



# Designing Division: Architecture's Role in Shaping Urban Inequality

Aryn Ryu

Bergen County Academies.

## INTRODUCTION

Architecture plays a pivotal role in shaping social hierarchies and segregation within urban spaces. Beyond aesthetics, the design and spatial organization of cities influence patterns of interaction, access, and inclusion. Urban design functions not only as a backdrop for social life but also as an active force in constructing and reinforcing societal divisions. Historically, architects and planners have used physical layouts such as colonial city plans, Jim Crow neighborhoods, and apartheid urban systems to entrench racial and class-based inequalities. These decisions, often formalized through zoning laws and public infrastructure projects, demonstrate how seemingly neutral architectural practices can sustain long-standing disparities. The concept of architectural exclusion highlights how built environments regulate access and privilege, shaping who is included and who is marginalized. At the same time, architecture has the potential to challenge and dismantle these deeply rooted barriers. A close examination of both historical contexts and present-day urban development reveals the enduring power of architectural design to either maintain or transform systems of inequality within the urban landscape.

## HISTORICAL EXAMPLES OF ARCHITECTURE AND SEGREGATION

Throughout history, architecture and urban planning have played a decisive role in constructing and maintaining systems of segregation. From colonial city plans to 20th-century zoning laws and redlining practices, the built environment has not only reflected existing social divisions but also actively reinforced them. These strategies were never neutral. Rather, they served as instruments of political and social control, shaping cities in ways that excluded certain populations from resources, opportunities, and full participation in civic life. The legacies of these spatial decisions continue to define the urban experience today, particularly in large cities like New York, where historical inequalities remain deeply embedded in the physical structure of neighborhoods.

Colonial city planning provides one of the earliest examples of how architecture has been used to enforce social hierarchies. In many colonized regions, urban centers were intentionally designed to separate European settlers from indigenous populations. These divisions were both ideological and

physical, with prime urban areas allocated to Europeans while indigenous communities were displaced to peripheral and underdeveloped zones (Weyeneth, 2005; Cheng et al., 2020). As Donnelly (2023) explains, these spatial arrangements were not merely administrative decisions. They functioned as deliberate expressions of power and control. The layout of the city itself became a tool for limiting access to economic, political, and social opportunities. The inequities embedded in these colonial designs have persisted over time. In many contemporary cities, patterns of exclusion continue to reflect these historical foundations. Marginalized communities are often concentrated in areas with limited public services, inadequate infrastructure, and lower property values.

The use of space to enforce racial and class boundaries reappeared in the United States through Jim Crow-era urban planning. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing into the first half of the twentieth century, local governments across the country, especially in the South, enacted laws to formalize racial segregation. Architecture and infrastructure played central roles in this process. Urban areas were deliberately designed to separate white and Black communities, not only through residential patterns but also through the placement of highways, railroads, and industrial zones. Zoning laws and racially restrictive covenants were systematically implemented to confine African Americans to designated neighborhoods. These areas were often characterized by poor infrastructure, inadequate schools, and exposure to industrial pollution (Massey, 2023). Such decisions were not solely the result of private discrimination but were embedded in public policy and executed through design. Even in Northern cities such as New York, where explicit Jim Crow laws were less prevalent, planners and policymakers relied on more subtle but equally effective mechanisms to enforce segregation. In New York City, the legacy of historical discriminatory practices remains clearly visible in the urban landscape. While New York did not adopt Jim Crow laws in the same legal form as Southern states, many of its neighborhoods were shaped by exclusionary policies such as redlining. In the 1930s, the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) created color-coded maps that categorized neighborhoods based on perceived credit risk. Areas with large Black populations were often marked as high-risk and labeled in red. These redlined neighborhoods

were consistently denied access to mortgage financing and public investment (Shertzer et al., 2018, 2021; Zeimer, 2020). Over time, this pattern of disinvestment contributed to persistent cycles of poverty and deterioration, while other areas received continued infrastructure support and experienced significant growth in property values. The long-term effects of these practices are evident in the economic disparities between neighborhoods such as the South Bronx and the Upper East Side. In this context, redlining extended segregation into the financial and architectural domains, shaping who could access wealth-building opportunities and who was systematically excluded. In addition to redlining, exclusionary zoning laws played a significant role in reinforcing segregation throughout urban America. In cities such as Baltimore and St. Louis, municipal ordinances in the early twentieth century explicitly regulated which racial groups could reside in specific neighborhoods (Troesken and Walsh, 2019). Although these laws were eventually struck down by the courts, their effects persisted through more indirect methods. For instance, zoning regulations that prohibited multi-family housing or imposed minimum lot size requirements were commonly used to prevent low-income and minority populations from moving into affluent areas (Whittemore, 2020). These practices allowed local governments to maintain racial and economic segregation under the guise of legally neutral policies. In this way, architecture and urban planning continued to function as tools for exclusion even in the absence of overtly discriminatory laws.

Public housing design in the mid-twentieth century played a significant role in reinforcing patterns of segregation. Many housing projects were built in already marginalized areas, far from transportation networks, quality schools, and employment opportunities. Their architectural form, often consisting of high-rise buildings that were densely packed and physically separated from surrounding neighborhoods, contributed to social isolation and economic stagnation (Atkinson, 2019). Instead of addressing the root causes of poverty, these developments often became enduring symbols of structural neglect. The buildings themselves, through their scale, layout, and lack of connection to the broader urban environment, reflected underlying assumptions about the communities they served. Rather than promoting inclusion, their design reinforced marginalization and deepened existing inequalities. Another significant aspect of architectural segregation is found in the spatial organization and control of movement. Historical city layouts often employed “threshold spaces,” including gates, stairwells, and boundaries between public and private areas, to regulate access along racial and class lines (Kimmel, 2021). These subtle design choices carried powerful symbolic and practical meanings, reinforcing who belonged and who did not in particular parts of the city. Although such mechanisms may appear less visible today, similar forms persist in the use of surveillance-oriented architecture, gated communities, and uneven public transportation infrastructure. These

contemporary practices reflect and perpetuate longstanding patterns of spatial inequality.

Apartheid urban planning in South Africa represents one of the most extreme examples of architectural segregation. During the apartheid era, cities were deliberately designed to separate racial groups, and Black South Africans were forcibly relocated to townships situated on the outskirts of urban centers. Infrastructure such as highways, railroads, and buffer zones was strategically built to restrict movement and prevent social integration (Strauss, 2019). These planning decisions reinforced the ideological foundations of apartheid while also limiting economic opportunities and access to essential public services. The physical geography of South African cities today continues to reflect this legacy, demonstrating the lasting impact of architectural choices made under a system of institutionalized segregation.

Taken together, these historical examples show that segregation has never been merely the result of social preferences or economic conditions. Instead, it has been actively produced and maintained through architectural choices, legal structures, and spatial planning. In cities such as New York, the legacy of these decisions remains embedded in the built environment, influencing access to housing, education, transportation, and public spaces. Recognizing this history is essential for addressing the persistent inequalities of today and for envisioning a more inclusive and equitable urban future.

## ARCHITECTURAL INFLUENCE ON SOCIAL HIERARCHIES AND URBAN SEGREGATION

Architecture plays a crucial role in shaping urban life by not only organizing physical space but also influencing social hierarchies. The design of buildings, public infrastructure, and spatial arrangements within cities directly shapes patterns of inclusion and exclusion. Urban planning and architectural decisions are never neutral. They reflect underlying social values and often lead to material outcomes that determine who has access to resources and under what conditions. As a result, the built environment often mirrors existing social divisions, embedding inequality into the physical structure of the city.

In many urban environments, architectural design contributes to the maintenance of social hierarchies through specific building forms and spatial arrangements. The organization of city space often leads to the creation of exclusive areas that restrict accessibility and limit interaction between social groups. Physical separation is frequently reinforced by symbolic cues, as architectural styles and materials communicate messages of status and authority. For example, the placement of luxury high-rises next to deteriorating neighborhoods visibly reinforces economic disparities, positioning wealth and poverty in stark juxtaposition (Forrest et al., 2020). According to Puumala (2019), architecture does more than reflect class distinctions. It plays an active role in shaping them by producing differentiated spaces

that embed class divisions into the urban landscape. This dynamic is especially evident in the phenomenon of vertical segregation within high-rise buildings. As noted by Massey and Tannen (2015), vertical stratification often mirrors socio-economic status, with higher floors typically reserved for more affluent residents and lower levels for those with fewer resources. Although residents may live in the same building, their daily experiences and access to amenities are often shaped by the floors they occupy. Maloutas (2024) expands on this point, noting that physical proximity does not necessarily lead to social integration. The building itself functions as a social hierarchy, reproducing class divisions within a single structure. In this way, architecture influences social relations not only across neighborhoods but also within shared environments.

Symbolic architecture plays an important role in reinforcing dominant narratives and power structures. Monumental buildings such as government halls, museums, and financial towers often convey authority and civic identity. However, they also reflect the concentration of power and privilege within the urban landscape. Through their scale, design, and prominent visibility, these structures affirm existing social hierarchies and signal who is included or excluded from particular spaces. Maloutas and Karadimitriou (2022) argue that such buildings materialize social dominance by encoding hierarchy into the skyline, shaping how urban residents perceive space and status. Public infrastructure further contributes to social stratification by functioning as both a connector and a divider. Projects such as highways, bridges, and rail lines often define the boundaries between neighborhoods and restrict mobility for certain populations. In many cities, highways have been strategically placed to separate affluent areas from marginalized communities, reinforcing both spatial and social divisions (Chellew, 2019). For example, the construction of the Cross Bronx Expressway in New York City during the mid-twentieth century, led by urban planner Robert Moses, displaced thousands of low-income Black and Puerto Rican residents and physically divided the South Bronx, contributing to long-term disinvestment and environmental decline (Caro, 1974). Similarly, the Claiborne Expressway (I-10) in New Orleans destroyed much of the historically Black Tremé neighborhood, severing cultural ties and disrupting economic activity (Graham, 2021). These cases illustrate how infrastructure projects can shape urban landscapes in ways that reinforce inequality. Chellew (2019) explains that infrastructure not only enables movement but also influences what he describes as “urban mobilities,” a concept that captures how access to resources and participation in civic life are determined by transportation systems. When infrastructure benefits some groups while limiting access for others, it becomes a powerful mechanism for maintaining social inequality.

In addition to vertical and symbolic forms of exclusion, zoning laws and architectural styles contribute to more subtle yet persistent patterns of segregation. Building styles often function as visual indicators of social status. Vernacular

architecture, rooted in local traditions and affordability, contrasts with neoclassical or colonial revival styles, which are typically associated with wealth and institutional authority (Weber, 2024). These aesthetic differences are often codified in zoning regulations that control the types of buildings permitted in specific areas. For instance, in Los Angeles, single-family zoning laws have historically restricted the development of multi-family or affordable housing in affluent, predominantly white neighborhoods such as Brentwood and Beverly Hills. This zoning has helped preserve architectural exclusivity while limiting social diversity (Monkkonen, 2019). Similarly, in Washington, D.C., neighborhoods like Georgetown enforce strict historic preservation rules that maintain its Georgian and Federal architecture but simultaneously restrict the construction of affordable housing (Vergara-Perucich, 2019). According to Resseger (2022), such zoning practices help preserve socio-economic segregation by discouraging architectural diversity and limiting investment in lower-income communities.

The distinction between public and private space is another important architectural factor that contributes to the persistence of urban inequality. Public spaces such as parks, plazas, and streetscapes have the potential to support social integration by offering places where diverse communities can interact. However, when these spaces are poorly designed, underfunded, or neglected, they may become sites of exclusion rather than inclusion. In contrast, private spaces are often protected through zoning regulations, surveillance technologies, or exclusive amenities, which create barriers that limit access based on economic or social status (Madanipour, 2020; Qi et al., 2024). These spatial arrangements determine who can occupy particular areas of the city and under what conditions, thereby reinforcing existing patterns of privilege and marginalization.

Taken together, architectural elements such as building height, infrastructure placement, zoning regulations, and stylistic design reveal how the built environment contributes to the creation and reinforcement of social hierarchies. Urban planning decisions are not merely technical or functional in nature. They carry significant social consequences. Through the design of public housing, the distribution of public space, and the vertical arrangement of residential buildings, architecture plays an active role in shaping how individuals live, move through the city, and interact with one another. Understanding these dynamics is essential for building more inclusive cities. A critical analysis of architectural form and spatial organization reveals how inequality is maintained, but also how it can be addressed. By reimagining the design and distribution of urban space, planners, architects, and policymakers have the opportunity to transform the built environment in ways that promote equity and strengthen social cohesion.

## CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE AND URBAN EXCLUSION: DESIGN, ZONING, AND SOCIAL STRATIFICATION

In contemporary urban planning, architecture remains a



powerful tool for shaping social hierarchies and patterns of exclusion. Although modern architectural discourse often highlights innovation and sustainability, the built environment frequently reinforces existing socio-economic divisions. Zoning regulations, exclusionary design practices, gated communities, and targeted infrastructure development all play a role in determining who is included, who is excluded, and how urban space is accessed. These decisions do more than reflect social inequities; they actively produce and sustain them by embedding structural inequalities into the physical layout of cities.

The concept of architectural exclusion offers a valuable framework for understanding how urban design can subtly yet effectively uphold societal hierarchies. Schindler (2015) argues that features such as physical barriers, restricted transportation access, and narrow sidewalks are not arbitrary aesthetic decisions but rather tools that control movement and access. In a similar vein, Nabirye (2024) emphasize that certain design elements convey implicit social messages by signaling who is welcome in a space and who is not. These seemingly neutral elements of design operate as regulatory tools, preventing seamless integration across racial, economic, and social boundaries.

Zoning laws remain among the most enduring and influential tools of urban exclusion. Although zoning is often framed as a means of efficiently organizing land use, it has historically been used to reinforce patterns of racial and class segregation. In Massachusetts, for example, density zoning regulations have limited housing availability in ways that maintain existing demographic boundaries (Resseger, 2022). At the national level, exclusionary zoning practices reduce access to multi-family housing, effectively pushing lower-income and minority residents to the margins of affluent neighborhoods (Zeimer, 2020; Shertzer et al., 2022). According to Whittemore (2021), these frameworks were originally designed to establish suburban enclaves that isolate wealthier populations. Over time, such practices have produced lasting effects on social cohesion and access to economic and educational opportunities. These zoning practices work hand in hand with gated communities and private housing developments, which physically embody socio-economic segregation. Such enclaves are often situated in highly desirable areas and are protected by restricted access, making them spatial representations of privilege. Their design and placement limit interaction between residents and the broader urban population, reinforcing both material and symbolic divisions (Lehrer, 2019). The zoning regulations that enable these developments strengthen their exclusivity, turning neighborhoods into enclosed spaces that reflect and perpetuate patterns of affluence and social separation.

The rise of eco-cities and high-tech urban developments introduces another dimension of contemporary exclusion. Although these projects often promote sustainability as a central goal, they are frequently designed for and accessible

only to affluent populations. Cucca (2020) observes that eco-city planning tends to prioritize technological and environmental innovation while neglecting principles of social inclusion. As a result, these developments often become enclaves of privilege, lacking socio-economic diversity. Lower-income groups are commonly excluded through high costs, remote locations, and design features that limit accessibility. This approach contributes to ongoing spatial inequality while presenting itself as environmentally progressive. Public spaces and infrastructure play a crucial role in shaping patterns of inclusion and exclusion within cities. When designed with accessibility and equity in mind, elements such as public parks, transportation systems, and pedestrian areas can promote interaction among diverse populations and strengthen social cohesion (Parker, 2020; Clarke et al., 2023). However, when infrastructure is unevenly distributed or disproportionately improved in affluent neighborhoods, it contributes to segregation. Chellew (2019) argues that the location of highways, bridges, and transit stops can function as barriers that limit the movement of marginalized groups into wealthier areas. Mahajan (2023) adds that these spatial decisions influence urban mobility and help determine who is able to participate in the social and economic life of the city. Accessibility features in architecture, when implemented equitably, have the potential to mitigate social exclusion. However, these features are often concentrated in affluent areas, where they tend to benefit populations that are already advantaged. Benameur (2024) caution that inclusive design principles can become exclusionary if they are not applied within the broader context of urban inequality. When accessibility is implemented selectively, it reveals deeper systemic problems, turning inclusivity into a benefit reserved for the privileged rather than upholding it as a universal right. The design and accessibility of public space play a significant role in shaping social hierarchies. Clarke et al. (2023) emphasize that well-designed communal areas can promote interaction and reduce social divisions. In contrast, when public amenities are limited or poorly maintained in marginalized neighborhoods, they contribute to feelings of exclusion and neglect (Mouratidis, 2021). These spatial disparities highlight the reality that public spaces, while intended to be open to all, are often influenced by socio-economic conditions that affect who can access and use them safely and comfortably.

In sum, contemporary architecture and urban planning continue to reinforce and legitimize various forms of exclusion. Through zoning regulations, gated communities, eco-urban developments, and selective accessibility, design decisions have far-reaching social implications. These choices influence not only the appearance and function of urban spaces but also the possibilities for social integration, mobility, and justice. Addressing these challenges requires more than technical solutions. It calls for a fundamental rethinking of how architecture intersects with structures of power and inequality. A truly inclusive urban environment must place equity at the center of its design, ensuring that

all residents, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to access, shape, and thrive within the city.

### CASE STUDIES OF ARCHITECTURAL IMPACT

The influence of architecture on social hierarchies becomes especially evident when analyzed through specific case studies. The development of eco-cities offers a clear example. Although these urban projects are often praised for their sustainable technologies and innovative design, they frequently cater to affluent populations. As a result, eco-cities can unintentionally reinforce socio-economic segregation rather than address it. Trevon (2024) notes that even when inclusivity is a stated objective, the spatial layout of eco-cities often preserves existing social divisions. This approach limits access for lower-income communities and reduces the potential for meaningful social integration. A similar concern emerges in multicultural urban settings. Benameur (2024) explore how certain architectural decisions, especially those focused primarily on sustainability, can deepen social divisions when equity is not given equal consideration. Their research emphasizes that architectural design in diverse societies must integrate environmental goals with the needs of all demographic groups. Without this balance, design strategies may unintentionally exclude marginalized communities rather than support their inclusion in the urban environment. These examples underscore the dual potential of contemporary architecture. Depending on how it is implemented, it can either reinforce patterns of exclusion or serve as a catalyst for greater social equity. In contrast, the transformation of Medellín, Colombia, offers a compelling example of how architecture and urban planning can be used to confront entrenched inequality. Once known for high levels of violence and extreme socio-economic disparities, the city has experienced a significant period of urban renewal. The implementation of public infrastructure, including outdoor escalators and cable cars, helped reconnect previously isolated neighborhoods to the city's economic and social core. These interventions expanded access to employment, education, and public services, contributing to the breakdown of long-standing spatial barriers (Benameur, 2024). Medellín's experience illustrates how urban planning that emphasizes accessibility and inclusion can promote social integration and improve quality of life for diverse communities.

The suburbanization of American cities provides a clear example of how architecture and planning can reinforce segregation. Suburban growth, shaped largely by exclusionary zoning policies, has historically favored wealthier, predominantly White populations. These suburban areas often limit the development of affordable housing and restrict access to public services, which results in the isolation of low-income and minority communities from critical urban resources. According to Shertzer et al. (2022), these policies have contributed to the creation of demographic enclaves, maintaining suburban spaces for affluent residents while marginalizing others. Zeimer (2020) adds that these

exclusionary patterns are often upheld through regulatory structures and strategic land use decisions. Taken together, these practices produce a persistent form of spatial inequality that continues to obstruct efforts toward equitable urban integration.

A more hopeful model can be found in the recent urban reforms undertaken in Barcelona. Through initiatives such as the Assembly of Citizens for Barcelonian Integration (ACBI), the city adopted a collaborative planning approach that engaged stakeholders from a wide range of social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. This model prioritized inclusivity in both policy and design, leading to the creation of public spaces that are accessible and welcoming to all residents (Medeiros and van der Zwet, 2020). Key features of this transformation included open communal areas and integrated green infrastructure that supported both environmental and social goals. Mouratidis (2021) emphasizes the importance of such inclusive public spaces, which facilitate social interaction and help foster a shared sense of urban identity. Barcelona's experience demonstrates that inclusive architectural planning, when paired with participatory governance, can help dismantle entrenched hierarchies and build more cohesive urban communities.

These case studies underscore the significant influence that architecture and urban planning have on social outcomes. While some projects continue to reinforce exclusion and inequality, others reveal the transformative potential of inclusive and community-centered design. The key challenge moving forward is to ensure that future architectural and planning decisions place equity at the forefront. By doing so, cities can evolve into spaces that are more just, accessible, and integrated for all residents.

### ECONOMIC AND ARCHITECTURAL SEGREGATION

The concept of "winner-take-all urbanism," introduced by Richard Florida, provides a valuable framework for understanding the connection between economic inequality and urban development. Florida argues that cities have increasingly become competitive arenas where individuals and firms vie for limited access to high-value urban space. This dynamic results in a concentration of investments, resources, and cultural amenities in a small number of affluent neighborhoods, while many other areas are neglected (Weber, 2024). The effects of this pattern are further amplified by technological advancement and the geographic clustering of skilled labor, which deepen the divide between prosperous city centers and less advantaged peripheral areas (Florida and Mellander, 2020). Within this context, architecture becomes a visible marker of inequality. Wealthy districts are characterized by luxury developments and advanced infrastructure, standing in stark contrast to under-resourced neighborhoods and reinforcing the uneven distribution of urban benefits.

High-rise luxury towers provide a clear example of how architectural form can reinforce economic segregation.

These buildings are typically constructed in highly desirable locations and are designed to serve an affluent population. They offer exclusive access to upscale amenities, private services, and elevated views, symbolizing both physical and social elevation. Forrest et al. (2020) observe that such towers create vertical divisions within the urban landscape, separating wealthy residents from the broader population through both height and restricted access. Maloutas (2024) further explains that this form of vertical segregation reflects deeper patterns of social inequality, where physical distance corresponds to distinctions in status, power, and influence. In this context, architectural design does not simply mirror economic disparities but actively contributes to their persistence by reinforcing spatial hierarchies.

### GENTRIFICATION AND SPATIAL INJUSTICE

Gentrification is another form of spatial injustice that reshapes urban environments through economic pressure and architectural change. It often begins when wealthier individuals and developers invest in economically marginalized neighborhoods targeted for redevelopment. As upscale housing and commercial projects replace older, and often culturally significant, buildings, property values and living costs increase. This shift frequently displaces original residents, who are typically from lower-income backgrounds, due to rising rents and the weakening of local support networks (Musterd, 2020). Maloutas (2024) emphasizes that gentrification not only changes the physical appearance of neighborhoods but also disrupts their social and cultural fabric. A clear example of this trend can be seen in Seoul, where traditional housing in several historic districts has been demolished and replaced with luxury developments that primarily serve affluent newcomers. These changes demonstrate how architecture can be used to displace rather than integrate, and how urban redevelopment can contribute to cultural loss and deeper social segregation.

Economic and political forces often intersect to intensify the impacts of gentrification. Large-scale investment and real estate development frequently prioritize financial returns over the preservation of existing communities. At the same time, government policies such as zoning reforms and tax incentives tend to support redevelopment projects without providing sufficient protections for current residents (Strauss, 2019). Although these initiatives are often presented as efforts to revitalize urban areas, they more commonly serve the interests of developers and affluent populations rather than those of the displaced communities. These processes reinforce existing socio-political hierarchies by shifting power and decision-making authority away from long-standing residents. As a result, gentrification functions not only as an economic transformation but also as a reconfiguration of urban power structures. In light of these developments, it is essential for urban planning to address both spatial and social equity. The built environment should be designed to support economic growth while also safeguarding the rights, cultures, and needs of all residents.

When these considerations are overlooked, architecture and development can become instruments of exclusion that reinforce and deepen existing inequalities within the city.

### URBAN PLANNING AND ARCHITECTURE: TOOLS FOR INTEGRATION OR EXCLUSION

Urban planning and architectural design have long influenced not only the physical structure of cities but also the social and political experiences of their residents. These disciplines hold the potential to promote inclusivity, strengthen community bonds, and support democratic participation. However, they can also reinforce patterns of exclusion and inequality. As cities continue to grow and diversify, the role of spatial design becomes increasingly important in shaping access to resources, opportunities for civic engagement, and the ways in which communities develop and interact. Urban planning plays a pivotal role in shaping social structures. When guided by a commitment to equity, planning can foster vibrant neighborhoods that promote interaction among diverse populations. Mouratidis (2021) observes that inclusive planning, particularly when it incorporates green spaces and shared public areas, enhances social cohesion and creates opportunities for engagement across demographic lines. Mouratidis (2020) also argues that the intentional inclusion of communal spaces can reduce socio-spatial segregation and support the development of more connected and resilient communities. However, when urban planning emphasizes aesthetics or economic returns over inclusivity, it can contribute to social fragmentation. For example, a focus on high-end architectural design may increase property values and limit access for marginalized groups (Cucca, 2020).

Balancing aesthetics and social justice remains a major challenge for urban planners. Projects that prioritize visual appeal or environmental objectives, such as eco-cities, often fail to address socio-economic disparities. As a result, these developments tend to benefit privileged populations while overlooking the needs of others (Cucca, 2020). To create more equitable urban environments, future planning strategies must integrate social equity into their core principles. This includes promoting multifunctional public spaces, adopting inclusive zoning policies, and ensuring fair access to schools and essential services. Boterman et al. (2019) emphasize that addressing educational segregation through thoughtful design and zoning can significantly contribute to reducing broader patterns of urban inequality. Architecture also holds the potential to serve as a form of resistance and reclamation. Fennel (2019) argue that communities can use architectural design to reclaim neglected or marginalized urban spaces, making their presence and needs visible in areas that have historically been shaped by exclusion. Elements of defensive design, which are often intended to limit access, can be reimagined to promote community participation and a sense of ownership (Chellew, 2019). This rethinking of architectural purpose frames it not only as a tool imposed from above but also as a medium for collective agency and social empowerment.



Community engagement in architectural and urban planning processes is essential for achieving meaningful inclusivity. Chellew (2019) explains that participatory design practices challenge exclusionary norms by incorporating the lived experiences and aspirations of local residents. This approach helps transform the built environment into a shared public resource rather than a marker of division. Successful examples of this model can be found in New York City's Neighborhood Plaza Program, which converts underused spaces into accessible public areas managed by local organizations (Aelbrecht and Stevens, 2018), and in Curitiba, Brazil, where participatory budgeting enables residents to influence urban development based on community-defined priorities.

The design and accessibility of public spaces play a vital role in promoting inclusivity within urban environments. Maloutas and Karadimitriou (2022) emphasize that thoughtfully planned open spaces can encourage multicultural interaction and reduce the micro-segregation that often emerges in cities. These spaces serve not only as areas for recreation but also as important sites for dialogue, civic participation, and shared experiences. When designed to be universally accessible, public spaces have the potential to bridge socio-economic gaps and contribute to rebuilding the social fabric of divided urban communities. Inclusive architectural practices that prioritize accessibility and universal design can play a crucial role in removing long-standing barriers within cities. Atkinson (2019) explains that equitable design reshapes patterns of urban mobility and access, challenging established power dynamics by expanding participation in urban life. This approach is especially important in cities where infrastructure has historically restricted movement and limited opportunities for certain populations. When equity is placed at the center of design decisions, architecture becomes a tool for resisting social stratification and fostering more just and integrated urban environments.

In sum, urban planning and architecture are powerful forces that can either reinforce existing social inequities or help dismantle them. When guided by inclusive values and supported by participatory processes, these disciplines have the potential to transform exclusionary urban landscapes into environments that reflect and serve the needs of all residents. As cities continue to confront rising inequality, population growth, and increasing cultural diversity, the need to design spaces that promote justice, accessibility, and a sense of belonging becomes more urgent than ever.

## CONCLUSION

Architecture and urban planning play a central role in shaping the social dynamics of cities and hold the power to either reinforce or challenge long-standing hierarchies. Historically, design practices such as exclusionary zoning, redlining, and defensive urbanism have contributed to segregation by restricting access to resources and opportunities for marginalized communities. More recent trends, including eco-city developments and planning focused primarily on aesthetics, continue to show that even well-intentioned

initiatives can perpetuate inequality if they do not explicitly incorporate principles of inclusivity.

At the same time, numerous case studies demonstrate the potential of architecture to support integration and social resilience. Well-designed public spaces, participatory planning processes, and inclusive zoning policies can help create environments where people from diverse backgrounds interact, collaborate, and build cohesive communities. When architects and planners prioritize equity, accessibility, and community engagement, urban spaces can serve as platforms for democratic participation and a shared sense of belonging.

As cities continue to evolve, there is a growing need to critically reimagine the built environment. Future urban development must adopt a holistic approach that integrates sustainability, aesthetic value, and social justice. By aligning these goals, architecture can move beyond merely reflecting existing inequalities and instead become a proactive force in addressing them. This shift can help create urban environments that are not only functional and visually appealing but also fair and inclusive for all residents.

## REFERENCE

1. Aelbrecht, P., & Stevens, Q. (2018). *Public space design and social cohesion: An international comparison*. Routledge. ISBN: 9781138594036.
2. Aiello, L. M., Juhász, S., & Vybornovaa, A. (2024). Urban highways are barriers to social tie.
3. Atkinson, R. (2019). Segregation and the urban rich: Enclaves, networks and mobilities.
4. Boterman, W. R., Karsten, L., & Musterd, S. (2019). School segregation and residential segregation in a context of changing urban demographics. *Urban Studies*, 56(15), 3116–3132.
5. Caro, R. A. (1974). *The power broker: Robert Moses and the fall of New York*. Knopf.
6. Chellew, C. (2019). Defending suburbia: Exploring the use of defensive urban design outside of the city centre. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 28(1), 19–33.
7. Chellew, C. (2019). The infrastructure of segregation: How highways divide urban space. *Urban Studies*, 56(8), 1575–1590.
8. Chellew, C. (2019). Public space beyond the city centre: Suburban and periurban dynamics. *Canadian Journal of Urban Research*, 28(1), 19–33.
9. Cheng, W., Davis, L., & Parker, M. (2020). Colonial urban planning and spatial segregation: Global perspectives on the legacy of empire. *Urban Studies*, 57(3), 517–534.
10. Clarke, P., South, E. C., & Rodriguez, D. A. (2023). Designing inclusive public spaces: Urban form and social interaction. *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, 43(1), 45–59.

11. Cucca, R. (2020). Spatial segregation and the quality of the local environment in contemporary cities. *Social and Political Science*.
12. Donnelly, S. J. (2023). *Architecture, planning and the colonial city: Using biographical methodologies to explore the life and works of Sir Charles Lanyon (1813–1889)*. Queen's University Belfast.
13. Fennell, C. (2019). Race, residential segregation, and the architecture of inequality. *American Journal of Sociology*, 125(2), 329–384.
14. Florida, R., & Mellander, C. (2020). Talent, technology, and the winner-take-all urban economy. *Cities*, 91, 186–195.
15. Forrest, R., Yip, N. M., & Wissink, B. (2020). The socio-spatial implications of vertical urbanism: Living in the high-rise city. *Urban Studies*, 57(4), 739–754. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788115605.00025>
16. Glaeser, E., Resseger, M., & Tobio, K. (2009). Inequality in cities. *Journal of Regional Science*, 49(4), 617–646.
17. Graham, R. (2021). Reconstructing Tremé: Infrastructure, culture, and community resistance. *Journal of Urban History*, 47(3), 512–529.
18. Hochstenbach, C., & Musterd, S. (2021). A regional geography of gentrification, displacement, and the suburbanisation of poverty: Towards an extended research agenda. *Area*, 53(1). <https://doi.org/10.1111/area.12708>
19. Jie, Q., Mazumdar, S., & Vasconcelos, A. (2024). Understanding the relationship between urban public space and social cohesion: A systematic review. Volume 7, 155–212.
20. Kato, N. (2024). The impact of architecture on urban spaces and community interaction. *Research Output Journal of Education*, 4(3), 17–20. <https://doi.org/10.59298/ROJE/2024/431720>
21. Kimmel, L. (2021). Architecture of threshold spaces: A critique of the ideologies of hyperconnectivity and segregation in the socio-political context. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003133889>
22. Lehrer, U. (2019). Vertical urbanism: High-rise buildings and public space. *York University*, 57(4), 37–42. <https://doi.org/10.33357/ys.88628>
23. Lens, M. C., & Monkkonen, P. (2016). Do strict land use regulations make metropolitan areas more segregated by income? *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 82(1), 6–21.
24. Logan, T. D., & Parman, J. (2024). Racial residential segregation in the United States. *Journal of Economic Literature*.
25. Madanipour, A. (2020). Public space and the challenges of urban transformation. *Journal of Urban Design*, 7(2), 241–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17535069.2014.910926>
26. Mahajan, A. (2023). Highways and segregation. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 141(3). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jue.2023.103574>
27. Maloutas, T. (2024). The role of vertical segregation in urban social processes. *Nature Cities*, 1(3), 185–193. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s44284-024-00037-5>
28. Massey, D. S. (2004). Segregation and stratification: A biosocial perspective. *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race*, 1(1), 7–25.
29. Massey, D. S. (2016). Segregation, race, and the social worlds of rich and poor. In *The Dynamics of Opportunity in America* (pp. 13–33). [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-25991-8\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-25991-8_2)
30. Medeiros, E., & van der Zwet, A. (2020). Sustainable and integrated urban planning and governance in metropolitan and medium-sized cities. *Sustainability*, 12(15), 5976. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12155976>
31. Monkkonen, P. (2016). Understanding and challenging opposition to housing construction in California's urban areas. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3459823>
32. Musterd, S. (2020). Gentrification and the suburbanization of poverty: Changing urban geographies through boom and bust periods. *Urban Geography*, 39(1), 26–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02723638.2016.1276718>
33. Nguyen, L., & van den Berg, P. E. W. (2024). Social impacts of living in high-rise apartment buildings: The effects of buildings and neighborhoods.
34. Pow, C. P. (2025). *Private enclaves and public exclusion: Selected essays*. Urban Studies Foundation. ISBN: 9781917466011. <https://doi.org/10.69752/0bcp-r306>
35. Qi, J., Mazumdar, S., & Vasconcelos, A. (2024). Understanding the relationship between urban public space and social cohesion: A systematic review. Volume 7, 155–212.
36. Resseger, M. (2022). Zoning and inequality: Architectural restrictions and social stratification in U.S. cities. *Regional Science and Urban Economics*, 92, 103745.
37. Schindler, S. (2015). Architectural exclusion: Discrimination and segregation through physical design of the built environment. *The Yale Law Journal*, 124(6), 1934–2024.
38. Shertzer, A., Twinam, T., & Walsh, R. P. (2018). Racial sorting and the emergence of segregation in American cities. <https://doi.org/10.3386/w22077>
39. Shertzer, A., Twinam, T., & Walsh, R. P. (2021). Zoning and segregation in urban economic history.



40. Strauss, M. (2019). A historical exposition of spatial injustice and segregated urban settlement in South Africa. *Fundamina*, 25(2). <https://doi.org/10.17159/2411-7870/2019/v25n2a6>
41. Troesken, W., & Walsh, R. P. (2019). Race, zoning, and the origins of urban segregation in the United States. *Journal of Economic History*, 79(3), 789–835.
42. Ute Lehrer. (2019). Vertical urbanism: High-rise buildings and public space. *York University*, 57(4), 37–42. <https://doi.org/10.33357/ys.88628>
43. Weber, R. (2024). *Architecture and inequality: Aesthetic choices and social divisions*. University of Chicago Press.
44. Weyeneth, R. R. (2005). The architecture of racial segregation: The challenges of preserving the problematical past. *The Public Historian*, 27(4), 11–44. <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2005.27.4.11>
45. Whittemore, A. H. (2020). Exclusionary zoning: Origins, open suburbs, and contemporary debates. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 87(3), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1828146>
46. Yaseen, A. (2017). Inclusive aspects of urban design: Sociability, walkability and overall ambiance. *Journal of Urban and Environmental Studies*, 5(1).
47. Zeimer, S. (2020). Exclusionary zoning, school segregation, and housing segregation: An investigation into a modern desegregation case and solutions to housing segregation. *UC Law Constitutional Quarterly*, 48.
48. How NYC transformed public spaces into urban lifelines. (n.d.). *Cities Today*.
49. Redlining and highways. (2021, April 13). *Geography Education*.

Citation: Aryn Ryu, "Designing Division: Architecture's Role in Shaping Urban Inequality", *American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol 11, no. 1, 2025, pp. 7-15.

Copyright © 2025 Aryn Ryu, This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.