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Russell Smith and John Railey: Spatial justice can resolve problems

By Russell Smith and John Railey Guest columnists
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Russell Smith

The old saying is true: Geography is destiny. Winston-Salem and Forsyth County, like many other American cities and counties, have long been defined and restrained by their physical and socially-influenced geography.




In the early 20th century, redlining defined where Blacks could live. That pattern accelerated in the mid-part of the century with the construction of U.S. 52, the bypass that literally cemented the divide between Blacks and whites in this city. Conventional wisdom holds that the road divided white residents of means from Black residents of limited means. What is

John Railey

forgotten is that the Black section cut off by the bypass had once been a thriving area, and the new highway demolished Black residential and business centers in the name of progress. That pattern is far from over, and, even with successful efforts to revitalize downtown Winston-Salem, residents within a quarter mile of downtown still reside in abject poverty. Municipal and private initiatives that have sought to reverse that trend have not gained traction, and much of East Winston suffers from decades of disinvestment, neglect and indifference.

Winston-Salem State University's Center for the Study of Economic Mobility (CSEM) has, almost since its inception three years ago, supported research to resolve those inequities through its emphasis on one type of spatial injustice — economic mobility. Spatial injustice is an emerging field of study that seeks to bring together multi-disciplinary perspectives to help resolve longstanding equity-based issues impacting Winston-Salem and numerous other communities across the globe.



Professor Russ Smith was a CSEM Research Fellow studying the relationship between the built environment and economic mobility when he was

approached about becoming the faculty lead for the Spatial Justice Studio, which is housed at the Center for Design Innovation (CDI) in Winston-Salem and is a collaborative effort between WSSU and the UNC School of the Arts. A 2019 CSEM-sponsored policy report, co-authored by Smith and CSEM Research Manager Zach Blizard, indicated a 50-unit reduction in sprawl is associated with an increase of around 2.5% in the probability of upward mobility for residents toward the bottom of the income ladder. As a result, public and private sector policies should be focused on decreasing urban sprawl throughout the county in an effort to tackle the spatial injustice of low economic mobility. Meanwhile, John Railey, in a long reporting career at the Winston-Salem Journal, saw firsthand the geographical inequities, and is now the writer-in-residence at CSEM, supporting the work of Smith and others on economic mobility.

The two of us have talked about ways of putting research on spatial justice to work. In the spatial justice realm, however, there has been relatively little research on how inequities can be measured. The next step, after acknowledging there is a problem, is to measure it and to determine how big a problem it is, and if efforts to combat it are successful.

Toward that end, for the past two years, Smith has been working with faculty at WSSU and UNCSA, WSSU students and public-sector organizations to develop a quantitative analysis that can help to measure levels of spatial (in)justice in communities. This work, while not directly

...tied to CSEM, is rooted in CSEM's support for Smith's fellowship research, and will align with CSEM's research on the broken rungs of the ladder to economic mobility.

A new grant, received by WSSU from the University of North Carolina System's Research Opportunities Initiative, establishes the WSSU Center for Applied Data Science. Through the center, Smith will be provided the funding and support needed to develop a Spatial Justice Index. The index seeks to create a methodology by which a wide range of spatial justice issues can be quantitatively explored, such as education, environment, health care, transportation and access to healthy food. These issues have been aggravated by the current public health pandemic, social and racial unrest, and decades of spatial inequality.

Many of us in Winston-Salem and Forsyth County benefit from local, state and federal initiatives and policies. Many of us do not get that help. Much of that inequity is defined by where we live. We can confront that problem by creating a method for measuring those inequities.

Geography is destiny. Through research, we can inform the debate and shape that destiny, a shared one.

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more info about the Spatial Justice Studio, go to
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