

Traffic Lab  
**The Seattle Times**

## Ask An Expert: How can transportation planners better serve Black and brown people?

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Destiny Thomas, Founder and CEO of Thrivance Group (Courtesy of Destiny Thomas)



By [Michelle Baruchman](#) 

*Seattle Times Traffic Lab engagement editor*

Destiny Thomas had been working on issues of race and how Black people in particular are treated in transportation planning long before recent protests against racial injustice and police violence spread across the nation.

“It’s the basis of my work and the research I’ve done. It’s the backdrop of my life,” she said. “It’s not something that was prompted necessarily by the protests or even COVID-19,” both of which have shined a light on racial disparities.

Thomas is the founder and chief executive officer of [Thrivance Group](#), an organization that serves people vulnerable to disparity, displacement and disenfranchisement. She is an anthropologist and planner from Oakland, California, and has worked at the California Department of Transportation as an environmental planner and at the City of Los Angeles as a transportation planner.

**TRAFFIC LAB**

[Traffic Lab](#) is a Seattle Times project that digs into the region’s thorny transportation issues, spotlights promising approaches to easing gridlock, and helps readers find the best ways to get around. It is funded with the help of community sponsors Alaska Airlines, Kemper Development Co., NHL Seattle, PEMCO Mutual

In our latest Traffic Lab Ask An Expert Q&A, we spoke with Thomas about her experiences that brought her to transportation planning and how she thinks the field could better serve Black and brown people.

Do you know of an expert you think we should feature in one of our Q&As? Nominate them [here](#).

This interview has been lightly edited for length and clarity.

### **What brought you to transportation planning?**

I experienced a mass eviction from an apartment complex when I was 19 in Alameda, California. There was new development going around, and I started seeing bike lanes go up and walls being built around the more expensive housing. I felt like we were an exposed eyesore. Even without having the language to articulate what it felt like, I knew that something was going to uproot us. That really politicized me and made it clear to me that I wanted to work in this field.

I also remember watching the news. They would do a recap of all the homicides for the year. I saw my first-ever boyfriend's face come up. That was how I found out he was killed. He had worked three shifts that day and got off the bus and was killed while standing at a bus stop that had no lighting. These things kept happening.

### **How did Thrivance Group form?**

I did some research with communities who are working to heal from trauma they encounter in the built environment. Through that, I found that I myself was sharing in their trauma by facilitating these healing sessions. I created a method for capturing resident feedback and stories in a way that doesn't require people to re-traumatize themselves. That's where the word Thrivance came from. It's a way of being and engaging with each other that promotes thriving as opposed to harm.

### **What is infrastructural trauma?**

Built design can uphold conditions that are traumatic. One of the most glaring examples of this is the compartmentalized construct of urban centers. There is a very racist and traumatic history associated with how urban development came about. Now

it's cutting edge, innovative, sustainable. But I feel like what's lost in that story is the fact that urban centers were literally created as mechanism to repress anyone who did not identify as white. People want to talk about an urban lifestyle, infusing the transportation amenities into an urban landscape. We can't do that without addressing the root causes of harm that existed before this new wave of urbanism.

### **How do you feel about the word urbanism?**

I think urbanism is a double entendre. Until recently, the word urban was code for Black or hood culture. Just like anything associated with Blackness and culture, it gets appropriated. When we call it urbanism, we're supporting the centering of white comfort. It's really troubling that we're taking this literal aspect of life and creating a temporal or hypothetical philosophical way of speaking about something that is actually our lives. It reproduces a notion of othering.

### **What are the issues you see in community engagement work around transportation projects?**

This work is relegated to women and Black people because there is a social construct where women are responsible for being gentle and emotional. Black women, in particular, are the nurturers and bearers of everyone else's pain. We need community engagement. We need that engagement to be meaningful. The flip side is that we're exploiting and taking advantage and probably underpaying and undervaluing the leadership of women and Black people and people of color.

### **How do you balance competing interests during community engagement?**

The fact that well-to-do people with lots of time are using that time to lift up complaints in bad faith is because they know that is a tactic that will work. Community engagement, when it is project specific, takes a long time to arrive at consensus or conceptual design that matches the needs and priorities at the community level. It takes a long time because there are no preexisting relationship at community level between the community and government agencies. Every time you go out there to talk about a project, it's the first time they saw you. What I proposed through dignity-infused community engagement is moving away from this project-specific, transactional relationship with neighborhoods. If community engagement is resourced properly and we lean into participatory decision making, we could get to a point where most of these projects are generated at the community level as requested by residents.

## What do you see as the future of streets and street planning?

There are so many beautiful opportunities if we de-center white comfort. A great example is all of the people who work in any kind of underground economy, like our street vendors. As we think about creating street canopies for people walking and biking, we have to think about those same opportunities for people doing business in the public right of way.

In anthropology, the word assembly has some duality. We usually think about it as an engagement activity. The word assemblages is really important in how we come to understand culture and build kinship. When these uprisings started, when tragedies happened, when our people were being murdered in the streets — if something happens, I already know where the protest is starting because I have a special and long standing relationship to the built environment. I know where people naturally converge when trauma happens. I know where the assembly is. What would it look like for planners to be accommodating of the ways people assemble and the reasons people assemble? Why isn't there amphitheater seating at plazas? Let's really build an environment that matches the way people organically move and exist in it.

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