Webinar

ULI Toronto: Past Meets Future: How Black History is Energizing the Future of City Building in Toronto
Date: January 31, 2024

Hello everyone.

Good afternoon and welcome to today's program.

As persons start to trickle in, we're going to play our membership video.

Having the ability to exchange stories, exchange ideas and really sort of find mentors in the industry via ULI was a huge plus for me.

One of the things that I first started doing with ULI in terms of active engagement was with their urban plan program.

And for me, that's they basically go into schools and work with young people in junior high and high school.

One of the great things about ULI is that it provides a great platform for public sector and private sector interests to meet.

But it's an opportunity to connect with a variety of people from a variety of different disciplines.

So I work in real estate development, but it's useful and important to get to know people in other aspects of city building.

Opportunity.

Get recognition.

The opportunity to participate in my community and give back in a way all of those things have enhanced my career and I think enhance what I'm able to offer the industry and.

I'm really excited to be part of ULI Toronto and
really advancing my leadership skills and fostering my connections and
really just advancing my mission for city building.
As a young professional new to the province and I
found ULI and other kind of similar organizations really helpful
in terms of no bridging connections and networking.
It's an opportunity.
To to connect with people who have questions, who are,
who have not quite figured out how to do things.
And I liked how hands on you could be as
a member.
You could get involved immediately.
You can volunteer.
For me, ULI is one of the greatest organizations in
the world and certainly in Toronto, to connect, to learn
and to become a part of an organization that really
values its people and its members.
ULI Toronto's membership video is your invitation to get more
involved with one of the world's largest and most active
ULI Chapter.
A few notes to our ULI members or those who
are are not yet members.
You can access Uli’s network through the Global Membership Directory.
There are exciting engagement opportunities on local ULI committees.
Through Navigator and our annual window to join our committees.
You can access upcoming and past event attendee list and
you can access unbelievable wealth of local and global ULI resources, archives, case studies, past webinars and more through the
Knowledge Finder.
We will provide links on that in our chat and
for you to learn more about the benefits.
Once again.
My name is Crystal Gones, Cibron Manager, ULI Toronto.
I'm pleased to be hosting today's session in partnership with
Beta Past Me's Future.
How Black History is energizing the future of city building
in Toronto.
Before we get into this, as always we will begin with the land acknowledgement. As a Toronto region based organization, we acknowledge the land we are meeting on virtually is the traditional territory of many nations including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Nashua, Nashuabit, the Chippewa, the Huttness, Shoni and Wendad people and is now meant home to many diverse First Nation Inuit and Matty people. We also acknowledge that Toronto is covered by Treaty 13 with the Mississaugas of the credit. We are all treaty people. Many of us have come here as settlers, immigrants and newcomers. In this generation or generations past. Uli stands in solidarity with Indigenous communities, demanding action and accountability for the ongoing legacy of the residential school system. We’d like to also acknowledge and honour those who came here involuntarily, particularly descendants of those who were brought here through enslavement. To better understand the meaning behind this at Land Acknowledgement, ULI recommends 4 programs that you can find on our ULI Toronto website page. We have also included a link in the chat to some of our Black History resources. These resources provide a wealth of information. Please check it out. A couple of additional notes. In March, Ulai Toronto will be convening a 2 1/2 day technical advisory panel for the City of Toronto's Confronting Anti Black Black Racism CBACABR unit, generously supported financially by CP Planning. A public report will be made later this spring, and this spring our Truth and Reconciliation Industry cohort will wrap up our initial workshop series.
And we'll be announcing next steps this spring. Stay tuned for opportunities to get involved.

Today's event and all of the ULI programming would not be possible without the support of our annual sponsors. I would like to thank all our sponsors for their support.

Now more than ever, ULI to Honor relies on the support of sponsors to put on high quality programs and to drive our mission to shape the future of the built environment for transformative impact in communities worldwide.

To all of our sponsors, we say thank you. We have today opened up the chat so participants can engage in the conversation and be actively involved in the chat.

So feel free to put your comments or start a discussion in the chat. We're happy to have that as an add on today.

It's now my pleasure to invite Camille Mitchell, Associate from SVN Architects and Planners and who is also the Chair of Beta who will be our moderator today.

Welcome Camille, and please feel free to take it away all.

Right.

Thank you, Crystal.

So again, my name is Camille Mitchell, an architect with SVN Architects and Planners and also the current chair of Black Architects and Interior Designers Association.

Welcome Camille, and please feel free to take it away all.

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Right.

Thank you, Crystal.
So today there's a flourishing study of black history and discovery in Ontario is revealing deep and systematic challenges that have impacted generations of black communities in Toronto and across Southern Ontario.

From this understanding is emerging a broad spectrum of approaches and innovations in city building driven by black professionals and the professional real estate and development community.

So at this point, I'm going to turn to each of our panelists individually and give them a time to introduce themselves and just talk about how they're approaching their experience.

So first I would like to bring Doctor Michael Ochi, Architect with ERE Architects. Hello Michael.

We can't hear you, Michael.

Hi, Camille.

It's a great privilege to be here today.

So I'm an heritage architect at ERA Architects, and for those who perhaps aren't familiar with ERA, we're a multidisciplinary firm and we are very much involved with sort of making assessments of heritage value and understand what is significant and why.

So we're not simply just tasked with preserving buildings, but understanding how they can be understood in the contemporary context.

And so a lot of our work involves not just kind of like the the fixing and repair of buildings, but it's it's largely steeped in making them relevant for the for the communities of today.

Can you tell us how briefly how ERA got involved with or the overview of interpreting Slavery, Trauma and Heritage Research initiative at ERA Architects?

Yeah, absolutely.

So it really stemmed from sort of a a research initiative that was having an elsewhere that was looking at
the connection between country the the creation of country homes
and and slavery.
So the wealth that was accumulated by slavery was was
used to create these like elaborate homes which you know
are very much seen as the embodiment of taste and
the sort of values and principles of the day.
But that connection back to the source of wealth isn't
isn't necessarily known and in in the age that we
live in now that that those types of connections
are really looked at through a critical lens.
And so we started to sort of explore and have
conversations within our office how we can better understand those
connections within the Canadian context.
And we're very much interested in how this history can
be become more of a shared heritage more broadly.
And but at the same time we're we're also
very much aware of the the level of sensitivity around
this this history and how it particularly impacts those who
have experienced trauma in the past which sort of connects
to the trauma of of slavery.
So we're very much interested in in these connections between,
you know, this is the specifics of of this thread
of history and and its relevance to contemporary society.
OK, so and why is it important to distinguish between
focusing on successes versus just acknowledging how a
nation failed
to provide justice or marking experience trauma?
Yeah.
So it really gives us a fuller understanding of of
history and allows us to really come to terms with
it in, in a way that's relevant today.
It gives us different perspectives that ultimately help to serve
the the, the today's society.
And it also allows us to explore these these parallel
stories, let's say, you know, between what happened in in
Canada and the United States of course, and then the
the Caribbean and and the African and European context.
So it really speaks to the diversity of of of
today's Toronto.
Really.
OK.

Thank you, Michael.

I'd like to turn now to Robert Walter Joseph, a senior planner with Gladly Planning and Associates.

Robert, you want to tell us about yourself?

Absolutely, yeah.

So I am actually now a principal with Gladly Planning Associates and Gladly Planning Associates is a full service firm.

We do large scale area plans as well as work for for profit, non profit housing as well as other developers.

Yeah, this is, yeah, this is yeah the work that we do.

Sorry.

OK, Mount Dennis is a neighbourhood in Toronto that is poised for growth with the soon to be open Eglinton Crosstown Subway with which is sure to help revitalize this area.

This area is a class example of Toronto's diversity and a large landing spot for immigrants, especially of Caribbean and African descent.

How do you get involved with the Mount Dennis area?

Yeah, the Mount Dennis neighbourhood is actually I think one that is representative of a lot of changes that are happening in Toronto.

The Eglinton Crosstown on Mount Dennis station, you know our representative of the rapid transit expansion that we're seeing all over the city.

My involvement and and the involvement of my firm in Mount Dennis really began in about 2021 in our work with the Learning Enrichment Foundation and we began working with LEF in their mixed-use affordable housing development on Weston.

And as part of that project, it was, you know, very collaborative with the community.

There was a lot of consultation that took place well
before any any sort of vision for the development happened.

And so as part of that, we began hearing from

the community in terms of some of the concerns that

the community had.

What are their current concerns with the mountains community?

Yeah.

So some of the concerns that we're hearing through our

own engagement, but then also through the secondary plan that

was also taking place at the time was affordability and

displacement.

There's you know significant concern about displacement risk in the

community.

A lot of community members were receiving you know rent

supplements and and other types of supports and and they

were very concerned that they were precariously housed and that

part of the changes that would take place in the

community would would see them leaving the community as

well.

So yeah that was something of of concern that

was coming up time and again every time we we

spoke to the community.

I'd say also just the community.

Yeah, through each consultation that that we conducted and then

every sort of city consultation that we listened into as

well, the community wasn't opposed to change or or
development.

You know, the transit investment was something that

everyone is

really quite excited about.

Having new construction in the neighbourhood was also

something that

was quite exciting, having new neighbours.

This was, you know, a potential opportunity for revitalization in

the community.

But you know, there really is no point to reinvigorating

the community if it also means that that you have

to leave as as part of that.
So community members really just wanted to see their place in the future, changes that were happening in the community as well.

All right.

Thank you, Robert.

There's a huge gap in the kinds of city services that are made accessible to racialized communities.

In the city of Toronto right now, black communities face the most inequality in and allocation of publicly available resources.

And now I turn to Jamila Mohammad, a housing policy planner with the City of Toronto.

I'm Jamila.

Would you like to say anything about yourself?

Thanks Camille and thanks Uli for hosting this really important discussion.

Just a bit about myself.

I'm a registered professional planner.

I'm based in Toronto, Toronto.

I'm currently working with the City of Toronto Strategic Initiatives Policy and Analysis team as a housing policy planner.

I have a lot a few years of experience in the private sector doing some really interesting projects related to large scale redevelopments and campus planning, which I really enjoyed.

The size that you'll be seeing in the background are part of an initiative that I'm hoping to talk about today, which is the Somali Centre for Culture and Recreation Soccer.

But yeah, this is a bit about me.

And your interests as a planner are centered around histories of cities, particularly the ways in which urban planning policies and practices guide growth and development in cities.

So what has that meant for black life across time and space?

I think that's a really interesting question.

I think the part that interests me the most about planning history is as we think about what it
has meant for black life, from the early days of black settlement in this country to the present time is that black life is really dynamic. And the impacts of urban planning are often framed in thinking through the challenges and the deficits that have been created in our community. So processes of urban renewal, racial covenants, formal and informal processes of racialized segregation, which have continued impacts on our communities today. And I also think that part of what is interesting and really hasn't been discussed enough is the histories of like black resistance and innovation and and and collaboration that have also brought forward really dynamic ways of understanding city planning from a black perspective. And ways of also thinking about how we can implement some of these strategies and tools to not only support black communities, but really create more just and equitable cities for all Torontonians or all members of the community. What is play space? Racial inequity in the built environment. So play space equity, inequity, really you can think about it as thinking through the geographical or like the spatial ish lens that applies to racial inequities. So to give an example, in Toronto it's often described as a city that is racially and an economically segregated. And the reason being that there's a high concentration of visible minorities in low income neighborhoods where white residents are, you know, concentrated in more dominant high income areas in numbers far higher than their shared share of the population. Another example is that there's substantial gaps in public investments and social infrastructure in predominantly black neighbourhoods and that leads to a deficit of cultural and recreational centres. And then another like example. That's really important thinking through the current culture,
the current

crisis in the climate is that, you know, Toronto's racialized
neighborhoods also have a far higher, far, far lower number
of urban forests and urban trees.
And So what does that mean when we're thinking about
as summers get hotter in these communities and people are
seeking, you know, respite from the sun and the heat
and all the other climatic effects.
So these are examples of how space and race really
works together, and we can start to think around the
inequities, but also finding ways to respond through equitable
solutions.
Thank you, Jamila.
I'd like to bring Tura cousin Wilson into the discussion.
He's a Principal Architect with Studio of Contemporary
Architecture.
Hello, Tura.
You tell us about yourself.
You're on mute.
You're on mute.
Sorry about that.
As Camille said, my name is Tura Cousins Wilson.
I'm an architect, Co founder and principal of Silca Studio
Contemporary Architecture.
As the name suggests, I think twofold.
I'm interested, I think in the black community and particularly
often, you know, both myself and studio partner have roots
in the Caribbean.
So an interest in, you know, the West Indies and
black populations within Canada and diaspora abroad and
then, you
know, thinking of there's a bit of a play I'm
worth, but also I think an interest from simply contemporary
condition.
Of what's affecting, you know, cities and architecture today
from
the politics around the built environment.
Silco was invited to the architects Against Housing Alienation
as
a contributing architect, representing Canada at the 18th
International Architecture
Exhibition at the Venice Biennale.
So what was the outcome of working with local activists
and advocates to get to this point?

So that exhibition was an extension of our work with various community groups, in particular CP Planning, Budo for Black Urbanism, Black Urbanism Toronto, and Keel Eggington, residents of ongoing work within the Little Jamaica community.

Those aren't familiar. Speaking of Eggington W, just West of the Allen Rd. In Eggington, and it was looking at affordable housing solutions.

The theme around the overall exhibition was 10 teams across Canada exploring affordable housing solutions in their community and our team in collaboration with CP Planning and Keel Edmonton residents focused in on the little Jamaica community.

And one of the key things was the importance of affordable housing. But in association, especially in culturally distinct neighbourhoods like Will Jamaica, that the importance of a holistic approach. So not just affordable housing, but also affordable cultural spaces, retail spaces and employment opportunities.

OK, because you also taught a course that you have at UFT Daniel School of Architecture about mixed-use in housing, as this applies to not just providing housing for like black communities, but other amenities as well. Right.

So I think, yeah, it's a good point. So I think an interest of ours and it's similar to what to Miller was saying.

I think sometimes a lot of our work is very culturally specific, but it it's it's touching on broader issues of zoning planning beyond just the the black community. I think it's in a way, you know speaking the work we're doing in Little Jamaica I think was you know questioning some of the zoning policies of say exclusive zoning where if you look on Edmonton West, a lot of the plan is to focus on development of Edmonton
where that is really the cultural hub of many businesses in the West Indian and black community. And so as you know, questioning approaches to exclusionary zoning, those who aren't familiar it's you know, limiting you know, types of housing to certain parts of the city or certain districts or limiting density to certain areas. So the little what we're doing in Little Jamaica was now questioning approaches to zoning that create a certain type of built form in the city that in many cases put pressure on displacement for small fine grained retail and existing housing. So you know I think one of the questions we asked we posed and it was exhibition. So it was it was speculative in its nature was you know if we allow laneway housing, why not laneway Barber shops or retail cafes, auto mechanics etcetera. You know, thinking if a Barber, why does a Barber who say, works largely based on word of mouth and their clientele, Do they need to have the foot traffic of a a certain type of business or do they need to pay the Main Street, expensive Main St. leases that another business might need to face, You know, questions around that? OK. Thanks, Tara. I'd like to invite all our panelists back to the screen and mics off. Also I wanted to note all our panellists are involved in numerous things, so Alex has been dropping links to their BIOS and more information about them. So I encourage the audience to reach out to them individually if you have any additional questions or do Google search of information and projects that they've been involved with so far. Our group discussion with the topic of re energizing city building. So our try to break the discussion into significant ways of how black history can energize the future of city building. So with regards to recognition of contributions, what are the
What are key black history points that are relevant to your work today?

It can be Canadian. Black history is not necessary, just points.

I'll go to you, Robert. Yeah, I think something that's been quite interesting to me is, is I've been working, I've worked with the ULI as part of the understanding historical black settlement and displacement in Southwestern Ontario.

And as part of that, we researched communities of historical settlement, past experiences of displacement and erasure. But really as part of that it was sort of uncovering this type of conversation that that used to take place where you know any discussion of a black community or potential risk of displacement to a black community in Canada sometimes shut down with well, you know we're not the United States or we don't have the same problems as as they have South of the border.

And as part of that project we sort of uncovered this where we're working with this idea of the North Star myth about understanding how Canadians see black history is really being that end point of the Underground Railroad as being the the point of refuge for previously enslaved people.

And then not fully understanding the histories that have taken place after that of, you know, the displacement of some of those communities of previously enslaved people back to the US or or histories of, you know, regulations that were put in place to prevent new black arrivals after, you know, 1910 in in Canada.

And so as part of that, you know we sort of look at the absence of predominantly black neighbourhoods as you know the signs that we actually don't have issues or or problems without recognising you know our past histories that have contributed to to the those historical patterns
of displacement.

Yeah, 'cause I often believe, as you were saying, the North the the myth of the.

North Star myth.

Yeah, because I often see like we are also, I think historically we're told that slaves escape to Canada, but then what?

And then if you look at our history, there's displacement, but not there's a lack of education to even ourselves of what happened in this country and what's currently happening in this country.

So I think I often say if we don't talk about it, there's no problem. And that's leads to the myth of like Canada being a better country or resolving issues.

It’s just that it's it's just not in our education, it's not even in our discussion or platforms.

Sorry, I don't know if Michael, you were saying something. I wasn't saying anything.

Oh, that's fine.

But totally agree, like all of these, these stories of displacement and erasure are are definitely the starting point for well, like our ideas and conversations.

You know, how do you have that fuller story and understand kind of that that perspective, when the sort of counterpoint often is that we are not the United States?

I can just add to that point.

I think that part of the work that has to happen is really for us as you know Canadian based planners to really start to think about how we can start to re examine this history of planning or architecture or design.

And really trying to make sure that when we're doing this examination that we're actually engaging in like a process of actually actively remembering with the intent of taking the lessons that we’ve learned and applying that to feature city building and initiatives.

A lot of the stories that, you know, Robert, Robert is pointing to these black settlements that have existed have
a lot of story, have a lot of history in terms of how buildings were actually built, like the materials, how the land was like, you know, plowed and how, how communities were sighting these buildings in relation to each other.

Where were the places where people were convening? How do you create these communities that have also been providing these specific types of amenities to support communities, where parents can support each other, relatives can support each other? But also, I think that for a very long time, the burden of uncovering this amazing history and grappling with the complexities of the, the difficult part of, you know, realizing enslavement and the horrors that it has led to and its legacy has been put on black planners and architects and designers. And I think that having these conversations on a platform like you and I really brings everybody else into the fold and puts forward the challenge that this is not just on us.

We're all together if we really want to achieve this, you know, city that is caring or these communities that are going to be more just and equitable. So in a means to address inequities, how can municipal governments ensure that developments can prioritize the needs and aspirations of black communities?

I know Jamil, you're working with the city, so I'm not sure if it's on you. Yeah, no, definitely not a spokesperson for the city today. You know, it's just, I just only started a couple weeks ago, but I think it would be well positioned to do that. But I think that even we can broaden that. Scope, yeah. It's not just unique to municipal. Exactly. So you know, one of the things that I'm very interested about and then just going back to the Somali Center project is this is a project that you know,
I think that all levels of government can get behind because it is speaking to like a 40 year history of the Somali community advocating for a space where people can have access to cultural recreational services. The community is, you know, Toronto has the largest Somali community, one of the largest black communities in Canada contributed many ways to the dynamic culture of this place. How can governments understand that there is gaps in the actual number of black LED social infrastructure in this in this country across all parts of it and you have a project here led by the community willing to take it on.

I think that this isn't a great opportunity for government and private sector also to get behind such an idea, support these young people volunteering to address address a major city building gap.

And with the with the Somali Center, you said it's 40 years of of building that relationship with the city. Is there like like there's so many other because the diaspora and the diversity of it, there's so many other communities that don't have 40 years to work with the city and work with different municipal lenses. Is there a different approach?

And it's not like tomorrow, but is it about getting on board? Is there tips on how to make more centers quicker in this?

Yes, I think that's a great question. I think even just, you know, talking also about provincial and federal governments as well, the community, you know, the Somalis through time of sorts of living.

Canada in the 70s, eighties as immigrants and then the 90s had a large refugee population that that came here due to the civil war. And in that time, members of the community have been advocating for a center in different ways through different coalitions and collaborations.

What I think is unique about this opportunity right now
is that you have that intergenerational connection from the folks early on to the younger people who are really seeing the deficits in their communities today and seeing the correlation between the benefits of having a Community Center, a library or other social infrastructure in their neighborhoods and not having to commute far away. So I think that there is that connection. So making sure, I think you know, a very common practice in black planning and urbanism is having intergenerational dialogue and making sure that we're connecting the past to the future. I think that you know the the community is also doing a lot of activism, sorry, not advocacy and engagement, community engagement. They're doing a series of citywide public engagements with the community members. They're engaging key stakeholders, business owners. So there's like this very multi prong approach to this work and it's it's something that I think it's continuously happening. We're learning also from or the Somali center is also learning from other cultural centers who've existed. We have the Japanese center, we have the amazing work the Tamil community is doing. And so it's always a a matter of like building coalitions also outside of your community. But there's lots of lessons I think that the the team members can share and you can always connect with them through their website. And Tura, you worked on the the Wild Seed Center for Art and Activism. How was that working with the community and getting like through design, getting their visions and understandings like designed as a centre. Does that make sense? Yeah, it's a good question. So and I think it kind of relates to I
So a lot of our projects are community organizations and in case you mentioned Wild Seed, an organization named after Octavia Butler novel.

And I think questions on black futurism, what is black in design or representation in kind of built form or visuals. A lot of and sort of I think heritage becomes kind of this, this question of you know what do we prioritize. So you know, a few of our projects have been in Victorian era buildings in the black community is repurposing an an older house and it sort of comes to questions of what what do organizations prioritize from a general policy collective. You know, people sort of say, you know restore the house. Sometimes we're finding or restore say a brick facade or mandated to restore. So I'm not speaking specifically of of what I'll see here. So the question sometimes that ultimately means you know funds coming out from whether a community organizations programming or reduction space to restore facade which I think might be questionable of what we deem worth restoring.

One thing I think that I'm getting a bit to the last question because I want to jump in, I think we've been actively encouraging for sorry is architects, planners coming to the table sooner. But also some like the work in little Jamaica that was really started not from a top down approach. It was community groups like Pluto sort of saying hey Metrolinks, we're we're being excluded here. We feel that, you know, our needs aren't listened to
and it's a conversation with the black community, in particular business owners. But I understand, you know what troubles that they've been facing with broader displacement from the Edlington Connects, the new transit line, a new LRT line in addition to then COVID. And, you know, a role that I see Architects of Planets placing is sometimes distilling that information where we have a lot of community groups approach us. They know their community really well, but not necessarily know architectural and planning like lingo of you know what these terms mean, what are setbacks, what are these zoning policies, GFA Heights, what's sort of limiting their community That's we can then help speak to, which is a lot of what we've been doing at both the urban scale but in particular projects whether if it's wild seed or ban understanding, you know what isn't community needs, what does that mean from the perspective to actually policy like code or rezoning, et cetera, OK. With regards. I want to actually just just get back to to Mount Dennis briefly as well because you mentioned, you know, what can cities do or what can municipalities do. And part of you know in hearing from the community part of what the Learning Enrichment Foundation did was advocating for a Community for All action plan which was endorsed by the local councillor and and is something that is now under development. But through that process there are a bunch of things that weren't really properly addressed through you know your standard secondary plan process and talking to the community about built form, heights, densities, you know FSI and setbacks and and those things. This community was not one that was opposed to change.
And so largely, you know, different heights, different densities were welcomed. But a lot of what the conversation could have been around was about, you know, anti displacement strategies about ensuring new affordable housing would be would be developed. And that wasn't something that was really possible through only dealing with one division of the city, through only dealing with community planning. And so part of this process will be or should be about bringing the entire city to the community. And so you know, where the community has an interest in a conversation, the correct stakeholders should be there in order to have that conversation as opposed to telling the community that, well, this isn't really what we're talking about right now because there really is no other opportunity to talk about future change in a community except during times like this.

So, so that's something that the Learning Enrichment Foundation is going through. They're going through that now. I think a, a subsequent report will be brought forward in March. It'll be something to watch. And I think it is honestly one of the most interesting parts of one of the most interesting innovations in planning currently in in Toronto.

With regards to stakeholders at the table, because we're here on this panel, but the reality is, is that there's a lack of representation in planning and architecture as black professionals. So this UL, this ULI session is being monitored by designers across the country, province. So with regards to architecture, I'm going to put this to you Michael. What considerations should architects or interior designers keep in mind when designing spaces for diverse black populations with...
varying cultural backgrounds and experiences?

Yeah.

So I'm also picking up on the chat as well.

And one of the things that you know is very interesting like we've we've talked a lot about affordability and

you know architecture is this kind of like emergence of the new.

But we also need to have have our value system aligned with preserving affordability.

And you know architecture very much is about the management of you know the assets that we have that you know that currently exists.

So, you know, I think a lot of the dialogue is about understanding and helping people through understanding what they already have, I think.

I think it's very easy to be captivated by the image of the new tower, you know, the new park, the new, the new community centre.

And it's it's perhaps more difficult to kind of work with people to to to fully understand and appreciate what they, what they already have.

And that that's, you know, that's a big part of preserving, you know, affordable assets and you know, the overlap with decarbonisation.

Yes, I understand that.

But if But whose responsibility is it to talk to help them understand that?

Like to understand the history and understand the context.

Like as perfect if if if there's like for instance if there's not a seat at the table or like a black planner or black architect.

How do we help our colleagues design spaces and other parts or just for different projects for?

Sure, yeah.

I mean, it can't be there.

Yeah, I, I.

And I think that's that's at the heart of representation in professions, right.
Like I think it's great to have community voices. But then, you know I'm a huge advocate for you know the type of work that ULI does where professionals come together and we're able to kind of fill in the knowledge gaps that others have and and work together and lift each other up to to kind of get to an approach. So you know having professionals that are are able to represent communities I think I think is essential and it you know, really speaks to the work that groups like beta.

It really speaks to the the work of of groups like Beta.

Mila, if I can just jump in from a perspective on how we kind of address the gaps in the planning community, the, you know, one group that I'm involved with as a volunteer is the Black Planners and Urbanist Association. It's a it's a nationwide organization that works in bringing black planners together, creating opportunities and doing advocacy. Some of the some of the work that we've been doing is also with our professional body which is the Ontario Professional Planning Institute and the Canadian Institute of Planners who have been receptive to under to thinking through and addressing issues of anti black racism in the profession through the curriculums of the universities and also in the workforce. So there's different opportunities and avenues. I think that these webinars are very important in bringing people who are not familiar with it or people don't have the space to talk about these issues together. I think the professional associations also have a responsibility to update their standards and ethics, the curriculum requirements to become a professional in this field. If you're if you're a part of that to address anti black racism and also black you know black successes and stories of of planning right.

And I think the universities also have a big role
...to play in terms of how they're getting accredited, making
sure that they're working.
And I know many of them are to address issues
of anti black racism, but also speaking to the positive
aspects of black life.
And then as a planner looking in on the architectural
world, if you guys don't mind me stepping in a
little bit, I think that one of the key things
we can do is really start to think beyond the
very narrow Eurocentric examples of precedence.
And I know the great work that Soca's been doing
is really trying to expand how we think about architectural
forms, practices from a black and Afrocentric perspective.
And so how do we think about, you know, sustainability
and looking at examples in the Caribbean and in the
the African continent or in black communities in the West.
So I think that there's a lot of learning we
can all do collectively.
And then those are just kind of some tips of
things that are already in the works that can be
built on.
Just thank you, Jamila.
So that's so some of your projects that you've worked
on, sorry if I hesitate on this question, but also
it was like so much what Gmail was saying, how,
how is your experience?
And I think this is just an architectural question of
just like representing a client but not necessarily being part
of the client group.
Does that make sense?
Like just to echo that again?
Yeah, I think I get what you're saying.
I'll respond and tell me if I got it.
I think it, I think it's to a certain degree
it's challenging you know as you know running a professional
practice and you know there's limits to what you can
do.
So and to say that I think a lot of
our work at Soca has both been built work but
also speculative work that might you know question systems
and
approaches that we might not necessarily be able to do
if we're just sort of engaged by a client or community.

So some of the work in Little Jamaica, you mentioned Venice B&L.

If that wasn't, you know, that was an exhibition separate from a client group reaching out one project in particular was in a way a counter proposal for Alexander Park and not specifically.

And I think these are interesting things, you know, so it's not it wasn't specifically about the black community, but you know, as Jamil was mentioning, mentioning earlier the kind of the intersection between racialized communities and poverty or lower income communities or even simple things like lack of a tree canopy.

And that project in particular and I I see this, you know, a comment about decarbonization was questioning do we need to completely demolish an entire 18 acre social housing site to revitalize it including both the built form and also the natural areas.

So you know there were trees that were you know 2 generations old, which will take another two generations to reach the same maturity.

But you know or really what what happens when we landfill all that embodied energy, where where is it going?

So questions like that and I think this become challenging. I think also get to where I think outside groups can connect because I think what we like to say is you know issues affecting the black community are also by the very nature that we're all Canadian or Canadian issues and the sort of fundamental design issues or planning issues that broader practice should be interested in.

I think we take that approach too. So we know we're not just black architects.

We're saying you know we're we're interested in community culture and these questions of sustainability and architecture in various communities.

And you know this conversation is is a lens into that.

And I think where people can learn is just having
a critical eye to existing approaches and how they may intercept with other communities.

But I think each other it's not always this call it a black or white scenarios when you're dealing with public communities, there's so many different types of intersections and and issues that you're dealing with.

So I think that's an approach that we really try to emphasize that we're doing work that can inform broader community and the spec.

Back to your question, I think the back to your work conversations like this. You know, being one of the Co founders of Beta Black Architects and Interior Designs Association to push conversations where you know private practice doesn't allow.

Robert what would how can planning give empowerment to the black community? Like what planning strategies can you think of that like that at the end result help feel people feel empowered and and and invited to the table? Yeah.

I mean one of the biggest things I think beyond just engagement is when and how you engage with with communities and particularly black communities. And when we talk about intersection, intersectionality, low income, black communities at risk of displacement, the planning process is one that I think is often quite prescriptive. There's a lot of policies that have to be adhered to.

There's a lot of things that just have to be put in place in communities in order to ensure that sort of future development can can take place. But I think one of the more meaningful responses is really to engage, identify what is at issue and then build a process around that. So you know if there are concerns about or not even just concerns, but if if there's maybe opportunities to
enhance Main Street retail with local locally owned black businesses,
You know what other resources would need to be there to ensure that those businesses may continue to exist and continue to thrive after the sort of redevelopment that is envisioned as as part of any plan takes place.
So really the sort of planning process I think can achieve a lot of the same outcomes, but really needs to be redefined in terms of how and when different things take place.
Thank you.
We're going to wrap up our conversation with the recent development in the City of Toronto, the renaming of Dundas Square to Sankofa Square.
Jamila, can you share the definition and the history of the words Sankofa?
I can do my best as a non Guinean person, but I've I've come across the term sankofa in my and I can make the connection toward planning for this in this way.
When I was doing my master's research, there's this amazing Guinean political social political theorist named Atu Sankiatu based at York University, and he wrote a book.
In the opening paragraph of that book he talks about the idea of Sankofa.
So the idea of retrieving an idea or a concept or a practice that's been lost from before and bringing it in to the present moment and using that as a way to create change and paraphrasing.
But I think that you know the term, the, the, the idea is really important for me as a planner when I think about Sankofa, because we learned from black history and I kind of touched on this in the beginning.
We learn about black history not to just sit with it and I learned a fact and that's it.
You take it and you make an active effort to respond to that.
If we know that, you know the history of enslavement has impact on housing affordability, home ownership for black communities,
how do we then respond to that and address that through policies and practices?
If we know that access to community spaces and social amenities are impacted because of the concentration where people have been concentrated over time, how do we respond to that?
Transportation.
There's many things around that.
So I think we learned from those histories not just to know a fact, but to actually think, how does this apply to me and my day-to-day work, you know, and it's an interesting concept.
I think it's applicable to everyone.
You don't have to be African or black to be able to understand and embody the the idea of Sankofa you can put into your daily practice as architect and as a planner.
But it's about being an active person who responds to something that has, you know, there's no shame in going back and saying, oh, we didn't know about this, Let's implement it today.
Now, Michael, I know, I think what you said earlier in our previous discussions was the interest for the city to focus on values versus referring to a place or as a form of symbolism.
So I mean the the, the Sankofa name in, I mean it, it says a lot and it says a lot about sort of language as this intangible heritage that we pass on.
So a lot of the work that we do we kind of look at tangible heritage being buildings and artifacts and whatnot and it's and the relationship to intangible heritage which is more about living histories like how do you perpetuate ideas and culture.
And I mean what's really fascinating with Sankofa is our name places are connected to say, people and that that person name, person relationship is very much about, you know, a definition that you know can change over time.
And what's really interesting with with Sankofa is about
it's kind of like an action like doing the the,

the process of retrieving history and this whole idea of

retrieving histories is something, yeah, it is explored in

heritage

and it's you know really interesting.

It's like how how do you kind of interpret what

happened in in a present and relevant way.

And I I think it's just really interesting this idea

of you know call it African language, Ghanaian language, I

can language but it become in shared heritage like and

it says a lot about language and how it it

transcends like at least ethnic, national, continental

boundaries and it

takes on new meaning to tell the human story.

And I think it's just really interesting to see this

being part of the Canadian identity now like we are

we are taking this language and it's for all of

us to use and you know how what happens and

how how this story unfolds, we don't know.

But at this point it's it's just very interesting to

me.

Thank you, Robert.

Or tour?

Would you like to add anything?

Sure.

Yeah, I'll jump in.

So, yeah, it's, it's interesting.

I think it's when we're talking about the tangible language

my I take and I I think there's a beauty

to think of.

You know, thinking it's right next to TMU, which was

formerly Ryerson and where they, you know, tore down the

the statue at the foot of what was it right

at Gould and yeah, Bond Street, I'm thinking.

So I think this idea that things can change.

And I think at the same time I feel there's

a missed opportunity with these things.

So you know, we have, say, streets in Toronto that

are still named after slave owners.

So Russell Street or Peter St., for example, named after,

you know, Peter Russell, there's, you know, Indian Rd.
So I think what I would really like to say,
I know this doesn't necessarily happen in politics.
Sometimes you kind of gravitate to one thing is the
opportunity to really, if we're going to rethink names, statues,
streets, holistically, what does that mean as a city?
And then I think too when we're talking about intangible
things like like a name, but what about some of
the tangible things?
You know, if we're going to, you know, the IT
was for a point there.
It wasn't just Dundas Square that was going to be
renamed the San Coppa Square, It was the entire, the
entire St.
And you know, the politicization of then businesses are
changing
the names of the street, the subway stations.
And I think an interesting question which, you know, as
a designer, an architect, you know, makes you think from
an intangible perspective of say, a name and how we
think of a name.
What about then, you know, rethinking the actual tangible
things
with the streets?
So are we just changing the name?
And that's it.
In many ways, Dundas Square is not a great square
and it and it has a lot of shortcomings, physical
shortcomings for many reasons that could be changed.
Dundas St.
you know, thinking of like complete streets and safe streets.
If we're going to say use St.
Koppa, which is aspirational, what does that aspiration come
to
meaning?
Ideally it would come to be, you know, changing our
the built realm and urban design in built form of
the square and the broader St.
Thank you, Robert.
I don't really have much to add, but it is
a really exciting and interesting time to engage with with
with Black History in Toronto, sort of understanding where
where
we've come from.
And I think what, Michael, you were saying about developing that shared heritage, I mean that is an absolutely sort of thrilling possibility. And so, you know, I'm just excited that conversations like this are happening and that they'll hopefully be many more conversations to come.

And that is it. There are hopefully there are many more conversations to come and this is where I'm going to turn it back and I'd like to thank all our panelists. So this is a conversation that we're just starting and by no means in the month of February are we limited to having this conversation. So I will turn it to Crystal for some closing remarks from ULI Toronto. Thank you everyone. Thank you, Camille. And on behalf of you Like Toronto, I want to thank all of our speakers for joining us today and for highlighting the powerful historic forces that are confronting legacy challenges and fuelling the modern frontiers of city building. With that, we say thank you for pushing this conversation forward.

On the eve of Black History Month, we have our upcoming events slide on screen. Please be sure to check them out and visit the events page that's posted in the chat.

Thank you all for joining us today and have a great rest of the afternoon.