

## **The Power of Diversity in the Built Environment: Engaging Future Planning PhDs of Color**

By James Rojas, founder of Place It and Gerardo Sandoval, PhD, Assistant Professor of Planning, Public Policy and Management, University of Oregon.

On July 22<sup>nd</sup>, Twenty-Five students of color from across the nation met in LA to investigate pursuing a PhD in Urban Planning. As a partnership program between UCLA and USC, and commissioned by ACSP, each student had to apply for this opportunity to participate in the 2014 Summer Pre-Doctoral four day workshop for students of color in Planning.

On the third day of the workshop we wanted the students to experience, and imagine, the power of diversity in urban planning through a journey of self-discovery that started with their favorite childhood memory and ended with a tour observing the streets of East Los Angeles. These activities unleashed their passion for their respective communities through exploratory and experiential aspects and tap their intuitive sense of inquiry.

We began the day at USC by asking students to build their favorite childhood memory in fifteen minutes using construction paper as a base and choosing from hundreds of small items with which to build. This took them on a deep dive into their memory, to understand their experiences, who they are, where they come from, and what they value as these were key questions to ask as they considered their academic future.

James asked each participant to share his/her memory with the group. The builders spoke with conviction as they told compelling, entertaining stories illustrated through the objects, colors, textures, and layouts of their models. Everyone listened with enthusiasm to these visceral details that engaged the group visually and orally. The group members began to learn about each other by sharing these stories and bonded through common themes. Dr. June Thomas, president of ACSP and Professor of Urban Planning at the University of Michigan also participated and shared her favorite childhood memory with the students.

Many key themes emerged from the students' memories and they discovered that as children they had a deep relationship with other people and with the environment through physical activity. The participants, as children sought fun activities, intimacy, shelter, and explored and challenged their environment. Playing in parks, streets, and yards were popular locations and activities. One participant described falling face first into a sandpit from a swing as his favorite memory.

Place mattered for many of the participants such as playing on a Mexican street, exploring a vacant house, playing in the snow in Chicago or with autumn leaves in Berkeley.

Many of the participants' rich experiences were shaped by culture. As children, many Latinas played soccer with their family on weekends for example.

Through these activities participants were able to understand their connection to the built environment and were able to personalize the urban planning process based on their experiences and imagination. This approach gave everyone access to the exercise and validated their knowledge of the built environment.

The workshop provided the students with a simple methodology that many of them might think about implementing in their current practices and careers from their numerous comments. Using colorful objects to build participants' ideal childhood memory links art making and urban planning. A student interested in arts and urban planning commented "as an artist who is a firm advocate for creative expression in the built environment, I felt a very personal connection with the workshop. I've spent a majority of my academic career in defense of the importance of arts, as well as justifying why I'm going to school for something that "won't make a living." So many recognize the beauty in a piece of art, yet are completely oblivious to the most important part, which is the process. The workshop helps expose and legitimize the importance of creative expression in the built environment".

Through this activity, participants were able to see the greater design and planning potential within themselves and their colleagues. These

memories brought the students together to understand the power and beauty of diversity in solving urban issues. It also helped them see the link between their own culture and the built environment, which was crucial as we continued on our tour of LA.

The Latino tour of Los Angeles highlighted the built environment research of Professor Sandoval and James Rojas. People learn differently and the tour allowed the students to experience the methodology of Prof. Sandoval's and James Rojas' research first hand.

The tour took students to four transit oriented development stations in Latino neighborhoods: MacArthur Park (near downtown LA); Aliso Pico, El Mercado, and Mariachi Plaza in East Los Angeles. We exposed future planning PhD's to the power of cultural capital within the build environment by demonstrating to them how these TOD projects could be shaped to meet the cultural needs of Latino neighborhoods. All four projects had strong links to community engagement, activism, economic development, cultural preservation and linked to affordable housing projects.

The first leg of the tour explored Professor Sandoval's TOD research on affordable housing at MacArthur Park where he grew up as boy. The students walked through the park where Sandoval highlighted the park's transformation and revitalization and ended at the TOD site.

For the next leg of the tour East Los Angeles native James Rojas retraced his MIT thesis research on how Latinos transform the built environment through their social, cultural and economic practices. In the past 25 years, his research has been widely cited on studies related to Latino built environment, not only with academics but urban planners and community members.

The students were introduced to the reasons why Latinos make interventions to the built environment by visiting El Mercado, a Latino market, the Evergreen Cemetery Jogging Path, and the numerous murals throughout Boyle Heights. This was followed by a brief visit to new affordable housing redevelopment project in Aliso/Pico based on New Urbanist and Latino urbanism design principles. The tour ended

at the Mariachi Plaza kiosk where students had time to reflect on how culture shapes the built environment.