



Urbanist organizations speak out about racial justice and white supremacy

EQUITY By [David Alpert](#) (Executive Director), [Kate Jentoft-Herr](#) (Program and Community Coordinator) June 2, 2020 2



A protest in Mount Pleasant, Michigan following George Floyd's killing. [Image](#) by Dan Gaken licensed under [Creative Commons](#).

A core part of urbanism involves how to create and design public spaces for people. How people experience public space depends directly on the color of their skin and outside perceptions of their gender, and with the recent killing of George Floyd, Americans are again confronting this reality.

Several prominent urbanist organizations including [NACTO](#), [SGA](#), and [SPUR](#) sent statements Monday condemning systemic racism and naming the ways that urbanism has been complicit in upholding systems of white supremacy. They acknowledged that the majority of urban planners, transportation professionals and policy experts are white, and the profound impact that has on the lived experiences of people of color, especially Black Americans.

The Greater Greater Washington [editorial board wrote](#) that people who have been killed recently by police “were seen as not having a right to belonging and safety while going about their daily life. We do not doubt that their experiences would have been very different had they been white.”

Bluntly put, we do not want walkable, bikeable, urban places and spaces that are unwelcoming or unsafe for some members of our community, especially those who have been and are continuing to be over-policed - Black men and boys. We fight for cities that work for all of us, not just white people, and not just those who are perceived as wealthy. ...

In [A Letter to White Urbanists](#), Alicia John-Baptiste of San Francisco Bay Area-based SPUR wrote:

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](#), they can also become [expanded spaces for racism to play out](#). So when we advocate for slow streets, we must consider [how they can be designed to signal belonging for all of us](#). 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](#) or culturally specific retailers?

Calvin Gladney, head of Smart Growth America (which is GGWash's 501(c)(3) fiscal sponsor) [wrote](#):

Decisions we [urban planners] have intentionally made about land use, transportation, and the built environment for decades have produced a system that is inherently unequal; where black and brown Americans are more likely to be struck and killed while walking, are less likely to own a home, are more likely to suffer from transportation-related air pollution that increases their chances of death from COVID-19, and—as we've seen again—are often targeted by the police in public spaces that are supposed to be for everyone. As a country, we need to do better.

[A statement](#) from the National Association of City Transportation Officials said in part (emphasis in original):

Our job is to make streets and public spaces safe for everyone. But, from historic policies like redlining to modern ones like criminalization of fare evasion, many transportation and land use decisions have amplified and fortified racial inequities. If we ignore historical and current-day racism and pretend that the spaces we create are neutral, we abdicate our responsibility to provide safe mobility for everyone and we become complicit in perpetuating the racist underpinnings of our systems and structures.

Every day, the people in transportation agencies at every level of government are faced with decisions that mean the difference between sustained progress, or a continuation of violent oppression. For example, when we open streets to people but rely on police presence to enforce those spaces, we actively harm many of the people we are trying to

support, opening up Black Americans in particular to another venue where they can be stopped by the police, and all too often, arrested, injured, or killed. When we shut transit systems in response to protests, we deny countless people, largely of color or lower incomes, a means of mobility and their right to voice their concerns and seek redress from their government. Transportation's complicity in these unjust systems must stop.

*For those of us in the transportation industry, especially those in leadership positions, this moment requires us to take special pause and self-reflection. Many of us entered this work because we wanted to correct the segregation and inequity of our regions; because we viewed cities as vehicles for justice, equality, and places where every person can find fulfillment and dignity. **Despite these good intentions, many of us, particularly those of us who are White, have unintentionally perpetuated the racist structures that make our cities and regions inequitable.***

We also must recognize that urbanist policies are not going to fix these problems in our society on their own. For instance, GGWash has been working for years to push for a Comprehensive Plan that expands affordable housing and integrates neighborhoods, but the Comp Plan will not make housing affordable or integrate neighborhoods on its own. No layout of lanes or network of transit service will immediately create a just world. But we can push for policies which do not worsen inequity and understand how decisions we make or proposals we pursue tie into a history of centuries of oppression.

As the GGWash editorial board put it, “We must dismantle cultures and structures of white supremacy as part and parcel with our work in dismantling structures of housing segregation and car dependence.” As the NACTO statement says, “We must recognize that our efforts will be incomplete and insufficient without equal effort to dismantle racist systems.”

For those of us who are privileged, and especially those of us who are white, we can, as John-Baptiste said, work to “understand that we disproportionately hold the power” and “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.”

Continue the conversation about urbanism in the Washington region and support GGWash’s news and advocacy when you [join the GGWash Neighborhood!](#)

Tagged: [equity](#), [nacto](#), [police](#), [public safety](#), [race](#), [smart growth america](#), [spur](#)



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Kate Jentoft-Herr is GGWash's Community and Program Coordinator. Previously the Development Manager at the Coalition for Smarter Growth, Kate is interested in exploring the relationships between land-use, racism, and the Climate Crisis and in making discussion of urban issues accessible to folks from all backgrounds. She is a proud DC native and loves being able to walk to work.

2 COMMENTS

THREADED NEWEST AT BOTTOM NEWEST AT TOP

LC on June 3, 2020 at 5:03 pm

Thanks for the article. Wow, that it took the filming of an actually murdering to wake many up to the Black experience and the systematic racism. Something that many have experienced daily for the past 400 years. But, please ask yourselves how are you complicit? How has your new urbanism, and smart

growth contributed to the perpetual marginalization of Black communities? Established Black communities know the needs of the area- they must be involved/ heard. This top-down approach to assess, and establish needs is racist. Your need for bike lanes that displace parking for Black church congregants; your unaffordable IZ, and micro-units continue to displace multigenerational /family units; and the lack of any sidewalk seating to prevent Black congregating = Black codes/ Jim Crow laws. furthermore your policy on retail priority area funding that seeks to exclude Black established businesses while catering to specialized clients class-based/ racist. Please answer are you willing to give up your privilege and class for equity to all? Do you have a diverse group of Blacks on your staff to provide a multicultural view? If so, do the work, and be about the change you speak of.

REPLY LINK REPORT

Chester B. on June 4, 2020 at 9:17 am

Do you have a diverse group of Blacks on your staff to provide a multicultural view?

[Here is their staff](#); it appears to be diverse

REPLY LINK REPORT



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