

Report on Professor Jerry S. Dickinson Event, 'Pittsburgh is America's Apartheid City'

On June 12, 2021, Jerry S. Dickinson, Esq., Associate Professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law, was invited by the Dr. Edna B. McKenzie Branch of ASALH to give a talk entitled "Pittsburgh Is America's Apartheid City."

Professor Dickinson emphasized the parallels between the structural inequalities wrought by South African system of apartheid and those seen in Pittsburgh today. He saw the racial inequalities in South Africa firsthand as a Fulbright Scholar and was struck by the comparison ten years later while back in his hometown.

Even under apartheid, Johannesburg was widely considered a desirable city in which to live. This falsehood mirrors the claim by many today that Pittsburgh is America's "Most Livable City," even as reports show that it is one of the worst and most unequal cities for Black residents.

Professor Dickinson argued that, as in South Africa, decades of racist government and business policies and practices have firmly institutionalized racial inequalities in Pittsburgh. Specific examples include Black displacement in the Lower Hill District and East Liberty, along with redlining, housing discrimination, exclusionary zoning, school segregation, and ongoing gentrification.

These policies and practices have established and worsened the racial inequalities we see in Pittsburgh today. The evidence is clear in terms of the significantly greater disparities in health, income, education, and employment in Pittsburgh by race as compared to other similar cities.

Professor Dickinson further argued that to build a successful city, residents must feel an attachment to its "moral vision"; they must feel they are a part of it and its future. But in Pittsburgh this sense of inclusion is lacking.

The talk was followed by a robust question and answer session with the community members present, with topics ranging from the issues of development and gentrification to economic disparities and political power. Some of the contributions to racial inequalities were discussed, including stagnating wages, the limited political power of the African American population compared to other cities, and the unwillingness of institutional power players to take effective actions for racial equality.

Development was discussed from a variety of angles. The need for governments to make significant investment in low-income Black neighborhoods was highlighted. Another community member urged for funding for Black arts to be included in community benefits agreements associated with development projects. "If we don't focus on that aspect of our future, we will have a huge problem for preserving Black culture," they said.

Professor Dickinson noted that Pittsburgh is unique in that government entities, including the City of Pittsburgh, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and the Housing Authority own a large percentage of land. He suggested that the land should be redistributed to the community on a large scale. The community land trust option puts resources firmly in control of the community, rather than the government.

Another community member stated regarding development, “We are given what other folks want us to have, rather than responding to our request for what we need.” Professor Dickinson also spoke to this point, suggesting that the entities that took a lead role in past development efforts, such as the Allegheny Conference on Community Development, need to place affected communities front and center in their work. The appropriate role of institutions like these should be a supporting role, not the lead.

The redevelopment of the Lower Hill was specifically discussed as far as the attempts to move forward with development without proper consultation of the Black community. Professor Dickinson, who is working with Bethel AME Church on its case for reparations, said, “The Lower Hill is an opportunity to make Pittsburgh a world-class city of racial equity and right historical wrongs. Developers aren’t realizing that this is that opportunity.” In regard to reparations, he posed the question, “How should the city be held accountable and be forced to bring those benefits back?”

Another community member spoke out economic issues, such as income inequality and occupational segregation, and emphasized the need for the private sector to be held accountable for these disparities. “Unless we get economic equality moving in the right direction, it will be difficult to achieve racial equality in Pittsburgh,” he said.

Professor Dickinson noted that the increased levels of activism during the past year are not only changing public opinion but are also beginning to effect institutional change on a policy level. The community discussion served to highlight several areas for change efforts that could effectively move Pittsburgh in the direction of racial equity.