

The Future of the NYC Waterfront: An Equitable Waterfront Summary Notes

Over the last year, the NYC Department of City Planning collaborated with the AIANY's Waterfront Initiative on three public dialogues as part of the *Future of the NYC Waterfront* series. Since then, New York City has changed in many ways. It faces the realities of a global pandemic that disproportionately affects communities of color, and a movement for racial justice. In response, **An Equitable Waterfront: Racial Justice and Social Inclusion** revisited the first three events in a virtual format to discuss what an equitable waterfront should look like. A panel of Black designers, public officials, developers, and environmental justice advocates discussed their experiences working to transform the waterfront in New York City through lenses of racial justice and social inclusion.

Panel Discussion:

The event began with a panel discussion moderated by **Marquise Stillwell**, Founder/Principal of Openbox. The panelists included:

- **Ifeoma Ebo**, Director, Predevelopment Unit-Office of Neighborhood Strategies, NYC HPD / Board Member BlackSpace Urbanist Collective
- **Justin Moore**, Executive Director, NYC Public Design Commission / Board Member, BlackSpace Urbanist Collective
- **Carlton Brown**, Principal, Direct Invest Development
- **Judah Asimov**, Senior Manager: Planning & Outreach, Rockaway Initiative for Sustainability & Equity (RISE)

Marquise Stillwell opened the panel by centering discussion about the waterfront as we would any other public space. He asked about the responsibility of architects and planners in shaping public spaces, including the waterfront. Each panelist described their idea of an equitable waterfront. **Judah Asimov** responded that an equitable waterfront in the Rockaways would be one where low-income communities and communities of color are prioritized. It is not about giving them equal investment, but centering on these communities and their needs. **Ifeoma Ebo** talked about using design as a tool to address social justice. She focused on how the implementation of projects, as well as the operation and management of these spaces, is crucial to having equitable spaces and ensuring those that are marginalized are included in the entire process- from design to operation. **Carlton Brown** mentioned that most investment along NYC's waterfront has been in communities of wealth and focused on how we could build communities around waterfronts that are accessible and can help undo damage that has been done in the past. **Justin Moore** stated that there has been a radical transformation of the waterfront, but that it hasn't been comprehensive or inclusive. He urged participants to think on how we reconstruct these spaces to benefit all people and the planet, while also acknowledging what we're capable of doing as a city and the reality of for who and how we've been able to do these projects.

Conversation moved to issues around public access. Marquise noted that parks are an extension of our outdoor spaces when we live in small apartments. Parks are where you get information about what is going on, they are an important gathering spot. Public space, the panelists noted, is where power dynamics play out, including policing. Who gets profiled by rules on the waterfront? It's not just about physical access, it's the hidden dynamics that you can't see that impact people's experiences. Black and brown people can feel excluded from waterfront public spaces.

The panelists noted that people must feel safe- with seven drownings this year in the Rockaways, it comes down to what is being prioritized for who. Learning how to swim is an equity issue. When discussing safety, there needs to be an understanding on how this word takes on very different meanings to different groups of people. Government often relies on a specific set of tools without necessarily knowing how these have been used in the past against Black communities. There is a need for more engaging methods of co-creation, tools that activate and enliven spaces as opposed to making groups of people feel unwelcome in public space through surveillance and hostile design.

Panelists cited examples of how waterfront developments have excluded Black stakeholders. Given that significant public investment has gone into these waterfront transformations, how can we produce better outcomes for all communities involved- both near and far from the edge? Policy conversations around waterfront development have multiple facets- the edge versus the upland area; about affordable housing at the edge; etc. These discussions exclude people. By keeping the conversation technical, i.e. X% of AMI, there is no true conversation about the real need in a specific place, no reconciliation of community concerns.

Conversation turned to the idea of community engagement. The panelists noted that the word 'engagement' has been coopted. It is used to placate, to inform. People's pain is often used or written about in plans, but there is no follow through with actions that promote equity or rectify underlying problems. Panelists urged the need to shift the power dynamic towards the 'Right to the City' ([Habitat III](#)): to shift to **co-creation**. New planning models would entirely abandon the idea of 'engagement', because the power dynamic is so shifted that there is **an equal plane** for conversation. We need to work toward the equal plane, rather than focusing on the process of the powerful reaching out to the less powerful. Ifeoma cited principles from the [Blackspace Manifesto](#), to create circles, not lines. **Co-creation** is tough, panelists noted, it can be messy. It requires public agencies to abandon rules and operations and work in a way that is very uncomfortable for the planner and practitioner. You have to give up and relinquish control over the direction you're going in.

The panelists discussed the idea of equal share. First, they noted, we have to remember that people who have access to these conversations are the people who can afford pro bono work. Pro bono work is inherently exclusive. There also needs to be more discussion about long-term public health impacts and work to include public health considerations in planning processes. We need to reshape our systems so that privilege and power can go to other stakeholders that might have important, transformative ideas.

Ultimately, the panelists noted, we have to pause and ask ourselves how to do things differently. It's difficult. It might mean that you don't go to the usual suspects, that you have to do extra work to reach new groups of people. Racism doesn't begin with hate; it begins with indifference.

Breakout Rooms:

Discussion in **Breakout Room 1** centered on engagement processes, particularly around rezonings. Participants felt that these meetings feel like a "check the box" thing. If we want communities to really be involved, the process would be longer and messier. The group also discusses lighting, which can be either a good design solution or a terrible security solution in public spaces.

Breakout Room 2 discussed frustrations and limitations about planning processes, and ULURP in particular. They asked, from the perspective of architects, how to create accountability for their clients to promote equity. They noted that redevelopment has been a tool of racism and that policy changes or needed to prevent displacement.

In **Breakout Room 3**, the group discussed infrastructure and access. They asked whether we could think of the waterfront more directly as a public health resource. Limiting access clearly limits health benefits. How can we focus on getting down into the water and learning how to swim? They also spoke about the ULURP process and engagement, how to center social justice, and getting closer to participatory planning processes.

Participants in **Breakout Room 4** discussed the pandemic and the ways it has shown that infrastructure in NYC is inequitable. They also noted discrepancies the ability of Community Boards to continue normal functions during COVID- some wealthier and whiter ones are running smoothly, while others don't have reliable internet services. Participants highlighted the need to understand, at a granular and citywide level, how community organizations can be included earlier in planning processes.

Participants in **Breakout Room 5** noted that NYC waterfront and development is often used a model for spaces all over the world. We have to be conscious of the impact this has in replicating implicit biases in our practices elsewhere. The conversation turned to rezonings and displacement. The group talked about specific tools that we can consider using in our everyday lives. The first is Choice Points, a tool used to raise awareness about our 'choice points' to help us be less likely to replicate implicit bias. The second mentioned was [Blackspace's manifesto](#), which includes 14 principles.

In **Breakout Room 6**, the group discussed a range of policy issues centered around equity and power dynamics. In particular, they talked about how negotiations happen- who is the community for the waterfront? Participants highlighted ways that we can engage more, have partnerships with different groups, and more diversity within the architectural profession.