

PLANNING

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VIEWPOINT

‘Colorblind-Spots’ in Campus Design

Planners and Architects Can Offer Solutions That Center on Social Justice

by Amara H. Pérez, PhD

Educational leaders are noting that conventional campus design planning efforts have neglected to include the voices of historically underserved communities. Socio-spatial inquiry can help institutions offer an equity approach to inclusivity and authentic engagement.

Space and Race

For the last four years, I’ve worked closely with student research teams, educators, planners, and architects to understand how campus space acts to reproduce racism in higher education. Using critical race theory (CRT) as an analytical framework has served to expose racial exclusion and colorblind ideologies embedded in traditional planning and design approaches to community engagement.

Colorblindness is a narrative used to conceal or negate racism as a feature of US culture: Just as an individual might say, “I don’t see color,” at the institutional level, colorblind practices simply ignore the presence of racism.

Using CRT in planning and design has helped us to understand that space is not neutral and perceptions of college space are not universal. All space is racialized, gendered, and classed, and acts to transmit dominant narratives that when unmediated serve to normalize systems of power and privilege. How communities perceive, experience, and imagine built environments are in part shaped by identity and social position. The failure of community engagement efforts to acknowledge the socializing function of space and the role of social identity in spatial



Leaders in higher education are now looking to planners and architects for guidance on how to best align institutional commitments of equity to campus space.

perceptions limits the possibility for design solutions to disrupt dominant culture and more truly reflect diverse voices.

Exclusionary Practices and Colorblind Paradigms

To gain a broader understanding of how education equity is linked to campus design and college space, architects and planners must examine community engagement practices more critically. While increased attention has been directed to the need for more inclusive outreach strategies, less consideration has been given to the kinds of questions that drive engagement activities. Often understated in community engagement plans, inquiry ultimately directs and determines outcome.

Studying traditional lines of inquiry through CRT with students and stakeholders has helped us to realize that commonly posed questions have missed some important answers. Lines of questioning that seek solely to understand existing and desired spatial arrangements, furniture, and technology, for example, miss an opportunity to learn how material objects and built environments act to reproduce or disrupt unwelcoming campus climates. Questions that invite perceptions of campus space but ignore social

identity miss students' diverse experiences on college campuses. Generating a shared vision by relying heavily on ideal renderings of future space misses an opportunity to interrogate cultural dimensions of space that invariably impact the future of access and inclusion.

In reflecting on the role of inquiry in community engagement, it's what we are *not* asking that is getting in the way.

Today, educational leaders recognize that traditional outreach efforts in campus design have failed to include communities of color. Requests for proposals issued by educational institutions are now more likely to insist on strategies for equitable outreach that target historically underserved communities, acknowledging the need for new approaches to elicit diverse voices and cultivate a shared vision. Even if unintentional, common practices have historically marginalized or tokenized the voices of people of color, which has resulted in a lack of racial diversity at the table. Instead, the practices have preserved whiteness and the status quo.

Getting people to the table is only one facet of community involvement. The engagement of diverse voices is ultimately curated through inquiry. Questions are critical to hearing diverse voices, stories, and input. Posed in a range of activities, what we learn from engaged communities is largely achieved through the questions we ask. Herein lies a problem.



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Traditional lines of inquiry are often informed by colorblind ideologies precisely because they fail to acknowledge cultural dimensions of space and spatial dimensions of inequity. One-dimensional paradigms conceal how the production of space is tied to whiteness, rendering a “colorblind-spot” when developing inquiry plans that drive engagement, inform process, and shape outcomes. In the context of design, colorblind-spots render invisible the presence of racism in higher education, presume irrelevant the lived experiences of students of color, and limit the potential of campus design solutions that contribute to education equity.

The predominant emphasis on function to define needs, the use of non-contextual visual prompts to invoke an educational vision, and idyllic lines of questioning to conjure utopian renderings of space act to reproduce dominant narratives of space as flat (non-hierarchical), unbiased, value-free, and racially neutral. In other words, when the questions we ask presume a level playing field between what exists and what is desired, one-dimensional inquiry can act to dismiss the socio-spatial realities of diverse communities within a highly stratified society.

If in fact the prevailing understanding of a design problem is informed by colorblind inquiry, then design solutions hold little promise to improve social impact on communities most affected by racial inequity. To design for justice, we must understand how racial and other disparities are linked to and reproduced by spatial arrangements. This can only be achieved when people most affected by racism and other social inequities are engaged in a collaborative inquiry effort to expose how space normalizes disparities and how design can make a difference. In this context, inquiry can be a critical tool for listening and learning, acting as an equity bridge between community outreach and authentic engagement.

Socio-Spatial Inquiry as an Equity Approach to Community Engagement

CRT offers tangible equity practices in community engagement that can also support educational institutions in creating more inclusive campus spaces. Socio-spatial inquiry, a method I developed for putting CRT into practice, goes beyond one-dimensional questioning and uses a multidimensional framework that links the material world to the social world. Functional questions are necessary, but delinked from social inquiry they normalize colorblind paradigms—and miss opportunities to design for justice.

Inquiry should strive to situate material needs into a larger social context by combining the traditional functional realm of space with experiential, relational, and cultural dimensions in order to understand:



All space is racialized, gendered, and classed, and acts to transmit dominant narratives that when unmediated serve to normalize systems of power and privilege.

- Institutional programs, functions, and usage (functional)
- How communities sense and perceive space based on social identity, lived experience, and positionality (experiential)

- Relationships between people and programs; programs and institutions; and institutions and local communities through a lens of power and privilege (relational)
- Spatial features of whiteness, exclusion, and other power-laden qualities and also spatial features of belonging, equity, and inclusion (cultural)



A Call to Action

As educational leaders seek design partners to align equity values to campus space, planners and architects must play an active role in transforming exclusionary and colorblind practices. CRT shows great promise as an equity tool for such a task—a lens to expose inequitable patterns and paradigms and a

guide to create new methods for inclusive outreach and authentic engagement. Acknowledging campus space as multifaceted, cultural, and inextricably linked to access and inclusion is a first step. To be action-oriented we must practice equity by offering design solutions that are tied to students' diverse lived experiences and reflect an educational vision for campus space that centers social justice.

Author Biography



AMARA H. PÉREZ, PHD, is a long-time social justice educator, participatory action researcher, and critical strategist. Drawing from critical race spatial theory, she studies-to-transform the role of planning, design, and built environments in (re)producing social inequities. She also researches critical race spatial praxis as a method for socio-spatial equity within education. In working closely with students of color as co-researchers for over 25 years, Pérez has instigated local community and institutional change.

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