Displacing Blackness: Planning, power, and race in twentieth-century Halifax

Ted Rutland
Associate Professor, Department of Geography, Planning, and Environment
Concordia University

Urban planning has long been seen as a way of improving human life through spatial means. But what if planning's commitment to human life is the cause of, rather than solution to, the destruction that often results? What if the human being, as planning conceives it, is more limited and race-specific than it might seem?

This presentation examines a century of planning history in the city of Halifax, Nova Scotia. Focusing on a series of planning initiatives that sought to protect or improve human life, it shows how planning's conception of the human being relied on particular distinctions between the normative and the pathological, and how Black life – and, thus, Halifax's longstanding Black population – was continually placed outside planning's vision of human flourishing. Drawing connections between the history of urban planning and emerging scholarship on anti-blackness, this presentation locates an anti-Black conception of the human being at the core of modern planning practice. Displacing blackness, expelling blackness from the sphere of the human, is integral to the operation of modern planning – not just in black neighbourhoods, but across the urban terrain.