On Equity, Chief City Planner Eleanor Sharpe (MCP'99) Looks for Philadelphia to Lead by Example

An in-depth interview with Eleanor Sharpe (MCP'99), executive director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission.

Eleanor Sharpe's personal, academic, and professional trajectory includes her native Kingston, Jamaica and a string of Eastern seaboard cities distinguished by singular "built environments" and social needs: Washington, DC, Miami, New Rochelle, and Philadelphia. This varied urban immersion is fitting for Sharpe, an architect who pivoted to, and has flourished in, city and regional planning—she earned her Master of City Planning degree at Penn in 1999. Sharpe joined the Philadelphia City Planning

Commission staff in 2013 and was named the commission's executive director in 2017. In that role, she has shaped the development and launched Re-Imagine Philadelphia—a rigorously inclusive and collaborative planning process to design an engagement framework for an update to the Planning Commission's comprehensive plan focusing on growing the city and improving quality-of-life for its residents, in their fullest diversity. Nationally, she is spearheading the Planning and Equity: A Commitment to Change statement and initiative. To date, more than thirty planning directors—from Boston, New York, and Atlanta, to Nashville, El Paso, and Salt Lake City, to Los Angeles, Portland, and Seattle—have committed to "changing our practices, policies, regulations, and actions to create inclusive and diverse neighborhoods and cities that equitably meet the needs of all residents, especially Black, Indigenous, and people of color."

At a news conference on November 9, U.S. Representative Dwight Evans announced that the Nicetown Community Development Corporation will receive federal support to assist development of the area beneath the Roosevelt Boulevard with public amenities including basketball courts, rain gardens, a skate park, a small amphitheater, and a plaza for vendors. One goal of the recently passed $1 trillion federal infrastructure bill is to reconnect communities of color previously divided by highways built through their centers—including Philadelphia's Chinatown and Nicetown, the former split in two by the Vine Street Expressway/676 and the latter by Roosevelt Boulevard. This aligns significantly with the intentions of the Planning and Equity initiative, led by Philadelphia, which calls for acknowledgement of past harms and building an equitable future.

In an interview, Sharpe shared insights about her life and work, Penn, and city planning's troubled past and future promise.

What drew you to study and work in city and regional planning?

I studied architecture at Howard University and worked as an architect in Miami for a number of years. While I love architecture and the process of problem-solving through design, which I still draw on, I found the specifics of my work limiting. Planning is in the same lexicon as architecture and allowed for more of my interests—in day-to-day work it has a macro perspective rather than a singular focus on one building.

How did your time and experiences at Howard, a Historically Black College and University, lay groundwork for your work and life in the United States?

I was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, and began my higher education there, and then went right to Howard. I had never lived in the U.S. before. Jamaican and American culture are very different, and while Jamaica is not a perfect society, its people are united in their identity as Jamaicans—not "black Jamaican" or "white Jamaican," etc. So, experiencing and responding to bias had not been part of my repertoire. Studying at Howard, I could acclimate to American culture and society but didn't even consider that racial bias would hinder my professional education and training in the academic setting. In retrospect, attending an HBCU was a wonderful grounding in building confidence that has continued to serve me well in my career.

What attracted you to Penn? Were there aspects of the program that resonated with you in particular?

I learned about Penn's graduate program in city planning through a fellow Howard alum who had enrolled in the program—Penn's program was the only one to which I applied. Once in the program, I found the "Workshop" course [CPLN 600] very powerful. The instructors—Ron Turner and David Hamme—really tried to leverage Penn's knowledge assets with community needs, saying "We have some brain-bank here that a small organization likely couldn't afford if they were to engage a professional firm. You may not have the funds to retain the big consultants in Center City, but we have a class here that corresponds to your needs and it would be mutually beneficial for your organization, our goals as educators, and our students' training if we delivered to you a product you can use."

I went on to teach the "Workshop" course for ten years. Philadelphia has so many needs that are not being met, and we have at Penn cohorts of students who can dedicate their time to an organization over the course of a semester and often beyond— many students continued working with these organizations, and that work became a connector for them and helped to build their careers.

Philadelphia is its own urbanity. There's a whole laboratory here. There's a whole range of issues here that we can commit this brainpower to. That, for me and my experience at Penn, was transformative.

Were matters of equity already being discussed while you were a student at Penn?

Not like they are today. Back then, it was implicit rather than explicit. But my professors got it—they knew there were resources at Penn that could be leveraged to leave a greater good. We could move the needle on issues in the society using the brain-talent that is hanging out on Penn's campus to do something productive. And, of course, the pressing concerns often follow along the needs of people of color.

You were the Associate Director of Penn's Netter Center for Community Partnerships from 2006 to 2010. What was the focus of that work?

It had to do with the University's relationship with the people of West Philadelphia—leveraging what's happening on Penn's campus to make things better in the community. The center's director, Ira Harkavy, had instituted ABCS—Academically Based Community Service—classes, in which students and faculty work with West Philadelphia public schools, communities of faith, and community organizations to help solve pressing campus and community problems across a range of areas including the environment, health, arts, and education. If students did work in the community, they received academic credit for it. It was very grassroots work—how can we make things better?

What inspired you to advocate for equity in planning?

As a person of color bearing witness to the racial reckoning that was unfolding in 2020, I began to seriously believe that the planning profession needed its own reckoning. This was followed with lots of reading, lots of exposure, and a sort of calling to do something. I believe in focusing on where you are: to what extent can I do the best that I'm able within my sphere of influence? For me, that's having the platform of Executive Director of the Philadelphia City Planning Commission.

It's not about me, or anyone else. The call of the Planning and Equity initiative is to all planning directors, and they are not, typically, people of color. Most of those who have championed and supported this cause and gotten it across the finish-line have been white men. This is because the profession of planning is predominantly white and male. Planning has played a devastating role in the past and history put down a specific, imperative marker in 2020. Planners are students of history. We're asking ourselves what should planning history look like at this specific marker in time. That was the inspiration—we are living history and have the opportunity to shape it. Being in it and of it, how can we take ourselves up enough to look down the road and think to ourselves,

"What do we want when a Penn (or any) student is reading a book thirty years from now?" Do we want them to read that planners did nothing or that we did hear and heed the call and committed, within our sphere, to make a difference? It's about how we, as a profession, can right past wrongs, because the profession has done some serious damage.

What, for you, is an especially powerful example of how inequity has been instituted in Philadelphia planning, harming individuals and communities?

There are plenty! Black Bottom in West Philadelphia, where a predominantly African American community was displaced as a product of urban renewal and slum clearance. Chinatown! 676 bifurcated that community. In Nicetown, an overhead expressway was built through the middle of the neighborhood in the 1950s—it was an infrastructure and "urban-renewal" project that was not helpful! Now, appointed and elected officials such as U.S. Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and Pennsylvania Congressman Dwight Evans are exploring how to knit communities such as these back together. There are lots of examples that still have negative impact today.

Are there efforts that have been completed, or are now in process, in Philadelphia during your tenure as executive director of which you are proud in regard to matters of equity?

Our latest and most involved effort is "Re-Imagine Philadelphia," a partnership with city agencies and community stakeholders to design an engagement plan that ensures future updates to the Planning Commission's Comprehensive Plan center equity, empower community members to participate early and regularly in the planning process, and hold government accountable while uplifting the voices of marginalized communities.

We realized that our current comprehensive plan—"Philadelphia 2035" and its "Citywide Vision" component, which were first adopted in 2011 and were followed by eighteen district plans prepared and adopted between 2012 and 2018—hadn't reached all the people we wanted to reach, that they shortchanged populations whose voices we want to hear and amplify, whose needs we want to address. We wanted to be sure that if we called a plan "comprehensive," that it would be so. We are very deliberate in investigating ways to improve. To "re-imagine" properly and thoroughly, every population must be represented at the table and asked "What are some of your pressing

needs that we can address in this process and how can we best engage with the population you represent?"

The staff at the Planning Commission are committed to "moving at the speed of trust." We're building trust with representatives from communities who have reason not to trust planning and government. And we don't want to be extractive, so for the first time, we are compensating the community representatives serving on the steering-committee for Re-Imagine Philadelphia for sharing their knowledge, because their lived experience is valid.

The hope is that through this process, we are better prepared to authentically engage with populations we have had difficulty with previous engagement efforts. There are representatives on the steering committee for Re-Imagine Philadelphia representing people of color and other underserved communities, the LGBTQ community, Indigenous and Native American people, women, older citizens, youth, differently abled people, the sheltered and unsheltered, people of differing educational attainment, ethnicity, race, religion. We looked at everybody as aspects and facets of diversity. And we only asked the community representatives one question: what can you bring to the table, what do you want from this? As a result, we have a steering-committee for Re-Imagine Philadelphia that is a very diverse group composed of not the usual go-to people. We had 800 applicants for 15 slots and they are so engaged—it's wonderful.

What is your vision for the future of planning in Philadelphia?

Historically, Philadelphia was a leader in city planning—it was the herald. While not all the decisions made by Philadelphia's planners were positive—many did real harm to individuals and communities—I would like to get back to a point where Philadelphia is leading by example. This time, part of that example is saying we're willing to take all necessary steps to remedy what's happened in the past, to lay an inclusive foundation for the future. Not to cast blame but to focus on what we can do to reconcile with harmed communities and move forward. For Philadelphia to be a model of excellence as we work towards translating community needs and values into policies that manifest in an equitable manner. We as a city are as strong as our weakest resident. I truly believe if we take care of the least among us, we will take care of all.

What is your message for those now studying planning?

To peel back the layers of the onion, to not just believe what you've been told. You will be shocked to really unearth and discover the truth of damage done through planning, and it can be hard to look the truth in the face because it can reflect back on the circumstances of one's own life. For example, if you grew up in the suburbs, you'll confront the reality that suburbs were developed, intentionally, to exclude Black people and other people of color. It's not your fault, it's not your parents' fault. But the imperative is to come to terms with the past and then move on and make things better.

What can those outside the planning professional—such as people reading this interview–do to bring about equity?

Get informed. I would ask people, in their own manner and time, to challenge their own presumptions and assumptions of why things are the way they are within their work and life experiences. For me, the question is why our places exist in the manner they do today. One reason is that government policies have created segregated communities and social constructs have assigned certain characteristics to different groups. Let's take for example the relationship between poverty and race: historically, people of color have been relegated to urban areas with accompanying levels of income disparity hence more poverty. The reality is that government policies have created poverty for communities of color. If you see a majority Black community that is impoverished, know that both that community and the poverty along with it is the end result of government policies, that the residents' race is not the root *cause* of the poverty. Similar questions can be asked of any industry.

Wherever you reside, try to make an impact there. Challenge your own beliefs. Be open to different perspectives. Try to move the needle within your own sphere. It might make what seems to be only a small difference, but small differences add up. The sooner we start acknowledging what *is*, without judgement, the sooner we can make this a better place for all.

By Matthew Singer