs were deployed this spring, we now know that those projects can and will happen with enough political will. Instead, the viral photo of young white people brunching in a curbside parklet as protesters march through the same streets demanding an end to police violence and structural racism shows what is at stake when city planning practitioners fail to consider the lives and legacies most impacted by their decisions.

This sector must no longer exist in service of white comfort, with no regard for the bodies that carry the burden of protest when Black lives are lost in the streets. This is a moment where a concept as beautiful as freedom of movement deserves to be dignified with processes that embrace civic engagement values, consider quality of life and challenge the policing of “otherness.”

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