

# The Character of Change

## Responding to the TCAUP: Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Symposium

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**“I look to a day when people will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.” –Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

As Americans and people across the world face a global economic downturn and a financial crisis the magnitude of which has not been seen in eighty years, they must also prepare to confront the social crises they will experience in their own communities. While the recent election cycle brought millions of people of all political persuasions into the national conversation and stirred nationwide grassroots mobilization, until now the federal government has been the most active player in dealing with the current economic crisis. Large-scale interventions are critical to keeping struggling states, cities, and key corporations afloat. However, to have a true impact the bailouts and economic stimulus will have to reach down to the local level, not just in a financial sense but in a social sense as well. This is the type of intervention that Dr. King envisioned: “Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable.... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals.”

In the Urban Planning community, we see these times as a chance to stand boldly and face the coming challenges. At this year’s annual Taubman College Martin Luther King Jr. Symposium at The University of Michigan, an event orchestrated every year by a committee of Urban Planning graduate students, the theme was “A Dreamer, but not the only one.” A panel of socially active practitioners and scholars—Kenneth Reardon, Associate Professor of Urban and Regional Planning at Cornell University; Madeline Janis, Executive Director of LAANE, Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy; Gloria Robinson, 2009 Sojourner Truth Visiting Professor at Taubman College and former Director of Planning & Development for the City of Detroit; and moderator Joe Grengs, Assistant Professor of Urban Planning at The University of Michigan—focused on redistribution through equity planning.

While redistribution has long been conceived in economic terms, it also has two critical spatial components. First, planners must realize that despite decades of

segregation into declining inner cities and abandoned suburbs, the disadvantaged are not invisible, nor are they separable from our continued success as a nation. The rich and poor are constantly pushed apart by a disparity of place, and the risky investment culture of recent years has only enhanced this separation. But despite this gulf, one must acknowledge that blighted urban centers and decaying suburbs are a part of the nation’s narrative just as much as vibrant downtowns and wealthy enclaves. Professor Joe Grengs speculated that the public “indifference to poor people is crumbling,” and planners must work to ensure that this progress translates into a crumbling of the walls that have created the current spatial order.

Second, equity planning has to acknowledge a federalist system where change can occur at many places. As Professor Ken Reardon explained, “You have to be active at each level where policy is being set.” This is most difficult for the poor, who have neither the means nor the time to devote to organizing and reforming their local political voice. Planners have long worked as surrogates for the neediest sectors of society, and we must be sure that our relationship with these communities is one of partnership rather than paternalism. Dr. Gloria Robinson described her time in Detroit as a period when “we worked on initiatives brought to us by the community,” a method significantly distinct from working on initiatives perceived from the outside as good for a community.

The dreams of Dr. King are not mere imaginings; they are meant to be pursued as aspirations. Addressing redistribution in both its economic and spatial forms is, of course, an important goal in itself. But it is also critical to enable people to create their own social capital and mobility—in short, to realize their own dreams. The poor, disadvantaged, disenfranchised, and their advocates and allies have long struggled for change at the grassroots level. Every time we allow these efforts to go unrewarded or to be blunted, we are telling these individuals that regardless of their character, we do not value their work. We are forgetting Dr. King’s call to judge people by “the content

of their character.” Most importantly, we are failing to realize that change is the product of many people working together—that there is a “character of change” reflective of every individual and the framework of our society.

Madeline Janis said “this is your time to put out your vision and insist...that we set up a whole new structure.” While hitting bottom is a painful process—one now being experienced by communities, neighborhoods, households, and individuals nationwide—it also creates opportunity. Since the time of Dr. King, many Americans have avoided activist, local citizenship and instead oriented toward disinterested, passive, removed consumerism. Rather than come together to tackle real problems, we too often perpetuate a divided culture that rallies around artificial notions of what is valuable. Just as this shift enabled much of the crises we now face, the course adjustments we make in these coming months and years will define us well into the future.

Urban planners and designers must embark on the uphill road of communicating, educating, and persuading the public about the positive effects of living in a more efficient, sustainable environment, all in a language that is locally-tailored but broadly-informed. We must enlist those who have been working for positive change behind the scenes; organize our communities, businesses, and leaders; and address our economic and spatial structural inequities. As part of the professional fields tasked with creating better cities, we have been equipped with many tools for effectuating these efforts. Let us hope that we have the requisite content of character to take advantage of our unique position.



The MLK Symposium Panel and Michigan URP Faculty  
From Left: Ken Reardon, Gloria Robinson, Joe Grengs, Madeline Janis, June Manning Thomas  
Photo: David Epstein



Detroit, Michigan Photo: Apoorva Alankar



Ingham County, Michigan Photo: Spencer Olinek