The Case for Bridge Planning and Cross-Cultural Practice

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Florida-born and California-raised, Grace Cho was a global studies major and urban and regional studies minor at UCLA. She was inspired to pursue planning after participating in a faith-based inner city immersion program in Fresno, California. Her experience as an AmeriCorps member also motivated her to help build a more equitable and inclusive society—physically, economically, and socially. She is currently pursuing her Master of Urban Planning at the University of Michigan, and is surviving the cold. So far.

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Like other professional and academic disciplines, planning faces the underrepresentation of minority groups. Despite some progress, planners of color may still face significant barriers to and within professional practice and academia. Some minority-race planners may have an internalized desire to advocate for marginalized communities, based on their own experience with oppressive circumstances. However, they are often "tokenized" within the workplace as being the most capable to work with minority groups. Even when a minority planner does possess an enhanced cultural fluency, they may feel unfairly burdened or pressured to deal with certain communities. Rather than pigeonhole minority planners with the expectation for advocacy, all planners can embrace this kind of work. These so-called "bridge planners" may be more comfortable in majority culture, but also possess an internalized value for social justice that motivates them to meaningfully engage with people who are different than them. Bridge planners must have the social knowledge and willpower to advocate for minority groups within their work and workplaces. When undertaken by planners of privilege, this can serve the dual purpose of alleviating the burden on minority planners and meaningfully leveraging their privilege to serve marginalized groups.

Upon visiting 12 prominent planning programs, Paul L. Niebanck observed large numbers of female students, but "among neither student bodies nor faculties, are blacks, Asians, Hispanics, or Native Americans adequately represented, by any standard of fairness…The situation is reprehensible, and it should embarrass us."[1] It is in this context that I will address the implications of the lack of racial diversity in the planning profession. I begin by briefly examining structural issues that contribute to the underrepresentation of minority planners, who can fill an important role in facilitating equitable development.

While minority planners often have unique social knowledge and values that empower them to advocate for marginalized groups, ultimately, all planners should develop the ability to work with, represent, and advocate for communities they cannot claim membership to. Planners of privileged status should highlight the needs and perspectives of minority communities and planners to shift dynamics of power and privilege within the profession. I have adapted the term "bridge planner" from June Thomas's discussion of black planners working in "minority-race" and/or low-income communities.[2] I will expand the definition of the bridge planner as an individual of any background who strives to make planning processes and workplaces more inclusive of underrepresented groups. Using Thomas's framework for "unified diversity for social action,"[3] I will argue that bridge planners must develop an understanding of structural groups, know how to navigate cross-cultural relationships in a variety of contexts, and leverage their privilege to successfully function as the link between marginalized groups and institutions of power.

According to Forester, the planning profession needs people who "speak articulately to the realities of poverty and suffering, [and] deal with race, displacement, and histories of underserved communities in ways that do not leave people's pain at the door."[4] Notably, Forester does not refer to planners' identities, choosing instead to focus on their knowledge of minority communities and their ability to choose empathy and empowerment over pity.

Individual planners may come to understand dynamics of power and privilege through Young's "structural groups, social positions that people occupy which condition their opportunities and life chances."[5] In Young's conceptualization, factors like race, class, and gender can all influence individual and community outcomes.

Based on these ideas, I define bridge planners as individuals who, regardless of cultural background, understand the effect of Young's structural groups on outcomes for society and within the planning profession. Bridge planners strive to address structural inequalities both in the workplace and in communities they serve.

The lack of diversity within the planning field provides an opportunity for bridge planners to elevate the voice and experience of their minority colleagues. This failure to adequately represent and respect the voice of minority planners begins in academia. Etienne and Sweet found that minority racial groups were underrepresented at all levels within planning schools. Troublingly, minority doctoral students experience difficulties in maintaining positions in academia, while those who succeed find themselves to be a hyper-minority among faculty members.[6] This inequitable representation has also been identified in the planning field; a study of 600 planners in the New York City metropolitan area found that African-American and Latino planners were underrepresented in the profession.[7]

The struggles of minority planners extend beyond underrepresentation; as a result of their background, they may be subject to marginalization within the professional workplace. In the same study of 600 planners in the New York City metropolitan area, Vazquez found that community members often are more responsive to minority planners. "Unfortunately, this limited notion of diversity tends to keep planners of color in frontline positions in minority neighborhoods while other planners are in positions of influence over development and public policy."[8] Such behavior, while seeming to leverage the cultural fluency of the minority planner, can in fact unfairly make one individual the sole agent for community advocacy and even stifle career advancement.

This may have a demoralizing effect on minority professionals. Indeed, Thomas completed six in-depth interviews with black planners who graduated from one program in Michigan to understand their experiences as bridge planners.[9] One planner reported that he felt "tokenized" when "colleagues relied upon him to serve as a bridge [to minority communities], oblivious to his other work commitments."[10] Designating minority individuals as the only bridge planners, while well-intentioned, places unfair expectations on them. In addition, it assumes that minority planners are comfortable in such a role. Troublingly, such actions absolve organizations from learning to navigate cross-cultural community relationships on a more structural level, which perpetuates existing power dynamics within the professional workplace and in the field.

Planning firms can and do benefit from the unique skills and perspectives of minority planners. Thomas's interviews confirm that planners' experiences as minority individuals enriched their professional practice, allowing them to "defend the interests of the minority or disadvantaged community within the [planning] agency, and…to link communication between urban communities and planning agencies."[11] Thus, minority professionals can play a unique role in the planning process, and may in fact be motivated to do so. Planners with experiences of marginalization simultaneously occupy positions of influence in planning processes and of sociocultural inequality. This combination of privilege and disadvantage can give minority planners the knowledge, skills, empathy, and trust-building capacity to effectively advocate for historically disadvantaged communities. Such skills and experiences are assets that the profession can benefit from.

However, the question of whether this kind of action is sustainable for the minority planner

remains. "Racial fatigue" among minority professionals results from "persistent experiences of racial discrimination and distrust" in their professional and/or personal lives.[12] Indeed, this phenomenon may be exacerbated by minority planners who place a burden on themselves to constantly play the difficult role of pushing against structural norms regarding representation and advocacy. Although minority individuals may be well-equipped to be bridge planners and have a strong desire to fill such a role, it is not sensible to thrust community advocacy on a few individuals and expect any kind of widespread, sustained success. Minority planners often inhabit the contested space between institutions of power and marginalized communities, either by choice or delegation. In the long run, this is not beneficial for either the institution of planning or the individual planner.

In light of the challenges faced by minority planners, scholars have highlighted the pressing need to diversify the planning profession.[13, 14, 15] Since the current lack of diversity in the planning profession is, in Niebanck's words, embarrassing,[16] planning agencies will continue to struggle to navigate relationships with minority professionals and communities. As a result, minority individuals will continue to experience underrepresentation and stifling tokenism for the foreseeable future within the profession. In light of this imbalance of power, minority planners cannot advocate for themselves or other minorities in an effective way. Non-minority planners must also be able to build trust cross-culturally, both in the professional workplace and with minority communities. Given the fact that non-minority planners may hold more positions of authority, they are perhaps best positioned to effectively act as bridge planners in present conditions of unrepresentativeness.[17] Indeed, "one might argue that planners who are racial minorities in situations of uneven opportunity may have much less personal power to move the system than planners who are not."[18] Majority-culture planners, who currently make up most of the profession and often hold racial and class privilege, are more likely to determine the trajectory of the field than their minority counterparts. These planners thus should partner with their minority colleagues to build authentic cross-cultural relationships as a part of their planning practice. Unless planners of privilege consciously choose to engage with the need for bridge planners, progress in achieving sustained diversity and informed practice may be thwarted.

What, then, does it mean to be a bridge planner? A bridge planner exhibits an internalized value for informed practice that prioritizes openness, respect of difference, and the affirmation of others' dignity. The idea of the bridge planner aligns with Thomas's discussion of "unified diversity for social action," a model for planning practice that leverages a sustainable, inclusive, and intentional diversity in pursuit of social justice in urban and regional contexts.[19] As planners develop meaningful relationships with colleagues and communities that acknowledge personal histories, abilities, and present struggles, they can leverage their knowledge, skills, and privilege on behalf of marginalized groups. This intentional value set can inspire planners to work alongside the communities they serve, an ideal that perhaps reflects the best of Thomas's framework for diversity.

The process of becoming a bridge planner is unique for everyone, and must prompt the individual to internalize a value for social justice. The American Institute of Certified Planners defines "social justice" as expanding "choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged, and to promote racial and economic integration."[20] Put another way, pursuing social justice inherently prioritizes

marginalized communities because of the existence of social inequity. Adopting a value for social justice thus can motivate bridge planners to reorient their professional practice toward the communities they intend to serve. Individuals who do not have personal experiences of societal inequity may build an understanding of social justice through education, exposure, humanistic concerns, meaningful relationships with people of different life experiences, or other means. Fainstein's theory of the "just city" provides a helpful framework for aspiring bridge planners by valuing "participation in decision making by relatively powerless groups and [the pursuit of] equity of outcomes."[21] Bridge planners also promote justice within the field by advocating for better representation of minorities and by elevating minority voices. The value for social justice thus acts as a catalyst that motivates planners to pursue equitable outcomes.

With the goal of social justice in mind, prospective bridge planners must be able to critically examine how structural qualities of race, class, sexuality, and gender manifest in cities. In addition, they must identify the aspects of their own personhood that contribute to their economic, political, and social privilege and/or marginalization. In recognizing components of their own identity, bridge planners will, at minimum, understand the need for nuanced trust-building in pursuit of social justice. Beyond their structural group associations, planners inherently occupy a position of privilege because of their role in making and influencing decisions about cities. Furthermore, planners often represent institutions of governance and, thus, power. Depending on the relationship between a community and said institutions, a planner may be viewed with distrust.[22] An effective bridge planner understands this potentially contentious power dynamic and approaches communities with a learner's perspective. In addition, they must have the will to act upon this social

knowledge in ways that are sensitive to the needs and perspectives of marginalized communities. Bridge planners must be prepared to deal with opposition from the organizations they represent, as well as from communities themselves. Planners must use their position of power to encourage community participation and collaboration, rather than as a blunt instrument to coerce groups to submit to a mediocre or even harmful vision for their neighborhoods.

Ultimately, the bridge planner can navigate potentially uncomfortable cross-cultural situations by building trust and relationships. According to Umemoto, "it [is not] realistic to think that one could become conversant in an unlimited number of cultural paradigms. It is not unrealistic, however, to create the foundation for social learning that emphasizes multiple epistemologies within planning processes."[23] Umemoto highlights the importance of mastering the ability to interact respectfully and effectively with people of different backgrounds, a skill that perhaps lies at the heart of bridge planning. By understanding one's own position in society, as well as the structure of society itself, the bridge planner is motivated to work with groups that they do not claim membership to. In this way, the bridge planner leverages their privilege on behalf of minority communities in a non-paternalistic way.

Many professional and educational fields are concerned about the lack of diversity within their respective field. Planning is unique because it theorizes about and exerts change upon an intricate web of structures that influences the daily lives of individuals, communities, and organizations. In attempting to shape the processes that make up the movements and trajectories of cities, planners must grow in their understanding of how cities, communities, and individuals operate on a sociopolitical plane. Without this knowledge, professionals

will simply enact changes on systems without understanding the potential ramifications, especially for specific structural groups. For the politically disenfranchised, economically disadvantaged, and socially excluded, such decontextualized actions reinforce a history of erasure and marginalization. Planners must be aware of the power they hold, both professionally and individually, to best serve underrepresented communities.

Understandably, some planners may not have been faced with the need to build meaningful working relationships that acknowledge systemic injustices. While principles of social justice can be taught, some individuals may resist internalizing Young's notions of structural groups and power.[24]

Part of the solution may be implemented in planning schools, which present an opportunity to systematically address the need for bridge planners. In this essay I have argued for the empowerment of minority bridge planners who can deftly supplement the culturally sensitive and socio-politically inclusive work of minority advocates. In addition, planners should begin to think about how to train and empower majority-culture bridge planners of all backgrounds to address the immediate needs of a diversifying society. Further research on how to build and maintain racial diversity in planning programs and professions is needed. Thoughtful actions and advocacy can and will influence institutions to better reflect the population and better serve marginalized communities. ▪

Endnotes

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23. Umemoto, "Walking in Another's Shoes," 20.

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