

Designing Equity: A Pratt Institute Desegregation Think Tank Symposium
Keynote Address

Pratt Institute School Of Architecture
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Thank you, Ron [Shiffman], for the kind introduction, and thank you to the Pratt Institute and Jerrod [Delaine] for inviting me to speak at this event.

First, a disclaimer. I see myself as a community developer with a dab of real estate development experience; I am not a planner, architect or designer, although sometimes I wish I was. As such professionals, you are visionaries, creatives, educators, and problem solvers. You have been responsible for shaping cities, towns and hamlets. Today, your talents are needed to resolve the significant economic disparity issues of our time. These are disparities that are undermining the social and political fabric of the nation, disparities that are the product of intentional planning and policy.

A word about my place of employment for the past 20 years. Bedford Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation, known as Restoration, is the nation's first community development corporation, founded in 1967 with the bipartisan support of the late senators Jacob Javits and Robert F Kennedy. In 1966, Senator Kennedy embarked on a walking tour of Bedford Stuyvesant in order to witness firsthand what was then largely referred to as "urban blight." The compounding effects of white and middle class flight and systemic disinvestment had left Bedford Stuyvesant and all of Central Brooklyn with an imperceptible economic pulse. As the senator witnessed, to walk down Fulton street in the late 1960s was to walk down a corridor of decay: abandoned storefronts and out-of-use buildings stood as a reminder of the fundamental lack of opportunity in the area. This concentration of poverty and disinvestment translated into

widespread poverty and rates of infant mortality, juvenile delinquency, and unemployment that were twice as high as the city average. Yet what Senator Kennedy also witnessed on his walking tour was an indefatigable community spirit *in spite of* this disinvestment. Beginning in the 1960s, residents, many of them homeowners, had taken it upon themselves to tackle the issues of poverty and crime in their community through grassroots initiatives. The founding of Restoration represented a commitment to furthering community-led efforts for neighborhood revitalization. I like to characterize Restoration as an economic development extension of the 1960s civil rights movement.

In 1971, Restoration acquired the abandoned Sheffield Farms milk bottling plant, a once robust economic engine which had since become an iconic symbol of disinvestment in the center of the community. The bottling plant and related buildings covered one full square block. In redesigning and repurposing the properties, Restoration did more than create 300,000 square feet of office and retail space for local businesses and nonprofits as well as a supermarket, banks, a theater, art gallery, dance studios, college, recording studio, community rooms, a skating rink and an outdoor public space. In renovating the hulk of a building on Fulton street, Restoration and its funders signalled to the residents of Bedford Stuyvesant that they deserved more: more resources, more access to economic opportunity and artistic expression, more investment, and a higher aesthetic. The new Plaza acknowledged that residents also needed opportunities for recreation, for joy and for stimulation, in order to truly thrive. Restoration Plaza represented hope and rebirth for the neighborhood economy. And it worked. Today, the Plaza receives more than 1.5 million visits per year and is a hotbed of civic and cultural engagement. This vitality radiates throughout the local commercial corridors.

In a 2017 Ted Talk, Architect and Author John Cary said that, “well-designed spaces are not just a matter of taste or a question of aesthetics. They literally shape our ideas about who we are in the world and what we deserve. That is the essence of dignity.” For residents of Bedford Stuyvesant, the renovation of the Sheffield Farms bottling plant signalled an investment in, and respect for, their dignity. And you should know that our own Professor Ron Schiffman participated in leading the planning of Restoration Plaza.

Restoration has evolved its mission to explicitly call out the need to disrupt and close the racial wealth gap. We spend a lot of time thinking about strategies to disrupt and close the racial wealth gap, including the role of real estate development--residential, commercial and public facilities. As many of you may know, the racial wealth gap in this country is staggering. In Brooklyn alone, the wealth gap between Black and white residents is \$40-50 billion. Homeownership is another measure of the wealth gap. Nationally, the gap in homeownership between Black and white americans is the same as it was in the 1960s, before racial discrimination in housing was outlawed. I trust everyone here recognizes that real estate has played a central role in creating and locking in the racial wealth gap. This is a crisis, and one that needs to be addressed through a sustained, innovative and comprehensive approach. This is a crisis that needs visionaries and problem solvers.

The real estate industry and related professions, including architects, urban planners, and those in the design industry, have a key role to play in this mission of disrupting and closing the racial wealth gap. The effect of the built environment on creating and perpetuating racial disparities in our country is undeniable. However, just as the built environment has the ability to entrench and maintain social inequalities, so too does it have the potential to disrupt, and even counteract those same patterns of injustice.

To disrupt and close the racial wealth gap, our cities need to be reinvented. And as this nation recovers from COVID-19 and Builds Back Better, a unique opportunity is presented to create economic inclusion. Through policy, planning, design and development, we have the opportunity to quite literally cement racial equity into our cities, and perhaps towns and hamlets. It is an immense task, one which requires integrating measures of economic mobility and wealth creation into your outcomes.

As I think about one approach to accomplish this transformation, I would ask you to consider whether it is feasible for you to address the task by thinking in terms of two questions. First, for each project, what populations or interests should be included within the definition of client? As to the second question, what are the range of objectives that each project should consider?

For the first question, we propose that a much greater number of projects take into consideration interests beyond those of the immediate paying client. As to the second question, we argue that more projects focus on intentionally creating economic mobility, economic diversity, and wealth for people of color, especially those of African and Latino descent. At Restoration, for every project, whether residential or commercial, we strive to create assets that improve the economic interests of as many people as possible. To do this, some of the questions we attempt to grapple with are:

1. In order to create the most housing for the greatest number of people, what is the appropriate balance between height, density and contextual zoning?
2. In gentrifying communities, what is the right ratio between new market rate housing and new affordable housing?

3. Is it possible to harness gentrification to produce economic benefits for low and moderate income households and minority owned businesses?
4. Is there tension between the creation of historic preservation districts and the preservation of homeownership for low and moderate income households?
5. In a high cost city like New York, how do we create homeownership opportunities for moderate income families?
6. What are the most effective ways to reduce or eliminate economic polarization and concentrations of poverty?
7. What is the correct balance between the production of affordable residential rental units and affordable homeownership units?
8. Can new infrastructure investment be harnessed to bring economic diversity to affluent neighborhoods;
9. In communities where there is a shortage of residential units, should all available developable land be used for the production of housing?
10. In communities where most residents are disconnected from wealth creation opportunities, what is the best way to install the connection?

I would like to chat for a moment about Restoration's ongoing efforts to answer the last two questions. As noted earlier, the Restoration Plaza developed in 1971 is an example of an effort to improve the economic circumstances of as many marginalized people of color as possible.

However, for the past two years, we have been working on a **complete reimagining of** Restoration Plaza and vastly increasing its economic and cultural benefit to the residents of Central Brooklyn. The proposed **Restoration Innovation Campus** is intended to bring together

the resources and stakeholders the Central Brooklyn community needs to participate in the tech-driven and creative economies of the future and build wealth. The project will grow Restoration Plaza from 300,000 square feet to 926,000 square feet.

We have been fortunate that Sir David Adjaye and his Associates have taken an interest in our vision. As many of you probably know, Sir David Adjaye is an award-winning Ghanaian-British architect. His international renown aside, Adjaye and Restoration are aligned in that both share the belief that architecture should serve marginalized people of color and enhance their communities. His designs prioritize the role of the built environment in transforming individual and collective lives.

For the Restoration Innovation Campus, we held multiple community visioning sessions, and prioritized residents' aspirations. However, we also view the business community, the educational community and local government as key stakeholders.

We combined community aspirations with Restoration's strategic vision. Thus, we went into the design process with clear objectives in mind. We are designing the plaza to be an ecosystem for disrupting and closing the racial wealth gap especially as it pertains to people of African descent.

We intend to create a facility that attracts emerging sectors of the economy, primarily tech, to central Brooklyn in order to create high-paying job opportunities and better-wage jobs for historically marginalized residents. The campus will also house a range of workforce development programs, which will prepare residents for jobs in these emerging sectors. Financial literacy and coaching will be available to all residents. Thus, the campus provides residents not only with access to high-paying jobs, but prepares them for those very jobs and to build wealth.

We will also create a major, one-of-a-kind space for minority business development and entrepreneurship by offering reduced rent and office space to POC-led businesses, both start-ups and mature businesses. In addition, the campus will create permanent and pop-up retail spaces for neighborhood, regional, and national businesses that will provide goods, services, and employment to countless residents. In bringing jobs and commercial businesses to the area—while simultaneously equipping residents with the tools and knowledge to participate in the economy and build wealth—we are hoping to disrupt the patterns of gentrification.

Finally, we will build a world class arts and culture facility that commemorates the role of the arts and culture of the African Diaspora in Central Brooklyn: a structure that will be here at least 100 years from now as an intentional testament to the creativity and industry of African Americans in the area. The historical presence of black and brown people in America and our cities is too frequently erased. I grew up in Brooklyn during the 1950s, 60s and 70s and I like to point out that Black and Puerto Rican people lived en masse in Dumbo, Park Slope, Boerum Hill, and Prospect Heights, not to mention Fort Greene and Clinton Hill. Yet there is no evidence of that now. Today, there are few, if any, physical symbols or memorials to the ingenuity, resilience, industry and creativity of people of color.

In our community planning sessions, it was very clear how important Restoration Plaza is as a marker of Black culture in Brooklyn, and we know the proposed Innovation Campus must do even more. In a similar vein, David Adjaye drew inspiration from signature elements of Bed Stuy Brownstones as well as elements of local West Indian and African culture in his design. His design communicates the importance of acknowledging and making permanent the specific culture and context of Central Brooklyn, and thus encourages a sense of community pride and belonging.

The proposed Innovation Campus is designed with the overt objective of disrupting and closing the racial wealth gap in Central Brooklyn, as well as with a broad range of interests in mind. In my over 25 years as a community developer, I view my role as bringing to life the aspirations, goals, and objectives of the community holistically defined. I respectfully submit that good design, equitable design, perhaps does the same thing: it enables the creation, cohesion, health, and prosperity of an inclusive community. Yet perhaps *truly* equitable design must do more than enable; it must communicate the value of and inspire inclusivity. Equitable design must build opportunities for economic mobility and wealth creation into the very fabric of our cities through innovative solutions that respect the needs and dignity of the population. As Whitney Young, then President of the NAACP said to the AIA Conference 53 years ago: you cannot be silent in the face of the equity crisis.

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