Spatial Justice:
Design Agency in the Production of Space

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Marginalized communities around the world are disproportionately impacted by the distribution of unjust infrastructure and environmental conditions. However, through distributive, procedural, and restorative frameworks, it is possible to teach spatial designers to challenge, inform, and reshape the world toward a more just and equitable future. This chapter delves into the various themes developed as part of the "Spatial Justice" professional elective at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, which offers an inter-disciplinary perspective on urban studies, urban design, and the roles that social, environmental, and ecological justice play in designing a more just and equitable urbanity. In this course, students explore critical urban theory, justice, counter cartographies, design activism, participatory systems, and spatial agency using alternative mapping methodologies to render legible latent sociospatial asymmetries.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary phenomena have amplified ongoing systemic asymmetries, and perhaps now more than ever, justice and anti-racist sentiments are at the forefront of spatial design discourse. The status quo or the notion of normalcy has been destabilized by the COVID-19 pandemic, racial inequity, climate change, and unprecedented political polarization, among other issues. Designers are speculating on what it means to arrive at the 'new normal,' but it is also our role to alternatively challenge systems and structures that have been previously deemed 'normal' (Easterling, 2021). In understanding design agency, we as designers should ask ourselves how we can "challenge, inform, and reshape our present world toward a better future" (Dark Matter University, 2020). It is within this politically charged discursive climate that I entered the academic world as a tenure-track junior faculty member in the College of Architecture and was tasked with developing a new professional elective.

"Spatial Justice" posits a shift from individual production to the collective production of built space, and how we as design educators can embed democratic and participatory design processes within our

pedagogical frameworks. This chapter elaborates on the pedagogical framework developed for "Spatial Justice" through five sections: *Institution of Higher Education Program Context, Evidence-Based Frameworks and Practices, Case Description, Possibilities and Constraints, and Insights, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations*. *Institution of Higher Education Program Context* describes the institutional circumstances surrounding the development of the professional elective. This context foregrounds the significance of spatial justice juxtaposed against the historic and ongoing racial tensions that exist at three scales, the City of Lincoln, the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, and the College of Architecture.

In *Evidence-Based Frameworks and Practices* I describe the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the course. Overall, there are six themes that provide the structure and framework: Critical Urban Theory, Design Justice, Counter-Cartographies, Design Activism, Participation, and Spatial Agency. Evidence-Based Frameworks and Practices elaborates on how the first three themes theoretically and methodologically ground the course content. Where Critical Urban Theory and Design Justice frame the theoretical conception of the course, Counter-Cartographies further expands on the way students will apply these crucial theories in practice. *Case Description* documents the emergence of the course through prototyping its themes in a studio format while elaborating on the active role designers play in the production of the built environment and how design for social change can be integrated in design education. *Possibilities and Constraints* outlines the potential of the course to sustain just discourse in the University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Architecture. Finally, *Insights, Lessons Learned, and Recommendations* provides a retrospective on the process of developing the course.

INSTITUTION OF HIGHER EDUCATION PROGRAM CONTEXT

City of Lincoln

The city of Lincoln, and more broadly, the state of Nebraska, is predominantly white. According to the American Community Survey (2018), in 2018 there were 15 times more white residents (227,000 people, 79.1%) in Lincoln than residents of any other race or ethnicity. There were 29,300 (7.77%) Hispanic and 12,500 (4.35%) Asian residents, the second and third most common ethnic groups. Black residents accounted for only 4.25% of the population (12,200 people). Nebraska itself has a documented history of segregation: for example, as recently as 1975 the US Supreme Court struck down Omaha, Nebraska's segregated schooling practice. In the early 20th century, the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) held a significant presence in Nebraska, and by 1922 the state had 45,000 KKK members, with Klan demonstrations, parades, and cross burnings becoming commonplace in many areas and Lincoln's "klavern," with an estimated 5,000 members, the largest and most vocal in the state. In 1924 the Nebraska KKK held its statewide convention in Lincoln and more than a thousand klansmen paraded openly through the streets (Hildebrand, 2010).

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Inequality and racism have long been issues at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, where 85 percent of the students identify as white and recent years have seen a myriad of incidents, discussions, and initiatives. For example, in 2013, culturally insensitive homecoming skits, a racial slur scrawled outside a fraternity house, and a student government senator openly using the n-word in debate sparked the "Not

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