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The birth of 'infrastructural citizenship' in the United States

November 2 2015, by David Ruth

Workers rebuild gates in Courtlandt with the highway spur in the background.
Credit: Houston Metropolitan Research Center

In one of the first case studies to examine how neighborhoods with

different racial and economic makeups dealt with similar, unpopular highway construction projects in the 1970s, a researcher at Rice University's Kinder Institute for Urban Research found that affluent whites and working class blacks in two Houston neighborhoods used remarkably similar methods of political activism to lobby against the proposed changes to their communities.

"There was a specific and recognizable brand of activism that developed independently in these diverse communities that I identify as 'infrastructural citizenship,'" said study author Kyle Shelton, a postdoctoral research fellow at the Kinder Institute. "This brand of 1970s activism was encouraged by federal environmental laws, public meeting requirements, political representation and a growing interest in how cities could be shaped to facilitate new forms of urban living."

The paper, "Building a Better Houston: Highways, Neighborhoods and Infrastructural Citizenship," was published in the Journal of Urban History. Shelton looked closely at how the white and wealthy residents of Courtlandt Place in Houston's Montrose area and the predominately black and mostly lower-income residents of the city's Third Ward responded to two disruptive highway projects in the 1970s.

"The negative impacts of highway construction, particularly for African-American communities, in many American cities have been well-established," Shelton said. "What I wanted to do was add to that by also showing how other communities within central cities dealt with infrastructure and how residents of different racial and economic backgrounds dealt with and thought about either protesting or attempting to change the infrastructural outcomes that were occurring."

Courtlandt Place was confronted with the construction of the 527 Highway Spur and the transition from a once elite, single-family neighborhood to a community dotted with multifamily dwellings and

commercialization. The Third Ward had to deal with the widening of Interstate 45. The initial construction of I-45 had already damaged a segment of the community. In the 1970s the highway department aimed to widen the road to ease suburban commutes.

"The scale and nature of the threats to the two communities were different, but the actions of residents were strikingly similar," Shelton said. "To resist highway construction and its aftereffects, residents from both communities embraced a rhetoric and set of actions that turned their homes and streets into political tools."

During the infrastructural debates, residents staged protests, wrote letters and attended countless public meetings, according to Shelton. They organized historic preservation campaigns, lobbied city officials and paid for independent planning efforts. They argued that their homes and local streets should be held in the same esteem as regional roadways and downtown redevelopments. With each action, the residents used infrastructural debates to assert their rights as citizens and worked to change the civic decision-making process.

While the two sets of Houstonian neighborhoods shared a common desire to protect their communities and followed common strategies, Courtlandters and Third-Warders experienced far different starting points and results.

"It is undeniable that the efficacy of activism was inherently circumscribed by the class and race of those who employed it," Shelton said. "The residents of Courtlandt Place, who were wealthy, politically connected and white, had an easier time of broadcasting and implementing demands than the poorer, black residents of Houston's Third Ward."

Shelton points out the construction problems Courtlandt residents faced

were far less disruptive than those confronting the Third Ward.

"While imbalances in racial and economic power of the two sets of actors involved definitively shaped the outcomes of the fights in the two neighborhoods, the common language and action residents claimed through assertions of infrastructural citizenship allowed them to attempt to protect their communities and to participate in the planning of the city's future," Shelton said.

Ultimately, the Courtlandt residents possessed the economic means to purchase their street from the city of Houston and provide for its upkeep. They also possessed the time, expertise and resources that allowed them to successfully pursue the creation of a historic district. In the end, Courtlandters lost their front gate. In contrast, road construction disrupted the Third Ward twice within a decade, dispersing residents, sapping resources and disrupting community organization that might have fought the new roadway, which was built.

"The omission of infrastructural debates from our shared political consciousness belies the importance of these fights to determining the shape of our cities," Shelton said. "I challenge the notion that infrastructural debates are a minor aspect of urban politics and life. Instead, I argue that since World War II, opposition to the planning, construction and use of infrastructural networks has been among the more contentious and formative debates within our cities and will remain so as our cities continue to evolve."

Shelton has also written "How Communities Leverage the Power of 'infrastructural citizenship'" for the Kinder Institute's Urban Edge blog.

Provided by Rice University

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