

SPACE & RACE

The case for linking civil rights and sprawl

by Michael Finley

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Legend has it that Daniel Boone was so averse to being hemmed in that when he saw the curl of smoke from a chimney four miles away, that was his cue to move on. He kept moving till he found a pass through the Cumberlands, creating a superhighway through which a century of American expansion flowed.

Residents of today's wealthier suburbs may claim kinship with Boone. Like him, they picked up and moved away from the troubles of the city to start a new life. What critics call "sprawl," modern-day homesteaders see as an expression of the American dream, their manifest destiny to work hard, live well, and fan out.

But what happens when one American dream, the freedom to move, collides with another, equal access to opportunity? An editorial writer for the National Center for Public Policy Research, a think tank devoted to conservatism and free market economies, sums up one side of the debate: "The campaign against urban sprawl is perilously close to a campaign against the American dream."

But the University's Institute on Race & Poverty (IRP) has been providing ammunition for the other side. According to John A. Powell, founder and head of the institute: "'Space' is how race plays out in American society -- and the key to solving inequities in housing, transportation, education and health care."

The question is, Who's right, the free market thinkers or those who see sprawl as a kind of conspiracy to segregate? And does the story play out any differently in Minnesota's liberal climate?

Powell makes a powerful claim about sprawl. From the first days, back in the 1930s and 40s, he said, the move to settle outside core cities was encouraged by the federal government, but black people never figured in these plans. "The effect has been to lock people who are not white out of access to opportunity. Sprawl," he said, "is the new face of Jim Crow."

The visible hand

Former research head of the American Civil Liberties Union, Powell (the lower case spelling is his idea) was one of the first to suggest that a correlation exists between how space is allocated in the United States and how races are allocated.

In some metro areas, like Detroit, sprawl has created a devastating doughnut effect, in which the inner city is an empty economic hole (40,000 abandoned homes), while the outer rings enjoys all the glaze and sprinkles.

The bad news is, it's getting worse, not better. In 1970, 25 percent of all Twin Cities offices were located in suburbs. By 1993 that rose to 60 percent, meaning that portion of metro jobs are simply out

of reach to people who must rely on public transportation or who, for whatever reason, can't find housing close to their jobs.

Atlanta is a case study of the harm caused by racialized sprawl. Years ago, whites moved in huge numbers to distant enclaves like Cobb County. Long commutes have created the worst smog problem in the U.S., and one of the worst cases of traffic congestion. The city is under fire for failing to meet air pollution standards. Meanwhile, there is no mass transit to help city dwellers partake of suburban job offerings.

Zoning has a particularly killing effect on integration, Powell said. A recent study of ten Twin Cities suburbs showed that zoning restrictions effectively exclude people needing affordable housing to settle there. For example, in areas zoned for single-family homes, all ten communities required lot sizes in bigger than the state recommends. Four of these ten required that each house have a two-car garage.

The 2000 census showed that only six suburbs out of 50 have more than 20% people of color. Since developers seldom build houses close to the city for under \$300,000, white up-and-comers have to reach further out each year to build. The "outer ring" reaches further out there than ever. Where Eden Prairie and White Bear Lake were the outer ring 20 years ago, Annandale, Watertown and Belle Plaine define the urban fringe today.

Suburban sprawl isn't the only way geography illustrates how people feel about race and opportunity. It happens within cities too, through the fragmentation of the metropolitan areas into poor and wealthy neighborhoods. But sprawl is so big and so obvious, and its history so indisputable, that Powell uses it as a lens to zero in on issues of justice.

Our system has designed metropolitan areas where the inner city and a few of the first rung suburbs, like the Twin Cities' Brooklyn Center, are the only options for the poor and nonwhite, and where upper-income people dominate outer-ring suburbs like Chaska and Wayzata, and the upscale communities within the city, like Kenwood and Crocus Hill.

To many people, this situation seems obvious and even necessary, that people of means will freely choose to live in the nicest areas, and people without means will be compelled to live where they can afford. Isn't that a free economy doing what free economies do?

Many developers, public officials, and members of the public take this view, and IRP includes some of the worst expressions of it in their handouts. "I don't buy into the 'urban sprawl' thing," IRP quotes a lobbyist for local builders saying. "What's the attraction of having affordable housing and mixing the races," a resident opposed to integration asked. A developer seeking to build lower-cost housing was told to "keep those spooks in Brooklyn Park and out of Elm Creek."

Ted Mondale, chairman of the Metropolitan Council, believes he is fighting the good fight against sprawl, and is unafraid of rocking the jurisdictional boat. "Almost all the urban policies of the 40's through the 70's were disasters," he said, referring to, among other things, the decline in mass transportation and building high-rises to warehouse poor people. "And we'll be spending the next 40 years undoing them."

But he resists the idea that race and space are linked. "Sprawl," he said, "is a development pattern. It is not, inherently, a race policy." Further, he suggests sprawl produces housing that on the surface is affordable – by building way out there, where land prices are still low – "but it's often a false economy, once you add up extra travel costs and other externalities."

Likewise, Larry Lee, community development officer for the city of Bloomington, a suburb that has a better record than many on low-cost housing, says that Powell's hypothesis is "controversial, for sure. The problem is, the concept of sprawl is not any single person or group's idea. It's the result of a lot of different decisions by people looking to buy homes, by developers choosing where to build offices and stores, and bankers deciding where to invest their money. This theory suggests a conspiracy. But how can you have a conspiracy when all the decisions are being made on such an incremental basis?" In short, what kind of conspirators never meet one another?

But that's not how it is, Powell insists. In city after city, there is a clear correlation between race, wealth, and access to opportunity. Sprawl is less the consequence of a free economy, he said, than of a stacked deck. A suburban refuge for the few was not only conceived by the very visible hand of government, but it has been financed from the beginning by all taxpayers, including the people left behind.

A brief history of sprawl

Eric Myott, a map specialist for IRP, says cities are more segregated today than they were a century ago. Back then people lived in ethnic and income-based neighborhoods, but these neighborhoods closely abutted one another, as the Summit and Selby Avenue neighborhoods do in Saint Paul. Today, we separate ourselves not by a single street boundary, but by miles and miles of space, and the barbed-wire equivalent of zoning and jurisdictional boundaries.

Most Americans don't realize, Powell said, that until the 1920s there was no zoning in the U.S. There were no suburbs *per se*. Cities simply grew by annexing outlying areas. Herbert Hoover, elected on the basis of his managerial skills, was both an early proponent of zoning, then called "Federal regionalism," and a voice of caution. Hoover saw that the power of government to say what went where had potential for abuse -- and specifically that separating people by jurisdiction poses problems of basic equity.

Some cities annexed everything -- New York being the prime example, swallowing four "boroughs" to become what it is today. Albuquerque is an example of a city that preserved this power -- it has no distinct suburbs. But Powell says that when the southern blacks migrated to northern cities in the 1920s, and began registering to vote, states suddenly saw the advantages of limiting cities' annexation powers. Powell's takeaway: annexation was an unassailable local power until there was a chance people of color could acquire political clout. Then, wham.

The federal government, Powell charged, actually taught banks how to redline, making loans more difficult in certain urban areas. (check accuracy on tape) The assumption of segregation was so strong that for years it was considered a violation of professional ethics -- not equal treatment under the law -- for a realtor to introduce blacks to a white neighborhood.

Powell actually likes working with the documents of the 1920s through the 1940s, because the records of that period are so forthright about their intention to keep black people in the city, while inviting white people to settle out of town. The same intention exists today, Powell said, but it lurks behind a thicket of politically appropriate language.

The curtain came down on explicit segregation with *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 1950, when "separate but equal" was ruled unconstitutional. When it became clear that segregation could not be maintained via education, Powell said, housing became the prime instrument. Today, thanks to sprawl,

powell asserts, America is more segregated than the day before the Supreme Court ruled on Brown. Indeed, census data show that cities are far less white today than 50 years ago -- and communities which did not then exist are overwhelmingly white.

"We need to stop glossing over the truths of history," powell said. "The reason for the Alamo was that white Texans wanted Texas to have slaves. Most Americans don't know slavery was outlawed in Mexico, that Mexico was the good guy in that conflict."

"In the two great giveaways in American history, blacks were explicitly excluded from participating," he said. The federal government stationed troops to prevent blacks from being part of the homesteading rushes following the Civil War. In the prosperity following World War II, we passed the GI Bill, so returning soldiers could own homes. We created new neighborhoods outside cities like Levittown for them to live in. And we built an incredible interstate highway system to move get the right people out there, powell, said. In no case were these new opportunities extended to African-Americans.

Sprawl, powell opined, is a continuation of what reasonable historians will conclude has been a conspiracy to deny people of color equal access to the good things of America.

The new Jim Crow

The Institute on Race & Poverty is one of a handful of research centers operating out of the Law School. Others address issues arising from the law that relate to human rights and criminal justice. The Institute on Race & Poverty has been in existence since 1993, when john powell decided to create a "think and do tank" that digs up and exposes to the light of day the facts and figures of racism and injustice that many people don't care to acknowledge: how real inequality in America is, what policies drive it, and what its consequences are.

"Sprawl is just one aspect of the issue," powell said. "The overlying issue is fragmentation, the splintering of a metropolitan area into jurisdictions and distinct neighborhoods that some people can move into, and other people cannot. The outward aspect of this movement seems at first glance like the natural result of free movement. But there is nothing 'natural' about sprawl."

Eric Myott has created census and other maps that are "smoking guns" to the charge that sprawl and race are linked to one another. Each map illustrates the imbalance in different way: where people of color live, how different communities permit land use, where the jobs are, where the bus routes stop. Unfortunately, buses generally stop before reaching the area of greatest job creation.

Perhaps the worst thing about sprawl segregation is that it is such a self-fulfilling dynamic. Even when nonwhites manage establish a foothold in a suburb, bad things happen. Powell described a "tipping point" of 8-9% minority, beyond which white flight begins in earnest.

This flight would present an opportunity, if thousands of other minorities were available to move into the suburb whites have moved out of. But minorities able to afford \$300,000 homes are in relatively short supply, particularly in largely white places like Minnesota. With such a limited market to sell to, houses go unsold, neighborhood values fall, and the newcomers who bought in lose money. When 92% of the market won't buy your product, prices plummet.

One exception is Chicago, where a politically strong black middle class has managed to create a positive presence outside the immediate city. The redistribution of people outside the city hasn't stopped sprawl, but it has created the fairest regional economy of any major American city.

Another exception is Albuquerque, which never lost its right to annex. As a result, there is no division today between rich suburbs and struggling inner city. Albuquerque is one community.

“A think and do tank”

In its short life to date, Powell's young organization has tackled a host of controversial issues, including racial profiling, disparities in health care, and disparities in incarceration. Since September 11, the institute has been to examine the civil rights impact on people of color of certain anti-terrorist measures.

In addition, the institute has been active in the World Conference Against Racism & Xenophobia. This is the group that news organizations last year depicted, to Powell's consternation, as being focused solely on the issue of the dollar amount to be paid in reparations for slavery. In fact, WCAR is responsible for many practical efforts, including the creation, with the institute's participation, of a "report card on racism," a single standard groups in different countries can use to report on conditions inside their borders.

But the sprawl theory has a grandeur and originality that is attracting many in public administration.

Gavin Kearney, IRP's director of research, says: "Our work is deliberately relevant to social justice issues. In academia one must be officially objective and neutral. In practice, that is harder to do. I suppose what we do seems inherently less "neutral" than organic chemistry. We are not neutral, for instance, on racism and poverty. Even if we were, other people would be quick to point out ways in which we are not. In any event, we're not trying to fool any one.

"Do we have enemies? I wouldn't go that far. But there are people who would prefer we not get involved in projects because the facts we turn up make their jobs more difficult. Until these facts become known, they have plausible deniability of them. Racism is something lots of people would rather not deal with."

Colleen Walbran, a research fellow at IRP, defends the existence of an advocacy institute within the Law School. "The problems attorneys deal with that relate to race and fairness are in almost infinite supply. But it's frustrating how the law requires us to seek individual solutions to endemic problems.

"What the IRP does is look not at the individual symptoms, but try to get at the root causes. Take housing issues. Why are there so many landlord/tenant problems? Because there is a shortage of places to live. Why the shortage? Because

Cookbook solution

What does this new awareness of space and race require of us? Is there anything people of good will can do about a "conspiracy" whose participants are not even conscious of joining? The first thing people need to do is acknowledge that a controversy exists, to carefully consider the two points of view, and to realize that what is at stake are fundamental justice and equal opportunity, Powell said. "We need to own up to history," he said, "and address the issues it has bequeathed to us."

IRP's Colleen Walbran described a four-step approach to achieving spatial justice:

1. *Analyze trends in your region.* Demographic maps like Eric Myott's clearly show the inequities of distribution in the Twin Cities. Many officials deny that disparities exist, until confronted with hard data. Once you acknowledge the data, it is hard to ignore it.

2. *See what's happening elsewhere.* Study successes occurring in such cities like Portland, Chicago, Baltimore, and Indianapolis. No two cities are alike, but there is much to be learned from experiences elsewhere.
3. *Identify what's disconnecting access to opportunities.* Not the visible end-issues like transportation and housing but the root issues of zoning and highway subsidies.
4. *Fix them.* The Twin Cities has established the Met Council for oversight of cross-jurisdictional meta-issues like sprawl and pollution. Protecting everyone's civil rights must be added to their responsibilities.

It's a war, and Powell and the others at IRP know that. They already know who their likely allies will be. They are hoping to win the support of leaders like Mondale. They know they can also link arms with existing anti-sprawl groups, like environmentalists, and "sustainable growth" advocates like the Smart Growth movement, which seeks to establish new standards for outward expansion that make better sense environmentally and economically.

And it makes sense that, in a system of winners and losers, the urban core city can make common cause with relatively integrated next-ring suburbs like Bloomington and Brooklyn Center to spread opportunities more equitably.

But the IRP knows its best chance for success rests with getting all people, rich and poor, white and nonwhite, to identify their own best interests. It's not good economics to abandon existing infrastructure, Powell said, and build a host of shiny new ones thirty miles away. It's not good business to tell a huge chunk of its customer base, as southern white businesses did in the 1950s, and outer-ring expansion is doing today, to get lost. It's not good for a society to split itself in half, into the entitled and the out-of-luck.

"I see attitudes about race improving a lot," Powell said. "We all understand that everyone wants something better for themselves. What could be more intrinsic to our sense of hope and hard work? But so far, we haven't looked up and seen, really seen, how this strange structure we have in place affects our choices. Once we see, I think we will see great change."

Mike Finley is the former editor (1973-78) of the University's external tabloid *Update* (now *M*).