The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries

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Publication details

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Published online on: 18 Oct 2018

How to cite: Ashley Dawson. 18 Oct 2018, Rapid adaptation and mitigation planning from: The Routledge Companion to Urban Imaginaries Routledge
Accessed on: 27 May 2019

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Rapid adaptation and mitigation planning

Ashley Dawson

Introduction

We are losing. Losing beloved people and places to anthropogenic climate disasters, and losing hope that global elites will take the action urgently needed to mitigate carbon emissions. Some victories have been won, it is true. The steadfast resistance of the Water Protectors and their allies at Standing Rock in the face of the heavily armed police who pepper-sprayed, tear-gassed, beat and arrested nonviolent protestors eventually prodded the procrastinating Obama administration to block construction of a section of the Dakota Access pipeline. But this eleventh-hour decision was promptly reversed with the arrival of the Trumpocene. More recently, the World Bank announced that it would cease funding oil and gas extraction by 2019, a signal victory for the growing fossil fuel divestment movement (Elliot, 2017). Yet notwithstanding such important victories, the overall trajectory is towards planetary ecocide, as underlined by the announcement at the 2018 United Nations Climate Change Conference in Bonn that none of the world’s industrialized countries are living up to the relatively tepid, voluntary pledges to cut carbon emissions they made two years before in Paris (Plumer and Popovich, 2017). And even if governments were to take further steps to meet their individual pledges, the world will still be on pace to warm-up well in excess of 2°C. This level of warming means irreversible sea-level rises of at least two meters (six and a half feet), which means that the entire bottom third of Florida will be covered in water by 2100, and that Miami and New Orleans will have to be abandoned. Many other major global cities will face catastrophic flooding, with Asian megacities like Shanghai, Shenzhen, Bangkok, Mumbai, Dhaka and Osaka worst affected (Holder et al., 2017). We cannot and will not give up the fight, but we must confront the fact that we are losing the struggle to forestall climate catastrophe.

Cities consequently need to adapt to increasingly destructive heat waves, droughts, hurricanes, and other “natural” disasters. Various adaptations will happen – indeed, they are already unfolding in fits and starts. The danger is that these steps to adapt to climate chaos will intensify the already appalling inequalities that characterize the world’s extreme cities. The absence of concerted social action, adaptation and even post-disaster “recovery” efforts tends to wear even deeper the grooves of quotidian economic and social marginalization that bear
down on urban communities the world over. As the climate emergency intensifies, adaptation threatens to exacerbate already nascent forms of climate apartheid (Dawson, 2017). For the global climate justice movement, it is imperative to imagine alternatives to such dystopian urban futures. How might climate adaptation be conceived of as an opportunity to heal the suppurating wounds of the extreme city, rather than to widen these gashes? How can we frame (and implement) redemptive urban imaginaries in order to shore up social solidarity and heal the divisions that imperil urban sustainability?

Climate action plans are emerging as an increasingly essential tool in envisioning an equitable urban future during the age of climate chaos. If the immediate cessation of all new fossil fuel infrastructure projects is the key demand of the global movement for climate protection, climate action plans offer a positive path beyond our current fossil-fueled social order. Such plans must offer a credible pathway towards zero carbon emissions no later than 2050. Climate action plans should be rolled out in verifiable stages, and the really heavy lifting of emissions reductions should not be left until the final stages. The climate justice movement is calling for the development of such plans by all organizations and at all levels of the state, but cities will clearly play a key role in articulating these, both because they are on the frontlines of climate chaos and because they often offer the greatest purchase for the democratic governance that is necessary to move societies beyond fossil fuels. Climate action plans certainly need to include sophisticated assessment of the technological challenges of moving to renewable energy, including the difficulties associated with transforming today’s fragmented (and increasingly privatized) energy grids. But climate action plans are not simply technical documents. They are also – and above all – schemes for social transformation. If we accept the basic premise that urban resiliency is crucially linked to the strength of urban denizens’ social networks, then successful climate action plans must hinge on imagining urban futures that capitalize on and strengthen communities. Building urban solidarities will be an essential task in order to help cities weather climate chaos. Such solidarities will also be imperative to fight against efforts by reactionary social forces to spark and exploit xenophobic and racist reactions to those displaced by the climate crisis.

In what follows, I examine two exemplary climate action plans: The Upper Manhattan Climate Action Manual (UMCAM) created by the Harlem-based environmental justice group WE ACT, and the Urban Land Institute’s proposal for strategic retreat from a low-lying neighborhood in Miami. With their diverse strengths and weaknesses, these two plans offer not just roadmaps for imagined urban futures but also paradigms for the more general global effort to draft climate action plans. The process by which these plans were drafted is in many ways as important as the actual content of the plans. Also of cardinal significance is the conceptualization each organization produces for how such plans may be implemented, since it is one thing to draft a climate action plan, and quite another to see that plan actually being realized. Finally, such plans should ideally mix adaptation to climate chaos with mitigation of carbon emissions – with efforts to bolster the former also boosting the latter. After all, if adaptation is not an integral part of efforts to move us beyond fossil fuels, it may become nothing more than a glossy supplement to the current trajectory toward planetary ecocide.

**Toward a just transition: the Northern Manhattan climate action manual**

WE ACT has a long history of fighting against environmental injustice. The organization was founded during the 1980s in response to plans by New York City authorities to open a sewage treatment plant on the Hudson River along the western fringe of Harlem
(Dawson, 2010). In addition to challenging such environmental injustices in New York, the group has also played a role in originating paradigms for an alternative social and environmental order. The drafting of the *Upper Manhattan Climate Action Manual (UMCAM)* by WE ACT and a broad swath of partner organizations carries forward this struggle for climate justice, and is informed by some of the climate justice movement’s cardinal principles. Among these is a framework which insists that the vulnerabilities of a city like New York are not simply a function of rising seas or aging infrastructure, but also of social inequality and exploitation:

> Without addressing fundamental issues such as poverty and racism, millions of New Yorkers will be displaced, regardless of climate. Therefore, methods of policymaking, infrastructure developments, financial systems, and more should work at the intersection of ending inequality and preparing for the specter of climate change.

This emphasis on the conjoined vulnerabilities that affect urban populations informs every aspect of the climate action plan, meaning that efforts to create resilient infrastructure and landscapes are always embedded in discussions of ameliorating the conditions for the communities that inhabit and use them. This approach contrasts significantly with dominant practices of even the most progressive architects, whose focus falls almost exclusively on shoring up physical infrastructures in order to climate-proof vulnerable cities, with consideration of the denizens of such cities coming in most cases as an afterthought. *UMCAM* deploys its highly holistic approach to climate action across a wide variety of sectors of urban society, including energy production, green infrastructure, waterfronts and coastal flooding – mitigating the urban heat island effect, affordable housing provision, and civic governance. In what follows I will touch on a few of the most indicative plans for these various sectors.

The intersectional lens of climate justice is perhaps most powerfully exemplified by *UMCAM*’s approach to urban energy. This is a key issue because the climate crisis is, above all, an energy emergency. The energy sector is responsible for at least two-thirds of all greenhouse gas emissions (International Energy Association, 2016). The world is growing increasingly hungry for power, and so, despite every effort, carbon emissions continue to rise. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA, 2016), overall global energy demand is projected to accelerate significantly in the coming decades, expanding by roughly one-third between now and 2040. This inconvenient truth has generated a sense of urgency around the need for an energy revolution, a wholesale shift from dirty fossil fuels to clean renewable energy. *UMCAM* registers this urgency and intervenes in the campaign for renewable energy, but situates this campaign within a much broader social struggle:

> Over the next several decades, billions of dollars will be invested in designing, building, and maintaining new energy systems. These systems can double-down on the centralized grid, gas, oil, and nuclear systems that New York State is already dependent on, or they can be transitioned to sources of renewable energy that are not managed by large bureaucracies, but rather by community-based institutions that can reinvest resources back in the community, including in the form of access to financial capital, jobs, educational opportunities, and more.

*(Khawarzad, 2017: 30)*

Making the shift to solar, wind, and other renewable energies is thus not simply about introducing novel technologies for the generation of power. It is, equally crucially, about
establishing the forms of community control and benefit that are increasingly known as energy democracy (Angel, 2016).

Energy democracy is predicated on the fundamental principle that energy production must not harm the environment or people. This seemingly obvious proposition comes with a radical corollary: planet-killing fossil fuels must be left in the ground. But it is not enough simply to switch to wind-, solar-, and tide-based renewable energy sources. This is not, in other words, simply an issue of technological innovation – as the shift to renewable energy is so often represented by mainstream commentators. Advocates of energy democracy insist that everyone should have sufficient access to renewable energy sources. Since the free market is notoriously unconcerned with such questions of egalitarian access, energy democracy thus also implies that the means of power production must be socialized and democratized. This entails conceptualizing energy as a form of commonwealth rather than, as at present, a commodity produced by for-profit entities. This shift makes sense since the new forms of renewable energy are predominantly produced in decentralized forms, making collective ownership of the means of production the most sensible way to regulate them, and to shift power to community and grassroots organizations.

UMCAM grasps and builds on the positive implications of energy democracy, treating the deployment of renewable energy as providing potential income and jobs to economically marginalized communities in Northern Manhattan. The Manual states that “organizing residential and commercial tenants into consumer and producer cooperatives can increase investments in energy, reduce costs, and provide needed ownership and employment within energy industries” (Khawarzad, 2017: 30). Collective investment in renewable energy would help speed the transition away from fossil fuels, and, in tandem, would allow communities to own the means of power production – allowing them to benefit when the energy they generate is fed back into the grid. Using progressive legislation such as New York City’s Community Shared Solar Act, public housing developments as well as other institutions such as universities and hospitals could all develop shared solar generation capacity. Using this act, residents of public housing could also form co-ops that could receive solar power from remote installations, meaning that they need not own their rooftops and could still use solar power even when their needs exceed the capacity of their roofs (Khawarzad, 2017: 34). In addition, if done correctly, Climate Action would generate skilled and well-paying jobs for local communities that have been economically marginalized for many decades. Finally, the establishment of energy democracy would also counter strong trends toward energy poverty. As UMCAM notes, “low-income New Yorkers pay up to 13 percent of their income on energy. The average family in the US pays 1.5 percent” (Khawarzad, 2017: 32). This striking disparity in the economic burden of energy is of course added to other disproportionate burdens shouldered by low-income communities in New York for basics amenities such as housing. Fighting such injustices will require dedication to a vision of energy democracy that sees the city not as a homogenous entity but as the site of extreme social and environmental inequalities. Thus, although New York has fairly progressive legislation on the books, such as the 80 x 50 plan to cut carbon emissions by 80 percent by 2050, very little of the renewable energy systems that will be essential in reaching that goal have actually been deployed in northern Manhattan. The city needs to recognize that poor communities have borne far more than their fair share of environmental injustices, and that true urban resilience can only come through policies that lift up historically marginalized and disenfranchised communities.

As these examples suggest, the social component of urban resiliency is always primary for UMCAM. Although this theme is threaded through all of the Manual’s proposals, it is
most apparent in the initiatives the Manual advocates for coping with disasters. In the section on emergencies, the Manual discusses the need for community education and the broader fostering of social networks as a key component in disaster harm-reduction. These proposals draw on insights about the centrality of social connections – rather than any particular technological system in isolation – in determining who survives and who does not in emergencies such as heat waves (Klinenberg, 2015). The Manual states:

Connecting tenants with each other, and with organizations that can provide support, is critical to surviving an emergency. In areas with high social cohesion, vulnerable populations can be identified and receive evacuation and medical support. In places with low social cohesion people risk not receiving the services they need because they can’t communicate and service providers don’t know where/how to find them. (Khawarzad, 2017: 44)

Building on such insights, UMCAM advocates for the construction of social centers as spaces to weather storms. In the short term, such spaces, provisioned with microgrids, can offer safe harbor from blackouts caused by either severe storms or the overloading of the energy grid during heat waves (Khawarzad, 2017: 45). But, beyond such emergencies, social centers – as their name suggests – offer venues dedicated to fostering urban sociality. For example, a proposal of particular note in the Manual is the diversity of uses that such social centers may have:

These places support programs ranging from hosting community meetings, providing facilities for meetings of tenant organizations, housing a library, showing film screenings, providing public health programming like yoga and self-defense, provide incubator space for community organizations, and access to technology and tools for art-making, among other things. The goal is to have a flexible space that can be programmed and managed by the community and therefore caters to local needs. (Khawarzad, 2017: 76)

Underlying these diverse uses of the social center is an emphasis on generating social cohesion, on providing access to key services and skill sharing, and on a myriad of other forms of informal community building.

Perhaps the most developed contemporary form of the social centers proposed by UMCAM can be found in the city of Jackson, Mississippi, where Black activists have been fighting back against the legacy of centuries of oppression by organizing a striking variety of vibrant cooperative institutions (Akuno and Nangwaya, 2017). Happily, there are many other examples of such cooperative social spaces, both around the US and the rest of the world, from the many collective institutions that have grown up in post-industrial Detroit to the profusion of autonomous social centers across Europe (Lee Boggs and Kurashige, 2012; Pusey, 2010). But all of these alternative, fundamentally anti-capitalist social spaces face not simply pushback from reactionary social forces – including, most obviously, the police – but also the fundamental challenge of countering the power of capital on an urban scale. While there is much talk of greening cities today, all too often the transformations that result from such discourse are relatively superficial. One need only visit one of the booming cities in the US (a profusion of craft breweries is often a good guide to finding such cities) to find examples of skin-deep environmentalism such as the introduction of a lightweight light rail system in a city that is simultaneously throwing up superhighways helter-skelter to cope...
with the traffic congestion caused by galloping suburban sprawl. Urban greening is in this case part of a neoliberal ethos of inter-city competition, in which progressive cities must compete to lure businesses and affluent consumers without fundamentally challenging the growth of carbon emissions that comes with US-style urban sprawl (Fox Gotham and Greenberg, 2014). In addition, efforts at ameliorating environmental conditions in cities can also generate green gentrification, as more attractive living spaces draw affluent settlers (Checker, 2011). All too often, successful struggles against environmental injustice by grassroots social movements can paradoxically create the conditions for the ultimate displacement of the very low-income residents who have engaged in this battle. In the absence of significant, systematic efforts to provide good jobs and affordable housing, the dynamics of capital on the urban scale can displace communities, perpetuating relatively invisible but nonetheless deep forms of injustice.

Many of the proposals for green infrastructure in the Climate Action Manual address the problem of urban capital and inequality in a relatively indirect manner, but UMCAM also tackles these challenges head-on in its discussions of housing and governance. Housing is a particularly difficult issue in New York. Despite the city’s much-ballyhooed program of constructing affordable housing under Mayor Bloomberg, New York still suffers from a massive dearth of housing that is truly affordable – and currently has all-time high numbers of homeless people as a result. Why is this? The Bloomberg affordable housing program worked by incentivizing developers to build putatively affordable apartments within luxury developments; in return for building these apartments, developers were given tax breaks under the city’s fifty-year old 421-a housing scheme. The program generated around 2,500 units of affordable housing each year, but cost tax payers $1.4 billion annually (Bagli, 2017). In addition to this large tax giveaway to real estate, the housing program was flawed by the fact that “affordable” was defined according to median income averages. As a result of the massive amounts of money garnered by the city’s 1 percent, median income for the city as a whole is totally unreflective of the income of the city’s working class. The affordable housing program effectively became purely symbolic, benefitting only a small slice of the city’s middle-class rather than the working poor it was truly intended to aid.

The situation may be particularly dire in New York, but it is part of a much broader, global crisis of housing. According to recent research, residential displacement due to development, extraction, and construction has reached a scale rivaling that caused by natural disasters and armed conflict (Madden and Marcuse, 2016). From the bulldozed townships of South Africa, to the demolished favelas of Brazil, the foreclosed suburbs of the American southwest and the gentrifying outer boroughs of New York, real estate is attacking housing, subordinating social belonging to private profit (Aalbers, 2016). Today more than a billion people are unable to find a decent or affordable home. The global housing crisis is a product of the underlying crisis of contemporary capitalism, as a tide of over-accumulated capital sloshes around the globe, commodifying housing, setting up urban “regeneration” schemes that generate mass displacement, and generally spreading insecurity and dispossession.

UMCAM confronts the housing crisis and the festering problem of gentrification in New York neighborhoods like Harlem and Washington Heights by highlighting the problem of impermanent and illusory “affordable” housing, and by calling for permanent (i.e. non-market-based) affordability as an alternative paradigm to the present capitalist one. One of the primary mechanisms the Manual suggests for realizing such ambitions is the Housing Development Finance Corporation (HDFC) co-op. Such co-ops are “social purpose corporations committed to the conservation of affordable housing” (Khawarzad, 2017: 114). Since, as the Manual notes, there are over 3,000 HDFC co-ops in New York,
the idea of leveraging this cooperative institution is not simply a pipe dream. But the HFDC co-op is not a genuine solution for the city’s deep housing crisis: these co-ops require a tricky combination of fixed income caps as well as a significant down payment—a combination that very few urban residents are able to satisfy. New Yorkers with low incomes tend to spend a significant amount of their incomes on housing, precluding the amassment of the types of financial assets required by HFDC co-ops (Higgins, 2014). While social lending institutions might be able to help poor urban residents by lending them some of the money required for HFDC co-op down payments, the concept of encouraging additional debt for the poor is a rather dubious one.

UMCAM’s ideal of permanent affordable housing needs to be radicalized around the demand for a universal right to housing. This demand, although unrealizable under present political conditions, can be a rallying cry to mobilize radical coalitions around transformative demands that can be won, which might include a fight to defend and expand public housing, a secure system of rent controls, public ownership of land, public financing, limits on speculation, and the adoption or reintroduction of regulations on home finance mechanisms. These and other specific struggles could go some way toward the broader goal of making housing a right. That said, UMCAM’s intuition to link struggles over the right to housing to environmental struggles is a vital contribution. As Raquel Rolnick, former UN Special Rapporteur on Housing, argues, “the notion of the human right to adequate housing is not restricted to the access of the house itself… the right to housing has to be apprehended in a much broader context” (Madden and Marcuse, 2016: 330). The struggle for social justice must, in other words, be closely tied to the fights for environmental and climate justice.

Solving the global housing crisis will clearly take more than piecemeal, reformist solutions. A climate action plan that addresses fundamental aspects of urban sustainability must consider the basic conflict between capital and the good of the vast majority of those who inhabit cities. Resolving this crisis will take radical action by urban movements dedicated to rethinking the neoliberal social order. In the section of the manual dedicated to urban governance, UMCAM discusses the issue of how such radical transformation might take place, and how new commons-based ideas and movements are fighting to reappropriate urban spaces and cities more broadly:

The urban commons framework raises the question of how best to produce and consume shared resources like energy, land, and water. Collaborative governance strategies ensure that resource allocation is not only based on who has power but that resources are made available to everyone.

(Khawarzad, 2017: 92)

The urban commons framework is predicated on moving political struggles beyond the market-state dichotomy that characterizes the great majority of the political struggles of the twentieth century. While it does not eschew the state-based gains of social democracy during the past century, it strives to move beyond the top-down orientation that often characterized such modes of governance through the empowerment of citizen-led collective initiatives and institutions (Ostrom, 2009).

The idea of an urban commons provides leverage for urban environmental justice movements to challenge the remorseless commodification of cities by real estate interests and neoliberal capitalism more broadly. But, as David Harvey notes in his thoughtful critique of autonomist ideas of popular self-determination, commons movements can all
too easily become the vehicle for producing greater inequality when they are appropriated by elite, neoliberal interests (Harvey, 2013: 83). As Harvey notes, urban commons exist alongside public spaces and institutions (such as public housing) that have been actively created by the state through direct conflict with the interests of capital. Both of these collective goods are being dismantled and privatized by capitalism. Effective commoning is predicated on taking collective goods out of the realm of private property relations, treating the commons as a good that is managed collectively and collaboratively. Recent proposals to achieve this include stipulating that those who use urban land exclusively should pay a “community land contribution” as compensation, creating a fund that would be administered either by local government or a community land trust to take land off the market or provide funding to those wanting to buy homes (Adams, 2016). In fact, New York already has such a program, known as the NYC Community Land Initiative, an organization formed in response to the housing crisis and the inadequacy of the city’s responses. This movement is doing important work, but it operates within a political context in which city governance largely remains tied to the prerogatives of real estate. It will take far more political mobilization and a significant diffusion of the radical ideas behind community land trusts for these movements to make significant inroads in a city ruled by the likes of David Rockefeller, Michael Bloomberg, and Donald Trump (Moody, 2007). But this is the terrain on which the struggle for a truly sustainable New York must be waged. The Upper Manhattan Climate Manual gives us one of the clearest and most comprehensive imaginaries of this terrain and some of the means through which the battle for urban resiliency must be waged.

Planning retreat: the Urban Land Institute’s adaptation action area framework

People will fight to hold onto and remake their cities, but some of these cities – many, in fact – will have to be abandoned, in part or in whole. The danger is that retreat from these drowning cities will take place in piecemeal fashion. The wealthy will eventually heed their financial advisors’ assessments about declining property values in repeatedly inundated zones in cities like Miami and Shanghai. They will jettison their coastal land holdings, moving to higher ground within cities or away from the coast altogether. The poor will be stranded behind, left underwater in both an economic and material sense. If we do not talk forthrightly about the ultimate need for retreat, this will necessarily be the fate of the world’s extreme cities.

But it is not easy to talk about retreat, and even harder to actually make it happen. Although the word has multiple meanings, including a quiet and secluded place in which one can rest and relax, the term has an overwhelmingly military connotation today. Military imagery and terminology has bled into virtually every aspect of life in this superpower that wages perpetual warfare. Even the environment has come to be represented using a military lexicon: for example, during the disastrous oil spill caused by the explosion of the Deepwater Horizon explosion, the struggle to stop the spill was described as a military campaign and, even more symptomatically, as an effort to “kill the leak” (McClintock, 2010). In this kind of martial culture, one thoroughly imbued with settler-colonial values of regeneration through violence, the notion of retreat is anathema (Slotkin, 2000).

The name of the post-Sandy recovery program in New York City says it all: Build It Back. This commitment to rebuilding at all costs is not purely rhetorical. Although coast-shaping policies such as the National Flood Insurance Program are nominally committed to supporting retreat from repeatedly flooded properties, out of every $100 of federal flood insurance money spent to rebuild homes damaged by floods, less than $2 goes to help
people relocate themselves away from flood-prone areas (Geiling, 2017). As a nation, the US is committed to systematically ignoring the rising tides that imperil the cities that line its coasts, not to mention the increasingly searing temperatures that are prostrating the improvidently sprawling cities of the southwest. Yet, as well-funded and muscular an ideology as climate change-denial may be in the contemporary US, the wrathful force of climate chaos will ultimately prove far more potent. How may we begin to imagine retreat from climate change-imperiled cities while we still have the means to make such plans real? We need to plan now, to begin imagining alternatives, when we have both the capital and the state capacity left to make bring such schemes to fruition, and to do so in a manner that respects the ethical imperative of an egalitarian transition.

The Urban Land Institute’s (ULI) scheme for the community of Arch Creek Basin in Northern Miami tackles this challenge of imagining a just urban retreat. The Arch Creek Basin report begins with a frank admission of the stark inequality that afflicts Miami. The Miami-Dade County metropolitan area is “one of the nation’s least-affordable housing markets and faces severe income inequality” (ULI, 2016: 9). As a result of this, “day-to-day realities for low-income families are extremely difficult, without even considering long-term vulnerabilities and exposure to sea-level rise, flooding, and storm risk”. In addition to this combination of quotidian and long-term precariousness, residents of Arch Creek Basin and other low-income neighborhoods in Miami are faced with what ULI calls climate gentrification: “fears that low-income, high-ground neighborhoods may become unaffordable as residents of the city’s coastal and low-lying neighborhoods seek to relocate to avoid their areas’ inherent risk” (ULI, 2016: 9). Concerns about climate gentrification are being articulated by low-income communities across the US, but they are particularly urgent in Miami and surrounding areas as a result of Florida’s uniquely dysfunctional racialized and classed geographies. Wealthy people typically live as close as possible to the state’s beaches, while poorer people usually inhabit less desirable (and heretofore less valuable) inland areas. But as sea-level rises begin to imperil coastlines, developers and wealthy individuals have begun acquiring property in neighborhoods on higher ground. The result is climate gentrification, a particularly vicious form of retreat in which poor communities of color are displaced from their land by wealthy people, who are ironically disproportionately responsible for the carbon emissions driving climate change.

ULI proposes to address this emerging climate change-related social injustice through a project of planned retreat in the zone of north Miami designated as a site for adaptation action. The Arch Creek Basin report sets out four interrelated areas of intervention: building social resilience in the area; managing water by restoring some of Arch Creek Basin’s historical, natural systems; encouraging resilient and connected development patterns in a future transportation hub located on high ground; and using the Adaptation Action Area framework to address governance, financing, and implementation (ULI, 2016: 14–15).

The first of these interventions – building social resilience – hinges on expanding the definition of this fashionable buzzword, which has been adopted across an astonishing variety of contemporary institutions and endeavors, from architecture and urban design, to high finance, to counter-terrorism. These days everyone wants to be resilient, to be able to cope in a flexible and nimble way with the risky and unstable environments we increasingly inhabit. Yet most definitions of resilience hinge on almost exclusively technical definitions of the term. While material infrastructures clearly need to be shored up to cope with climate chaos, these (often extremely expensive) efforts will make little difference if communities are not educated about the threats they face and the adaptation options available to them. Resilience consequently must include a social component, one that crucially acknowledges the deleterious impact of extreme
economic inequalities. The ULI team lays out a number of recommendations for how such social resilience may be built, and foremost is an effort to engage local communities through the creation of a social center very much along the lines proposed in WE ACT’s *Climate Action Manual*, called, in ULI’s case, a Resilience Resource Center (ULI, 2016: 15). This site would become a resource for recovery assistance during natural disasters as well as a venue for year-round outreach efforts to community organizations. Importantly, the ULI report recognizes that Miami in general and Arch Creek in particular is already home to many civic groups working around the intertwined issues of social and environmental resilience, and suggests that these groups must play an integral role in planning efforts through participation in the Adaptation Action Area Steering Committee. Although ULI is undeniably an external actor, and, as we shall see, might be viewed with suspicion by working class communities of color, it nonetheless sounds the right note through this insistence not just on community inclusion but on giving affected people a directing role in the adaptation solutions under development.

The extent of ULI’s dedication to social justice only becomes truly apparent, however, in the section of the report dedicated to restoring Arch Creek’s natural flood-absorption capacities. Some of these proposals flow naturally out of efforts at community education, including, for instance, the encouragement of household-level efforts to capture roof runoff using rain barrels. But other proposals are more sweeping, including the signature suggestion that the city construct a “slough” or wetland park to absorb flood waters at appropriate times, and provide much-needed recreational space for the community in drier times. This proposal builds on examples of flood-absorbing public space pioneered elsewhere, such as Rotterdam’s Benthemplein Water Square (Keeton, 2015). ULI innovates, however, by marrying this proposal to an effort to provide safer, affordable housing to flood-affected residents of Arch Creek Basin. As the report puts it, “The slough would be implemented over time in concert with the alternative safe housing strategy, through the acquisition and assembly of persistent flood-prone properties” (ULI, 2016: 15–16). This scheme recognizes the imperative to retreat from certain flood-prone portions of a city like Miami, but in doing so seeks to ensure communities have a right to reside in a more attractive location rather than simply leaving them to fend for themselves as the waters rise. It is an immensely important intervention, one that acknowledges low-income communities’ concerns about climate gentrification as well as the realities that must prompt retreat for imperiled coastlines.

ULI has come to this social-justice oriented framework around urban retreat as a result of the firestorm of criticism elicited by previous proposals by the organization for shrinking New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina decimated the city. Shortly after Katrina, Bring New Orleans Back (BNOB), an organization led by mega-developers such as Joseph Canizaro, persuaded Mayor Ray Nagin to invite ULI to propose a redevelopment plan for New Orleans (Davis, 2014: xii). As Mike Davis argues in his stinging review of the resulting plan,

> ULI’s recommendations reframed the historical elite desire to shrink New Orleans’s socioeconomic footprint of Black poverty as a crusade to reduce the city’s physical footprint to contours commensurate with flood safety and a fiscally viable urban infrastructure. The outside “experts” proposed an unprecedented triage of a US city, in which low-lying neighborhoods would be targeted for mass buyouts and future conversion into a greenbelt to protect New Orleans from storm surges. ULI proposed setting up the Crescent City Rebuilding Corporation, armed with eminent domain and able to bypass city council. For veterans of the 1960s civil rights movement, it reeked of a return to the paternalism of plantation days.

*(Davis, 2014: xiii)*
Under a barrage of criticism for embracing this plan to appropriate largely working class, historically Black portions of the city by legal fiat, Mayor Nagin reversed course and condemned the ULI/BNOB plan. Community mobilization against forceful displacement scored an important victory against a top-down, developer-led initiative with a genealogy extending back to the destructive “urban renewal” programs of previous decades. But the upshot is that many perennially flood-threatened neighborhoods in New Orleans remain at risk, their residents given no recourse as communities throughout Louisiana begin contemplating – and, increasingly, engaging in – managed retreat from imperiled zones (Gass, 2017). The solution cannot be to obstinately remain in place: this is a recipe for an eventual repeat of the mass devastation caused by the largely anthropogenic disaster that resulted from Hurricane Katrina (Smith, 2006). If current trajectories of carbon emissions are not radically altered, hundreds of millions of city-dwellers will have to be resettled in the coming decades. It is becoming increasingly apparent that we need policies of planned, just retreat from threatened coastlines (as well as drought-prone areas) if we wish to avert civilization-destroying social chaos (Watts, 2017). We need, in short, to imagine what it would mean to move portions of and even entire cities out of harm’s way.

To what extent has ULI learned from the debacle in New Orleans? In its proposals for Arch Creek Basin in Miami, ULI lays out a plan for a new high-density, transit-oriented housing development located on higher ground along the area’s Coastal Ridge (ULI, 2016: 15). The proposal for the new development hews to now well-established New Urbanist criteria: according to ULI, it should be “mixed use, walkable, and mixed income, creating a unique sense of place and economic development opportunities for downtown north Miami”. Yet as critics such as Andrew Ross have argued, New Urbanist ideals often perpetuate auto-centric, sprawl-based urbanization through segregated zoning of commercial and residential areas. It is not clear that the ULI proposal has learned from the failures of New Urbanist design in recent decades. Indeed, ULI’s discussion of the proposed Coastal Ridge complex as a “hub for economic development for a larger area” raises suspicion that the organization has retained the role of a “self-interested voice of corporate land developers”, as Mike Davis characterizes it in his discussion of planning for post-Katrina New Orleans (2014: xii). And yet immediately after describing this economic potential, the ULI report states that “with this development potential comes the opportunity to serve nearby vulnerable communities” (ULI, 2016: 33). In addition to integrating mass transit and energy-efficient green buildings and systems into the new neighborhood, that is, ULI proposes a mixed-income housing strategy within a half mile of the new transit station. Crucially, ULI suggests that residents of Arch Creek Basin who choose to relocate from their repeatedly flooded properties would be given “first right of refusal” to the affordable housing units integrated into the new Coastal Ridge development. On first glance, this seems like a highly progressive proposal, one that overturns the policies of careless displacement that marred ULI’s proposals for shrinking New Orleans and that potentially offers a paradigm for policies of just retreat from endangered coastal zones around the world.

Yet there are significant reasons to be skeptical of ULI’s proposals. For one thing, there are problems, to put it mildly, with urban policies based on leveling public housing complexes – which are routinely perceived by urban elites in nakedly racist terms as hives of criminality and social dysfunction – and decanting residents into “mixed-use housing”. Mixed-income developments billed as liberating the poor from the projects are, in fact, usually characterized by a wall of security measures, including lease compliance checks, housekeeping checks, criminal background checks, credit checks, employment verification, and drug testing (Dukmasova, 2014). If they are lucky enough to make it through this gauntlet and successfully resettle in the new developments, the residents of set-aside...
affordable housing find themselves subjected to a bevy of disciplinary mechanisms designed to maintain putative middle-class social standards. They find themselves living in a “sort of well-outfitted prison”, where they are “pacified through rigid discipline privileging the perceptions and priorities of their wealthier neighbors” (Dukmasova, 2014). Many residents of such panoptical mixed-use developments unsurprisingly find themselves feeling isolated, disempowered, and not-too-subtly ostracized. But it is in relation to the notion of “affordable housing” that the pitfalls of ULI’s proposal is most clear. As we have seen in relation to New York, affordable housing schemes pegged to “area median income” all too easily become boondoggles that benefit a small number of better-off urbanites while doing little to ameliorate the grave housing crisis afflicting the truly needy. True to the ersatz affordable housing protocols in rapidly gentrifying cities such as New York, ULI’s proposal for Miami specifies that housing assistance should be directed to “low-income families (meaning families with 80 percent or less of area median income)” (ULI, 2016: 35). And yet, in an earlier section of the report, the authors note the city of Miami’s gaping economic polarization: the “highest-income residents earn $40 for every $1 earned by Miami-Dade’s low-income residents” (ULI, 2016: 25). Given this disparity, affordable housing based on area median income is inevitably destined, by simple mathematical necessity, to be completely out of reach for the vast majority of low-income residents of the city.

In summary, the ULI plan for Arch Creek Basin has the great virtue of taking the necessity of coastal retreat seriously, and attempts to offer a detailed plan for facilitating that retreat in a manner that cleaves to principles of economic and social justice. The plan’s insistence on providing a social context for resiliency-building efforts, and its consequent effort to marry the revival of natural flood-protection features in the urban fabric to a voluntary relocation program is highly laudable, at least in principle. But these admirable elements are marred by a failure to be sufficiently serious in confronting the fundamentally unjust, economically exclusionary aspects of the extreme city. As we have seen, contemporary capitalism is quite remorseless in its development of socially and environmentally unsustainable cities. Without plans to fight back against the destructive aspects of the commodification of land and the natural world, vulnerable people and communities will continue to find themselves in harm’s way as they struggle to survive in the inhospitable niches of the planet’s increasingly extreme cities.

The shortcomings of ULI’s work should perhaps not be so surprising given the organization’s relatively elite background and the technocratic process through which the report on Arch Creek Basin was generated. How, we might well imagine, might a report on this topic have looked had a Miami-based organization similar to Harlem’s WE ACT taken up the task of reimagining the area? We can only hope that grassroots climate justice organizations in Miami and other cities will respond to ULI’s efforts to plan for retreat with their own overtly anti-capitalist imaginings of the sustainable, just cities of the future. Such radical urban imaginaries, which hinge above all on social solidarity, hold the key to winning the struggle for climate justice.

References


New York City Community Land Initiative. https://nyccli.org/about/background/.


