

[https://www.journalnow.com/opinion/columnists/russell-smith-spatial-injustice-is-hurting-winston-salem/article\\_2bd3d68c-f6fb-53c8-9c31-994619257220.html](https://www.journalnow.com/opinion/columnists/russell-smith-spatial-injustice-is-hurting-winston-salem/article_2bd3d68c-f6fb-53c8-9c31-994619257220.html)

## **Russell Smith: Spatial injustice is hurting Winston-Salem**

By Russell Smith Guest columnist May 3, 2019

Even a cursory analysis of Winston-Salem's geography reveals a variety of alarming inequities, ranging from uneven access to healthy food and educational opportunities to severe job and housing imbalances and dramatic health inequalities. There's also environmental pollution at local schools, food insecurity, and recent research that places Forsyth County among the worst-performing counties nationally for economic mobility.

Add all of this together and the situation becomes clear. We have a critical problem in our city with a corrosive pattern of inequality that is placed-based and is captured by a fairly new term: spatial (in)justice.

In communities where spatial justice exists, we tend to see equitable access to public goods, basic services, cultural goods, economic opportunity and healthy environments — all of which are enabled by inclusive and efficient spatial planning, design and management of urban spaces and resources. In other words, spatially just communities give their residents access to a quality education; affordable, quality housing; rewarding employment opportunities; and healthy and safe neighborhoods.

It's no mystery why we don't have those conditions in parts of Winston-Salem and also why they don't exist in many places across North Carolina.

A new book by historian Elizabeth Herbin-Triant, *Threatening Property*, explores the history of race and class on the creation of Jim Crow neighborhoods in our state, showing that serious problems rooted in racial inequity have long plagued our city. Today, we see those dynamics playing out with the spatial concentration of poverty, unemployment and other socio-economic challenges in several East Winston communities.

We can't change the past decisions that have gotten us here. But we urgently need a new and different way forward — and the Spatial Justice Studio (SJS) at the Center for Design Innovation is poised to make unique contributions to this work. The SJS is bringing faculty, students and the community together to explore alternative possibilities for urban areas and ways of achieving more equitable urban futures through research, teaching and dialogue.

As part of this outreach, the SJS hosted a workshop on April 12 to explore the concept of spatial justice. It was attended by a wide variety of nonprofits, government officials, community activists, foundations, residents and academics. Together, we explored how the concept of spatial justice can be applied to create greater opportunities for everyone in Winston-Salem. This was just the start of our work. We will continue to foster collaboration among diverse community partners, and we encourage everyone who is interested to join this conversation. There really is no time to waste.

Unless we can identify, discuss and collaboratively address these sensitive and pressing issues, including past grievances based on racist and classist policies, present spatial inequities will likely broaden. If that happens, we run the very real risk of continuing to perpetuate the creation of unjust and inequitable spaces in our community — and selling short the future of our entire city.

The Spatial Justice Studio will continue to foster collaboration among a diverse range of community partners seeking a greater balance of opportunities through the creation and regeneration of more equitable, functional and sustainable communities for everyone.

We also welcome your support. You can learn more about the studio and upcoming events at [cdiwsnc.org](http://cdiwsnc.org). Also, if you see spatial justice in our community, take a photo, upload it on Twitter

and Instagram and use #SpatialJusticeWSNC. The photos will be part of an upcoming project to help us better tell the story.

---

Russell Smith is a geography professor at Winston-Salem State University and the faculty lead for the Spatial Justice Studio at the Center for Design Innovation.