Learn About City Planning



Y-PLAN students from Sacramento, California examine a map of their project site.

This document provides a broad overview of the city planning field and is meant for both Y-PLAN students and adult participants! To learn about additional concepts that it does not cover explicitly, you can review City Planning Terms.

City Planning 101

At its most basic level, city planning - also known as urban planning or town planning - is a professional field that shapes how people will live, work, and play in urban areas. While city planners are primarily known for managing land use and designing the built environment (streets, parks, etc.), they oversee a number of other systems and services. These responsibilities include - but are not limited to - distributing necessities like water and electricity, fostering economic growth, improving public health, promoting a sense of inclusion and opportunity, protecting historic structures, and protecting the natural environment.

Given how the field encompasses so many different topics, many city planners specialize in particular areas. Despite their expertise, there are growing efforts to involve more community members in city planning processes. This is why strategies like Y-PLAN are so impactful!

To understand the basics of the city planning field, consider watching the following educational videos:

- A Brief History of U.S. City Planning
- How to Become a City Planner
- How do the layers of government affect city planning?
- Who REALLY designs cities?
- An Introduction to Zoning
- Are cities like organisms?
- 7 principles for building better cities

Key City Planning Topics



Y-PLAN enables young people to analyze four, interrelated elements of the built environment: (1) **Housing,** (2) **Transportation,** (3) **Public Space,** (4) **Schools, Services & Amenities** These core topics are described in the following pages. You will notice that certain sections contain some of the same resources; this is because many planning issues are highly multifaceted and relate to at least two of these categories!



Housing

Definition

Structures that provide shelter for people and families; defines local communities; and determines access to jobs, services, amenities, and support networks.

Why Does it Matter?

Stable housing provides us with far more than shelter from the elements. It positively impacts one's personal well-being, improving educational, professional, health, and social outcomes. Inadequate housing, on the other hand, can negatively affect residents in numerous ways, including exposing them to **harmful toxins**.

Housing also impacts how local governments are funded. Homeowners pay property taxes that cities and counties use to fund services like schools, public transportation systems, health clinics, and police and fire departments.

In many US cities, there are concentrations of wealth and poverty that are largely due to 20th century policies - such as **redlining** - that created segregated neighborhoods based on race and class. Although these practices are now illegal, their legacy is unfortunately still noticeable throughout the country.

Housing affordability is a serious issue in the US, particularly in major metropolitan areas. A **lack of affordable housing** in urban centers forces many low- or moderate-income people to live further from where they work. These individuals must commute longer distances, which is expensive, time-consuming, and associated with negative health outcomes. Those who do live in major cities often pay large portions of their salaries on expensive rents, limiting their ability to invest in child-care, healthcare, hobbies, and starting new businesses. City governments play a powerful role in creating more housing that is affordable to people of all income levels.

City **zoning policies** determine which types of homes that are legally able to be built in particular areas. For example, 'single-family' neighborhoods do not allow for denser housing types like duplexes and triplexes, which would increase the overall number of housing units. There are growing efforts to update zoning laws to enable denser housing, as this would drive down housing costs; create more vibrant, walkable neighborhoods; reduce carbon emissions due to fewer car trips; and improve the efficiency of home heating and cooling.

Possible Discussion Questions

- *Does your family live in a neighborhood with mostly 'single-family' or 'multi-family' housing?*
- *What can you access within a 15-minute walk from your home (public transportation, parks, shops, friends/family, school, etc.)?*
- *How long does it take you/your family to get to school and work?*
- *Are there any factories or major roadways that emit toxins/pollution in your neighborhood?*
- *What are ways that your neighborhood supports - or does not support - a healthy lifestyle?*
- *What are ways that your housing supports - or does not support - a healthy lifestyle?*

Resources

- **City Planning Terms**
- **An Introduction to Zoning**
- **What is a suburb?**
- **Housing Segregation and Redlining in America: A Short History**
- **How Eminent Domain Destroys Neighborhoods**
- **Why The East Sides of Cities Are Poorer Than The West**
- **Why the "wrong side of the tracks" is usually the east side of cities**
- **American segregation, mapped at day and night**
- **The Case Against Single-Family Zoning**
- **How Minneapolis became the first to end single-family zoning**
- **Urban Sprawl: Which U.S. City Sprawls the Most?**
- **Retrofitting Suburbia**
- **The Houses that Can't be Built in America - The Missing Middle**
- **Should the U.S. Build More Public Housing?**
- **Are NIMBYs Selfish?**
- **Can tiny houses save Detroit?**
- **In defense of the "gentrification" building**
- **How can cities end homelessness?**



Transportation

Definition

The system of bikes, cars, buses, ferries, trains and walking networks (or any other mode) that we use to get from one place to another.

Why Does it Matter?

Transportation systems play a critical role in all of our lives. When they are at their best, they allow us to spend more time doing what we love or need to do and less of our time worrying about reaching our destination. Unfortunately, this is often not the case; in many US cities, transportation can be unaffordable, inconvenient, and genuinely harmful.

In recent years, **15-20%** of the average US household's total spending went toward transportation. Transportation costs are higher for lower-income Americans who cannot afford to live close to their jobs or loved ones. The combination of transportation and housing costs account for nearly half of the average household's spending, leaving less money for basic necessities and recreation.

Transportation significantly impacts both the natural environment and our personal health. Cars and trucks account for roughly **25%** of total US greenhouse gas emissions, which contribute to climate change and expose people to harmful toxins. In fact, studies indicate that populations living near major roadways - which are disproportionately low-income and communities of color - have **higher rates** of asthma and cardiovascular diseases. Even the act of driving is associated with **negative health outcomes**!

Many city planners are working to address these environmental and public health concerns by supporting **transit-oriented development**, which makes using public transit and **active transportation** (walking, biking, etc.) safe and convenient. Lessening our dependence on cars can also

make urban centers more vibrant by providing more street space to pedestrians, cyclists, restaurants, and community events.

Possible Discussion Questions

- *What mode of transportation (car, bus, train, bike, walking, etc.) do you use to get to school? Do you use different modes for different activities?*
- *What transportation mode do you prefer and why?*
- *What can you access within a 15-minute walk from your home (public transportation, parks, shops, friends/family, school, etc.)?*
- *How long does it take your family to get to school and work?*
- *Describe your experience riding public transportation:*
    - *How far do you have to walk to get to the nearest bus/train/tram stop?*
    - *How long do you usually need to wait?*
    - *Who else rides public transportation?*
    - *Do you feel safe on public transportation?*
- *If you live in an area where cars are the dominant mode of transportation, what are two ideas to get people to use other modes of transportation?*
- *Do you use apps or other technology to make using public transportation easier (showing wait times, traffic congestion, etc.)? How have those changed your use of transit?*
- *What is your carbon footprint? To calculate this, you can use the Nature Conservancy's **Carbon Footprint Calculator**.*

Resources

- **City Planning Terms**
- **Where did the rules of the road come from?**
- **Did GM really kill the streetcar in Los Angeles?**
- **Why American public transit is so bad**
- **Why don't more U.S. cities have metro systems like New York?**
- **Let's Make Mass Transit Free***
- **Transit Oriented Development, Explained**
- **The Death And Rebirth Of Bike Highways**
- **Utrecht: Planning for People & Bikes, Not for Cars**
- **How Expanding Bike Lanes Can Actually Decrease Traffic**
- **Why protected bike lanes are more valuable than parking spaces**
- **Bike lanes are not good enough**
- **E-Bikes Could Change Cities Forever**
- **What Happened When They Banned Cars**

- [Can we make cities car free?]
- [Why are we still widening highways in US cities?]
- [Residential streets are too wide. Here's why.]
- [Road diets: designing a safer street]
- [Wildlife crossings stop roadkill. Why aren't there more?]
- [Urban Gondolas: Transit by Cable]
- [The Future of Cities Starts with Transportation Equity]



Public Space

Definition

Physical places that are owned by us (the public) and free for anyone to enjoy.

Why Does it Matter?

Public spaces give residents opportunities for social interaction: to gather, play, and learn from each other. They do not cost anything to enter and - when designed inclusively - should feel accessible, inviting, and safe for everyone. In many cities, they are important spaces for political demonstration and have been a critical component of American social justice movements. For example, Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous 'March on Washington' took place at Washington D.C.'s National Mall. Public spaces can be very large, like city parks or boulevards, or as small as the sidewalk in front of your house. Some of the bigger public spaces, such as New York City's Central Park, have become defining landmarks that attract visitors from around the world.

One growing trend is to make small-scale changes, or 'interventions,' to unused urban spaces. Sometimes these changes are sanctioned by local governments and sometimes groups of residents take it upon themselves to improve spaces. Examples of small-scale interventions include creating

'**pocket parks**,' beautifying streets with **sidewalk gardening**, installing **swings**, and cleaning up vacant properties.

In recent years, many public spaces in the U.S. have been turned over to private entities. There may be benefits to this arrangement, such as dedicated funding property maintenance, but it is worth investigating its limitations. For example, who *is* and who *is not* granted access to these spaces? Are there entrance fees and are those costs prohibitive for low-income people? Are these places truly managed as public goods, meant to be accessible and enjoyed by all?

Possible Discussion Questions

- Many K-12 schools contain areas that act like public spaces in cities. They might be places where you eat, play sports, or socialize. Take a piece of paper and draw one of those spaces, labeling various components (e.g. paths, edges, nodes, landmarks, etc.). Also consider the following questions:
    - *How does the space make me feel?*
    - *Where do people walk, sit, or stand?*
    - *How do people use the space?*
    - *Is it occupied throughout the day or just during certain times of the day or week?*
    - *How do people get to and from the site?*
    - *Is it used as its original design intended or has its use changed over time?*

Resources

- **City Planning Terms**
- **An Introduction to Zoning**
- **How to design a great street**
- **How to design streets for everyone (Universal Design)**
- **The quick way to make new pedestrian plazas**
- **How Chicago Built an Amazing Lake Shore**
- **What happens after a city removes a freeway?**
- **What Happened When They Banned Cars**
- **Can we make cities car free?**
- **Future of Cities: Medellin, Colombia solves city slums**
- **Why cities are full of uncomfortable benches**
- **An Ode to Street Trees**



Schools, Services, & Amenities

Definition

The combination of programs, activities, and urban design features that enhance the quality of life for residents and visitors.

Why Does it Matter?

Services and amenities are the vital systems that societies depend on, ranging from public education to waste management. Services and amenities support health and wellness, promote recreation, foster educational and professional opportunity, and generally boost a population's quality of life. When government officials are unable or unwilling to properly support local populations, communities often develop their own, informal services. A famous example this occurred in the 1960s-70s when the Black Panther Party **established free medical clinics** because African Americans faced discrimination in hospitals and private medical practices.

People's life outcomes are strongly affected by the conditions they experience as children. Therefore, it is very important for government and school district officials to provide young people access to high-quality education, healthcare, recreational facilities, and healthy food. Unfortunately, millions of elementary and secondary school children in the U.S. attend public schools with deteriorated and obsolete facilities that undermine achievement, harm health, and that are not climate resilient.

It is imperative that these key services and amenities - particularly those related to public schools - are treated as high priorities. Improving them has the potential to positively affect all of society. A rising tide lifts all boats!

Possible Discussion Questions

- *What are areas or neighborhoods that you enjoy the most?*
- *In thinking about one of your favorite places, can you describe the different qualities of those areas?*
    - *What activities can you do there?*
    - *What types of transportation do you need to get there?*
    - *What kind of plants or features (such as benches, public art, water slides, etc.) are there? How do these elements impact how you feel about this space?*
    - *Does everybody here use this space in the same way? If not, what are some different ways that this space is used?*
- *What are different programs that you are involved in outside of school?*
- *What are different programs or services that your family can readily access?*
- *What programs, services, activities or amenities are missing in your neighborhood?*

Resources

- **City Planning Terms**
- **How school boundaries segregate cities**
- **Every neighborhood should have a corner store—but can't**
- **Can you build main streets in the suburbs?**
- **How can cities end homelessness?**

Additional Resources

Urban Form

- **How do cities grow?**
- **Urban Growth Boundaries: Effective or Worthless?**
- **An Introduction to Zoning**
- **U.S. and European Zoning, Compared**
- **How does Houston plan without zoning?**
- **What is a suburb?**

- The Case Against Single-Family Zoning
- Can you build main streets in the suburbs?
- Retrofitting Suburbia
- Urban Sprawl: Which U.S. City Sprawls the Most?
- Why are there so many strip malls?
- What is New Urbanism?
- Why do so many U.S. cities have gridded streets?
- The Reason Our Streets Switched to Cul-De-Sacs
- Residential streets are too wide. Here's why.

Spatial Inequity

- Housing Segregation and Redlining in America: A Short History
- How Eminent Domain Destroys Neighborhoods
- Why The East Sides of Cities Are Poorer Than The West
- Why the “wrong side of the tracks” is usually the east side of cities
- American segregation, mapped at day and night
- A Tale of Two Zip Codes

Resilience

- How do cities get enough fresh water?
- An Intro to Urban Wastewater Systems
- Will sea level rise drown our coastal cities?
- Why Sea Walls Alone Won't Save Our Cities From Rising Seas
- The problems with rebuilding beaches
- How “levee wars” are making floods worse
- How Bad Planning Makes Wildfires Worse
- An Ode to Street Trees
- 3 Cool Ways to Cool Our Cities
- Integrated Water Harvesting Earthworks, Restoring Ecosystems with Permaculture Design
- How radical gardeners took back New York City