

On Race and Space

Urban sprawl, the outward development of metropolitan areas, relocates jobs and tax bases away from central cities and first-ring suburbs. University law professor John Powell believes people of color are disproportionately affected by sprawl and that such exclusion from opportunities is not new.

Legend has it that Daniel Boone was so averse to being hemmed in that when he saw the curl of smoke from a chimney four miles away, it was his cue to move on. He kept moving till he found a pass through the Cumberlands, creating a superhighway through which a century of American expansion flowed.

Residents of today's affluent suburbs may claim kinship with Boone. Like him, they picked up and moved away from the troubles of the city to start a new life. What critics call "sprawl," modern-day homesteaders see as an expression of the American dream, their manifest destiny to work hard, live well, and fan out.

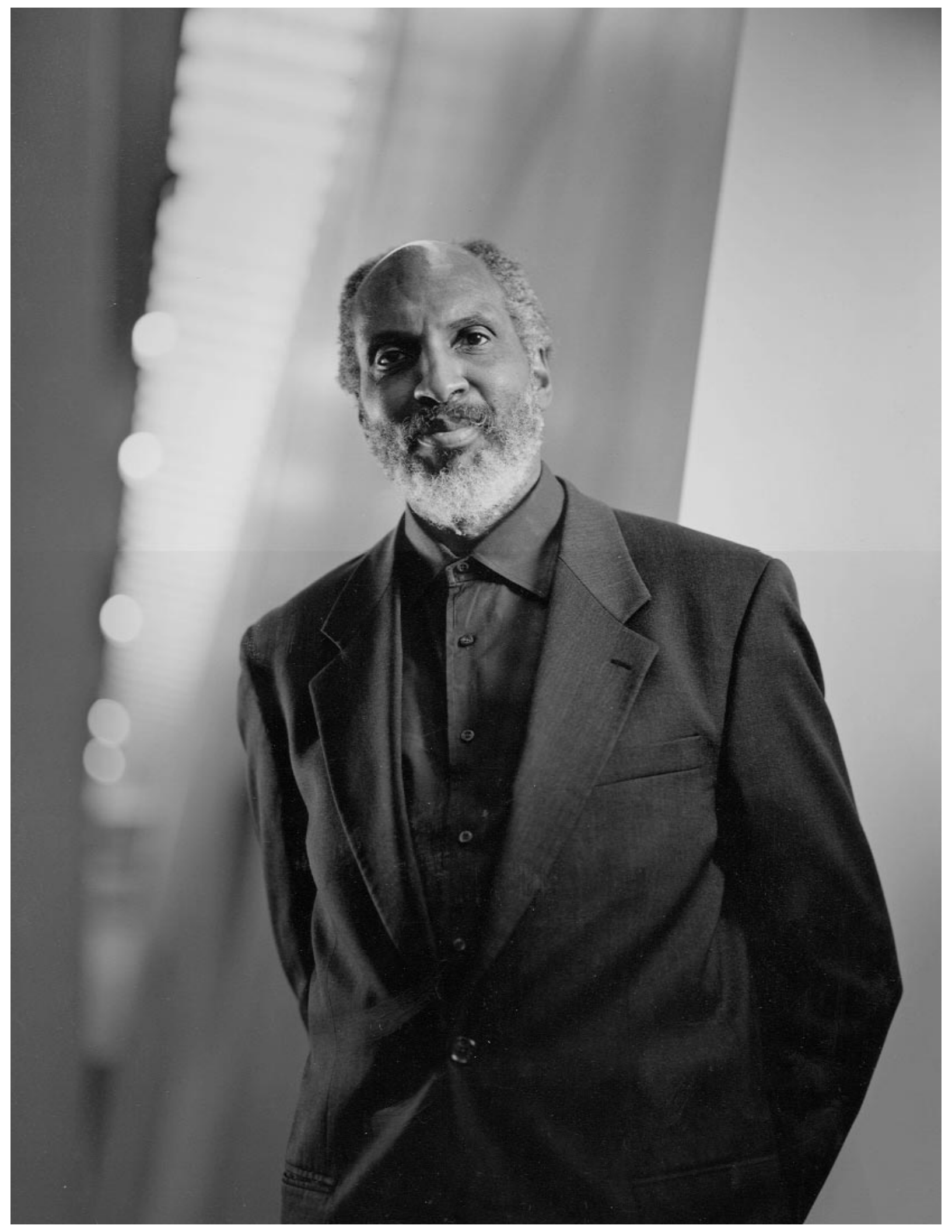
But what happens when one American dream, the freedom to move, collides with another, equal access to opportunity? An editorial writer for the National Center for Public Policy Research, a Washington, D.C., think tank devoted to conservatism and free-market economics, sums up one side of the debate: "The campaign against urban sprawl is perilously close to a campaign against the American dream."

But the University Law School's Institute on Race and Poverty (IRP) has been providing ammunition for the other side. "'Space' is how race plays out in American society—and the key to solving inequities in housing, transportation, education, and health care," says John Powell, founder and executive director of the institute and the Earl R. Larson Chair of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties Law at the University's Law School.

The question is, who's right? The free-market thinkers, or those who see sprawl as a kind of conspiracy to segregate? And does the story play out any differently in Minnesota's tolerant climate?

Powell makes a powerful claim about sprawl. From the first days, he says, back in the 1930s and '40s, the move to settle outside core cities was encouraged by the federal government, but black people never figured in these plans. "The effect has been to lock people who are not white out of access to opportunity. Sprawl," he says, "is the new face of Jim Crow."

BY MICHAEL FINLEY | PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK LUINENBURG



THE VISIBLE HAND

Former national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, Powell (who prefers the lower-case spelling of his name) was one of the first to suggest that a correlation exists between how space is allocated in the United States and how races are allocated within it.

In some metro areas, like Detroit, sprawl has created a devastating doughnut effect in which the inner city is an empty economic hole, with 40,000 abandoned homes, while the outer rings enjoy all the glaze and sprinkles.

In the Twin Cities, the trend is the same, although not as devastating. In 1970, 25 percent of all Twin Cities offices were located in suburbs. By 1993 that rose to 60 percent, meaning that that portion of metropolitan area jobs are simply out of reach for people who rely on public transportation, which is limited, or who, for whatever reason, can't find housing close to those jobs.

Zoning has a particularly killing effect on integration, says Powell, who won a Community Service Award in 2001 for contributions to improving the lives of people and communities of color by identifying barriers such as race, poverty, education and housing and working to overcome these barriers. A recent study of 10 Twin

“The overlying issue is fragmentation, the splintering of a metropolitan area into jurisdictions and distinct neighborhoods that some people can move into and other people cannot,” says John Powell. “The outward aspect of this movement seems at first glance like the natural result of free movement. But there is nothing natural about sprawl.”

Cities suburbs showed that zoning restrictions effectively exclude people needing affordable housing to settle there. For example, in areas zoned for single-family homes, all 10 communities required lot sizes larger than the state recommends. Four of the 10 suburbs required that each house have a two-car garage.

The 2000 census showed that only six suburbs out of 50 have more than 20 percent people of color living in them. Since developers seldom build houses close to the city for under \$300,000, white up-and-comers have to travel farther out each year to build. The outer ring reaches farther than ever. Where Eden Prairie and White Bear Lake were part of the outer ring 20 years ago, Annandale, Watertown, and Belle Plaine define the urban fringe today.

Suburban sprawl isn't the only way geography hints at how people feel about race and opportunity. It happens within cities, too, through the fragmentation of cities into poor and wealthy neighborhoods. But sprawl is so big and so obvious and its history so indisputable to Powell that he uses it as a lens to zero in on issues of justice.

Our system has designed metropolitan areas where the inner city and a few of the first-ring suburbs, like Minneapolis's Brooklyn Center, are the only options for the poor and nonwhite, and where upper-income people dominate outer-ring suburbs like Chaska and Wayzata or the upscale communities within the city, like Kenwood in Minneapolis and Crocus Hill in St. Paul.

To many people, this situation seems logical and even necessary,

that people of means will freely choose to live in the nicest areas, and people without means will be compelled to live where they can afford. Isn't that a free economy doing what free economies do?

Many developers, public officials, and members of the public take this view, and the IRP includes some of the worst expressions of it in its literature. “I don't buy into the ‘urban sprawl’ thing,” the IRP quotes a lobbyist for local builders. And, “What's the attraction of having affordable housing and mixing the races?” a resident opposed to integration asks.

Ted Mondale (B.A. '85), chairman of the Metropolitan Council, the regional planning agency serving the Twin Cities seven-county area, believes he is fighting the good fight against sprawl and is unafraid of rocking the jurisdictional boat. “Almost all the urban policies of the '40s through the '70s were disasters,” he says, referring to, among other things, the decline in mass transportation and the building of high-rises where low-income people are concentrated. “And we'll be spending the next 40 years undoing them.”

But Mondale resists the idea that race and space are linked. “Sprawl,” he says, “is a development pattern. It is not, inherently, a race policy.” He suggests that sprawl produces housing that

on the surface is affordable—by building way out there, where land prices are still low—“but it's often a false economy, once you add up extra travel costs and other externalities.”

Likewise, Larry Lee, a community development officer for the city of Bloomington, a Minneapolis suburb that has a better record than many on developing affordable housing, says that Powell's hypothesis is “controversial, for sure. The problem is, the concept of sprawl is not any single person or group's

idea. It's the result of a lot of different decisions by people looking to buy homes, by developers choosing where to build offices and stores, and bankers deciding where to invest their money. This theory suggests a conspiracy. But how can you have a conspiracy when all the decisions are being made on such an incremental basis?” In short, what kind of conspirators never meet one another?

But that's not how it works, Powell insists. In city after city, there is a clear correlation between race, wealth, and access to opportunity. Sprawl is less the consequence of a free economy, he says, than of a stacked deck. A suburban refuge for the few was not only conceived by the very visible hand of government, it has been financed from the beginning by all taxpayers, including the people left behind.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF SPRAWL

Eric Myott, a geographic information systems specialist for the IRP, says cities are more segregated today than they were a century ago. Back then, people did live in ethnic and income-based neighborhoods, but these neighborhoods closely abutted one another, as the Summit and Selby Avenue neighborhoods do in St. Paul. Today, we separate ourselves not by a single street or row of houses, but by miles and miles of space, and the barbed-wire equivalent of zoning and jurisdictional boundaries.

Most Americans don't realize, Powell says, that until the 1920s

there was no zoning in the United States. There were no “suburbs.” Cities simply grew by annexing outlying areas. U.S. President Herbert Hoover, elected on the basis of his managerial skills, was both an early proponent of zoning, then called “federal regionalism,” and a voice of caution. Hoover saw that the power of government to say what went where had potential for abuse—and specifically that separating people by jurisdiction poses problems of basic equity.

Some cities annexed everything—New York being the prime example, swallowing four boroughs to become what it is today. Albuquerque is an example of a city that preserved this power; it has no distinct suburbs. But Powell says that when the southern blacks migrated to northern cities in the 1920s, and began registering to vote, states suddenly saw the advantages of limiting cities’ annexation powers. Powell’s supposition: Annexation was an unassailable local power until there was a chance people of color could acquire political clout.

The federal government, Powell says, actually taught banks how to redline, in which the granting of loans and mortgages is refused in areas deemed a high financial risk. Feelings of segregation were so strong that for years it was considered a violation of professional ethics—not of equal treatment—for a Realtor to introduce blacks to a white neighborhood.

Powell actually enjoys studying documents from the 1920s through the ’40s, because the records of that period are so forthright about their intention to keep black people in the city, while inviting white people to create their own neighborhoods. The same intention exists today, Powell says, but it lurks behind a thicket of politically appropriate language.

The curtain came down on explicit segregation with *Brown v. the Board of Education* in 1950, when “separate but equal” was ruled unconstitutional. When it became clear that segregation could not be maintained via education, Powell says, housing became the prime instrument. Thanks to sprawl, Powell asserts, America is more segregated than the day before the Supreme Court ruled on that landmark case. Indeed, census data show that cities are far less white today than 50 years ago, and communities that did not exist a half century ago are overwhelmingly white today.

“We need to stop glossing over the truths of history,” Powell says. “The reason for the Alamo was that white Texans wanted Texas to have slaves. Most Americans don’t know slavery was outlawed in Mexico, that Mexico was the good guy in that conflict.

“In the two great giveaways in American history, blacks were explicitly excluded from participating,” he continues. The federal government stationed troops to prevent blacks from being part of the homesteading rushes following the Civil War. And in the prosperity following World War II, many black soldiers never received their G.I. Bill benefits, intended to help returning soldiers to go to college, finance a small business, or buy a home.

Sprawl, Powell believes, is a continuation of what reasonable historians will conclude has been a conspiracy to deny people of color equal access to the good things of America.

THE TIPPING POINT

The Institute on Race and Poverty, whose goals are to create scholarship, commentary, and dialogue to promote a better understanding of the issues confronting communities that face the combined challenges of racial segregation and poverty, is one of a handful of research centers operating out of the University’s Law School. Others include the Human Rights Center and the Institute on Criminal Justice. The Institute on Race and Poverty has been in existence since 1993, when John Powell decided to create a “think and do tank” that digs up and exposes the facts and figures of racism and injustice that many people don’t know exist, or don’t care to acknowledge: how real inequality in America is, what policies drive it, and what its consequences are.

“Sprawl is just one aspect of the issue,” Powell says. “The overlying issue is fragmentation, the splintering of a metropolitan area into jurisdictions and distinct neighborhoods that some people can move into and other people cannot. The outward aspect of this movement seems at first glance like the natural result of free movement. But there is nothing natural about sprawl.”

Myott has created census and other maps that illustrate the charge that sprawl and race are linked. Each map shows the imbalance in a different way: where peo-

ple of color live, how different communities permit land use, where the jobs are, where the bus routes stop. Unfortunately, buses generally turn back before reaching the areas of greatest job creation.

Perhaps the worst thing about sprawl segregation is that it is such a self-fulfilling dynamic. Even when people of color establish a foothold in a suburb, bad things happen. Powell describes a “tipping point” of 8 percent to 9 percent minority in a community beyond which white flight begins in earnest.

This flight would present an opportunity, if thousands of other minorities were available to move into the suburb that whites have left. But minorities able to afford \$300,000 homes are in short supply, particularly in largely white places like Minnesota. With such a limited market to sell to, houses go unsold, property values fall, and the newcomers who bought in lose money. When 92 percent of the market won’t buy your product, prices plummet.

One exception is Chicago, where a politically strong black middle class has managed to create a stable presence outside the immediate city. The redistribution of people outside the city hasn’t stopped sprawl, but it has created the fairest regional economy of any major American city.

Another exception is Albuquerque. Because it annexes outlying areas, there is no division today between rich suburbs and a struggling inner city. Albuquerque is one community.

A THINK AND DO TANK

In its nine years, powell’s research center has tackled a host of controversial issues, including racial profiling, disparities in health care, and disparities in incarceration. Since September 11, the institute has been examining the civil rights violations for people of color because of certain antiterrorism measures.

In addition, the institute has been active in the World Conference Against Racism and Xenophobia. This is the group that news organizations last year depicted, to powell’s consternation, as being focused solely on the issue of the dollar amount to be paid in reparations for slavery. In fact, WCAR is responsible for many practical efforts, including the creation, with the institute’s participation, of a “report card on racism,” a single standard that groups in various countries can use to report on conditions inside their borders.

But the sprawl theory has a grandeur and originality that is attracting many in public administration. “Our work is deliberately relevant to social justice issues,” says Gavin Kearney (J.D. ’97), the IRP’s director of research. “In academia one must be officially objective and neutral. In practice, that is harder to do. I suppose what we do seems inherently less neutral than organic chemistry. We are not neutral, for instance, on racism and poverty. Even if we were, other people would be quick to point out ways in which we are not. In any event, we’re not trying to fool anyone.

“Do we have enemies?” he poses. “I wouldn’t go that far. But there are people who would prefer we not get involved in projects because the facts we turn up make their jobs more difficult. Until these facts become known, they have plausible deniability of them. Racism is something lots of people would rather not deal with.”

Colleen Walbran (J.D. ’00), a research fellow at IRP, defends the existence of an advocacy institute within the Law School. “The problems attorneys deal with that relate to race and fairness are in almost infinite supply. But it’s frustrating how the law

requires us to seek individual solutions to endemic problems,” she says. “What the IRP does is look not at the individual symptoms, but try to get at the root causes.”

FACING THE SPACE AND RACE ISSUE

What does an awareness of the racial injustices caused by sprawl require of people? Is there anything people of good will can do about a “conspiracy” whose participants are not even conscious of joining? The first thing people need to do, powell says, is acknowledge that a controversy exists, to carefully consider the two points of view, and to realize that what is at stake are fundamental justice and equal opportunity. “We need to own up to history and address the issues it has bequeathed to us.”

Walbran describes a four-step approach:

Analyze trends in your region. Demographic maps like Eric Myott’s clearly show the inequities of distribution of the races in the Twin Cities. Public officials may deny that disparities exist, until confronted with hard data.

See what’s happening elsewhere. Study successes occurring in cities like Portland, Chicago, Baltimore, and Indianapolis. No two cities are alike, but there is much to be learned from experiences elsewhere.

Identify what’s disconnecting access to opportunities. Don’t look for the usual suspects, like transportation and housing, but look hard at the root issues, such as zoning and highway subsidies.

Fix them. The Twin Cities has established the Metropolitan Council for oversight of cross-jurisdictional issues like sprawl and pollution. Perhaps protecting everyone’s civil rights must be added to its responsibilities.

It’s a battle, and powell and the others at the IRP know whom their likely allies will be. They are hoping to win the support of leaders like Mondale. They know they can also link arms with existing anti-sprawl groups, like environmentalists, and “sustainable growth” advocates like the Smart Growth movement, which seeks to establish new standards for outward expansion that make better sense environmentally and economically. And it makes sense that, in a system of winners and losers, the urban core city can make common cause with relatively integrated next-ring suburbs like Bloomington and Brooklyn Center to spread opportunities more equitably.

But the IRP knows its best chance for success rests with getting all people, rich and poor, white and nonwhite, to identify their own best interests. It’s not good economics to abandon existing infrastructure and build a host of shiny new ones 30 miles away, powell says. It’s not good business to tell a huge chunk of its customer base, as southern white businesses did in the 1950s, and outer-ring expansion is doing today, to get lost. It’s not good for a society to split itself in half, into the entitled and the restricted.

“I see attitudes about race improving a lot,” powell says. “We all understand that everyone wants something better for themselves. What could be more intrinsic to our sense of hope and hard work? But so far, we haven’t looked up and seen, really seen, how this strange structure we have in place affects our choices. Once we see, I think we will see great change.” ■

Mike Finley is a freelance writer living in St. Paul. For more information on the Institute on Race and Poverty, visit www.umn.edu/irp.