



## Expanding the Concept of Inclusivity to Meet Contemporary Urban Planning Needs

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Today's cities, even those known for their historical character, are places where change and transformation are ever-present; from newly emerging environmental hazards and the interventions meant to address them, to the growing use and proliferation of technology, levels of population diversity and social polarization that are significantly higher than in the past, and new urban forms that challenge settled assumptions about what cities are supposed to look like, the field of urban planning has no lack of challenges to confront. Moreover, many of these changes are difficult or impossible to forecast, which adds another layer of complexity to the work of policymakers and urban planners in both research and in practice. Everyone involved in the process of designing and developing the environments where so many different people live and work must take thoughtful steps toward becoming more flexible and adaptable to these ongoing changes and being able to read the "here and now" of cities, carefully examining how they unfold. My experience in conducting research and teaching urban planning has led me to believe that one potential path toward meeting the challenges of urban uncertainties would be to extend the field's and planners' engagement with the concept of "inclusivity."

### An Expanded Approach to Inclusive Urban Planning

As the discourse around inclusion becomes more common, the meaning of the word itself can become confusing or watered-down. In urban planning, "inclusivity" is typically meant to describe the need to think about the "other": Who is left out of the picture when planners imagine a city space? In practice, inclusivity involves not just imagining and designing for diversity and urban people's multiple needs and desires, but also including those "others" in planning processes. This conceptualization has led to important gains in urban accessibility and equity—but expanding the concept of inclusivity to include more abstract spheres can increase its potential even more.

To adapt planning practices to the newly-emerging and ever-ongoing complexities of cities, we need new and improved tools that will enable urban planners to more fully understand the cultural, political, and economic forces—among others—that act upon each other to create current cities, and from there to develop strategies that mediate the negative effects of this process. An expanded inclusivity approach must not only account for all the different types of city dwellers and all the different ways of using city infrastructure and features, but also new and different concepts and ideas. Becoming more inclusive of concepts and ideas can make room for new ways of thinking, understanding, discerning and reading the present to better engage with what is out there now, with changes and transformations, and the ways they unfold and alter. With this type of inclusivity, urban planning can accommodate new conceptualizations and practices from diverse fields—beyond the social sciences—including sustainability studies, STEM fields, and philosophy.

## Examples of Expanded Inclusivity in San Diego

This type of inclusivity is practiced in community engagement with underinvested communities, in which planners need to adopt new approaches and methods to work with diverse people and to explore their experiences of the places they inhabit. As is typical for a Community Engaged Learning (CEL) class, students in a class I've led since 2021 at UC San Diego are expected to collaborate with community members, in this case in the Logan Heights neighborhood of San Diego, to develop deliverables and products that will meet local needs (with the appreciated support of grants and philanthropic funds). However, this class departs from more traditional practices by drawing on relational theories—that is, schools of thought that emphasize relationships and interconnections between diverse actors and entities—and conceptualizations of renowned philosophers such as Bruno Latour, Baruch Spinoza and Brian Massumi. Relational theories are highly popular in fields such as sociology, urban studies, and human geography, but lacking in urban planning; including them has enabled me and my students to find new ways to collaborate with underinvested communities, and particularly with stratified communities that can find it difficult to reach a consensus.

Considering super-diversity, growing immigration, and gentrification patterns, working with “a community” seems almost impossible nowadays—communities are constantly in flux, along with prevailing ideas about who gets to claim membership in a community. Common civic engagement processes that seek to work with a “good” number of community representatives in order to reach consensus seem to miss the on-the-ground needs of diverse residents. Rather than try to achieve some amount of participants that could somehow account for all the diversity of their community, in our Logan Heights work, we draw on the relational idea that community engagement can be conducted by collaboration with several individuals as long as those individuals' proposed initiatives could potentially benefit the whole neighborhood and as long as they are able and willing to engage with us over time while bringing the place-based knowledge we want to integrate into more academic forms of knowledge.

One resident we collaborated with gathered a group of local artists who wished to beautify the neighborhood and advance its connection to art. Working with this resident, we realized there is much room to extend her ideas in practice and develop products and deliverables that will meet diverse needs on-the-ground. One deliverable we produced together is a [15-min documentary](#) about artists and the history and unfolding of art as part of Logan Heights identity, which was screened in an event created by the students and residents that attracted a diverse audience including people from the university, Logan Heights, and greater San Diego. This ongoing project meets not just the baseline goal of beautifying a neighborhood, but also urgent local needs including better inter-neighborhood engagement for Logan Heights; a means of presenting the unique attributes and resources of this community and its beauty and meaningfulness for residents; the advancement of residents' independence and pride in producing a local asset they can use to promote themselves, their initiatives, and their narratives; and a strengthened connection between the community and a leading San Diego university campus and its students.

## Increased Urban Complexity Calls for New Tools and Ideas

Urban planning is inherently interdisciplinary. However, to address the increasingly complex challenges of contemporary urban environments, planning must go beyond traditional boundaries and expand its capacity to embrace ideas from a wider array of scholarships. This includes integrating insights that may seem counterintuitive to conventional planning practices that seek stability—those that prioritize flexibility, fluidity, and abstract thinking. By broadening urban planning, and by translating new theoretical ideas into practical

applications, planners can develop alternative approaches that challenge conventional methods while still providing a Community Engaged Learning experience for tomorrow's urban planning scholars and practitioners. This interdisciplinary integration allows planners to imagine and create innovative planning processes that are more adaptive, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities, and contribute to the development of cities that are equipped to handle the complex challenges of the 21st century.