



# A Call to Courage

An Open Letter to Canadian Urbanists

Written by Jay Pitter | June 2020

Dear Canadian Urbanists,

Cities across North America are aglow with rage and unwavering cries for justice. While leaders throughout the entertainment, sports and business sectors have issued statements formally denouncing anti-Black racism, mainstream urbanists have, for the most part, remained silent. This is disheartening given that a civil uprising is unfolding against the backdrop of the public realm—the central domain of urbanism practitioners. Consequently, as a public housing kid turned award-winning placemaker, with a practice spanning both Canadian and North American cities where beloved colleagues are risking their lives on the front lines, I'm compelled to issue this call to courage.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, Canadians have cast a collective gaze south of the border, enthralled by reports of African Americans [dying from COVID-19 at three times the rate of their white counterparts](#), and later by numerous public space conflicts that both threatened and claimed Black lives. While we share close ties to the U.S., our propensity to hyper-focus on their racial divisions is emblematic of the denial of systemic racism in our proverbial backyard. This denial reinforces our moral authority among global leaders but prevents us from fully living up to our espoused values of equity. This, in part, explains why most Canadian decision-makers were initially reticent about collecting coronavirus race-based data. However, thanks to the advocacy of Black public health experts, we've begun to gather data and have learned that much like the U.S., Black people and those from other equity-seeking groups are most impacted by the virus.

For instance, the City of Toronto released [COVID-19: Status of Cases](#), showing that the vast majority of cases have been reported outside of the wealthier, whiter downtown core in neighbourhoods where many Black and other racialized people reside. Similarly, emerging evidence shows that Montreal North, a racialized low-income community with a significant Haitian Canadian population, has become a [“COVID-19 hot spot.”](#) And sadly, like our African American counterparts, Black communities here are contending with citizen profiling and the loss of precious Black lives, such as [D'Andre Campbell](#) and [Regis Korchinski-Paquet](#), two young people experiencing mental health struggles who somehow ended up drawing their last breath after police were called to serve and protect them.

At this point, you're likely thinking, I'm concerned but what does this have to do with Canadian urbanism?

Everything.



Respected geography scholar Katherine McKittrick asserts that “Black matters are spatial matters,” so while the issues above are frequently framed as public health, policing or social policy issues, they also fall within the purview of urbanism. Almost every professional association evokes tenets related to social responsibility and regard for the public interest. For example, the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada’s [vision statement](#) reads: “The RAIC is the leading voice for excellence in the built environment in Canada, demonstrating how design enhances the quality of life, while addressing important issues of society through responsible architecture.” The [Architects Act](#) references a responsibility to serve and protect the public’s interest and goes as far as asserting that “a lack of knowledge, skill or judgment or disregard for the welfare of the public” is a form of professional incompetence.

Urban planners are governed by similar social responsibility sentiments. The [Canadian Institute of Planners](#) instructs members to practice in a manner “that respects diversity, needs, values and aspirations of the public, as well as acknowledge the inter-related nature of planning decisions and the consequences for natural and human environments.” The problem with these and other statements is they fail to unpack the pluralistic publics within the category of public and systemic inequities that inform whose interests are considered worthy of protecting.

The examples above are not meant to be an indictment and it is important to recognize that genuine effort has been undertaken. Also, municipalities, private firms and even grassroots organizations use similar language while falling short of these complex goals. Words like equity and inclusion are not clearly defined in terms of their application to urban design processes, organizational cultures or notions of design excellence. There almost no performance indicators or tools for measuring these concepts throughout urban design and development processes. This overall lack of clarity about urbanism’s role in advancing social equity is why Black people and numerous other equity-seeking groups have been harmed, both unintentionally and callously, by various professional disciplines.

Anti-Black racism is lodged deep within the foundation of Canadian cities. We have a [history of “slavery”](#) here that thrusts Black people into this country’s social and economic margins. Later, segregation laws preventing Black people from freely accessing skating rinks, swimming pools and entertainment spaces further cemented the divides. Black people were denied equal access to colonial land grants restricted by race, and municipal covenants prohibited Black people from living in many Canadian neighbourhoods. [One](#) such covenant, only recently voided in the City of Vancouver, read, “No person of the African or Asiatic race, or of African or Asiatic descent, except servants of the occupier of the premises and residence...shall reside or be allowed to remain on the premises.” Racist covenants are not specific to Vancouver; there are many across Canadian cities that need to be formally voided.

Another threat to Black people’s sense of place has been urban renewal schemes prioritizing car-centric infrastructure that pierced the hearts of Black communities like [Africville](#) and [Hogan’s Alley](#), leading to the obliteration of invaluable social networks and generations of displacement trauma. Moreover, movement on the geographic and imaginary edges of the city is fraught with higher risk of automobile fatalities due to lack of safe pedestrian infrastructure and impossibly long commutes to jobs and opportunities. But deadly automobiles and lack of complete communities aren’t Black people’s primary worry. Many Canadian cities such as Toronto, Halifax and Montreal all practice racial profiling impinging on the dignity of thousands of innocent Black men—and [Amnesty International](#) found that Black people living in Toronto were 20 times more likely to be shot by police.



These examples demonstrate the ways anti-Blackness is profoundly spatialized and clearly tethered to land use, amenity use, public space enforcement, safe streets, mobility and housing. The public realm and built environment are not simply a backdrop to the current civil unrest; urbanism has contributed to the racial inequities inciting it. Acknowledging complicity in systemic racism and harms enacted across time is overwhelming. However, an unnamed issue cannot be reconciled. Transformation cannot occur without radical truth telling followed up with courageous action.

I have had the pleasure of working with great colleagues across cities, racial backgrounds and professional disciplines. Despite immense despair, I still believe many of us are fundamentally good and committed to creating cities where everyone thrives. I understand some of you are already doing this work; thank you for your labour. However, we need a more concerted and coordinated effort. With a collaborative approach and commitment to pushing past the discomfort of race-related conversations, I believe we can move beyond polite platitudes and guilt to boldly chart a course forward. I'm calling on all of us to help do this work, which is at once personal and systemic. I'm calling on all of us to embrace the spirit of humility and curiosity to learn more about the history of anti-Black racism and urbanism. I'm calling on all of us to not only speak out against anti-Black racism and all forms of urban inequities but also to have the courage to address these issues. It's time to take tangible steps such as the following:

- Acknowledge that urban design is not neutral, it either perpetuates or reduces social inequities;
- If you haven't been doing equity-based placemaking work prior to the pandemic, kindly refrain from exploiting this moment and allow urbanists with the professional competence and lived experience to lead;
- Reflect on how your implicit biases—unconscious thoughts and stereotypes—may influence how you view an individual, group or entire neighbourhood;
- Review policies and practices that may be creating invisible barriers for team members from equity-seeking groups to make meaningful contributions within your municipality or organization/firm;
- Don't conflate an embrace of equity with compromising excellence; urbanists from equity-seeking groups possess considerable professional expertise and lived experiences;
- Identify and actively work to reduce power imbalances when engaging communities—especially those with histories of exclusion and/or marginalization;
- Research the history and untold place-based stories related to all urban design and development projects;
- Develop equity-based placemaking guidelines and a personal learning agenda.

These recommendations are meant to be a starting point, and although I work at the nexus of urban design and social equity, I don't presume to speak for all urbanists similarly trained or for my cultural community. This is not a moment for a single voice or a single vision. What we need is collective action and humility from urbanists from all racial backgrounds, professional disciplines (including unsung grassroots leaders) and cities. I've added a few resources in addition to this letter to encourage action. Please flip forward to access: **[A Call to Courage Individual Learning Agenda; What is equity-based placemaking?; Intersectionality & Placemaking; Glossary of Equity-Based Placemaking Terms, and a Black Communities and Urbanism Annotated Bibliography.](#)**

Jay Pitter

A Call to Courage  
Individual Learning Agenda

## A Call to Courage – Individual Learning Agenda

### Racial Equity and Urbanism

Urbanists often consider themselves visionaries and solution finders. However, great placemaking occurs when professionals center community-based knowledge and approach each project with curiosity and a desire to learn. One way of doing this is by developing a learning agenda to outline key questions and activities for answering them. While learning agendas are often applied to large projects or organizational goals, this template has been modified to accommodate a quick individual reflection, identification of a personal opportunity for growth and an action to be completed within eight weeks. This work is ongoing; this template is intended to kick-start and/or provide structure for this important learning journey.

#### Quick Personal Assessment:

Are you currently addressing racial inequity in your urbanism practice?

Yes

Somewhat

No

If yes, what approaches have you taken, and how have these approaches contributed to the reduction racial inequity?

If no, what is the primary barrier preventing you from contributing to the reduction of racial inequity in your practice?

What makes you most uncomfortable or reluctant to engage in urbanism practices and conversations focused on racial inequity?

## Defining Your Personal Opportunity For Growth

Define a racial inequity and urbanism topic you would like to learn more about. Conventionally, this learning agenda step would entail the identification of a broad question followed by a list of related sub-questions. However, for the purposes of beginning this process, it's recommended you select and delve into a clearly defined topic. The topic examples provided below are not meant to be prescriptive or exhaustive. They are intended to be a provocation to help you define an opportunity for growth most aligned with your personal interests and professional responsibilities.

### Opportunity for Growth Topic Examples:

- Delving into the ways anti-Black racism diminishes Black people's freedom and joy on streets;
- Examining the erasure of Indigenous peoples and places in Canadian cities;
- Exploring the LGBTQIP2SAA spaces that are welcoming to racialized people outside of gay "villages";
- Identifying informal rituals and practices that are valued by racialized communities;
- Looking at how housing unaffordability and discrimination disproportionately impact racialized people;
- Evaluate public transit policies and service variances that perpetuate racial inequities;
- Learn how to convene and/or participate in conversations related to racial inequity and urbanism;
- Exploring alternatives to public space enforcement and policing to reduce risks to racialized people;
- Building more inclusive urbanism teams and fostering a culture that supports different perspectives and expertise.
- Other

## Identifying Actions for Answering Key Questions

Please list three actions you can take within the next eight weeks to address your opportunity for growth topic. Actions may include listening to podcasts, reading books authored by racialized people, one-on-one conversations, volunteering with a racialized group and formal policy/literature review.

Action 1

Action 2

Action 3

## Applying and Sharing New Knowledge

How will you apply and share what you've learned?

# Appendices

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What is equity-based placemaking?  
Intersectionality & Placemaking  
Glossary of Equity-Based Placemaking Terms  
Annotated Bibliography

## What is equity-based placemaking?

Placemaking is conventionally defined as a collaborative approach to the design, programming and policy of public and semi-public spaces. It brings community knowledge and vision to the forefront of public realm design processes, historically going beyond the urbanism status quo and hierarchy. Equity-based placemaking builds on pluralism and recognizes power relations within communities and the place-based histories of exclusion and socio-spatial dynamics that shape the character of public spaces. An equity-based placemaking approach explicitly acknowledges that urban design is not neutral; it either perpetuates or reduces urban inequities. Key approaches include:

- » Acknowledge the complex histories and socio-political dynamics of public spaces—and how they inform people’s mobility, safety and joy;
- » Identify and address power imbalances at all stages of the placemaking process;
- » Embrace multiple expressions of community power and assets;
- » Develop strong social plans and programming that address competing interests among young families, elders, people experiencing homelessness, disabled people, sex workers and other groups that use public spaces;
- » Co-create public spaces where everyone is a steward and experiences a healthy sense of belonging;
- » Recognize the character of a place is shaped through interactions with humans, other living beings and the natural environment.

Equity-based placemaking deeply considers both the spatial and social aspects of public spaces. This is why, despite being nascent and not yet fully codified, equity-based placemaking practitioners must have a broad knowledge of theories such as urban design, human geography, place-based attachment and intersectionality. That said, everyone from residents to public health professionals to municipal decision-makers all have an important role in equity-based placemaking.

## Intersectionality & Placemaking

Intersection. Intersectional. Intersectionality. All three words are becoming popularized among urbanists across various professions. The basis of these words is rooted in the theory and analytic framework of *intersectionality*. Coined by African American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, proper attribution and understanding of the term's meaning are vital for implementing equity-based placemaking processes. Intersectionality responds to the early feminist movement's omission regarding the ways identities such as race, class and disability create distinct challenges when overlapped with gender. In "Mapping the Margins," published in 1991, Crenshaw uses the experiences of Black women to illustrate how using singular identity frameworks (like race or gender proposed as "mutually exclusive terrains") ignores differences within groups and forces people to marginalize parts of themselves "within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other."

She notes her focus on race and gender underscores a larger impetus: "the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed." Public spaces are inarguably sites of considerable social construction, production and negotiation. They are primarily shaped by three intersecting socio-spatial forces: urban design, social policy and identity. Also, intersecting aspects of our identities, such as race, gender, age and ability, distinctly shape how we navigate public spaces. This is why even the most well-designed public space can elicit an infinite number of experiences within and across diverse groups. These complex intersections prompt a deeper analysis of *spatial privileges* and *spatial barriers*, leading to the design of more equitable public spaces. The following infographic depicts intersecting socio-spatial factors, both visible and invisible, shaping people's public space experiences:



## Glossary of Equity-Based Placemaking Terms

Equity-based placemaking begins with respectful and informed conversations. While we occasionally use an outdated or incorrect word or term, it's important to continually strive to increase our equity-based placemaking vocabulary. Here is a list of terms that may be helpful during the course of the work.

“\_\_\_\_\_” **ism**: Harmful beliefs, behaviours or institutional practices by a group or person with power directed against specific groups, rationalized by an underlying belief that certain people are superior to others. Examples include ageism, anti-Semitism, audism, cis-sexism, classism, ethnocentrism, heterosexism, racism, sexism, shadism and sizeism.

“\_\_\_\_\_” **phobia**: A learned dislike, aversion or an extreme, irrational fear and/or hatred of a particular group of people. It is expressed through beliefs and tactics that devalue, demean and terrorize people. Examples include biphobia, homophobia, Islamophobia, transphobia, xenophobia and others.

**Access Barriers**: Any obstruction that prevents people with visible and invisible disabilities from using facilities, equipment and online tools.

**Accommodation**: An adjustment made to policies, programs and/or practices to enable individuals to benefit from and participate in the provision of services equally and perform to the best of their ability. Accommodations are provided so that individuals are not disadvantaged based on the prohibited grounds of discrimination identified in the Ontario Human Rights Code or other similar codes. All accommodations should be dignified.

**Community Engagement**: The process of working in a collaborative manner with and through groups affiliated by geographic proximity, race/culture, shared vulnerabilities and/or a collective vision. All equity-based community engagement processes should positively contribute to the group's wellness.

**Cultural Competence**: A person's ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. Cultural competence has four components: awareness of one's own cultural worldview; attitude toward cultural differences; knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews; and cross-cultural skills. Developing cultural competence results in an ability to better understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures.

**Dominant Group**: A group that is considered more powerful and privileged in a particular society or context and that has power and influence over others.

**Duty to Accommodate**: The legal obligation that employers, organizations, service providers and public institutions have under human rights legislation to ensure fair and equal access to services in a way that respects the dignity of every person. The principle of dignity strives to maximize integration and promote full participation in society, in consideration of the importance of privacy, confidentiality, comfort, autonomy, individuality and self-esteem.

**Equity**: The practice of ensuring just, inclusive and respectful treatment of all people, with consideration of individual and group diversities. Equity honours and accommodates the specific needs of individuals and groups.

**Healing**: The process of becoming well after a physical injury and or personal loss. Revitalization initiatives often create unaddressed feelings of loss and trauma for equity-seeking groups. Community engagement should engender a form of community healing for those from equity-seeking groups.

**Housing Exclusion:** The failure of society to ensure that adequate systems, funding, and support are in place so all people, even in crisis situations, have access to housing.

**Implicit Bias:** Harmful unconscious thoughts, assumptions and stereotypes attributed to particular groups.

**Intangible Cultural Heritage:** Cultural heritage refers to tangible and intangible expressions of the history of a place. Tangible cultural heritage refers to physical aspects of the built environment. Intangible heritage, which is less understood, refers to equally important community assets like place-based stories, rituals and celebrations.

**Internalized Oppression:** When members of a marginalized group accept stereotypes assigned to them and begin to believe they are inferior. This can result in self-hatred, speaking poorly about one's own group and powerlessness. This form of oppression is oftentimes difficult to detect and perpetuates systemic inequity.

**Intersectionality:** Intersectionality is a theory and analytic framework coined by African American scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. It helps us to understand how various aspects of our identities such as race, class and gender overlap, creating interconnected forms of discrimination. This scholarship is increasingly applied to restorative justice, health care and city-building as it enables professionals to mitigate systemic and spatial barriers.

**Intrinsic Personal & Community Power Versus Empowering:** Oftentimes the term “empowering” is used in relation to equity-seeking groups such as women, racialized people, disabled people and poor people. While these and other groups are subject to uneven power relations and systemic barriers, they also possess intrinsic forms of power such as resilience, creativity and intangible cultural heritage. Rather than “empowering” people it is more effective and respectful to share space, resources and access to decision-making. This distinction directly emerges from Jay Pitter’s equity-based placemaking practice.

**Lived Experience:** Lived experience is an important form of expertise often underutilized in urban development processes. Individuals with lived experience of a place and/or social identity possess a deepened knowledge of neighbourhood strengths, challenges and opportunities. Lived experience experts are also the keepers of important place-based stories and rituals. When this form of knowledge is coupled with professional expertise and translated into design, programming and policy decisions—community transformation processes are more harmonious and productive.

**Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement:** Place-based community trauma is often caused by divestment, displacement and neighbourhood-based stigma. It impacts social groups and entire neighbourhoods subjected to other forms of systemic inequities such as historical oppression and poverty. The goal of the Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement model is to contribute to the social fabric, health and agency of the community.

**Urban Revitalization:** Urban Revitalization refers to design and policy initiatives intended to transform a place or structure considered to be in “decline” due to economic, social and safety factors. These initiatives often include upgrades to street infrastructure, new housing developments and the provision of amenities such as parks. These changes can create many benefits and enhance communities. However, this term is contested by equity-seeking groups—often diminished or erased in the revitalization processes.

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## Black Communities and Urbanism

### Annotated Bibliography

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The following bibliography has been culled from a larger catalogue of resources, which inform Jay Pitter’s placemaking practice focused on urban design and social equity. It is intended to provide urbanists and other interested stakeholders with concepts for thinking about urban equity amid and beyond COVID-19. This resource has been formatted to be user friendly. Key information pertaining to each resource appears alphabetically—each title is a live link—followed by citations at the end of the document.

#### [Walking While Black](#)

Garnette Cadogen | Lit Hub | 2016

This essay chronicles a Black man’s experience of walking along the streets in the Caribbean and in the United States. Cadogen shares his informal map as “often bizarre, cultural and political and social activity” and appoints himself “its nighttime cartographer.”

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#### [Black Mother Black Daughter](#)

Sylvia Hamilton | Claire Prieto | National Film Board of Canada | 1989

“Black Mother Black Daughter” is a documentary film that explores the lives, experiences, and fortitude of Black women in Nova Scotia. It delves the histories of Black womanhood in Nova Scotia through interviews with women from various walks of life who have intergenerational connections to the community, church and home, and intergenerational knowledge.

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#### [A seat at the table? Reflections on Black geographies and the limits of dialogue](#)

Camilla Hawthorne | Kailey Heitz | Dialogues in Human Geography | 2018

This article explores the historical exclusion of Black bodies and Black geographies from human geography research. Lastly, the article mentions a few notable racialized authors who’ve contributed to the work on Black geographies.

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#### [Black Muslims in Canada: A Systematic Review of Published and Unpublished Literature](#)

Fatimah Jackson-Best | The Tessellate Institute & The Black Muslim Initiative | 2019

This is an accompanying infographic to the Jackson-Best’s 2019 literature review: Black Muslims in Canada: A Systematic Review. The infographic details the long historical presence of Black Muslims in Canada. Additionally, it consolidates the published and unpublished information on Black Muslims in Canada and details where further research is needed.

### On plantations, prisons, and a black sense of place

Katherine McKittrick | Routledge | 2011

This article discusses the concept of a “black sense of place” and “draws attention to the longstanding links of Blackness and geography.” Three central spaces of focus in this text are the plantation, place annihilation (urbicide) and the prison system. The author aims to “identify the possibilities and limitations embedded in analyzing and theorizing Black geographies.”

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### Social geographies of race: Connecting race and space

Brooke Neely | Michelle Samura | Ethnic and Racial Studies | 2011

This article draws upon spatial theory and attempts to convey the relationship between space and race, and how it can result in challenging spatial inequalities for Black communities.

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### Unarmed Verses

Charles Officer | National Film Board | 2016

This documentary based in Ontario, Canada, tells the story of a community facing forced displacement and gentrification. The main character is a 12-year-old Black girl who uses the power of storytelling to animate the dimensions of loss Black communities experience amid urban renewal schemes.

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### Urban Density: Confronting the Distance Between Desire and Disparity

Jay Pitter | AZURE | 2020

This article challenges urbanists to cast their gaze beyond the downtown core to consider “forgotten densities,” a term coined by Pitter to describe residential density types such as favelas, shanty towns, factory dormitories, seniors’ homes, tent cities, Indigenous reserves, prisons, mobile home parks, shelters and public housing.

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### Spatializing Blackness: Architectures of Confinement and Black Masculinity in Chicago

Rashad Shabazz | University of Illinois Press | 2015

This book examines how Black people in Chicago, specifically males, were “being built into a system of masculinity through carceral power” between 1900 and 1940.

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### The Black Plague

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor | The New Yorker | 2020

This article unpacks racial and socioeconomic inequities contributing to increased COVID-19 risks faced by Black communities.

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### Claiming Space Racialization in Canadian Cities

Cheryl Teelucksingh | Wilfred Laurier University Press | 2006

This anthology critically examines the ways in which “race is systemically hidden within the workings of Canadian cities.” Using an intersectionality lens the contributors who represent multiple racial groups also explore dimensions of class, gender and sexuality. Cumulatively these thinkers present ideas that champion the need for new space and spatial reclamation.

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### 'Safe Streets' Are Not Safe for Black Lives

Destiny Thomas | CityLab | 2020

This article underscores the dangers of reopening of streets during COVID-19 due to lack of participatory decision-making and public feedback. Specifically, the article highlights deepening inequities and the growing “mistrust in communities that have been disenfranchised and underserved for generations.” The article concludes with recommendations for those working in the fields of city planning and transportation.

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### Planning History and the Black Urban Experience: Linkages and Contemporary Implications

June Manning Thomas | Journal of Planning Education and Research | 1994

This article highlights several Black metropolises in the U.S. during the early 20th century and how they came to be, along with their unique attributes. Additionally, this article uses a critical-race lens to analyze the racism, segregation and life experiences of Black people residing in these various regions.

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