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Arup Live Event

Shocks + Stressors: A conversation about COVID, social justice, and climate

Questions and answers

What are some immediate calls to action for those attending this meeting?

Richard France (Estolano Advisors): There's something to be said for acknowledging the problem, which is great, and that is the first step but this is the part that the United States in particular has struggled with and it's how do we atone for that. How are we addressing that? How are we working with communities to payback for the harm that society has done to them? So I think as we think through what we are doing in terms of immediate pandemic response, what we are doing about police brutality, and what we are doing about building climate resiliency in all of our communities, I think we have to think through which systems we are operating in and how our work is actually moving that system. For folks who are in the dominant racial structure, it's what am I doing to see power? What am I doing to think through how I generate wealth? What am I doing to give some of that back in a way that acknowledges what other communities are going through and what kind of other communities have born for me to be able to live this privilege?

In each panelist's view, what is the "top priority" area of political advocacy that can benefit from designers' support to advance equitable, resilient, healthy communities?

Warren Logan (Oakland Mayor's Office): Strong support for advancing affordable housing near jobs, and specifically jobs that people are qualified for. here's something to be said for acknowledging the problem, which is great, and that.

Melissa Burton (Arup): Improve transit infrastructure that more widely and broadly connects all areas of cities. This transit needs the be both affordable and safe.

Danielle Antonellis (Kindling): Integrated resilience investments in physical and social infrastructure designed specifically to reduce vulnerabilities of low income and/or marginalized groups to shocks and stresses.

Richard, you focused on the role played by economics. Warren's comments reinforced this recognition as an explanation for how redlining persists despite change in law. How can we as designers influence change in the economic paradigms governing the project's we work on so they are more inclusive and equitable?

Warren Logan (Oakland Mayor's Office): We have to start looking at designs that make us uncomfortable. It's not uncommon for designers to consider traditional design strategies to address uncommon/non-traditional issues and we have to stop doing that. Yes, bike lanes should be on the table, and we should also consider how we partner with other departments and agencies to more holistically address racial disparities. For example, it's not uncommon for my DOT to discuss mobility challenges with Oakland residents, but ultimately reach an impasse when their tools are not what's needed to address the underlying disparities neighbors are experiencing. That's when it's time to collaborate and bring an interdepartmental team together to dig deeper and consider how our respective tools can make more lasting changes. It's on us to dig deeper and ask the harder questions. To ask, WHY people feel the way they do, and not just take their input at face value when our feelings get hurt or our egos get bruised.

Another tool we need to consider is just saying "I'm sorry". It's so rare for designers and government authorities to just apologize for past actions. Some of our issues aren't going to be resolved by concrete and steel but rather, by soft-touch efforts. Lastly, we need to be thinking not just about what we are designing but how that design is implemented. Many

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neighbors in Oakland suggest that their feedback is related to how they've seen and experienced the construction impacts of those "improvements." We need to think about how we can not only design better projects but implement them without impacting the health and safety of the people we're trying to help in the long run.

Richard France (Estolano Advisors): To emphasize Warren's point, we should situate design within the larger system of privilege, marginalization, and oppression. Acknowledging that no design process is values neutral exercise is a good place to start. Designing with intention to enhance access, safety, and reliability for the most vulnerable users enhances the experience for all users. It also has the effect of centering the needs of vulnerable populations and investing in solutions that address those needs. To pursue this approach, designers need to expand the traditional roster of collaborators to include historically (and currently) marginalized voices.

A few questions that designers may consider: (1) Have you identified specific users that will face barriers (or may be harmed) by a proposed design intervention? (2) Have you built a process that allows vulnerable communities to shape the design of the project? (3) Does that process share power in a way that allows underserved communities and under-represented populations to make decisions that center their needs and reflect their priorities? (4) Is your design putting forth a vision that fundamentally shifts the way we allocate resources by prioritizing under-served communities?

Where can you find stakeholders doing good? As an intermediate designer, I feel I get handed projects and don't have any influence.

Heather Rosenberg (Arup): We can have influence in many ways. Even by raising questions at the beginning of the project, we can bring new issues and ideas to the table that might not otherwise get attention. Don't assume that the leaders have all the answers. Name the problems and challenges that you see. Consider the history of your project sites, how they came to be and who they serve, and don't be afraid to share what you are learning. Ask for the opinion of others and listen to what is said and what gets left unsaid. Get active outside of work on the issues you care about. Amplify the voices that are not being heard. And remember that as your career grows, so will your influence. Use it well.

Are there examples of successful participatory budgeting processes to shift resources? Or how can historically neglected communities uncover funds for investments in street trees, parks, transit, etc., when the government always says there's not enough funds to do more?

Heather Rosenberg Arup): While not technically participatory budgeting, a really exciting example of participatory policy-making is the Los Angeles County Alternatives to Incarceration Work Group. The Work Group was established by the LA County Board of Supervisors to "road map, with an action-oriented framework and implementation plan, to scale alternatives to incarceration and diversion so care and services are provided first and jail is a last resort." The Care First, Jails Last report was developed through a collaborative process that included scores of organizations from across the County and is helping to shape County priorities around investment. The group also has a budget committee. Even examples that come from outside the government can have significant influence. See the People's Budget LA project. That initiative put real pressure on the Mayor and City Council to revisit the actual budget and make significant changes.

Are you worried that increasing climate change incidents will exacerbate the inequities that the pandemic has revealed?

Melissa Burton (Arup): We are seeing this already. In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans much of the city was impacted with large scale flooding when the levees were breached. Recovery efforts began shortly after the event and New Orleans began its built back; however socioeconomic status shaped the accessible recovery funding. The Lower ninth ward, an area of lower socioeconomic status in New Orleans is still trying to recover. In 2016, eleven years after the event, it was estimated that only 40% of homes had returned to receiving mail delivery.

With rising housing costs in many cities vulnerable populations are being pushed into homes in flood plains or areas more susceptible to wildfires. The country's-built landscape means that those of lower socioeconomic status are often the most vulnerable to disasters. As climate change is intensifying hurricanes, exacerbating drought and fueling wildfires the inequities that have been observed in the pandemic and previous hazard shocks will most certainly continue to be revealed.

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Can we make positive progress in addressing these major inequities without federal leadership or even support?

Danielle Antonellis (Kindling): There is no question that federal leadership and support is needed to fully dismantle systemic racism and other institutional biases in our country. But we do not need to wait for federal action to make progress.

State and city level governments have a key leadership role to play. Taking a clear stance on issues and committing to address them is an obvious first step. But real change comes through open dialogue with the public and commitment to listen and act accordingly, investments in physical and social infrastructure, job creation, and more.

As service delivery partners to the public sector, and as standalone actors in our communities, the private sector also has a critical role to play. Honest reflections on diversity and inclusion within the private sector is a start, but again, is not enough. The private sector has an obligation to take a deeper look at how their services or goods either exacerbate or addresses social inequities. While the bottom line may incite resistance to change for some companies, those who prioritize their contributions to a sustainable and just society will ultimately benefit. Our society is increasingly expecting and demanding this type of positive transformation.

Finally, the public has the most important role to play. We have opportunities to tackle inequities in our homes, our streets, town halls, through our jobs and of course, by voting in local and national elections. We need to continue to put pressure on our local and national institutions to continue to dismantle biases and address inequities.

Question 9: I'm asking this from the building owner and facility management standpoint. Are there common vulnerabilities you see in existing buildings, or are being missed in new construction?

Heather Rosenberg (Arup): Existing buildings can have many types of vulnerabilities depending on where they are located and what hazards they face, when they were build and what the code requirements were at the time, and how they have been maintained. The first step for building owners is to evaluate what types of hazards your buildings might face, how much exposure you have to those hazards, how vulnerable your buildings are to losses, and what sort of impacts that might have on your organization. This can be done at the building and portfolio level to help you target investment. You should consider your current hazard profile, as well as potential impacts from a changing climate over time. You might also want to consider seismic and other hazards that aren't driven by climate. Arup regularly works with clients to make sense of these complex issues.

Remember that code is generally based on current climate, not future climate. So even new buildings can fall short on things like heat waves or extreme weather. Also remember that life safety codes may not ensure that your building can be used after a major event—the represent minimum requirements to make sure you can crawl out alive. So again, it is important to understand what hazards you might face, and what impacts that might have on your on-going operations.

All of these challenges are even more pronounced with affordable housing. In many cases, the biggest vulnerability around affordable housing stems from deferred maintenance. Because rents are lower, landlords may not be incentivized to invest in on-going maintenance that can support health and safety and may not catch problems before they occur. New models of investment are needed to support retrofits in affordable housing, including seismic and climate related retrofits, weatherization, etc.