UEPodcast Episode Two: Boston's Wicked Problem

(KC): Hi, I'm Kaili Chen,

(CB): And I'm Celia Bottger, and we are two recent graduates of Tufts University who studied international relations, environmental studies, and biology. Last spring, we took Professor Agyeman's class at the UEP called Developing Sustainable Communities, where we learned the importance of centering social justice in sustainability and urban planning practices. Throughout the class, we learned how sustainability initiatives in the past have excluded issues of equity and justice, and how Professor Agyeman's just sustainabilities approach can remedy past injustices while promoting sustainable development in urban communities. The class underscored how crucial it is to center communities in policy-making processes, especially when those communities have been marginalized by past urban planning policies.

(CB): And, in the wake of George Floyd's murder and subsequent protests, we bore witness to the failings of not only the criminal justice system, but also of our cities' racialized urban planning writ large. As Professor Agyeman's class made abundantly clear, policies aimed at sustainability often fail to actually address the underlying barriers to long-term prosperity, and instead, perpetuate existing inequities.

(KC): The resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement has prompted us to think more critically about how our cities are structured to benefit white residents while disempowering communities of color. Racialized urban policies such as redlining, single-family zoning, and public housing have left many neighborhoods of color disinvested and disempowered, while White neighborhoods reap the benefits of long-term investment and resource allocation.

(KC): For months, protestors have come together in the Greater Boston Area to stand in solidarity for George Floyd and countless others who have been victims of police brutality. For decades, activists have demanded justice for innocent Black Americans killed at the hands of the police, and reparations for centuries of anti-Black racism, violence, and discrimination. The rallying cry of the movement has become "Defund the Police," which calls for reducing oversized police budgets and reallocating those funds to social services, namely mental health services, affordable housing, and education. In order to meet these demands and rectify the racial wealth disparities that are glaringly visible in our cities, it is essential that urban planners and city residents work together to empower historically disenfranchised communities.

(CB): As two recent graduates of Tufts, Boston is our home away from home and thus the contextual background for this podcast. In this podcast mini-series, we will first explore the history of racial inequity in Boston, and how urban planning policies have reinforced racial

segregation in Boston's neighborhoods. We then turn to community leaders working in some of Boston's historically marginalized neighborhoods, and learn how they are building resilience and empowering their residents to address Boston's racial inequities from the ground up.

(CB): From Boston's countless universities, non-profit organizations and large concentration of young professionals, many perceive Boston as a hub of progressive politics and social justice activism. Having gone to college in Boston, we experienced this liberal ethos first-hand.

(CB): Nonetheless, systemic racism exists in Boston and is enforced by its police department and urban planning policies. A recent commentary in WBUR written by Arielle Gray, a Black Boston resident, points to the countless instances she and her community have faced violence and targeted discrimination at the hands of the Boston Police Department. Black Americans are incarcerated at more than five times the rate of white Americans, according to an NAACP fact sheet on incarceration in the US, and 2 1/2 times more likely to be killed by the police compared to white Americans. For Black men, the lifetime risk of dying at the hands of the police is 1 in 1,000.

(KC): Systemic racism in Northern cities, specifically in politically progressive cities like Boston, manifests itself in covert, "rationalized, tolerated, and usually denied" police misconduct, as stated by Dr. Martin Luther King in 1964. Systemic racism also manifests itself in the staggering inequality among wealthy, predominantly White neighborhoods and neighborhoods of color in Boston.

(KC): In a Brookings report released in 2018, Boston was ranked as the seventh-most income-unequal city in the country. This growing wealth disparity has pushed over 15,000 middle-income residents out in the past 25 years and continues to exacerbate the racial and economic segregation of neighborhoods in the Greater Boston Area. Having lived in Boston for 21 years, we asked Professor Agyeman what he has noticed about its racial and wealth inequities.

(JA): Yeah, I've lived in Boston since June '99. And, I've noticed big changes. Boston has become much more diverse since I've been living here. The number of interracial couplings that I've seen has increased dramatically, compared to when I first came. But all the data, all the statistics that I read, including just this morning in the Boston Globe that, [indicate] black renters facing higher evictions, Black people who want to rent and who have names that sound black are denied the access that other people would want. So, you know, racism is alive and well, despite the fact that we are now a much more diverse and, certainly in terms of relationships, more integrated society. So I think it's a mixed bag of results really.

(KC): Today, Black residents account for only 4% of households in Boston earning more than $75,000 annually. In a 2015 report on The Color of Wealth in Boston, researchers found for every dollar the typical white household in Boston has in liquid assets, Black residents have 2 cents, Caribbean Black residents 14 cents, and Puerto Ricans and Dominicans less than 1 cent. The report concluded that in Boston, this drastic inequality is "a first-order public policy problem requiring immediate attention."

(CB): Why is Boston so racially and economically segregated? According to a 2017 analysis by the Boston Globe's Spotlight team, one can point to Boston's history as well as a chronic disinvestment in low-income communities of color to understand Boston's racial and economic disparities. Boston's black population is comparatively small -- only 7% of Boston's 4.7 million residents. This population has remained relatively unchanged for decades, partially due to the fact that Boston did not experience as large an influx of African-Americans from the Great Migration as cities like Chicago and New York City did throughout the mid-twentieth century.

(CB): As a result, Boston's black middle class stagnated, beginning a vicious cycle: with fewer Black professionals in Boston, those who did climb the economic ladder encountered a shockingly white world, which further alienated them, and maintained Boston's reputation as unwelcoming to Black people.

(KC): Looking more into this, we found that Boston was not the welcoming city we felt it to be. In fact, in a survey commissioned in 2016, the Boston Globe found Boston to be the least welcoming city for people of color: in the survey, 54% of Black people rated Boston as unwelcoming. This comes as little surprise when considering Boston's predominantly white middle-class, a result of limited opportunities for upward mobility in BIPOC communities.

(KC): And, given the racist upheaval that occurred during and after Boston's court-ordered school desegregation in the 1970s and 80s, Black professionals and graduates found little incentive to stay in Boston. State-sanctioned programming, in turn, perpetuated a legacy of segregation, gentrification and redlining that forced many Black residents to relocate out of Boston to more welcoming cities.

(CB): We wanted to take a deeper look into what kind of urban planning policies either integrate or segregate their residents. We learned in Professor Agyeman's class that in the p˜ast, city planners have weaponized urban planning tools to enforce racial segregation that privileges White, wealthy residents. Professor Agyeman expands on how these practices were utilized in American cities to racially segregate residents, and how racial injustices in Boston's urban planning practices, past and present, manifest themselves today.

(JA): I think past practices are the typical practices of cities in the U.S. that used zoning in a racialized way. [Cities] used zoning for especially single-family housing in a way that might not, at first sight, appear to be racially motivated. But when you look at who can afford single-family homes, you realize that this is racism by the backdoor in many ways.

(JA): Moving away from single-family zoning to more mixed uses and to uses that promote affordability. Moving away from exclusionary zoning, moving into ideas like this notion of greenlining. Why is it that now ecological, sustainable neighborhoods, complete streets, places with cycle lanes, places with broad walkable sidewalks and medians in the street, and traffic calming, why is it that they all occur in wealthy neighborhoods? And that your Walk Score is correlated with your house price?

(JA): All of these are newer aspects of the social injustice of urban planning. And again, it's not to say that we shouldn't have complete streets, but it's [about] who gets to have a complete street in their neighborhood. And why is it that lower-income neighborhoods, which generally have more busily-trafficked streets and cars going, in general, a little bit faster, why is it that those streets aren't prioritized for traffic calming? Because we have horrendous differentiation in mortalities and serious injuries between African American, Latino, and then White communities, a very big difference. And in fact, the idea of Vision Zero -- this idea of moving towards zero pedestrian and traffic and cycle fatalities-- has really shown that in certain neighborhoods... for instance, in Austin, Texas, they've now added equity as a major component to the Vision Zero goals because they realize that not everybody is equal in terms of traffic injuries and fatalities, especially. So every aspect of urban planning is riven with questions of social justice.

(CB): Boston's staggering income inequality between Black and white residents is reinforced by chronic disinvestment in low-income neighborhoods of color and continual investment in wealthy white neighborhoods. This phenomenon can be physically seen just by walking around Boston: compare the high-tech infrastructure of Kendall Square in Cambridge, or the newly renovated Boston Seaport district, with aging residential neighborhoods in Roxbury or Dorchester.

(KC): Boston's prioritization of white neighborhoods is even apparent in its tourism strategies: the main tourism website highlights places like Faneuil Hall, Symphony Hall, and the Charles River Esplanade, while the dining guide encourages tourists to visit restaurants in the Back Bay, downtown Boston, the North End, and the Seaport. Growing up in and outside of Boston, my family and I often brought guests to these "must-see" destinations. All of these neighborhoods are home to very few Black residents or people of color, yet, according to the website, feature the best of Boston.

(KC): As Sarah J. Jackson, a Black scholar who teaches at Northeastern University, stated in the Boston Globe, "that's literally making entire communities invisible." She continues, "It became really apparent to me soon after moving here that the version of Boston that the city is really invested in portraying to the outside world is only white Boston."

(JA): I've been really working with this idea that urban planning is the spatial toolkit of white supremacy. If you think about what urban planning has done to our cities, in terms of segregation through zoning, segregation through redlining, segregation through covenants and deeds, segregation through schools... Urban Planning has been the toolkit, the enabler of a white supremacy. So I think urban planning and social justice are intimately interlinked. And I think recognizing this, urban planning, and urban planners, and politicians who are responsible for urban plans need to think about how we can dismantle white supremacy through changing some of the tools in the toolkit.

(CB): While the Black experience in Boston is unique, racialized urban planning tools have ultimately disenfranchised entire communities of color. To end the cycle of poverty and violence in POC communities in Boston specifically, we need to not only reinvest in historically marginalized neighborhoods, but allow them to lead the way in creating racially, economically, and environmentally just communities. In the rest of this podcast, we will seek to amplify the work of several BIPOC-led, Boston-area organizations that are taking back control of their communities and actively building sustainable, just, and equitable livelihoods for and with their BIPOC residents.

(JA): In many ways, ideas need to be co-produced with communities. I think we're past the days now where paternalistic government can impose solutions on communities. I think the ideas need to be co-generated, co-produced and co-implemented in communities. That's what governance is, as opposed to *government*, which tends to be more paternalistic. So a governance approach would say, let's work with communities to find out what works in those communities and what role people can have in co-imagining, co-producing, and co-implementing solutions.

(CB): In today's episode, we focus on the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, or DSNI, a community development organization based in Dorchester, Massachusetts that certainly takes a governance approach in co-producing solutions with the community it serves. We first heard of DSNI in Professor Agyeman's class, and we were excited to learn more about their work.

(CB): Dorchester, like many other neighborhoods of color, has suffered from disinvestment and neglect for decades. Following World War II, racially discriminatory banking and housing policies, known as "redlining," segregated people of color from the possibility of wealth, housing stability, and opportunity. By the 1980s, the Dudley neighborhood of North Dorchester had been

devastated by disinvestment and white flight during the 1960s and 70s, during which white residents relocated to the suburbs of Boston as their neighbors grew increasingly racially diverse. The White population of Dudley dropped from almost 95% in 1950 to only 14% by 1990, while the Black population increased from under 5% to around 55% in the same period. What's more, Dorchester residents lost even more of their land and were in some cases displaced entirely by urban renewal projects and highway building.

(KC): Committed to reclaiming and reinvesting in their "urban village", the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has worked on initiatives to promote community economic development, leadership development, and youth opportunities. Since its inception in 1984, DSNI has secured ownership over their land, cleaned and beautified their streets, and increased civic engagement. Over the past three decades, DSNI has created a land trust with permanently affordable housing, partnered with promise schools, and developed a youth jobs collaborative.

(KC): By securing development without displacement, DSNI continues to defend and serve its community. Today, DSNI is a membership organization with over 3,000 members. Represented by a democratically-elected Board, Dudley Street residents lead an effort that includes all neighborhood stakeholders. We spoke with Jose Barros, the Community Organizer & Planner for DSNI.

(JB): My name is Jose Barros. I'm a community organizer at DSNI, Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative. I've been there for 24 years as a community organizer. Something that I was doing before in the community, I did some work before that at the Cape Verdean consulate for about six years. Then, I've been organizing at DSNI these past 24 years. I live in the community down the street. I usually come home every day for lunch because I live close by. I've been part of a lot of campaigns before I started working there.

(CB): What are some of the current projects you are working on as a community organizer for DSNI?

(JB): My main work is civic engagement right now. I did some on safety, working on Crime Watch and police and [neighborhood] associations for a little while. Then I did some work organizing with parents at different schools. And then right now, I'm organizing to make sure people are completing the 2020 census. And also voting is a major thing every year I have to go back to. There is always an election. So we gotta educate people to convince them, call them, knock on their doors to make sure they vote. Right now there is a vote by mail, which is really important. A lot of people don't know that. So we are calling them also for the census and also for the vote by mail.

(JB): And then I work with my favorite committee, it's the sustainable development committee. I organize the monthly meeting to make sure I let residents know if there is any development coming to the DSNI area, to make sure those people from Dudley Street know about it. Whatever development is coming might get support from the DSNI, maybe we call another meeting. But that's what I am doing now. And there is the multicultural festival. I work on the annual meeting, I have a lot of information on the board, how to do the orientation, all those crazy things that we need to do to do a good election, a democratic election.

(KC): Why do you believe it's important to have a democratically-elected board?

(JB): Because they represent the community. They tell us what to do. So they are the top responsible for anything that happens at the community. So we have a staff that sometimes makes small decisions on those things. But when it comes to the community, we have a meeting, we call residents, they come, they make a decision, they might support something or not, and then it goes to the board. The board will support it and they make a recommendation. If there is anything that needs to go to the city, it goes with a board recommendation. If there is something that is bigger than the board, the board will say this is bigger than us. We need to bring it to the community. They'll make a decision. Then we do a presentation. Then the community will vote--the majority gets it. But the sustainable development [meeting] happens every month. So that's the voice also of the community because they make big decisions and we don't have a say. So DSNI as a staff, we don't have any say.

(CB): In 1984, more than ⅓ of the Dudley neighborhood was vacant land: 1,300 empty parcels existed in just a 1.5 square mile area. As a longtime Dudley resident himself, Jose expanded more on some of the injustices facing Dudley residents as a result of this disinvestment, both in the past and in the present.

(JB): In the Dudley area, in the small triangle, we had about 1,300 empty lots at the beginning. One lot is a space where a house used to be. Trash everywhere. So no voice. You call the city, you get no response for years. So we decided to clean those lots and we built houses on them, put it in our land trust. And we built gardens, we built parks, playgrounds, which we didn't have when I first came, there was just a few. There was nothing really working in the community. People come in and dump in Roxbury and Dorchester, North Dorchester, just because it's minority people living there. It is immigrant people: they have no voice. So dumping, it was part of everyday life. People come in from other cities, even from other states. If they go work in any other state, in Vermont, or New Hampshire, they know they could bring the truck full of debris or anything and dump it in Roxbury.

(KC) According to the Boston Globe, waste removal companies used the vacant parcels as illegal dumping grounds, while individuals from outside the neighborhood would drive in during the night to discard trash and unwanted items.

(KC): As Jose notes, “dumping is a part of everyday life”. However, this is not the case for all Bostonians. In a study conducted in 2002, researchers found that compared to higher-income communities, communities with a median household income less than $30,000 had four times as many hazardous waste sites per square mile.

(JB): So it's hard because our community doesn't have power or money. Sometimes you get a developer that is from the community, people are happy about it. But you don't get a lot of those. Sometimes they are from outside: that's the part that hurts the most. It's not just who is building but it's more, they're coming from another state, build a condo, sell it, walk away. That's what hurts the most. So you never see them. These are people that are afraid of us still. So they don't participate. There are some that will say, they want to run for the board, they want to be at the meeting, they want to make some more changes, they want to be part of it. But there are others that you knock on the door and they don't even open it because they're afraid of us.

(JB): So we fought to make sure we had a voice, that the city pays attention. That's why right now we are at the table. If we call, we know who to call. It doesn't mean that DSNI gets everything we want, but we know the process. By knowing the process, by knowing people, how to gain that power, it makes a big difference. Sometimes we want the city not to vote on something but they don't listen to us, and the community comes back and tries again on another project. (17:36)

(CB): In the 1980s, Dudley residents successfully used their voice to gain community-control over their neighborhood’s development. The Dudley Neighbors’ Community Land Trust was established in the fall of 1988 by the Boston Redevelopment Authority to acquire privately-owned vacant land in the Dudley Triangle, which was then leased to developers to build affordable housing consistent with the community’s master plan. The Land Trust provides a community-centered way to combat gentrification in communities of color.

(JB): We have a lot of houses on land trust but it's still not enough. Those cannot be touched by those developers because they don't qualify, they make too much money so this is not for rich people. I know the city's working with us, but it's a very slow process. By the time we get it, we work on all the documentation to get the property and build another house, it's too late. But I think putting more houses on land trust, find a way to do it quicker. Sometimes it's on our end, it's our capacity to do it. So I think the Land Trust will help a lot.

(CB): In addition to promoting sustainable and equitable development, DSNI hosts cultural events open to the Dorchester community. As we learned in Professor Agyeman's class, inclusive spaces that foster cultural exchange, or "cosmopolitan canopies," are crucial to strengthening and unifying an urban community.

(JB): Cultural programming I think helps us to get along better because we appreciate each other's culture, each other's food. It teaches us to respect each other since we are here together. Instead of me being in my house and playing my songs in the house, I can be out, I can listen to yours. We can eat and try your food and you try mine. We can dance together. So that's why we do the multicultural festival once a year, to celebrate diversity, to teach our kids that there are different languages, there are different foods, there are different people in the house, there are different cultures everywhere in the United States that respect each other. It will make us stronger when it comes to fighting for justice.

(KC): Beautifully put. How can we and the Boston community best support and promote the work you're doing at DSNI?

(JB): So right now we have a lot of countries, a lot of universities. They do a lot of tours that bring a lot of students. I know that those students, once they visit DNSI, their life will change. But I think we need more of that to promote what we do, especially to give voice and listen to the community, because we don't have the answer. So when we listen to residents, the decisions that we make last longer, and everyone feels that they own it. They protect it. They protect those decisions.

(JB): For example, right now we do virtual tours. We can do Zoom tours. So we've been doing not a lot yet, but we can still continue to promote and help other communities that want to do the same thing; they want to build, bring land trusts into their community and protect their community. But I think that's the way to continue to keep the door open for those that want to learn what we're doing.

(CB) Through collective leadership and control, the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative has created greater civic participation, economic opportunity, community connections, and youth engagement. In the face of rampant disinvestment, DSNI has successfully facilitated co-development of its neighborhood while celebrating its vibrant cultural diversity. The result is a tight-knit, politically empowered community that effectively advocates for equity and justice for all its residents. Black Lives Matter activists and communities of color have laid out their demands: affordable housing, access to food, and safe open spaces, among others. DSNI is actively enabling this vision in Dorchester and ensuring that its residents have access to resources they were previously denied.

(KC) To ensure that these neighborhoods can continue to secure ownership of community-controlled land and develop cultural programming, you can learn more about DSNI and support their work at www.dsni.org. We will also be posting their social media accounts on the Practical Visionaries Blog, along with a transcript of this podcast. In our next and final episode, we will discuss food justice in Dorchester with the Dorchester Food Co-Op, and the importance of youth empowerment and environmental justice advocacy in Roxbury with Alternatives for Community and Environment.

Music - Blue Dot Sessions and Epidemic Sound
When in the West
Sand Reverie
Our Only Lark
Coulis Coulis
Salvation is Coming (ES)

Key readings:

- Federal Reserve Bank of Boston 2015 report on The Color of Wealth in Boston
- "Boston. Racism. Image. Reality," a 2017 analysis by the Boston Globe's Spotlight team
- "Boston Prides Itself on its Progressive Image. Let Me Tell You What I Know," a commentary in WBUR by Arielle Gray
- "Boston's Booming... But For Whom?" report by Boston Indicators