

## CORE CONCEPT: SPATIAL JUSTICE

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One of the most important concepts of equity in design and spatial justice is that both physical space and architecture are social constructs. As Edward W. Soja put it in “The City and Spatial Justice” (2009), “Space is socially produced and can therefore be socially changed.”

We also need to focus on the relationship—the dialogue—between the social and the spatial. Soja, again: “The spatial shapes the social as much as the social shapes the spatial.”

The broad public, policymakers, and community leaders across the world have awakened to how true this is in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The social changes brought on by the pandemic are shaping how we use our homes and how our cities function. Many city leaders are right now rethinking commercial office towers

the “good life.” But this good life was not equitable, as it was a life supported by racist and inequitable policies and systems put in place by the federal government and maintained by state and local authorities. BIPOC residents could not participate fully, or at all, in this American dream.

These examples point to the importance of understanding that the root of inequity in design—spatial injustice—imposed on certain geographies or populations is systemic and institutional racism. Our ability as designers to change this reality means that we must engage in the radical reimagining of these systems and institutions along social, moral, cultural, and political lines.

In the first chapter of their new book *Spatializing Justice: Building Blocks*, titled “Confront Inequality,” Teddy

urban asymmetry? All urban and architectural initiatives today must begin by confronting the institutional mechanisms that exacerbate social and economic disparity. Inequality is the axis around which our political stance as designers should be organized.”

This is a powerful statement that reinforces the hard reality that architecture is formed by these inequitable systems and that architects must be willing to challenge and change them. Whitney Young Jr. challenged the profession in the same way over 50 years ago in his famous speech at the AIA convention where he pointed out that we are a profession distinguished by our thunderous silence.

The realities of the world in which we live—continuing social and racial unrest, climate change, homelessness, a growing wealth divide, distrust in our institutions and our neighbors, and much more—means that those involved in shaping the built environment can no longer be silent on issues of inequality. In their book, Cruz and Forman lay out 12 drivers of inequality, including erosion of the safety net, racism and segregation, housing unaffordability, and concentration of economic and political power.

These drivers are all parts of social, economic, or political systems; the work of architecture and development exists in and is influenced by all of them.

Architects and designers are incredibly knowledgeable and talented individuals. They have the capacity and ability to bring their special skill sets (creativity, ability to vision, and command of systems thinking) and networks (professional and social connections to civic and community power) to the challenges we face today.

We can design our way to more just city, town, and rural environments, but to do so, we must focus on designing more just systems. ●

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and the spatial organization of cities in response to the fundamental paradigm shift in social interactions related to how and where a lot of work now gets done.

The evolution of the suburbs after World War II is a study in this dialogue between social and spatial. The suburbs were brought about by massive changes in our society. The spatial design of car-dependent, single-family neighborhoods contributed to the idea of the American dream of everyone being able to own a home and enjoy

Cruz and Fonna Forman write, “All urban and architectural initiatives today must begin by confronting the institutional mechanisms that exacerbate social and economic disparity . . . At bottom, inequality is an institutional attack on human dignity, supported by social norms and deployed through deliberate economic agendas that spatialize segregation, racism, and exclusion. Urban violence is a direct consequence of disinvestment and neglect. How can our design fields collectively confront