Conversation with Linda Shi
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your background and what ultimately brought you to your area of specialization in terms of research?

Linda Shi: Hi Ashley. Great to be here. I'm an assistant professor at Cornell's Department of City and Regional Planning. Let's see how far back we can go. I grew up in the suburbs of Cleveland. I loved the environment. I grew up reading Ranger Rick as a kid. I was the president of the Lorax Club in high school— recycling queen. I was intensively environmentalist in my orientation. When I was in college, I spent a summer in many different parts of the world each summer, and always focused on conservation issues, working with Indigenous communities, trying to get more of the non-human species conservation. As I did that work, I realized more and more that it was all tied ultimately to processes of urbanization and to urban consumption and development and those kinds of rural natural resource consumptive demands.

…So I shifted towards environmental planning issues in cities, and I got a degree in city planning so that I could better understand human systems and political systems of cities and how they function, why they exist, in order to address some of the systems-based issues that I had learned as an environmental manager. Eventually, I was doing that kind of work in Southeast Asia, and was really interested in questions about water and sanitation. You can't get biodiversity conservation in urban waterways when there's no basic sanitation. And basic sanitation leads you to a track of all sorts of things around housing rights and water rights and the right to process, so that you are given a voice and consideration in these types of places.

So what I was seeing, for instance, in Manila was that, after a major flood event, you could have cities trying to relocate people out of waterways, because it is very vulnerable, but also because they have no land rights, they don't get compensation, and they get resettled in the far periphery of the city, so that the city's resiliency can improve while the resilience of the people who are being relocated is nominally safer. Not even, it could be equally as unsafe, because of lower economic prospects, fewer jobs, fewer lending options/mutual aid, and not necessarily less exposure to hazards in a new location.

I began to see, as I was there, growing numbers of hazards and typhoons and weather events and heat, and how all of that compounded existing vulnerabilities of housing and economic precarity. I ended up doing my dissertation on adaptation issues and how we can get regional cooperation so that we don't have so much spatial inequality in how we think about adaptation. And a lot of my early work really showed how many adaptation efforts that cities take exacerbate their inequalities.

Now, my research really looks at why it is that they behave this way, what kinds of structural components shape why well-meaning people end up making these kinds of choices. And it has for me a lot to do with the kinds of land governance institutions that we have put in place, which comes back to land and property, and all the things that we lay on top that depends on the notion of how we conceive of land and property, like our property tax system, our finance system, our insurance systems, our disaster aid systems, our housing policy. All of that is predicated on certain ways of holding land and what we think of as being appropriate, how we draw boundaries around property, how we draw boundaries around cities, how we share those kinds of resources in land. I try to look at those to see if we can pull any of those levers. And through changing those levers, get to more equitable outcomes.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's really powerful what you mentioned about adaptation efforts not actually making things better for all the people who are involved. In the time that you've been doing this work, have you come across case studies and examples where it's happening in a better way, that you think is worth replicating, studying, or researching more?

Linda Shi: There are many different examples, and the challenge is always one of scale, and the interplay between the very large scale, so that you get many places doing it. But this kind of work often is predicated on law. I liked what Indy Johar said, law is about power and preserving power. Law reflects power… and advocates of justice usually have to be outside of it in order to change the law when they gain power.

There are more examples at a local level that show how community organizations oftentimes advocated for more just outcomes. Some examples that I could give here, the work in UPROSE, in

Sunset Park in New York, in Brooklyn is a long industrial community, which has an elevated expressway, industrial waterfront and high levels of air pollution. There is coal and garbage and all sorts of unwanted land uses that worsen air quality, water quality, and health for residents, which is one third Black, one third Hispanic or Asian, and one third other (races/ethnicities). It's a very diverse community. The work that Elizabeth Yeampierre has spearheaded there in UPROSE has been to create a mobilized community that is multi-generational, multi-racial, and really believes in feminist BIPOC-led power to create alternative visions of community health and wellbeing.

I think the state wanted to create a new high-tech center in the post-industrial waterfront because they have some vacant warehouses that could be easily upgraded to high-tech. And the community fiercely opposed it, because they felt that high-tech would mean jobs not for them, but for people from somewhere else, and that they would be then relegated to service-level jobs that would not be well-paying. They mobilized their community to come up with an alternative vision, which was that the community wanted to be assembling the wind turbines that are being put in offshore, and that it would be well-paid manufacturing jobs, that is more comparable to the payment that they were losing. That's also part of the work that they had done for a long time to advocate for the Governor of New York to sign and pass legislation at the state level, to have more ambitious interim targets for decarbonization, and to build it in as part of that funding for communities of color and environmental justice to receive, much like the Justice40 approach.

It's been, what, 30- 35 years since Clinton signed the Environmental Justice Executive Order? It's been 55 years since environmental justice was coined as a concept and the work against PCBs in North Carolina, the kind of labor and environmental justice movements, alliances that have spread worldwide, and then is coming down in (this time). So the Justice40 is the child of so many decades of mobilization. For that to then finally find a political opportunity to be expressed at a national scale, it really is rooted in community-based mobilization and grassroots organizing for that to come into effect.

Now it comes to what exactly is an environmental justice community? Is that just basically income? Is it by race? And what about Indigenous communities that maybe don't meet some of these things, but they also should qualify? So the whole definition of how money comes down now.. everybody has a lot of questions. How it'll be implemented and that tension between top-down and bottom-up.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is missing from the larger conversation we're having about planning and design issues in cities. What is a gap that you'd like to see filled?

Linda Shi: Great question. I think the perennial struggle is that a lot of times in different spaces we're having different conversations, and it's hard to move in the same direction when you're just not speaking the same language. Even in the adaptation space, Susie Moser and I have an article in Science that talks about how the private sector is moving in a direction of internalizing climate impacts into their risk portfolios, and recognizing that they need to alter where they put their investments in order to avoid losses. Insurers, asset management corporations, land and real estate, banking, and in the professional agencies of engineering and landscape architecture, recognizing that it could become a serious legal liability if they build and design in a way that then leads to failure before the expected lifetime.

Those kinds of private sector evolutions are really rooted more in a risk intolerance and profit maximization mode. It doesn't necessarily care if, by changing the logics of where you invest or what you finance, you could completely ruin a city's prospects or a household's prospects. At an urban level, at a government level, thankfully this administration is paying a lot of attention to climate, and in very thoughtful and justice-centered ways, but it remains a kind of risk mitigation approach of trying to reduce and minimize losses.

For instance, FEMA, its main interest is to reduce loss of life and to protect property and minimize liability of its losses. Its main mission is not to create healthy, resilient communities. That's not exactly its mission. It's disaster risk reduction, and just because you're not dead doesn't mean you're healthy. So, that is a different conversation.

Then you have communities and academics talking about justice and equity and health and the complexity of multiple systems, so it's a very different set of conversations. There are logics of how urban development happens that will certainly intervene, and both spatially mediate what is happening, as well as, through the policies that govern that space, mediate the kinds of interventions that one puts in.

For example, you could have a FEMA, BRIC or some other type of project, where the government spends a great deal of money in a community of color that is low-lying and vulnerable, to give them resources or to give them infrastructure so that they are protected. That seems, on its face, a really great idea of centering long-marginalized communities. In some cases, it may be that that offers a signal to the land markets that says, this is an ideal place, because it's now protected with new infrastructure. It might be green infrastructure, it might be open space, it might be a lovely place to live as a result of this. Then property values are going to escalate, but incomes haven't escalated, so your ability to pay property taxes and new higher assessments isn't increasing. Rents are going to grow, but

your renter income hasn't increased either. So, that's when you began to see neighborhood change, perhaps.

We don't have great ways of measuring how much of that population change really is because people are being displaced, or culturally displaced, or financially displaced, versus moving because of many other factors. But that's where an inattention to space and to land dynamics can sometimes end up subverting the original intention of how funding is being spent. My Intention with sharing that example is not to say, let's not spend money in poor communities, because they're not going to get to hang onto it anyway. It's more to say, let's think about how these communities have power to stay in their communities, and maybe those should also change in tandem with some of these investments, so that we give people tools to avoid the dynamics that we see happening over and over again. It's not a surprise. Nobody finds it surprising. What's surprising is that we keep behaving like it won't happen, and then we are surprised by it.

There are tools. Oakland Community Land Trust is a known way to prevent this from happening, but why are there only 250 (land trusts) in the country? So few. What would it take to give them the kinds of power and support that we have for so many other types of property systems in this country? Corporations, private land holdings, tax breaks, all sorts of things. There has only been, in the history of the U.S., one neighborhood that has ever been given the powers of eminent domain. This was in community gardens, and they have become a leading example of a community that is able to really hold power in that particular way. So, can we actually not just give power through participation, but give power over the things that actually matter, like land and housing?

Ashley Hopkinson: That's such a good point, because we started the conversation talking about the importance of power. I heard you mention at the property gathering in Oakland, a regional hub associated with mobile home parks. Can you share more about that example and what you thought was significant about it? Boston, I think it's in the '70s, the Dudley Square Neighborhood Initiative was given by, at that time, the Boston Redevelopment Authority, the right of eminent domain. They could take property and they could hold property. And through that power, they were able to create land trusts, housing, cooperative development, and community.

Linda Shi: You're referring to ROC USA? Resident-owned communities are ROCs, and there are a bunch of resident-owned communities, but ROC USA is the one that supports it for affordable housing. So, much as community land trusts operate for usually single family housing, sometimes multi-family housing, ROCs are explicitly targeting manufactured home parks, or mobile home parks, or manufactured housing communities.

Often these mobile home parks are located on land that is held by a landlord who owns the utilities, the electrics. They're kind of unto themselves. The city doesn't come in and do their drainage and roads and utilities. Usually it's like you have a little park, and you are responsible for delivering all the services. So, when a landlord decides to sell it and redevelop it...it can be very disruptive, because the mobile homes themselves are no longer movable. They're not like RVs. You can't just drive them off. Even though it says mobile home park, the mobile home, once set, is not a structure that is easily something you can pick up and have it not fall apart, or it's very expensive to move them.So, people are really kind of a captive audience, because they can't just pick up and move, and if they move, they're going to lose their assets.

So that makes it much easier for people or landlords to exploit them, because if they said, "I'm going to ask for X rent increase," you kind of just have to go with it. You have no recourse. And that's why these different global corporations are super interested in buying these, because they're very profitable.

So in 20-some states, there are rules that require that landlords give residents a right of first refusal in making a purchase, or at least of notification that there is a purchase, a sale that's coming up, all these different kinds of regulations. ROC USA is a very interesting system, because it has both support for financing and for technical assistance. They have a financial arm that helps communities if they decide to buy the land together, to give them a very low-cost loan, like a 1% interest rate loan, that comes from Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae, and foundations and other resources, so that people can buy the land, and also built into that is capital improvements, like they go and say, the executive director says, "The residents know where the bones are buried. They know exactly what isn't working." So, you walk around with them, they say, "We need X, Y, and Z," and you build that into the loans that those investments can be made.

It also incorporates funding for technical assistance, because as you can imagine…if I suddenly became somebody co-owning infrastructure in several blocks, I would have no idea how to do the finances, how to manage the drainage etc. How am I supposed to pave the road if nobody's going to pave it for me? So, there are these regional technical assistance providers who have regional expertise in the Rockies in the Northeast and the Southeast, and they provide that assistance to the boards that are created in these communities, so that they can figure out how to do annual reporting, how to create bylaws, how to manage their finances and do this whole process. So, it's been very successful in that none of them have ever defaulted on a loan. They've not sold off. People are able to stay, and stay in better housing. And it's expanded significantly and very quickly, much faster than community land trusts, on this particular model.

What I would call out from this model is that it's a really interesting package of multiple things that are happening in order to make this work. One is that states adopted legislation that made it possible to give residents a right of purchase. So, it's eagerly supporting this particular mechanism of cooperative land ownership. It is also supported by a funding mechanism that is subsidized from various sources, but there is a consistent low-cost financial resource that enables this. And there is technical assistance, because it is really difficult to do collective decision-making and collective governance. It's not like you could just hand over and say, "Here's a poor neighborhood, let's give you all your land rights …" Well, even if you did that, we don't have the governance mechanisms now to have that decision-making ability. So, it's recreating that process and in many ways, everybody prefers to have their own individual house, because they don't want to deal with their neighbors. I don't want to have to listen to their opinions.

So, some of that benefit of collective power in advocacy, in landholding, in resistance, comes also with the collective weakness of having to deal with each other in shared decision-making, which is something that would have to be created and built and invested in, equally as we've invested in systems of individual decision-making and control.

It's an interesting model. Again, I'm not calling for the end of private property for everybody, but at least as a first piece to enable alternative systems to be possible, for people who want to avail of that. And ROCs, interestingly, are not just urban communities of color who vote Democrat. There's a lot of different mixes of people who live in those communities across the political spectrum, across urban and rural spectrums. So can we find those kinds of existing innovations, and try to apply them to other types of areas where we're currently struggling?

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the amount of research that you've done and how long you've been in the field, this might seem like a very big question, but do you have anything that you would say has been a great insight or takeaway from the work that you do especially as you have seen the field change over the years?

Linda Shi: Great question. I don't know that this is the biggest one. I'll just say it's one takeaway. These days, environmental justice is very in vogue, and racial justice, all of it, BIPOC, Indigenous, land back, land repair, reparations, the whole progressive agenda is now in vogue. And I see that in the research that's being produced, a lot of considerations of equity and climate and climate justice and environmental justice, a lot in how cities do their work, what they're talking about when they come up with plans. They always nod to it and recognize it, which is the first step. It's an important first step. You're not going to get anything else if you don't at least recognize that as an issue.

But I think that what many people lose sight of is that it is not an issue in and of itself. It's an outcome that's rooted and coded for in many, many other spaces. So, if you don't think about how it's coded for in banking, in land, in zoning, in housing, in all of these boring, uninteresting, pedantic, technical types of fields and sectors, you won't get to a just outcome just by saying, "I want to talk about environmental justice."

We did a special issue titled, Planning for Climate Transformations, which received about 60 submissions and abstracts. Probably half of those were talking about climate vulnerability, equity, justice, equality, displacement etc. Then we had one on climate and law, two on climate and transportation, one on administration, one on finance, one on urban design. But it's like, who do you think builds the stuff, pays for the stuff, and makes decisions on all this?

..So we need to get not only a certain set of people who are interested in sustainability and environment and human dimensions and justice to care about it. We need to get the people who are in the spaces of banking and insurance and law (and) other professional spaces, to think about these issues. For those of us who are advocating to become educated in those spheres, so that we can push for the climate justice components in those domains.

So, somebody was saying "Yes, the renter's question. If rents could be part of a tax deduction, the way that your mortgage and property taxes are tax deductions, that would make more difference to all the renters than any of your rental protections that might happen at a local level, or your anti-displacement campaign of some kind."

So there are certain places where there are acupuncture points that we should be looking for, that can unlock the basis of some of these questions, and does so at a scale that would not mean that every municipality, every community group has to advocate for that at that level. Because that system change is currently in the control of people, industries, sectors, corporations that are at that scale. And so whatever you do, if you just have the little points where we're all moving, and they're not connected and they're not changing the fundamental DNA, you will never win. It'll just be a blip, in some ways. So, how do you institutionalize that change is a key question.

Ashley Hopkinson: Often for systems change to occur, people will share that it requires partnership, fewer silos and more people across different sectors talking to each other. Is that true for planning as well? Do you need to be in rooms with policymakers along with community advocates? What does it take for systems change in an area like planning, where it may be unpopular to think outside of what is practical or profitable.

Linda Shi: Planning Is an interesting field. It's changed a lot since it started over 100 years ago. And its flux is both its strength and sometimes its weakness. There are many dimensions, especially old style planning, which still operates in many different countries. Planning is a handmaiden of capitalism, where you're playing out the land and zoning in order to create the basis of industrialization and extraction, so that you can support this whole infrastructure. At the same time, planning has also its roots in public health, and how do you allow for safe water and health and sanitation and pedestrian safety and all of these measures, in how we design for our cities?

There's been a lot of reflexivity since the '70s, when people looked at things like urban renewal, which is not just coming from planners. It's a whole set of sectors that push for those things. But to say, now we really need to focus on justice and community and all of that. It's imperfect. There's also academic planning versus what really happens in cities. And cities have to respond to their mayor, so if the mayor wants to do something, or their council people, your planning department is not the only group that is making decisions on what happens on land and infrastructure.

There are a lot of silos within planning. So as I said, if you went to a conference of academic planning, you get a lot of land use people and environment people talking about climate, but if you went to transportation or you went to finance, you went to administration, those planners are not necessarily talking about climate. So, it's a struggle. No matter how big or small your circle that you're drawing, people fragment into their individual expertise and their interests and geographies.

….But I'll say that planning is a very integrative field. It is also a very normatively oriented field about what should be and what could be in the future. So, I think it's well positioned to be an integrator for many other disciplines, because in this physical space, we are organizing everybody's different interests and desires and needs to locate it in space. So, similarly, I think we're in a good position to help facilitate some of these conversations about how do you integrate law and insurance and engineering and community, environmental justice and public health, in a way that makes sense in all of the different spheres of policy, built environment, finance, and all those things. There's a new NOAA proposal for a social science research agenda for climate adaptation, and I know of a couple of different planning groups that are putting in for leading that as a national conversation. We'll see what happens.

Ashley Hopkinson: I appreciate that framework, because I had not thought about it in that way before. Given the right support, what would you like to see replicated, scaled, prioritized to expand/grow when it comes to re-imagining wellbeing in planning?

Linda Shi: A tricky question. I'm not a good chess player. You have to see so many levels ahead, so I don't know, with anything that I say, how it'll actually play out multiple steps ahead. Things never turn out the way you anticipate.

One would be for health to be a center point for how we think about what is the goal, both of humans and non-human species. If we measured that instead of GDP, it would shift our orientation. For instance, right now, if you have a very sick population that still is economically productive, the additional doctor's bills and insurance bills and all those things generate GDP, but it doesn't mean that you are healthy as a group or in good shape. Imagine if our ultimate national goal is a global health index or a national health index. We would look at things like racism, which New York City has ruled as a public health threat. We would look at pollution, we would look at obesity, we would look at all these things, and everything that factors into it would be considered as, how much does it factor into the *"gross health index"?* I would like to think, if we took health as an outcome, it might lead to more integrative approaches.

Another is the conversation about land and pluralism of land. I don't know that any country you would look at and say, they've sorted out their property system to be the sustainable, decolonial, zero-carbon kind of a model. It is everywhere, always in tension with something. It would be helpful to at least question these systems. In a way, the very stability of it is its strength, because you can find it so durable, that opens up many other investments and decisions. If, in different moments of different countries' political histories, you made it very unstable, then everything else stops. But at the same time, I think that it is worth considering how to experiment with this, and where to see and learn from alternatives, so that we are resilient and diversified in these approaches.

Or at the very least, how we're responding to the diversity that exists on the ground. Indigenous people have different land holding strategies in the U.S. than everybody else who's not Indigenous. …We have these mobile home parks that are odd. They're not single family homes. We have condos in multi-family buildings that are not single family homes. So, we have all of these different approaches, and we don't have systems that really readily support them.

…In a way, Mother Nature is claiming a lease. It's the end of her lease on your development. So, what can we learn from long-term leases as a strategy for rethinking how we think of the permanence of some of our urban settlements, and how we support it? So, we have a system that is quite well tailored to a very few dominant approaches, and perhaps we can at least diversify it to support those who need it now, and to enable experimentation and innovation in this space, alongside other innovations and changes that will have to happen in all these other spaces.

Ashley Hopkinson: The last question is, what gives you hope and keeps you excited about the field you're in or for the next generation that's coming along, the people you're teaching?

Linda Shi: Something that keeps me sane is that I was at the Museum of Planetary Science here near Ithaca, and they have this, on this wall, geological time scale, dating back to the formation of Earth. When I saw that years ago, visiting with my kids, I was strangely comforted by it, that in the scale of geologic time, even when things are so, so bad, given enough time, life will succeed again. Maybe not with us, but with something. And that made it okay for me, in some ways. It de-stresses me (from the) we must change, we have to save the world in this particular moment, and if I don't, I will fail, and we will fail. It'll just go on in some new way. I think that is helpful.

Also, in a slightly more positive, shorter-term history, sometimes I think as I'm walking in any space, who has walked in this space before? And who has seen the stars from where I've been standing before? And if you think about the hundreds of years, in some places thousands of years, possibly tens of thousands of years, and the things that they have had to endure to get to this moment, whether it's slavery or it's indigeneity or it's bad sanitation or it's whatever it is, people have struggled for a long, long time. I'm just part of a continuum of struggle that will continue past me, to future peoples. So, I find those things, when I'm stressed out about my contributions, to be helpful.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much for your time today.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

* This conversation has been edited and condensed.