

Liz Ogbu

Designer, Social Innovator, and Urbanist

Liz Ogbu is a designer, urbanist, and spatial justice activist. She is an expert on engaging and transforming unjust urban environments. Her multidisciplinary design and innovation practice, Studio O, operates at the intersection of racial and spatial justice. She collaborates with and in communities in need to leverage design to catalyze sustained social impact.

From designing shelters for immigrant day laborers in the U.S. and a water and health social enterprise for low-income Kenyans to developing a Social Impact Protocol for housing with university researchers and the Local Initiatives Support Corporation (LISC), Liz has a long history of working on and advocating for issues of spatial and racial justice. Her work blends community-centered research methodologies, dynamic and creative forms of engagement and prototyping, spatial just architecture and planning principles, and tools to build participatory power and community-centered systems.

In the work Liz has done in advocating for social, racial, and spatial justice, there are key steps in the process to be considered for other advocacy work, including:

The Importance of History

Liz notes anti-racism and its impact on the principles of development. One of the biggest is the necessary look we must all take at our shared history. We must first understand how racism has played out since our country's founding to the disparities in communities today. The conditions in underserved neighborhoods are not accidental, and tie directly to racial injustice. By looking at what neighborhoods HAVE and what others DON'T makes this clear. The best bus lines, the nicest housing, etc. is the result of a history of a place and how racism played a role in how it was built. We must face it, take it into consideration, and hold space for the process a community needs to share the pain of it.

Incorporating All Voices

Typically, organizations only focus on data and demographics, and don't think to sit down with those who are the living history of a place. However, in starting a project, Liz makes it a priority to work directly with the people who have been most harmed by the status quo. Once identified, it is then necessary to set up a pathway with multiple touch points for them to influence the process. This can start with small sessions to hear their stories, as this information is just as important as quantitative data. The stories provide nuance to the numbers. Then throughout the process, these voices must maintain a seat at the table, as historically, they have not been represented at all.

Asking the Right Questions

Often, when development projects start, the questions that clients and project teams use to drive the process do not take into consideration the importance of history and incorporating all voices. These two factors are required in developing the set of questions at the onset. If one starts by asking the wrong questions, then the result will be skewed and inequitable. By understanding the history and then speaking to those most harmed by the status quo, it is possible to discover what a common idea (e.g., Safer streets) means to them—and it may be different than what our preconceived assumptions might be.

Outcomes Over Output

Defining metrics is also something that needs to be reconsidered, notes Liz. If the focus is on outputs, then we are often defeating the purpose of the work. If building a nicer park in an underserved community is considered the measurement of success, then all we have done is help the "poor be poor better," as one of her collaborators, Sunshine Mahon, once said. But if we have improved the quality of their lives, then we are changing outcomes. This is the lens by which we should judge success. Examples of this include addressing childcare needs and transportation requirements, and creating wealth.