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Sharing the Promise of Spatial Justice with Low Wealth Communities of Color Through Historically Black Colleges and Universities and Community Partnerships

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ABSTRACT

Spatial justice as a theoretical concept holds much promise for exploring, understanding, and solving issues of spatial inequality. However, the application of spatial justice leaves much to be desired. It is important to advance the practice of spatial justice through a variety of educational methodologies. One educational methodology that has been employed in other research areas is the use of university/community partnerships to solve local issues. This paper seeks to determine if a Historically Black College/University and community partnership is a viable alternative educational platform to raise the awareness of spatial justice within low wealth communities of color.



KEYWORDS

Community engagement; HBCU; partnerships; spatial justice; Winston-Salem

Introduction

Spatial justice as a theoretical concept holds much promise for exploring, understanding, and solving issues of spatial inequality in a wide variety of landscapes. Numerous scholars have used the concept to call for a more equitable future for millions of people across the globe, as a theory by which planners should create more spatially just cities and as a political agenda to drive social change (Fainstein, 2010; Williams, 2018). However, the ‘real world’ application of spatial justice leaves much to be desired and the application of spatial justice in the United States has yet to realize its full potential as a mechanism by which communities can become more just. The practice of employing spatial justice is a reality in other parts of the globe with scholars in China exploring its potential on public open space planning (Jian *et al.*, 2020) and in developing a Spatial Justice Index for Iraqi cities (Alrobaee, 2021).

However, in the United States, questions about the definition of spatial justice, to issues of tackling past versus future spatial injustices, to making the larger public aware of the concept and its potential, spatial justice as a working concept is still in its infancy and is not a widely heard term outside of academia. When employed in the United States, spatial justice is often associated with societal issues surrounding race in communities including redlining, urban renewal, and racialized zoning (Jackson, 1987; Avila & Rose,

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2009; Herbin-Triant, 2019). With this in mind, it is important to continue to advance the theory and practice of spatial justice through a wide variety of educational methods and platforms to create more just spaces for all.

One alternative educational platform that has been employed in other research areas (and which may be of value for spatial justice) is the use of university and community partnerships to solve local issues (Baum, 2000; Lowe, 2008; Allahwala *et al.*, 2013; Jackson & Marques, 2019). These ‘town and gown’ relationships have offered an opportunity for academic theory to be applied to local community issues. In the United States, the presence of Historical Black College and Universities (HBCUs) provide an additional avenue by which university and community partnerships can be explored.

This paper aims to determine if an HBCU and community partnership is a viable alternative educational platform to raise the awareness of spatial justice within low wealth communities of color through a personal reflection on the work of the Spatial Justice Studio in the City of Winston-Salem, NC. HBCUs are institutions that were established prior to educational integration to serve predominately African American communities and continue to provide higher educational opportunities for these students (Lovett, 2011). Specifically, this research will evaluate the partnership between Winston-Salem State University (WSSU) which is an HBCU and the Spatial Justice Studio (SJS) at the Center for Design Innovation (CDI). WSSU helped create the SJS in the Summer of 2018 in an attempt to connect with the local minority community and explore past, current and future spatial injustices.

Why Spatial Justice and Why Now?

The development of the partnership discussed in this paper was the result of a unique opportunity presented to me. Prior to joining the faculty at WSSU, I spent a decade as an AICP urban planner for a variety of local governments. During my time as a practicing planner, I was always troubled by development that ‘meet’ the requirements of zoning, subdivision and other regulations, but still seemed to be missing something. It might have been a rezoning that was approved and brought additional commercial development to a community that already had its fair share of retail establishments. Another example if the approval of an unwanted land use in a part of town in which there were already too many unwanted land uses and not enough quality development for residents that were often too busy or disconnected from the planning process to attend meetings, speak to elected officials, or lobby for themselves and their communities.

In the Summer of 2016, I was gifted the book *Seeking Spatial Justice* by Edward Soja (2010) and for the first time it provided me with the necessary lens through which to investigate, question, and ponder the many thoughts I encountered as a practicing planner. The book gave me new insight into the internal struggle that I dealt with trying to balance the procedural duties of a planner and the larger goals of the planning profession. It also gave a name to something that many of us are well aware of . . . spatial inequality and a way of resolving spatial injustices!

I also found the concept to be welcomed by my students at WSSU (an HBCU). The concept of spatial (in)justice resonated in classroom discussion, lectures, and office conversations, with the predominately minority population at WSSU. Many students informed me that they came from communities in which spatial injustice is a given and

that having a term for the reality they were living provided an acknowledgement of their spatial reality. They also shared that by naming what they experienced, they felt empowered to solve the problems facing their collective communities including: locally unwanted land uses, gentrification, poor provision of public services, etc. It is within this context that I first began thinking of the power of spatial justice to enact change within low wealth communities of color through a partnership with an HBCU (McAvoy *et al.*, 2000; Height, 2017).

The Spatial Justice Studio

From the beginning, the mission of the Spatial Justice Studio was to establish and sustain inter-institutional, interdisciplinary, and inter-sectoral programs that bring faculty, students, and the community together across disciplines into diverse experiences to develop meaningful solutions to issues related to spatial (in)justice. SJS explores alternative possibilities for urban areas and ways of achieving more equitable urban futures through active research agendas, engaged teaching practices and community based participatory research which will lead to the creation/regeneration of equitable, functional, and sustainable communities for all (SJS, 2021).

The SJS primarily focuses its work program in the East Winston area of Winston-Salem, NC. This community is comprised of several historic and predominately African American neighborhoods surrounding the campus of WSSU and has been the location for a wide variety of spatial injustices over the years. This includes the siting of unwanted land uses, the demolition of predominately African American neighborhoods during the period of urban renewal and the construction of a highway that bisects East Winston from the remainder of the city, causing displacement and erosion of a once thriving black community. East Winston had an estimated 2019 population of 36,046, of which 83.6% were people of color. The median household income of the community is estimated at \$23,559, per capita income is \$13,732 (the City's estimates are \$45,204 and \$28,833 respectively). Only 27.3% of the residents in the community have completed high school and prior to the recent global pandemic, the unemployment was 7.5% (double the city rate).

From its inception, the SJS has been focused on delivering unique and quality events that showcase spatial injustices to the community and students. In order to support the goal and mission of the SJS, a multi-pronged community driven approach to connecting with the community and students was initiated. This included the development of a unique Faculty and Community Fellows program that sought to engage academics and community members in spatial justice-based community research projects. During the 2018–2019 academic year, four (4) fellowships were funded that resulted in community-based research that explored spatial inequalities in Winston-Salem from several angles including: brownfields, recreational amenities and urban tree canopies (SJS, 2021). These fellows connected with WSSU students, community members in East Winston-Salem and brought to life spatial injustices occurring within the community.

In addition to the Fellows program, the SJS hosted two events that explored spatial justice topics of interest for the community and the student body. The first event was a two-day workshop on Environmental Justice (see Figure 1). This kick-off event was deliberately chosen in order to help the community and students identify with the



Figure 1. Environmental justice event, November 2018. Photo Credit: Author

concept of spatial justice. Spatial justice as a term/concept/idea does not have much resonance and understanding in the community and as a result, efforts were made to introduce the concept to the community. The Environmental Justice events included a community conversation around the history of the environmental justice movement (which began in Warren County, NC) and environmental justice issues impacting the local community.

The additional event that was held in the first year was a community workshop titled ‘Exploring Spatial Justice: Winston-Salem’s Past, Present and Future’ (see [Figure 2](#)). The focus of the event was to introduce the idea of spatial justice to the wider non-academic community. Originally planned for an audience of 50, the response from the community required the event to expand registration to the maximum capacity of the event space which was 125 people. Attendees represented a wide range of groups including government agencies, community-based non-profits, K-12 education entities, university faculty, staff and students and concerned citizens from low wealth communities of color (see [Figure 3](#)).

The all-day event included the following presentations and discussions: the theory of spatial justice, history of spatial injustices in the community, current community-based initiatives tackling spatial injustices in the area, spatial (in)justice mapping strategies and next steps. The discussions, presentations and conversations of the day were graphically recorded on [Figure 4](#).



Figure 2. Exploring spatial justice workshop registration. Photo Credit: Author



Figure 3. Exploring spatial justice workshop discussion. Photo Credit: Author

The main takeaways from the event included introducing the concept of spatial justice to the broader community, unveiling the SJS as a new entity and identifying spatial injustices facing low wealth communities of color in Winston-Salem, NC. Additionally, the workshop provided an opportunity to help the SJS identify its next steps and the role it can take in alleviating spatial injustices in the community. In the end, the SJS roles would include building partnerships, promoting inclusive growth in the community, expanding economic opportunities, improving the quality of life, and helping to build consensus around a neighborhood vision. One interesting sidenote to the event was the desire among many community members to see the SJS take an active role in lobbying local elected officials on topics of spatial injustice. This role for the SJS was not agreed upon due to the relationship between the SJS and its founding entities,

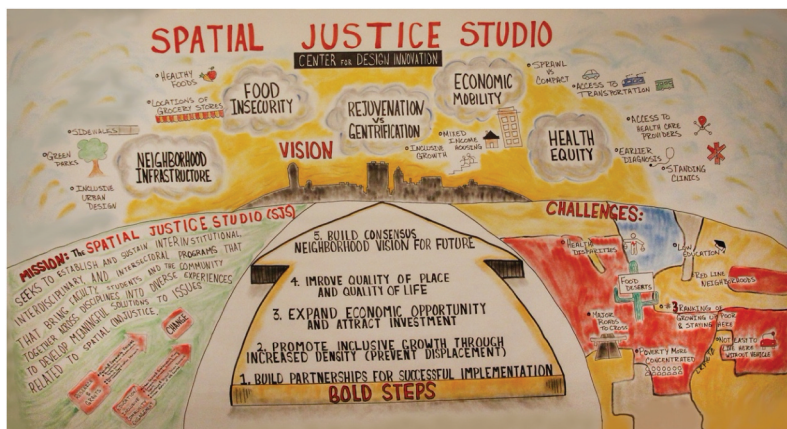


Figure 4. Spatial justice graphic recording, April 2019. Photo Credit: Spatial Justice Studio

both agents of the State of North Carolina. Instead, the SJS accepted the task of educating, researching and promoting spatially just solutions within low wealth communities of color (Smith, 2019).

In the SJS's second year (2019–2020) an emphasis was placed on continuing to introduce the concept of spatial justice to the community and creating opportunities to interact with the concept based on feedback from the community. No one could predict the events that would occur in 2020 that would reinforce spatial injustices and severely impact the SJS's community engagement efforts.

First, the SJS partnered with the City of Winston-Salem to host an event focused on Gentrification (see Figures 5 and 6). Gentrification is a growing concern for low wealth residents of color living in close proximity to a revitalizing downtown Winston-Salem. At the year-end event in 2019, gentrification was identified by the community as a major concern and an issue that the SJS should address in the near future. A series of speakers, panelists and community conversations was held in November of 2019 around the topic of gentrification. The event held on the campus of WSSU provided a platform to explore this complicated issue

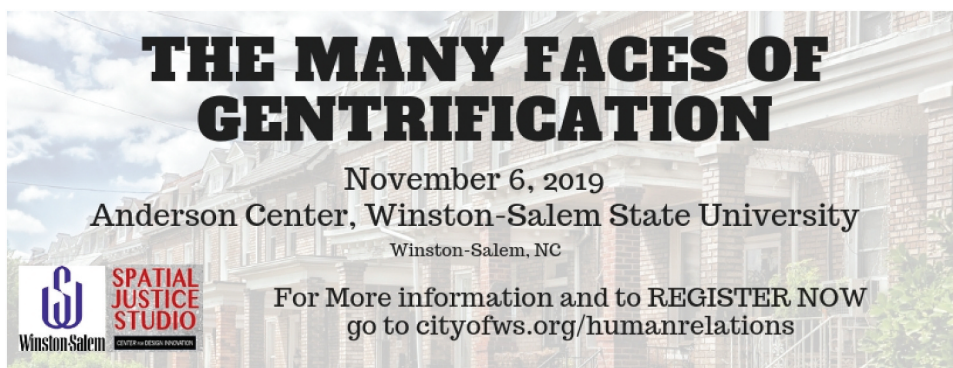


Figure 5. Gentrification event announcement, November 2019. Photo Credit: Author



Figure 6. Gentrification opening remarks, November 2019. Photo Credit: Author

and discuss how neighborhood revitalization for communities of low wealth can occur without displacement, which is a major concern of the community. In the end, there was general agreement that the use of spatial justice as a lens by which to view gentrification and associated revitalization pressures on low wealth communities of color could aid in preventing displacement as a mechanism in the accumulation of wealth for privileged members of society.

Additional community events held in the Winter of 2020 focused on exploring the relationship between the built environment and spatial injustice – specifically the lack of economic mobility for the poorest residents of the community (Chetty *et al.*, 2014). Forsyth County, NC is ranked as the 3rd worst county in the United States for economic mobility, meaning persons born into poverty have a very low chance of moving up the economic ladder and attaining wealth. Within Forsyth County, the lack of economic mobility is not surprisingly concentrated in low wealth communities of color (Blizard & Smith, 2021). Additionally, research has highlighted the role that the built environment has on the geography of economic mobility (Ewing *et al.*, 2016). As a result, the SJS focused attention on the spatial injustice of economic mobility for the poorest communities in an attempt to spur debate and discussions around the topic of sprawl and neighborhood design. These debates brought light to the fact that the manner in which communities are constructed can have an influence on future wealth outcomes. Density, access to opportunities (i.e. food, jobs, etc.), street network connectivity and transportation options (i.e. public transport) all greatly influence a neighborhood's economic mobility (Blizard & Smith, 2021).

A planned event in April of 2020 was to bring the issue of economic mobility and the built environment to the larger community through a two-day workshop for residents, elected officials, academics and students. The event was to feature presentations by

Richard Rothstein (2017), the author of *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How our Government Segregated America* and Dr. Reid Ewing an expert on sprawl and the built environment. The workshop would have engaged participants to more critically think about the spatial injustices created from sprawling development patterns and Federal, State and Local government policies and programs that segregated America. Unfortunately, one month before the workshop the world changed, and the COVID-19 Global Pandemic shut down this and many other planned events for the next year (WECT New 6, 2020)! While COVID-19 prevented the workshop from occurring, it did expose the world to a myriad of spatial injustices that were often overlooked by the privileged in our society and has raised issues of spatial justice, access, equity and inclusion to the forefront on many people's minds and agendas. From the opportunities for redesigning office spaces that have been vacated in many urban centers into affordable housing, to rethinking public transportation and the distribution of the COVID-19 vaccine, the global pandemic has placed spatial justice(s) on everyone's radar.

Discussion

After revisiting the past several years of work completed by the Spatial Justice Studio, several opportunities and challenges have presented themselves. First, spatial justice as a term/concept holds much promise as a mechanism for engaging with communities and people who might not otherwise be interested in planning and planning related events (Height, 2017). The term was immediately met with approval and acceptance by students at WSSU and communities of color. Residents often mentioned that the term resonated with them and they were glad to finally find the verbiage for something that has historically afflicted their community. In the ever-increasing acknowledgement of economic injustice and social injustice, communities and people of color welcomed the idea of spatial justice.

Secondly, the experiences of the Spatial Justice Studio and its connection to WSSU, an HBCU, revealed that the use of a minority serving institution as a mechanism by which to engage with communities of color holds some promise (Lowe, 2008; Height, 2017). Communities of color that engaged with the SJS over the study period discussed the importance of having WSSU as a part of the conversation. With that said, an HBCU may open the door to connecting with communities of color, but trust, empathy and shared expectations are also required to be invited in for the longer term and these things can only develop over time. In the end, whether or not the SJS is successful in engaging with low wealth communities of color in Winston-Salem, NC will still depend upon honesty and mutually agreed upon deliverables.

Several challenges also presented themselves during the first few years of the SJS's existence. First and foremost was defining the concept of spatial justice for application in the 'real world'. While many individuals expressed a connection and fondness for the term spatial justice, reaching consensus on what spatial justice actually means was difficult. The SJS generally defined spatial justice as the equitable distribution of private and public goods and services across the urban landscape, which builds upon Rocco's definition 'spatial Justice refers to general access to public goods, basic services, cultural goods, economic opportunity and healthy environments' (Rocco, 2014). Soja (2010) believed that spatial justice as a theoretical concept holds much promise for exploring,

understanding and solving issues of spatial inequality in a wide variety of geographies. Numerous scholars have used the concept to call for a more equitable future for millions of people across the globe, as a theory by which planners should create more spatially just cities and as a political agenda to drive social change (Fainstein, 2010; Williams 2018). Achieving spatial justice would be a means through which to address the inequitable distribution of public and private goods, services and resources facing many low wealth communities of color. A concrete definition of spatial justice that can be quantitatively applied to communities is still under development (Deb & Smith, 2020; Smith & Railey, 2020). In the end, a major obstacle facing the use of spatial justice in addressing spatial injustices is defining the term so that all parties are in agreement on its meaning and evaluation.

A second challenge facing the SJS has been the traditional issues of funding, staffing and workflow. Since its inception, the SJS has been staffed part-time by a faculty lead, who also must fulfill his teaching, research and service requirements of his full-time job, and a part-time undergraduate research assistant. These two part-time employees are responsible for administering the SJS Community Fellows program, organizing and managing all sponsored events, conducting spatial justice-based research, and engaging with community partners. Funding for the SJS is limited to a small base budget and can be supplemented with grant funding, which must also be applied for and managed by the faculty lead. As a result of a limited budget and small staff, the SJS must carefully pick and choose the projects, communities, and partners with which it engages.

A final challenge is engaging with communities on their terms and in their spaces. Many low wealth communities of color are skeptical of ‘outsiders’ and have often had bad experiences with consultants who come in to help. While the HBCU moniker can help alleviate some of the tension and misgivings, more work is still required to build trust. Additionally, identifying spatial inequalities through the spatial justice lens is often easy for a community, what is difficult is solving the spatial injustice. Low wealth communities of color do not want to be part of another study, research and/or class project, but rather they want change! As a result, the promise of spatial justice is a powerful concept, but must be used wisely and judiciously. The SJS is aware of this and has taken a deliberate and slow path towards connecting with low wealth communities of color to make sure that it serves the interests of the community and not itself.

Conclusions

Through a personal reflection of the SJS, this paper explored the history and mission of the SJS, examined SJS sponsored events and programs between 2018 and 2020, discussed opportunities and challenges that emerged because of partnerships with local community groups and evaluated the overall role of an HBCU in this effort. In the end, this paper determined that a university/community partnership is an appropriate educational platform for the conveyance of the spatial justice concept at the community level. Results revealed that communities of color have generally not heard of the term ‘spatial justice’, but once presented with the concept, find promise in the potential it offers. Specifically, the term ‘spatial justice’ was viewed by low wealth communities of color as providing the needed lexicon through which they can explain their lived experiences and seek

remediation for past, present and future spatial injustices. In short, spatial justice gives a vocabulary to a reality that exists in most communities in the United States and around the globe.

Additionally, low wealth communities of color are also generally suspect of outsider's top-down driven community engagement efforts, but that the inclusion of a local HBCU in the community engagement process can be viewed as a positive for community members. Low wealth communities of color are generally leery of projects proposed by outsiders as a result of past betrayals and broken promises. Finally, a clear definition of spatial justice and project goals must accompany any university/community partnership in order to set clear expectations about resources and deliverables for the community.

In closing, the Spatial Justice Studio continues to be actively engaged in the local community through the SJS Fellows Program, delivering public presentation and hosting workshops on a wide variety of spatial injustice topics, and has partnered with Forsyth County in the development of a Neighborhood Opportunity Atlas (NOA) (FCNOA, 2022). The NOA is an interactive quantitative analysis of a plethora of spatial justice related variables that impact communities across the County and is seen as a first step in solving the spatial injustices faced by residents of Forsyth County.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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