

Mobilizing the Commons in an era Predatory Planning

“The commons –those creations of nature and society we inherit together and must preserve for our children—is under siege.”¹

Looking around your neighborhood you can find evidence of a healthy public commons. You might see people you know on the walk to the corner store, or many people using a public park or plaza throughout the day. Maybe you go to your favorite beach and find families picnicking and playing, or shop at a local grocery store that is cooperatively owned and managed by its members. Maybe you have a skate park in your town built and run by local youth, or an annual parade, festival, or block party that everyone looks forward to. These are some examples of when a healthy commons is used, felt, and created. When people share something, be it land, culture, ideas, traditions or services, the commons are active and enacted.

I have begun calling the growing aggregate of planning practices that strangle the proliferation of the commons and threaten the health and culture of communities **predatory planning**. Predatory planning places the cultural commons in danger. Yet without a healthy cultural commons, there is little defense from the forces of predatory planning. The current challenge we now face is how to strengthen and sustain a healthy commons while resisting the impending forces of predatory planning.

First we must understand this new epidemic of predatory planning and the impact it has on the commons. By examining the repercussions of the impact, we reframe the problem as an interconnected, complex situation and align unlikely allies as stakeholders in the solutions. Using the commons framework is a deliberate attempt to apply systems theory to link land, people, places, ideas, culture in a connected web that can match the complexity of the assault. It is a conscious attempt to overcome fragmentation between practitioners and communities, and bridge between sectors. In the process, we connect people together with a shared fate to begin healing from historic wounds and broken promises, and start to re-imagine what might be possible.

This article will define predatory planning and its impact in simple, usable terms. I will use examples from real places contending with predatory planning to illustrate the reality of this definition. As you grasp the definition, I encourage readers to consider the people and places they love and consider the ways predatory planning is affecting them. Because predatory planning is striking our communities across the country and around the globe, people everywhere are experiencing its destruction. Communities all over the world are responding with new forms of self-organizing for cultural and political resistance.

What is predatory planning?

In the aftermath of Katrina, a new era of complexity in redevelopment emerged. Nearly all the **building blocks of predatory planning** were evident for the world to see. Before

the water drained out of the homes, redevelopment decisions were made and redistributing of land began. People began experiencing an unprecedented level of gluttony and unhindered aggression in development practices or **predatory planning**. Predatory planning uses highly sophisticated tools and new mechanisms marked by increased speed, scale, and precision. These are layered on top of pre-existing and historical trauma.

PREDATORY PLANNING is the intended process of dispossession through aggressive, global-powered planning processes and use of multiple redevelopment tactics (building blocks), in the wake of pre-existing trauma. The result is a traumatic stress reaction called root shock and the dismantling of our cultural commons.²

How does predatory planning destroy the cultural commons?

Everyone is harmed and affected by a system of predatory planning that repeatedly ruptures places and destabilizes people and cultures. Even though huge profits are being generated through these aggressive redevelopment tactics, I would argue from a systems approach, that even those benefiting from predatory planning are experiencing loss on a larger level. The evidence left behind is visible as scars on our built environment – like a highway dissecting a city and amputating a neighborhood. The wounds are also apparent on people and families: stripped of social and cultural networks, they become more isolated and vulnerable to poverty, inequity, and poor health. They have diminished access and depleted resources resulting in a seriously impaired quality of life.

In order to recognize this process, it is important to trace the history and evolution of predatory planning. Planning can be a tool for promoting equity or it can manifest as a tool for exerting power and controlling people, resources, and profits. We must shape our ability to differentiate between the two. The **building blocks of predatory planning** have been used historically as deliberate forces for maintaining power, acquiring land, and controlling people. These planning mechanisms have shaped our built environment and social interactions over the last century. Today, several building blocks are often used simultaneously. When they come on top of pre-existing trauma to people and neighborhoods, the condition for predatory planning are created.

People experiencing dispossession of their land, destruction of their home, and dismantling of their culture and social networks as a result of predatory planning are contending with real trauma. The enormity and far reaching affects of this individual and collective trauma is nearly impossible to fully capture. In recent years, researchers have learned a great deal about both individual and collective trauma. We have much to learn in this area yet we do know post traumatic stress disorder is a severe psychological consequence of exposure to stressful situations. What we do know is PTSD symptoms may come and go over many years. But about 1 out of 3 people who develop PTSD always will have some symptoms. These symptoms may disrupt your life, making it hard to continue with your daily activities. One way of understanding this trauma caused by **predatory planning is through the concept of root shock.**³

Researcher and psychiatrist Dr. Mindy Fullilove describes the phenomenon of root shock as, “the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem. The term derives from the book Root Shock: How tearing up city neighborhoods hurts American and what we can do about it, which examined the impact of federal urban renewal program’s destruction of over 1,600 African American neighborhoods across the country.

According to Fullilove, “Root shock at the level of the individual is a profound emotional upheaval...root shock at the level of the local community ruptures bonds, dispersing people to all directions of the compass (Fullilove, 2004).”

It is nearly impossible to view people as completely separate from the places they inhabit, or fully understand places without considering the people who call them home. A person’s connection to place is profound and deeply rooted. Just ask people to describe where they grew up and you are sure to illicit detailed stories filled with memory, experience, and emotion. The commons provides a framework for recognizing the linkages between people, culture and place.

Cultural Commons: Creations of nature and society that we inherit jointly and hold in trust for future generations, including cultural and natural resources.⁴ They are the places, physical, conceptual and spiritual places where we come together and interact.

Place can serve as incubator of cultural practices. Practices are passed on within a place and local knowledge develops around sustainable cultural practices such as how to build a house, prepare a meal, or celebrate a special occasion. The framework of the commons is a way of understanding that which is public and shared in a way that links people, places, culture, ideas, and natural resources in an interdependent, living eco-system. While discourse around the commons often point to public spaces or ideas collectively owned and maintained, the cultural commons speaks to a large range of cultural practices and practitioners that contributes to a rich cultural infrastructure with broad participation. The cultural commons is often rooted historically in local traditions, but may also evolve from a combination of new ideas with old cultures and traditions.

There are many ways that predatory planning impacts the cultural commons. Some of the effects may appear small, such as the ability to gather in a local park, enjoy a favorite sledding hill, or cook a favorite meal, but these can have a great impact. The impact may also be found in the loss of ability to organize neighbors, to access support, practice traditional practices, or pass on knowledge from elders to the next generation.

The building blocks are some of the historical ways that predatory planning has destroyed the cultural commons.

BUILDING BLOCKS OF PREDATORY PLANNING

GENOCIDE: acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group. Early US policy of Indian Removal forced relocation of major indigenous groups

to reservations, the massacres of entire villages and followed by forced assimilation, resulted in the deaths of tens of thousands of indigenous Americans.

Support White Earth Land Recovery Project www.nativeharvest.com

LASTING LEGACY from colonization, slavery, Reconstruction, Jim Crow and other historical forms of oppressions shaped our institutions and continues to affect neighborhoods today.

Support The People's Institute for Survival & Beyond www.pisab.org.

REDLINING: denying banking, insurance, access to jobs, access to healthcare, or even supermarkets to residents in certain, often racially determined, areas. It describes the practice of marking a red line on a map to delineate the area where banks would not invest.

Read *Sorting Out the New South City: Race, Class, and Urban Development in Charlotte, 1875-1975* by Thomas W. Hanchett

DEINDUSTRIALIZATION: the removal or reduction of industrial activity in an area. Many factors have contributed to industry's abandonment of cities including outsourcing industry and exporting jobs abroad and to non-union facilities. In Flint, Michigan, for example, General Motor's jobs dropped from 80,000 in 1978 to under 23,000 in 1990 to about 8,000 after 2006.

Read *Origins of the Urban Crisis* by Thomas Segrue

URBAN RENEWAL: Federal program that allowed government to use eminent domain to clear large tracks of urban neighborhoods between 1949-early 1970s, causing displacement and the loss of important cultural institutions and social networks. Given the mostly non-white neighborhoods labeled as blighted and slated for demolition, urban renewal had a particularly devastating impact on African American neighborhoods; it is estimated that over 1,600 African American neighborhoods were devastated as a result of urban renewal nationwide.

Read *Root Shock: How Tearing up City Neighborhoods Hurts America, and What We Can do about it* by Dr. Mindy Fullilove.

PLANNED SHRINKAGE: Intentional starving off of public services and resources, often to the point of whole neighborhoods or systems facing collapse. For example, when they scaled back public services in the South Bronx, eventually closing the firehouses down, areas of the South Central Bronx lost 80% of housing units and population between 1970-1980 and the neighborhood nearly burned to the ground.

Read *A Plague on Your House* by Rod and Deborah Wallace

GENTRIFICATION: the process of an influx of wealthy residents displacing existing residents as property values increase and neighborhoods become more upscale.

Manhattan's Alphabet City neighborhood surrounding Tompkin's Square Park was historically an immigrant neighborhood with mix of tenements, public housing, and small bodegas. In the 1990s, the neighborhood was marketed as a new urban frontier, homeless in the park were removed; the park was privatized, squatters were evicted from tenements they had occupied for decades in a notably militarized anti-gentrification battle. At the same time, legal tenants, Puerto Rican families and artists, unable to afford rapidly rising rents, were pushed out, leaving behind luxury condos, trendy shops and restaurants in their wake. This now familiar story of gentrification, resulting in upscale neighborhoods and displacement of the poor, is evident in almost every major city in the country.

Read *The New Urban Frontier* by Neil Smith

Read *Displacement: How to Fight it* by Chester Hartmann et al.

EMINENT DOMAIN: power of the state to seize a citizen's private property without owner's consent.

Historically use of eminent domain required property be used for public benefit but in *Kelo v. the City of New London*, U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Connecticut city had the right to condemn unblighted private property and transfer it to another private owner for development even if only public benefit is increased employment and tax revenues. Since the 2005 Kelo decision, over 5,783 properties have been threatened or condemned by local governments.

Support <http://www.developdontdestroy.org>.

UNIVERSITY EXPANSION: urban universities are increasing need for additional space usually results in conflicts with surrounding neighborhoods. In 1997 it was revealed that Harvard had been purchasing individual plots of land under the names of different real estate organizations since the 1980s and had acquired more than 50 non-contiguous acres of land in different parts of Allston, a community across the Charles River from Cambridge. Harvard used third parties to purchase the land to avoid being charged high prices by sellers who thought they could raise prices if Harvard were the buyer. These clandestine purchases created tense relations between Allston community, the City of Boston, and the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Read http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2005/03/20/universities_are_the_new_city_planners/

PREDATORY LENDING: the practice of a lender deceptively convincing borrowers to agree to unfair and abusive loan terms.

Despite fair lending laws, predatory lending still continues in both legal and illegal ways. The subprime market is frequently run through subsidiaries, which are not subject to federal oversight. A Center for Community Change's study revealed that lower-income African-Americans receive 2.4 times as many subprime loans as lower-income whites, while upper-income African-Americans receive 3 times as many subprime loans as whites with comparable incomes. About 2.4 million subprime mortgage loans made between 1998 and 2006 will lose their properties to foreclosure, according to Center for Responsible Lending.

HOPE VI: Federal housing program beginning in the 1990s converting public housing to lower density, mixed-income developments, resulting in dispersal of public housing residents who experience a range of relocation difficulties and a significant loss of much needed affordable housing units nationally.

Read Center Community Change report, "*HOPE Unseen: Voices from the Other Side.*"

CULTURAL TOURISM, THEME PARKS AND STADIUMS: Using the local culture to sell a place as a destination to visitors at the expense of local needs or rights. Large projects constructed to lure outsiders, encroach on neighborhoods, result in displacement, and affect cities. Foreign investment related to tourism went from 70.8 million dollars in 1981 to over a billion and a half in 1986. Today, foreign investors own nearly every major hotel and Native Hawaiians remain the poorest, sickest and least educated of all people in Hawaii.

Support Hawai'i Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development www.hacbed.org

ENVIRONMENTAL AND HEALTH DISPARITIES: Studies of the systemic patterns of injustice have shown inequitable distributions of environmental burdens (pollution, industrial facilities, crime, etc) and access to environmental goods (nutritious food, clean air & water, parks, recreation, health care, education, transportation, safe jobs). Uneven development and the absence of public services contribute to environmental injustices and health disparities. Structural barriers including lack of healthcare providers, insurance, transportation, language, and financial resources affect neighborhoods where Black, Latino and immigrant communities tend to live. As a result, cancer rate among African Americans is 10% higher than whites and African Americans and Latinos have higher rates of cardiovascular disease, HIV/AIDS, and infant mortality, and twice the risk of diabetes than whites.

Read [Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality](#) by Robert Bullard

DISASTER CAPITALISM: As reconstruction work has been revealed as a tremendously lucrative industry, rebuilding is no longer the primary goal post disaster.

After \$1.5 billion in Iraq, Halliburton was awarded \$29.8 million after Katrina to start rebuilding naval bases. In preparation for post-disaster profit opportunities, the White House created the Office of the Coordinator for Reconstruction and Stabilization in 2004. Its mandate is to draw up elaborate "post-conflict" plans for up to twenty-five countries that are not, as of yet, in conflict. It will also be able to coordinate three full-scale reconstruction operations in different countries "at the same time," each lasting "five to seven years."

Read Naomi Klein, [The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism](#)

PRISON INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: With a criminal justice system that now costs \$147 billion per year, the US has, in the last 20 years, built more prisons than any country during any period in history. The costs are passed on to those least able to pay them-the poor rural towns in which most prisons are built and the poor urban communities from which most prisoners are sent. The Justice Mapping project found a disproportionate concentration of people going in and out of prison from particular neighborhoods in Brooklyn revealing 'million dollar blocks,' where the total price tag for incarceration of people from the block will exceed \$1 million. They found 35 such blocks in Brooklyn alone and highlighted the opportunity costs of mass incarceration concentrated in small neighborhood areas.

MILITARY INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX: refers to a close and symbiotic relationship the military has to private industry and associated political and commercial interests. Armed forces are comprised mainly of the nation's Black, Latino and poor whites. Soldiers returning home struggle to reintegrate to families and communities while coping with the trauma of the war experience. Prioritization of government spending takes away from social services and stability of neighborhoods. At \$1,228 billion in 2008, it is estimated that 51% of total U.S. tax dollars are spent on military defense.

Support <http://www.warresisters.org>.

ENCLOSURE: public places, parks, services, and utilities becoming privately owned or maintained. Relates to dominance of corporations over public space and public resources, including as diverse examples as advertising logos are populating the landscape to incorporating organizing efforts and cultural practices and public private partnerships enclosing public lands.

Read *Who Owns the Sky?* By Peter Barnes

Organized Resistance: Understand linkages of people, place, and culture

In response to the long history of institutional racism and policies that enforce inequality, as evidenced in the aforementioned building blocks, community organizing has emerged. At many points in history, communities have organized for resistance or to promote the conditions that would support their health, safety, and quality of life. Because of this, we have a proud legacy of resistance and organizing lessons to draw from.

Just as culture and place are inexplicably linked, so are predatory planning and the loss of the commons. A vibrant commons represents the most effective way to mobilize resistance to predatory planning. The building blocks of predatory planning have repeatedly undermined collective power and the capacity to affect the health of people, places, and culture. The importance of the commons cannot be underestimated.

“The cultural commons are difficult to recognize, as our participation in them is largely part of the taken for granted experience of everyday life. Awareness of their loss too often occurs after they have been enclosed --when it is too late to resist.”⁵

How do we recognize the contributions of the cultural commons and its architects before it is too late?

Hawai'i Fights for its Commons

The work of building and strengthening the cultural commons is exciting, vibrant work but its architects are not being supported or compensated for the gifts they provide. Despite the expanding market of cultural consumption, culturally-based tourism and cultural appropriation, cultural producers and practitioners, indigenous organizers, musicians, artists, and healers, are contending simultaneously with destruction of their places and practices.

In Hawaii we met with a variety of architects of the cultural commons: a master Hula teacher and cultural rights activist who is fighting intellectual property rights battles, a visual artist who is coming up with a new form of Pokemon cards to connect youth to Hawaiian culture and environmentalism, a family deeply engaged in struggles over sovereign land rights, *lomilomi* teachers of traditional healing massage practice who offering it as a free service to their community, and a *kapuna* (elder) caretaking an exquisite stretch of black sand beach and mentoring the young surfers who flock there.

Enclosure of the Commons

Each cultural architect spoke of their practice as site specific and deeply connected to the land or place they occupied. Each of the architects is actively resisting different forms of encroachment or threats of enclosure. Sovereign land struggles are a hot debate throughout Hawaii, and people are fighting for the land that has supported their people for generations. The Hula teacher and her students are opposing restrictions that would keep them from gathering the grasses and plants they need to make hula lei and bracelets. The *kapuna's* beach is being encroached upon by the state and environmental researchers who would like to see the area restricted. The *lomilomi* teacher is hoping to pass his

teachings down to his students so this healing art is not lost, but meanwhile non-Hawaiians are learning the craft and charging fees in violation of traditional practice. Many architects spoke to us about the importance of the taro plant to Hawaiian culture and resistance to current efforts to genetically patent taro. Just as the cultural commons take diverse forms, so too do the forms of encroachment and enclosure that endanger these places that incubate vital cultural practices.

Several of the cultural commons architects we met were carefully forging intergenerational linkages. Their understanding of the importance of teaching their craft to the next generation is explicit and overt. One intervention we saw frequently in Hawaii was the deliberate instruction of culture passed on to younger generations, such as the culturally-based charter schools that are teaching young people knowledge of traditional practices. The charter school network is also feeding a resurgence of native Hawaiian language among young people.

Normally economic development practitioners don't think to consult to local youth, a spiritual healer may not feel any direct connection to people working to implement smart growth standards, local protesters opposing a new Wal-Mart don't tend to look to cultural practitioners as natural allies, nor are researchers in public health generally interested in the role arts and culture play in maintaining social health. With a systems-approach to analyzing problems and understanding predatory planning, how does our social movement building reflect a systems-hybrid response?

What are some lessons from a systems approach:

- 1. Organizations are living systems with the capacity to self-organize into adaptive patterns without imposed plans.** Since living systems have the capacity to *self-organize*, they are able to sustain themselves and move toward greater complexity and order as needed. They can respond intelligently to the need for change.
- 2. Self-organizing systems have the capacity to respond continuously to change. In these systems, change is the organizing force.** Leaders emerge from the needs of the moment.
- 3. The basic patterns of life are relationships. Communities of practice** are groups in relationship whose members regularly engage in sharing and learning. Support of communities of practice can improve organizational performance.⁶

If what is at our core, what is home, symbolically and actually, is the people around us, the places we inhabit, and culture we create and share. How do we protect them? Fight for them? Feed their opportunities for growth, hybridity, and adaptability? How do we recognize them as interconnected, shared, self-organized, and public?

In this moment, we are combining lessons from civil rights-era organizing and popular education with youth strategies for integrating hip-hop education, digital story-telling, game design, and myspace social networking. These are just some of the examples I know of. There are many other efforts around the world. The future is in our hands. We are creative and adaptive. How will you sustain cultural expression as a force of life and

critical piece of maintaining our commons? What practices will you combine to support the people around you? What new remix will you drop that will change the future of our places?

Kiara L. Nagel is a fellow of the Design Studio 4 Social Intervention. As an urban planner, organizer, researcher, event planner, connector, and convener, she mixes many mediums and practices in her approach to social justice. Much of her work engages participation from a broad spectrum of community organizers, cultural and community development practitioners, youth, elders, skaters, sneaker-fiends, artists, and storytellers. With a bad ass team of practitioners, Kiara is working to bring people together and support creation of tools that will promote our ability to organize resistance to predatory planning practices and heal from root shock. This article is one piece of this larger effort. In addition, we have created a Predatory Planning Game and Toolkit to help people, planners, and organizers identify predatory planning in their own communities. We have also launched the Cultural Commons Project, a project of the Design Studio 4 Social Intervention <http://ds4si.org>.

Contact kiarastar@gmail.com to offer feedback, stories, or more info on these efforts.

1 Barnes, Peter. Capitalism 3.0 A guide to reclaiming the commons; BK, San Francisco: 2006.

2 Nagel, Kiara L. "Understanding Place After Katrina: Predatory Planning and Cultural Resistance in New Orleans Treme Neighborhood." Thesis, MIT Dept. of Urban Studies and Planning: 2006.

3 Fullilove, Mindy. Root Shock: How tearing up city neighborhoods destroys American and what we can do about it. Random House: 2004.

4 Tomales Bay Institute. "The State of the Commons." <http://onthecommons.org/files/publications/stateofthecommons.pdf>

5 Chet Bowers. 5 Bowers, Chet. Relevance of Revitalizing the Commons to Spiritual Covenants. Network of Spiritual Progressives. August 30 2006.

6 Meg Wheatley, as cited by J. Eva Nagel in, "Organizing Elephants," from The Barr Fellows go to Africa June 2005.