

## Interview with Prof. Kirk Harris

Liam Farin, Urban Studies Programs, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee



Dr. Harris is a longstanding faculty member in the School of Architecture and Urban Planning and an affiliate of the Urban Studies Programs. He has been at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee for nearly 30 years, teaching and conducting community-focused projects and research. His research is focused on how systemic and historic policy practices have long undermined and suppressed racial and economic justice among Black and low-income communities of color.

It was the Wednesday before finals week that I sat down to have a conversation with Dr. Harris. Our conversation further reinforced something in my mind, that urban studies and urban planning are inherently difficult work. Our field is seeking to find the causes of deep rooted, historical, systemic issues, and then develop solutions for them. Anyone who pretends this is simple work that ends at the end of a workday is missing the point. Whether it is researching at

the university level the conditions that lead to a lack of housing, organizing at the community level to advocate for community autonomy, working at the private or governmental level to find ways to connect people with jobs, or any other urban studies-based job, this work is taxing mentally and emotionally. I think about the drive to do this work as a small fire: at some point, this fire was stoked among all of us, making it grow and drawing us to this field. As time goes on and we are challenged by the work that we do, this fire begins dwindling, and we need someone or something to come by and add kindling to the fire to prevent it from burning out. When I got the chance to sit down and talk with Dr. Harris, I had no idea that not only was he going to add kindling to this fire, but that he would impart a stockpile of wisdom and lessons to help keep the fire burning for a long time. Hearing him speak about the work that he has done in academia, in policy, and with communities was inspiring. I hope you find our conversation just as impactful.

*Liam Farin:* I want to be respectful of your time, So I'll jump right in and ask if you'd be willing to briefly introduce yourself and share something fun that your students might not know.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* Well, let me just say. I started with the program [Urban Planning] as an adjunct faculty member in the early 90s. I'm a lawyer originally, I started out my career as a legal service lawyer. I actually found planning by accident, as a function of my interest in doing community work, and subsequently did a doctorate at Cornell in urban planning. I think for me, as I thought about and played a role as a lawyer, I recognized that many of the things that we do as lawyers are individual-based, when we know that many of the systems that are creating the problems for the individuals are still in place, and replicate those very issues that we're trying to resolve on an individual basis. One of the things that has brought me to planning is this idea that we can deal with things in a more systemic way, and recognizing that the intersection between

economics, politics, social norms, participation, advances in inclusion and democracy, all matter in terms of the outcomes that we want to see in communities that are healthy and sustainable. So from my vantage point, taking a systems view which really embraces the notion of democratizing the urban and regional space and creating opportunities for people to raise their voices about those things in their environment that are impacting them, whether they know it or not is important.

As a planner, I'm always vigilant about both the participation elements, the advocacy elements, but also recognizing that the system as it's presently articulated tends to reinforce the very inequalities we say as a democratic society we shouldn't tolerate. So I recognize that every day when we're engaged in our work, whether it's in planning, architecture, whether we're doing the urban studies initiative program, that is really trying to understand how these systems are functioning to the disadvantage of communities that have historically been experiencing the bulk of the inequalities that we know exist in our society and seem to remain in place unfortunately. So basically, I'm committed to these larger, these greater questions of social justice, economic justice and equity as a function of recognizing that place and the work that we do in formulating place is fundamental to positive outcomes, not only for the people that are we can see in front of us, but for the people that are yet to be born. I think taking a long view of that is critically important and if we don't then we don't have a vision for what could be as opposed to what is. So that's my sense. So that's kind of my overall philosophy.

And I don't know if this is considered fun, but I'm a motorcycle enthusiast, which I am very much involved in when time permits which is too few opportunities. It's a touring bike and I really just enjoy chilling, turning up my music and letting the wind hit me in my face. It's a great

experience. And the other thing that has been a long time passion is that I started my private pilot's license a number of years ago and I have a number of hours of training. It has been horribly episodic, and I've committed to myself that I would actually complete my training before they throw me in a hole and throw dirt on me [laughing]. So those are my two things that are my outlets, if you will, along with of course engaging with good folks and always finding projects that not only about what can happen in terms of serving community, but also building new relationships and identifying people who have like-minds who I can find community with. So that's the other piece of what I enjoy.

*Liam Farin:* Oh nice! You know, a question like “Tell me about yourself” can send you reeling, because it's so open ended, but I never would have otherwise found out that you're working towards your pilot's license and ride motorcycles.

So you mentioned that you're interested in addressing systemic issues. It also seems you're working with an interdisciplinary approach, or at least like approaching problems from multiple sources. I wonder if you can talk about how your work in promoting nonviolence among young people, education, and family support systems all connect and relate to your broader work.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* Absolutely. Well, thank you for asking that question. I appreciate it. I haven't been trained in community development, but also having had a long-term interest in family, families and family strengthening, I recognize that what makes for a strong, vibrant and sustainable community is a strong, viable, sustainable set of families because communities are nothing but an aggregation of families and individuals who create a fabric of a cultural reality which is called the neighborhood, or which is called the community. So the intersection for me,

as it relates to the work that I do as a planner, is recognizing these overlapping systems we have. We have family systems that have to be recognized when we're doing our planning, we have economic systems that have to be recognized when we're doing our planning, we have legal systems that we have to recognize. And all of these systems, among others, have their own particular role in either supporting or undermining the fundamental outcomes that we want to achieve in our communities. For example, we can go in for a solution around housing and the lack of the production of affordable housing. But affordability is also manifested in the context of your ability to produce a living wage. So when you talk about affordable housing you have to ask the question, affordable to whom? So I mean if we don't take that deeper dive into the things that we're exploring, what we do is we give solutions that are not reflective of the multiple systems operating to undermine whatever strategies that we want. So when you're doing an affordable housing strategy you should also be advocating for living wages, decent wages, and economic development strategies that produce employment that produces living wages, and transportation systems that allow people to get to those living wage jobs so that they can afford the housing. There's a whole series of things that have to be contemplated, and often we silo those things in ways that are not helpful. We work on that issue and think we've solved the problem, but what we've done is we've looked at an element of the problem and not considered it holistically. I'm a huge advocate of thinking holistically about these issues and understanding that we have to take a systems view if we're going to be effective in what we do. That's whether we're a planner, we're an architect, we're people working in communities around urban issues, it doesn't matter. We've got to take a more systemic view because the truth is, the reason we don't do it is because these things are complex, and that means that as practitioners we can't shy away from the complexities, we have to embrace them and try to grapple with them.

*Liam Farin:* It reminds me of in my class with the other Dr. Harris, Dr. Jamie Harris, we read about the idea of thick injustice; the web of issues that are all contributing to each other.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* That's right, that's right.

*Liam Farin:* You mentioned that you started as a lawyer. I'm curious, what type of law were you practicing? And then how does that impact the work that you're now doing as an urban planning researcher?

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* I was a legal service lawyer. There are legal services throughout the country and they serve vulnerable and low income communities, and much of my work as a legal service lawyer touched on issues related to governmental benefits, related to housing rights, to various issues and their impacts on vulnerable communities. When I began sharing my perspective of how I view the world, one of the things that informed my work was my experience as a legal service lawyer as I mentioned to you. I had folks who would come into my office who have a housing issue. I help them with their housing issue, but then they come into my office with another issue. It might have been an issue with the police or it might have been an issue related to their governmental benefit, or it might have been an issue related to their children in the school system--it could be any number of issues and a lot of these issues in large measure were a function of communities existing in systems that weren't serving them well. The systems weren't recognizing their voice, they weren't supporting them well, they weren't recognizing the uniqueness of their challenges. And this was happening, not at the individual level, but at the mass level, right, which is often when we're looking at vulnerable communities, we see poor outcomes for children across the board, whether it's educational outcomes, or whether it's health outcomes, or whether it's nutrition. It's because systems are not serving these communities well.

And so, as lawyers, we try to address the immediate and most urgent concerns of the individuals in front of us, but often we're unable to get to the fundamentals of what's producing this from a systemic basis.

Now in the law, you can do what we call class actions, which tries to get at these larger systems issues by challenging the way some systems are working, right? But you know there's limits to that, and there's limits to the extent to which the legislature, which often provides the kinds of resources for legal services throughout the country, has decided the extent to which legal services can be involved in those kinds of class action suits. When I was frustrated, it was by the idea that I could solve these problems individual by individual. Recognizing that that was not possible was very frustrating because for me, you often have to ask the question “how am I contributing? Am I contributing significantly to resolving these issues, or am I just putting band aids on people as they socially hemorrhage?” And so that was my challenge as a legal service lawyer, which as I indicated to you brought me to the to the notion of planning.

*Liam Farin:* Yeah, I know I've thought a lot about that too: addressing individual problems versus trying to figure out sort of what's happening upstream that's causing that.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* Yeah. And of course, the challenge here is that you have to do both, because the immediacy of the issues that are confronting the individual that come in front of me is important. We should not diminish that; they have to get immediate relief. But we also recognize that as we do that, there are legions of individuals behind them with the same problem, and we can't provide relief to all of those individuals. And that's the challenge.

**Liam Farin:** It seems like over the course of your career, you've been involved in a lot of different approaches and a lot of different projects that have all been advocating for, or creating change. I mean, just when I was reading everything on your CV--the APA Social Justice Task force, teaching at UWM for over 15 years, all of that--how do you do it all without burning out? And also, can you share some things that you've learned from some of the social justice work and equity work that you've done?

**Prof. Kirk Harris:** Yeah, absolutely. I don't know, I guess I come from the old school. I'm a baby boomer and I kind of come from the old school that you just kind of keep at it, you know? And over the last couple of decades, there's been this kind of movement for self-care. And I never really truly embraced that. This notion that "Oh yeah, you should go take breaks, and you should stop working and just relax" and this and that and the other thing. But what I've come to realize is that's really important. Not only is it important physically, it's really important mentally for clarity. Sometimes when you keep at something, your creative juices and the openings for opportunities to think about things differently become narrowed. And so even though I'm not a good practitioner of taking breaks, I recognize how important they are, and I'm less cynical about what it means to relax. And my family's always complaining with me, they tell me I'm going to work till I collapse. And let me just say the other thing, it's not like I'm doing this and don't like it, right? The fact is, I feel that to who much is given, much is expected. And I think, you know, I've been fortunate to get a good education, I've been fortunate to have certain supports in my life, a supportive family, and I feel like part of my responsibility to the world is to make some kind of contribution that leaves it better than when I found it. And that's no small objective. And the truth is, I do like what I do. I love teaching. I love doing these projects, even though sometimes balancing them is exhausting. But when you feel like you've made a dent in something as it



relates to something you're concerned about, whether it's bringing communities to the table when they never were at the table or advancing an initiative that people said couldn't happen, I mean those are the successes you have to relish, and it's what keeps you going. It keeps you motivated to say "do more, and more is possible." And at the same time I think you do have to take a break, and reflect, and do some self-evaluation. I think it's really important as a practitioner to be able to do that, because we sometimes get locked into a way of doing things that is not always productive, and it's not always the path to the success we really want. That's one of the reasons why I'm hoping to get out on my motorcycle more this summer than I did last summer and to do those things that I don't really get a chance to do during the year when I'm a little bit more hemmed in because of my commitments. But the thing that I've learned is that you have to be intentional. Just like you put stuff on the schedule to do your work or to do a project, you gotta put stuff on the schedule to chill out. You gotta be purposeful about it. And I'm not always purposeful about it, but I'm trying to get better.

Was there another element to that question before I went off on the...? [Chuckle]

*Liam Farin:* [Laughing] Oh yeah, what were some takeaways or things that you've learned from the work that you've done.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* Ohh yeah, one of the things that I've learned is: you can't do this by yourself. It's really important that you find like-minds that you can collaborate with to do the work, because it's a lot to handle individually. Many of the barriers and challenges that we've had, the historical inequalities that have been produced, and the resistance that we may experience in changing some of the systems that are intersecting to create these inequalities, it takes a lot of energy, time commitment and tenacity. And it is a tiring process, which means that you really

gotta find like-minds that you work with. You've got to collaborate with people that you enjoy working with and that you can take breaks with. You know you can go out and chill and sit and have a--I don't drink, so I would say have a drink--but have a non-alcoholic beverage and just have a conversation you know? So finding community is a really important part of doing this work and sustaining yourself in the work. And also recognizing--one of my most appreciated, and an intellectual leader for me, is Cornell West. He said that: what we need to do is find joy in the struggle. Recognizing that struggle is what creates change, and if you find joy in that struggle, that is the idea that you are honoring the ancestors, that they struggled, and that has some positive ramifications for you. That you struggle because it's going to have positive ramifications for the generations that go after you, and you should find joy in that, right? And I think that's the other thing that keeps me going, this idea that struggle is not, like, this thing where you're always in pain and suffering and, you know, just miserable, but struggle is actually the notion of the contribution and recognizing that struggle is what produces change, and you should find joy in that that process. And I wholeheartedly embrace that. I train planning students and I tell them, you should not expect as a practicing planner, when you begin to call the question on some of these issues of inequality and injustice, you will not be immediately embraced. Do not anticipate that. Do not expect it to happen. Do not go home depressed when that happens. What you have to do is recognize that there's struggle in the change and you have to be strategic about it. You have to pick your battles, you have to identify your allies, and you have to identify your strategy. And you have to take those things together, and move out. I always try to encourage my students to remind them that doing the thing that raises democracy, doing the thing that raises the quotient of equity, doing the thing that raises justice, you shouldn't anticipate that being an easy thing or something that everybody will embrace. You should anticipate it being difficult. Not everybody's

gonna be feeling you. I mean, that's the reality. And sometimes calling the question might be the first time that somebody called the question in that context, and now you have an opportunity to sit in and that might just move the conversation in a way that has never been moved before. As it might be difficult so. I think that's my obligation as a planner, and that's my obligation as a citizen, and that's my obligation as someone who wants to leave a legacy. I should be calling the hard questions, if it's not making sense to me in terms of the approach and solving the problem that we that we say we're committed to solving, then we should call the question on it. And ask "am I looking at this wrong or are you looking at this wrong?" I think that's our jobs as citizens and caring citizens and committed individuals to democracy and justice.

*Liam Farin:* I really like that idea of struggle, and hadn't heard that quote before, so thanks for sharing that. In the five minutes that we've got before zoom kicks us out, I've got one more question for you that is maybe in the same spirit: What advice do you have for new or prospective graduate and also undergraduate students who are interested in taking a social justice approach to urban studies?

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* Well, I would say students should always find places in which they can touch communities when they are working on their academic course of study. What happens is that sometimes in the academy, we abstract things. Like for example, in planning we tell students that when they go out, they should be advancing equity in their practice. But then we don't give them practical tools to show how you do that. We tell them that they should be advancing equity, but we don't give them the real tools, strategies, and approaches or the fundamental understandings about how to do that. So I think one of the things that I believe is that as students follow their academic passion, they try to mirror that with their experiences on the ground, and they try to

identify the tools that they are going to commit themselves to as practitioners to make the change that they want to make. Whether that's advocacy from a legislative vantage point, whether it's organizing, whether it's building new programs or institutions: how do you translate your academic understandings and emerging intellectual prowess? How does that translate into what you do on a daily basis? Making that translation is critically important, because what I tell my students also is that democracy is not a spectator sport. Either you're on the field or you're not. So if you have some fundamental understandings about the way in which systems work, the world works, and what's encumbering our ability to produce a more democratic and equitable society, then you need to be out on the field somehow. And that could take all shapes and sizes: it's not one-size-fits-all, but it has to be applied. It has to be applied and you have to find the ways in which it meets your skill set, and which you can make a contribution. If we can kind of collect all of that energy from individuals thinking about it that way, change will come. Change will come.

*Liam Farin:* Wow, thank you. Thank you so, so much for your time. It's been really insightful and inspiring.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* Yeah, thank you for the opportunity. I really do appreciate you guys reaching out to feature my profile. It's an honor. I thank you for that and I mean, one of the reasons why I've been in the academy so long is students like you inspire me because you have a desire to leave something behind. And I just think that's so important to the change that we all want to make. That we all should be wanting to make, at the very least. Thank you and I appreciate it.

*Liam Farin:* Thank you, that means a lot. I hope you get to get out on the motorcycle soon.

*Prof. Kirk Harris:* It's going to happen. It's going to happen soon.