
We need to talk about systemic racism in infrastructure

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Some would call them walls designed and constructed to divide. Others might liken them to symbols that chronicle insidious ties to systemic racism. I'm not talking about confederate statues or memorials. I'm talking about actual roads, bridges, and other infrastructure projects that have unquestionably exacerbated racial divides. Over the past century, both the U.S. and Canada (and other nations around the world) have designed and built some infrastructure projects that have harmed disadvantaged and impoverished populations.

What's disconcerting is that infrastructure—especially transport infrastructure—is supposed to connect people and provide easier geographic access to all citizens. It should link low-income persons to areas of economic prosperity, thereby reducing inequality and providing access to good-paying jobs.

However, historical records show that infrastructure has not always been designed or built with equity or fairness in mind. In some cases, there's irrefutable evidence that infrastructure has played an egregious role in inflaming racial division and inequality.

Whether done overtly or covertly is open for debate. (Something beyond the scope of this article.) What I intend to highlight here are a few instances where infrastructure has, without question, divided communities along racial and socioeconomic lines. I'll also examine several promising infrastructure projects that got it right and discuss what the industry can do moving forward.

Let's start by scrutinizing some projects that have hurt minorities and other low-income neighborhoods.



ISI's Melissa Peneycad

8 MILE ROAD

8 Mile in Detroit, Michigan, made famous by the 2002 movie starring Eminem, is a prime example of how infrastructure can divide communities. 8 Mile is also home to a half-mile-long graffiti-covered concrete barrier known by locals as 'the wall.' Erected in 1941, the wall was built to physically divide 8 Mile from an adjacent parcel of land on which a developer wanted to construct a "whites only subdivision."

The wall stands in the 8 Mile area to this day, serving as a reminder of the area's history, though it no longer functions as a racial barrier.[1]

[1] Miller, Johnny. February 21, 2018. "Roads to nowhere: how infrastructure built on American inequality." The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/feb/21/roads-nowhere-infrastructure-american-inequality>

WEST BALTIMORE

West Baltimore is another city known for being overwhelmingly black and impoverished. It was here that Freddie Gray, a black man, died from a spinal cord injury in 2015 while in police custody. His death ignited weeks of protests throughout Baltimore.[2] It is also home to the infamous “Highway to Nowhere” – a result of “road-bullish governments, local and federal, that made big plans without regard for their immediate human impact.”[3] This six-lane, mile-long road sliced through and sealed off communities in a major American city for ultimately no reason. It’s a blight on the community and represents decades of broken promises for West Baltimore residents.[4]

AFRICVILLE

The story of Africville in Nova Scotia, Canada, can serve as another teachable example of what can go wrong. Africville was a black community whose residents traced their family roots to slaves brought across the Atlantic during the 1700s. For more than 150 years, this community existed on the edge of Halifax and lacked basic essential services such as clean running water, and sewerage systems. Despite the lack of services, many residents were landowners who paid taxes.

Also, there was a powerful sense of community in Africville. Residents stuck together and looked out for each other. In the 1960s, residents in this community were forcibly evicted to make way for the MacKay bridge, a 1.2 kilometer, 4-lane bridge that links the Halifax Peninsula with neighboring Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.[5]

Sadly, the 8 Mile wall in Detroit, the Highway to Nowhere in West Baltimore, and the MacKay Bridge in Halifax are only a few examples of infrastructure causing or exacerbating the social and racial divide. (Far too many exist around the world.)

PROMISING EXAMPLES

The Historic Fourth Ward Park in Atlanta[6] serves as an excellent example of positive infrastructure development. The project initially started as a typical stormwater management and flooding control project, but then, it was turned into a solution that addressed not only that problem but also resulted in much needed economic and community development, environmental restoration, and the creation of a public amenity. This project earned an Envision Gold award for sustainability from the Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure in 2016.[7]

[2] Lopez, German. August 18, 2016. “The Baltimore protests over Freddie Gray’s death explained.” Vox: <https://www.vox.com/2016/7/27/18089352/freddie-gray-baltimore-riots-police-violence>

[3] Rodricks, Dan. August 20, 2019. “Here’s a big idea: Turn Baltimore’s Highway to Nowhere into a mile-long public park.” The Baltimore Sun: <https://www.baltimoresun.com/opinion/columnists/dan-rodricks/tbs-md-rodricks-0821-20190820-dainjbahsjhwtdbd2z5cbnyxnu-story.html>

[4] Miller, Johnny. February 21, 2018. “Roads to nowhere: how infrastructure built on American inequality.” The Guardian: <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/feb/21/roads-nowhere-infrastructure-american-inequality>

[5] Beaumont, Hilary. September 25, 2017. “United Nations report blasts Canada for destruction of historic black community.” Vice: https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/3kp7a5/united-nations-report-blasts-canada-for-destruction-of-historic-black-community

[6] Historic Fourth Ward Park: Gather and Relax in Atlanta’s Urban Oasis. Atlanta Beltline: <https://beltline.org/places-to-go/historic-fourth-ward-park/>

[7] Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure. April 14, 2016. “Atlanta Beltline Historic Fourth Ward Park Earns ISI’s Envision Gold Award.”: <https://sustainableinfrastructure.org/project-awards/historic-fourth-ward-park/>



Historic Fourth Ward Park - Atlanta / Photo courtesy of HDR

Same with the **South Los Angeles Wetland Park** (Envision Platinum [8]) and the **Albion Riverside Park** (Envision Gold [9]) projects. These projects are great examples of turning historically underdeveloped or previously contaminated lands into neighborhood revitalizing amenities that bring people together and protect the environment.



South LA Wetlands Park

MUSQUEAM

A relatively recent infrastructure development that brought people together to create a more harmonious and prosperous future is the formal agreement made between the **Musqueam Indian Band** and the Vancouver International Airport. The Airport and Musqueam Indian Band are located in the same community on land that is Musqueam traditional territory. The agreement is “based on friendship and respect to achieve a sustainable and mutually beneficial future” [10]. The 30-year agreement includes jobs, scholarships, annual revenue sharing, and identification and protection of archeological resources.

[8] Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure. January 30, 2014. “South Los Angeles Wetland Park Receives Envision Platinum Award”: <https://sustainableinfrastructure.org/project-awards/south-la-wetland-park/>

[9] Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure. March 12, 2020. “Los Angeles’ Albion Riverside Park Project Earns Envision Gold”: <https://sustainableinfrastructure.org/project-awards/los-albion-riverside-park-project-earns-envision-gold-award/>

[10] Musqueam YVR Agreement: <https://www.yvr.ca/en/about-yvr/who-we-are/musqueam-yvr-agreement>



Albion Riverside Park (Four Photos Above)

MOVING FORWARD

Infrastructure alone cannot fix systemic racism, but infrastructure development that focuses on the equitable distribution of benefits and incorporation of public-consultation— which genuinely considers the historical context of equity and social justice— can go a long way in addressing and correcting past injustices.

Moving forward, the architecture, engineering, and construction (A/E/C) industry can— and must— do its part to formulate and implement plans, policies, and programs to tackle social equity, discrimination, and unconscious bias in the workplace. Organizations must also adopt hiring processes that focus on diversity and inclusion while resolving pay-equity issues, and they must consider how their projects impact everyone in the community.

ORGANIZATIONS AND EQUITY

What's exciting is that many organizations are stepping forward with firmer commitments already—and some are true stand outs. Consider the following:

- The American Society of Civil Engineers affirmed their support for racial justice in a statement of unity published online. [11]
- Iuuceo, a small women-owned business based in Vancouver, Canada, has made formal commitments on taking action against racism and discrimination. [12]
- New York City's Department of Design and Construction (NYC DDC) reaffirmed the organization's commitment to building equitable and just infrastructure in an internal memo to staff. The memo made specific references to ONENYC 2050 [13] – New York City's official strategic plan based on the principles of growth, equity, sustainability, and resiliency – as well as the Envision sustainable infrastructure framework [14], which explicitly addresses social equity and justice in credit QL1.3 within the Quality of Life credit category and also in credits that address stakeholder engagement within the Leadership credit category.

As for ISI, we are tenacious in our pledge to advance diversity and inclusion in the workplace. We are also creating educational courses on how the Envision framework specifically addresses racial and social justice and inequality in the built environment, and we hope to partner with other organizations to champion these ideals. The way we view it: the first step toward change is awareness; the next step is action.



[11] American Society of Civil Engineers. Statement of Unity: <https://info.asce.org/unity>

[12] MacKenzie, Quin and Worrick, Bronwyn. June 8, 2020. "A Message from Our Founders & Our Commitments to Take Action." Iuuceo: <https://www.iuuceo.com/2020/06/08/a-message-from-our-founders-our-commitments-to-take-action/>

[13] OneNYC 2050: <http://onenyc.cityofnewyork.us/reports-resources/>

[14] Institute for Sustainable Infrastructure: www.sustainableinfrastructure.org