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Trauma as Condition and Trauma as Claim: Advancing the Concept of Trauma in Planning Theory and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This paper articulates a framework for considering the relevance of trauma in planning. Planners may encounter trauma as either a social-psychological condition or as a political claim, with distinct emphases on process or outcome, and in psychic or public realms. We apply the theoretical framework to a case in a city in the US South to empirically show how trauma-informed practice principles can paradoxically both be healing and retraumatizing for communities that seek to reform mainstream planning institutions. Our case suggests differentiating goals of personal healing and systemic justice to distinguish strategies of trauma as condition versus trauma as claim.

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Introduction

Planners have long grappled with the relationship between planning and displacement, and the disproportionate burdens of displacement on the already marginalized. Whether through forcible removal by urban policy or through diffuse social-economic forces such as gentrification, residents not only experience loss materially, but psychologically and emotionally. How planners frame, encounter, and utilize the concept of “trauma” in the context of these impacts is the focus of this paper. Recognizing disproportionate negative impacts as traumas – psychological or emotional wounds so deep as to be unspeakable – has implications both for how planners engage with members of the community (Erfan, 2017) and for the profession’s obligations toward reparations for the harms it has caused (Williams, 2024).

Regardless of how displacement occurs, and irrespective of its material outcomes, self-aware planners should consider the psychological and emotional impacts on communities. For example, Peter Marris documented how slum clearance in places as diverse as Boston, Massachusetts (USA) and Lagos, Nigeria resulted in intense feelings of grief and loss for residents, even when displacement occurred to an area with improved physical conditions. Despite planners “solving” the physical problem of substandard housing, residents meant to benefit from improved

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conditions expressed loss of connection with the new place, preferring their previous physical conditions over the negative toll of social isolation (Marris, 1974). To explain the observations of deep bereavement and residents' struggles with the reconstruction of meaning of place, Marris drew heavily on psychoanalytic theories of attachment, sense of stability and development, and the psychology of love and grief.

Planning interventions have been a cause of trauma, which has implications for how planners work in community and how they might achieve goals around social justice and reform of the systems that harmed marginalized communities. Planning theoreticians have suggested intentional engagement with emotion as one way the profession might achieve transformation away from hegemonic patterns that have contributed to oppression through decisions about the built environment (Sandercock, 2004). For example, therapeutic planning aims to heal broken trust and forge authentic relationships across difference using methods that include therapy-adjacent techniques, such as facilitated storytelling and group meaning-making (Throgmorton, 2003).

In contrast to the psychoanalytic view of trauma as a condition to be treated, social justice and redress of historical wrongs are political struggles. While there are metaphorical parallels to "healing" traumas in the psychoanalytic sense, the act of claiming trauma and harm also serves a political function: to legitimize efforts and urgency to reform unjust systems and motivate legal or policy action. Claims of harm are among the most politically salient and identifiable motivations for action (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009). Thus, planners may be concerned with both the *condition* of trauma as a social-psychological state encountered in their work and addressed through creative and emotional engagement methods, as well as the *claim* of trauma as a political strategy to achieve broader goals of social change.

Here, we analyze our experiences working in the specter of historical displacement that triggered intense emotional reactions to a contemporary land-use development conflict in a small city in the Southern United States: Roanoke, Virginia. We came together during the City of Roanoke's process to update an area plan. The area is located directly north of a predominantly African American neighborhood, many of whose residents had experienced the destruction of, and displacement from, another historic African American neighborhood decades earlier. A resident activist group formed to resist the contemporary plan.

We are a leader of the resident activist group (Niamke), a trauma specialist and ally of the African American community in Roanoke (Knight), and scholars and teachers of urban planning from a nearby university (Lim, Stephens, and Wagle). Together, we planned and facilitated workshops with the resident activist group. Based on our experiences from the workshops, we attempted several strategies to change the community engagement processes in the city. For this paper, we analyze field notes, meeting minutes and transcripts, and media reports, from an approximately one-year period of collaboration from 2023 to 2024. We seek to answer two related questions: First, how does trauma as condition and as claim manifest in the context of the intense emotional and political implications of displacement of a marginalized group that seeks to organize social change? Second, in what ways are planning frameworks that address trauma and harm useful for achieving transformation?

Literature Review

Trauma and Politics

The word "trauma" originates from the Greek for "wound." In psychological and emotional trauma, the wound is often so profound that sufferers of trauma are unable to speak of, or

even identify the events that have caused their pain. The effects of intense pain may permeate the sufferer's life without them being fully aware of the impacts. Within the psychoanalytic tradition, the traumatized self "has been shattered following an overwhelming experience of violence or loss, an experience that cannot be rationalized yet recursively returns as a haunting experience to disrupt the coherence of our existence" (Chouliaraki, 2024, p. 18). Emphasizing the relationship between the unspeakable, language, and trauma, Freud and Lacan prescribed talk therapy to process trauma.

As the psychoanalytic tradition prescribes conversational therapy, speaking pain and suffering can play a societal role. The increased recognition of survivors and witnesses of suffering grew out of Holocaust survivors' public testimonials in the 1960s (Dean, 2017). Speaking trauma became tied to the assertion of truth and moral clarity. Giving voice to the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust served as a public call for sympathy for survivors to mobilize justice (Chouliaraki, 2024). Rather than addressing the psychoanalytic basis of trauma, bringing trauma into the public sphere generates claims of human rights violations and calls for justice.

We refer to the psychoanalytic description of the effects of trauma on individuals and communities as the *condition* of trauma. In contrast, we refer to the decision to publicly identify trauma as a *claim*, an act of public speech meant to mobilize collective action for systems change. Our distinction between condition and claim of trauma mirrors Chouliaraki's (2024) distinction between vulnerability (a condition) and victimhood (a claim). Table 1 summarizes the utilization of trauma.

Table 1. Trauma as condition and trauma as claim.

	Trauma as condition	Trauma as claim
Field	Psychoanalysis	Human rights
Sources of trauma	Interpersonal relationships, ego, language, parent-child relationships, violence, racism, loss of control	Injustice-related injury, social vulnerability
Realm in which trauma is addressed	Psyche — client and professional therapist or facilitator	Public — trauma spoken as truth for justice
Action motivated	Talk therapy for improved relationships with self and others	Collective struggle for system reform or legal protection for those who have suffered

Systems based on colonialism, White supremacy, and dominance as broader causes of spatialized trauma generate traumatic experiences requiring justice. Public recognition of harms caused by public policy led to prominent progressive social justice reckonings in the 20th and 21st centuries. For example, the United States issued monetary redress Japanese Americans in 1988 for internment policies during World War II; Indigenous groups' dispossession and displacement from land by the state have been recognized in the US, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Accompanied by cultural erasure and forced assimilation, child abuse and gender-based violence, displacement caused intergenerational trauma. In particular, slavery, anti-Black racism, and discriminatory policies caused intergenerational trauma in African American communities in the United States.

For example, Urban Renewal between 1950 and 1970 saw federal grants provided to local governments to remove "blight," disproportionately targeting African American neighborhoods. The designation of blight resulted in an immediate loss of wealth, with many residents never fully compensated for the properties seized through government processes. Fullilove et al. (2016) showed how the displacement of residents from these areas broke social ties among neighbors that psychiatrists consider protective factors that individuals and communities need

to withstand shocks and challenges. Fullilove et al. (2016, p. 11) terms this effect “root shock,” defined as the “traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one’s emotional ecosystem.” She documents how areas destroyed by Urban Renewal continue to have high levels of vacancy and “contagious” housing destruction and disinvestment, factors that negatively impact mental health and wellbeing.

Poe (2022) describes the inability to control changes to one’s own place as re-traumatizing, connecting trauma encountered by planners working in African American communities to deeper histories of slavery and White supremacy. For residents, the past is inseparable from present and future. Loss is experienced not only as loss of neighbors and neighborhood character, but as loss of identity. Poe (2022, p. 65) defines communal trauma as “harm and wrong committed against targeted racialized groups so horrendous that ... it disrupts conceptions of time and place, [causes] psycho-somatic reactions, ... and [causes] targeted groups [to] perceive spatial processes (planning and development) as threats to collective well-being.”

The planning literature’s broadened recognition of what constitutes the condition of trauma parallels the broadened understanding of trauma from the mental and behavioral health sciences. Health specialists now recognize trauma as extending beyond a diagnosis of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The emotional and psychological toll associated with repeated exposures to stressful experiences – such as abuse, neglect, domestic violence, family incarceration, community violence, poverty – frequently borne by women and people of color are now recognized as generating historical, collective, and intergenerational complex trauma (van der Kolk et al., 2005).

The Rise of the Therapeutic Ethos and “Therapy Culture”

While recognition of psychological harm has increased, ambivalence lingers around the rise of the therapeutic ethos. We briefly show how some of this ambivalence relates to our distinction between trauma as condition and trauma as claim.

First, the rise in application of mental health and psychoanalytical insights has coincided with the influence of consumerism, neoliberalism, and individualization, which prevent achieving broader social goals. Rieff (1966) and Lasch (1979) framed the rise of the therapeutic as a “rejection of the possibility of organizing collective life through systems of controls and prohibitions which impose a sacrifice on the individual for the needs of the collective” (Foster, 2016, p. 101). Others point out that the diffusion of “therapy culture” into other domains has resulted in the normalization of the “sick role” and victimization in everyday life, generating a need for experts, diagnosis, and further managerialism, an internalized form of control over individuals (Furedi, 2004).

Furthermore, claims to trauma and harm are not exclusively made by minoritized groups. For example, populist groups use displacement and harm narratives advancing grievances to claim being “displaced” by immigrants, non-Whites, and women: such impassioned pronouncements of injustice have become politically salient (Fainstein & Novy, 2025). In the United States, the intense emotional responses that accompany displacement – grief, mourning, anger, and shame – have been used to explain the political rise of Donald Trump and the Make America Great Again movement (Hochschild, 2016). MacIntyre (1981) has lamented the rise of the emotivist self, because its emphasis on subjective interiority provides no way of distinguishing between manipulative and non-manipulative discourse in the societal realm.

The intersection of emotion, technology, and far-right groups has engaged planning (Trapenberg Frick, 2016). “Therapy culture” intersects with changes in technology and the

political economy of media and Big Tech. Concepts such as emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2007), uncritical sentimentalization (Fassin & Rechtman, 2009), and the “platformization” of pain (Chouliaraki, 2024) capture how emotions are used to grab attention for profit, are exploited by social media algorithms controlled by corporations, direct attention away from social change, and incentivize diagnosis of victimhood or pathology for corporate or political gain. Tuck (2009) cautioned against the harms that deficiency narratives perpetuate in communities.

Nonetheless, others emphasize positive effects of the rise of the therapeutic ethos (Wright 2020). Therapeutic culture and “trauma talk” make experiences that have not been given space in the past, such as the abuse of women and children, more visible in society. When coupled with a justice lens, psychoanalytic expertise legitimizes marginalized experiences, making their articulation useful politically for strengthening social movements.

Planning Responses to Trauma as Condition and Trauma as Claim

Planning frameworks have focused on addressing the condition of trauma through empathic community engagement techniques and on using the claim of trauma to push for systems reform. We highlight two strands of planning that respectively emphasize the condition of trauma and the claim of trauma: therapeutic planning and reparative planning. We then draw attention to a newer area, “trauma-informed planning,” and suggest another model for planners’ attention: Kingian nonviolence.

Therapeutic planning is most associated with the work of Sandercock (2003), who emphasizes the need to grapple with memory for reconciliation, healing, or social transformation to occur. Recognizing the role of strong emotions associated with the traumatic contexts in which planners need to operate – fear, anger, hope, betrayal, abandonment, loss, unrecognized memories, and histories of disempowerment and exclusion – we need a language and process of emotional involvement and resolution of conflicts between groups (Sandercock, 2004, p. 139). Erfan extends these ideas, defining therapeutic planning as

Emotionally engaged planning, which intends to support a process of healing and reconstruction of meaning. It is a dialogical, rational, embodied and collaborative process that brings community members together and creates the conditions for them to work through collective traumas. (Erfan 2017, p. 37)

Others question how personal and interpersonal healing that is achieved in the context of therapeutic planning translate into broader institutional change (Schweitzer, 2016). Examples of personal and interpersonal transformation usually presume authentic engagement of emotion results in social learning, which transforms planners themselves and their interpersonal relationships, which then leads to the transformation of the profession. However, in professional roles shaped by wider cultural and structural forces planners are often not able to practice empathy. They may instead find themselves as “mindful planners in a mindless system” that rejects emotional ways of knowing and relating to others (Osborne & Grant-Smith, 2015 p. 677). In practice, cultures of professional conduct continue to privilege technical knowledge over emotional ways of knowing, potentially undermining the planner’s projection of professional judgment (Ferreira, 2013).

In contrast to therapeutic planning, reparative planning seeks to shift emphasis from the healing of communities that have experienced trauma toward the need for change within

state-led planning institutions. Goetz et al. (2020) and Williams and Steil (2023) argue that the institutions of planning must actively work to dismantle White supremacy and push for material resources to those who have endured past harms. Reparative planning aims to stop harm, change systems so they do not continue to cause harm, and make amends for committed harms (Song & Mizrahi, 2023). Reparative planning includes challenging and dismantling White spatial imaginaries of control and dominance over space that are implicated in perpetuating trauma (Bates et al., 2018; Williams, 2024). Thus, reparative planning engages with trauma as a claim that motivates the transformation of oppressive systems of power, control, and thought. While therapeutic planning emphasizes interpersonal connection and personal healing with a less clear connection to broader transformation of mainstream planning institutions, reparative planning emphasizes the material and structural, with lesser emphasis on the emotional and spiritual tolls of harm.

Admittedly, the distinctions are not clear-cut. While therapeutic planning aligns with the psychoanalytic tradition, in practice it is motivated by consideration of human rights. Erfan (2017), for example, grounded her work in Deep Democracy methods that address intensive talk-therapy-like empathic listening and are intended to improve democratic practice. Because planning is a normative activity that concerns societal action, the literature's articulation of the condition of trauma is often inextricable from the political implications of the claim of trauma. For example, Sweet and Harper-Anderson (2023) describe trauma (trauma as condition), call for accountability for this trauma (trauma as condition and claim), and mobilize the need for justice (trauma as claim). Therapeutic planning and reparative planning are not mutually exclusive. Williams (2024) suggests politicizing therapeutic planning so that it aligns with the goal of reparative justice. Although trauma as condition and trauma as claim are often intertwined in planning, we find it useful to establish the major orientations in understanding how planning theory and practice incorporate trauma.

Trauma-Informed Planning

In North America, scholars and practitioners suggest the idea of trauma-informed planning to recognize conditions of trauma when engaging with community. The phrase "trauma-informed" stems from the fields of mental and behavioral health and human services. A frequently-cited definition for "trauma informed practice" in the United States comes from the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), describing the "4 Rs" of trauma-informed practice: to Realize the extent of trauma in society; to Recognize specific symptoms of trauma in individuals; to Respond with empathy; and to actively Resist Retraumatization (SAMHSA, 2014).

SAMHSA principles alert service providers that behaviors and reactions that may seem out of place, incommensurate to the situation, or inappropriate can often be explained as trauma responses (e.g., extreme anger, suspicion, distrust, or apathy). The principles of trauma-informed care are adopted by service providers in diverse fields, including education, nonprofit organizations, public health, education, and criminal justice (Champine et al., 2019; van der Kolk et al., 2005).

Some planning scholars draw insights from trauma-informed practice, suggesting that planners form partnerships with trauma experts to learn about trauma-informed approaches

(Knapp et al., 2022; Reece, 2020; Schroeder, 2023). Schroeder (2023) defines trauma-informed planning as:

an approach to planning [that] infus[es] trauma-informed principles throughout the entire planning process... This includes ensuring the community has formal power and voice in all steps of the planning process; ... not overpromising on what planners ... can deliver; taking a strengths-based approach that values and highlights the community's assets... and providing opportunities that benefit the community from their perspective.

Some suggest that trauma-informed community building should be conceived of as precursor to conventional community engagement (BRIDGE Housing, 2018). Berglund and Kitson (2021) recommend avoiding re-traumatization through codifying trauma-informed principles of engagement.

"Trauma-informed planning" incorporates trauma as a condition that planners need to be aware of while working in community. These ideas are closely related to the orientation of therapeutic planning. Less addressed has been the politically strategic use of trauma as a claim for social justice and systemic change.

Kingian Nonviolence

We introduce Kingian nonviolence because of its significance to our case. Niamke is a Kingian nonviolence Level Two Organizer and has used its principles to lead the resident activist group at the heart of the case. Kingian nonviolence principles are based in the teachings of the American Civil Rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Reflecting on Kingian nonviolence, Colaiaco (1986, pp. 17–18) points out the "paradox" of how King (1965, p. 16) defined a successful nonviolent direct-action campaign: First, nonviolent demonstrators publicly exercise their constitutional rights; racists, including the State, are provoked, and unleash violence against demonstrators; witnessing the violence against nonviolent protests causes Americans of conscience to demand federal intervention; and finally, under mass pressure, the administration initiates intervention and legislation.

The paradox is that nonviolence provokes violence intentionally to expose injustice to a broader audience. Today, some might consider this process a traumatization. King himself suffered immense emotional guilt with the uncertainty of whether the traumas his followers bore would materialize into social change (Eig, 2023). However, King grounded the nonviolence concept in an outcome-oriented vision for social justice: achieving the ideal of his Beloved Community. Kingian nonviolence is not passive, but active in its provocation, and is full of the "positive content" of his vision, not the "negative understanding of the absence of harm" (Buck, 2024, p. 42). While having a strong outcome-oriented vision, Kingian nonviolence is grounded in procedural principles, such as the exercise of *agape* love through democratic participation and civic engagement. Furthermore, Kingian nonviolence is explicitly oriented for the public sphere.

Table 2 compares four frameworks – reparative planning, therapeutic planning, trauma-informed planning, and Kingian nonviolence – along three key dimensions: outcome or process-oriented emphases, the treatment of trauma, and alignment with the public and psychic realms.

Next, we turn to our case in Roanoke, Virginia to examine how the local planning context exhibited this framework of trauma.

Table 2. Comparison of four frameworks that engage with trauma and harm.

Framework	Ethical emphasis	Trauma/harm treatment	Realm
Reparative Planning	Outcome – The goal is material and structural change to make reparations for slavery	Trauma is primarily a <i>claim</i> that planners may choose to politically support as a justification for action.	Public – trauma/harm are spoken as truth for justice
Therapeutic Planning	Process – Goal is healing within the group.	Trauma is primarily a <i>condition</i> that planners may encounter and need to learn to work effectively with.	Psyche – often a controlled facilitation with the group that has experienced harm
Trauma-Informed Planning	Process – Goal is avoidance of re-traumatization for traumatized groups.	Trauma is a <i>condition</i> that planners may encounter and need to learn to work effectively with.	Psyche – consideration of interpersonal responses of groups that have experienced harm
Kingian Nonviolence	Process and Outcome – Goals are provocation of dialogic actions to achieve the Beloved Community.	Trauma is a <i>condition</i> and a <i>claim</i> . Harm (violence), and thus, trauma, are instrumental, to be used in action for the purpose of achieving social change.	Public – nonviolent acts of civil disobedience are staged to reveal injustice and coerce change. Psyche – drawing on cultivation of <i>agape</i> love to sustain hardship in fighting for justice

Case Background, Data, and Methods

Roanoke, Virginia is a small city in the southeastern United States, population 100,000. Within Roanoke is an area called Evans Spring, which at the time of writing, contained a cluster of privately owned, undeveloped, mostly forested properties zoned for low-density development. For over a decade, the owners of properties in Evans Spring have been pushing for an update to the area plan to allow them to rezone for higher density development. In 2022, the City initiated a process to update the area plan for Evans Spring, joining with the property owners to pay an external consultant to lead the area plan update. The consultant's scope included a requirement to engage the surrounding community in the planning process.

The consultant's process met significant resistance from residents of Melrose-Rugby, the predominantly African American neighborhood adjacent to Evans Spring. A resident activist group called the Friends of Evans Spring (hereafter, the Friends) formed to protest the plan update. The Friends opposed development of the forested area and instead wanted it to become a nature park. While some might discount the protest as NIMBYism, a history of racial discrimination and displacement of African American residents in Roanoke complicates this framing. Many Melrose-Rugby residents experienced displacement through large development and infrastructure projects during Urban Renewal. Moreover, Melrose-Rugby residents have less access to nature than people in other areas of the city. Although the Evans Spring parcels are private property, some residents have informally used the space to access nature for many decades. The potential loss of the forest thus had both material and emotional meaning. The nature of community engagement offered by the external consultant particularly troubled the Friends. Critics referred to the community engagement as “manufactured consent”: manipulative and leading to the predetermined preferences of the property owners and City officials (Yates, 2023).

Experiences that residents had during Urban Renewal shaped the Evans Spring issue. Roanoke had four Urban Renewal projects between 1955 and 1974. These projects displaced thousands of Black Roanokers as government seized land for large infrastructure projects, including a highway interchange. Today, however, much of the appropriated land remains vacant while promises of revitalization and affordable housing never materialized (Fullilove et al., 2016). As children, many members of the Friends experienced the loss of their homes and community, followed by subsequent traumas (including poverty, mass incarceration, effects of drugs and

violence) that have profoundly impacted the neighborhood. In the eyes of the residents of Melrose-Rugby, community challenges are linked to the specter of Urban Renewal. They believe that the city continues to make decisions that devalue its African American residents.

The Evans Spring area has long been eyed for its development potential for the region. The previous area plan for Evans Spring identified the tracts as suitable for commercial, residential and mixed-use development, and suggested an expanded highway interchange to serve the development (City of Roanoke, 2013). Residents protested the highway interchange and development during a previous planning process for the area. In 2011, a well-known African American elder and environmental advocate in Roanoke, Estelle McCadden, voiced her distrust of any City action in the Evans Spring area, saying “the city can do what they want to do for whoever they want to do it,” evoking the history of Urban Renewal and its displacement of Black residents. Recalling that Ms. McCadden’s protests seemed not to have been heard during the previous planning process – a pattern that residents interpreted as a continuation from the period of Urban Renewal – alongside the loss of property and displacement during the 1950s–1970s, members of the Friends began referring to the newest Evans Spring area plan update pejoratively as “Urban Renewal 2.0” (Hunter, 2023). Figure 1 shows the plan produced by the external consultant hired by the City: the Friends associated it with the previous period of Urban Renewal.

How to sensitively recognize the impacts of Urban Renewal on the African American community, while encouraging participation in mainstream planning processes, interested Lim, who was leading participatory action research projects in Roanoke. Niamke invited Lim to meet with the Friends to develop the group’s strategies. Together, we planned workshops with the group to strategize and navigate mainstream planning processes. Graduate students in Lim’s community engagement class helped facilitate the workshops. Following the workshops, the Friends continued their community organizing and activism efforts, with Lim providing expertise in urban and environmental planning and assisting with public comments.

Beginning with his involvement with the Friends in May 2023, Lim kept detailed fieldnotes of events and interactions. Workshop planning and discussions and interactions with the student facilitators were recorded and transcribed, as were discussions and activities during the workshop. Theo also gathered local media coverage (news articles and video) related to the Evans Spring development, and transcribed relevant City Council recordings.

This formed a rich text-based data set which Lim compiled and preliminarily coded to identify how trauma as condition and trauma as claim appeared in the case, and toward what outcomes. Analysis followed an abductive process (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). We were interested in how trauma appeared, *a priori*. Sometimes participants mentioned trauma explicitly, but other times we interpreted harm as trauma (for example as it related to the concept of “root shock” and the effect of displacement on the emotional well-being of residents). We remained open to other emergent themes. Lim frequently scanned academic and practice literature in search of new explanatory models, eventually finding theories related to harm discourses, and the rise of the therapeutic ethos and its critiques useful. Lim convened meetings to discuss interpretations of the themes with the other authors, who provided feedback and further contextualization and interpretation of the data. Kingian nonviolence was particularly meaningful to Niamke and the Friends, who used these principles in organizing.

Results: Trauma as Both *Condition* and *Claim* in a Planning Context

We report on how the concept of trauma emerged in our case, as both condition and claim. Recognition of the role of displacement and ongoing struggles with poverty and community



Figure 1. The recommended development plan for the Evans Spring area produced by an external consultant ignored residents' concerns. The plan shows residential and intensive mixed-used and commercial development, including big box stores, and a new highway interchange leading into a predominantly African American neighborhood (City of Roanoke, 2024).

violence influenced how we decided to facilitate workshops with the Friends using storytelling-based and empathic planning techniques. In the process we also attempted to use trauma as a claim, by moving emotional testimonies into the public sphere. While our experiences with trauma as condition resulted in positive emotions, efforts with claiming trauma included a mix of positive and negative responses, prompting us to reflect on our actions.

Trauma as Condition: Shaping Engagement Techniques

We facilitated storytelling-based approaches in the workshops with members of the Friends to address the high levels of emotion and distrust of outsiders. Friends participants reported examples of personal healing as a result of the storytelling and empathic listening exercises. In her work with an Indigenous community in Canada, Erfan (2017, pp. 40–42) lists personal healing outcomes that resulted from deep community engagement: participants willing to engage emotionally and share deeply, participants improved their interpersonal relationships and sense of community, participants turned feelings of victimization into empowerment, participants successfully negotiated internal struggles connected to their trauma, and participants used the language of healing in describing the project. Participants in our workshops reported similar outcomes.

For example, through the process of community engagement, the Friends connected the challenges of intergenerational traumas related to displacement, disinvestment, and marginalization with motivations for activism to protect the Evans Spring area. Through storytelling workshops, they realized that the problem they sought to address was broader than the fight for what would happen to the Evans Spring area: they found purpose in community activism and organization to improve livability. Participants reported that they felt strengthened as a group because of the deeper understanding of each other's stories gained through the workshops. One participant stated, "[sustained organizing] is possible because we know each other better, and we trust each other now more than ever, and we share a vision for what it is that we want out of our community."

Student facilitators and residents formed deep interpersonal bonds, helpful given the intense distrust that residents had of the institution of planning early in the process. One resident participant said of the process, "you all had me in tears, when I saw from your presentation that you all really heard us," during a debrief of our final workshop. Trusting relationships enabled student facilitators to speak in greater depth about the planning process and explore other scenarios for the Evans Spring area. Learning about the planning process shifted the Friends' previous position of outright rejection of any development on the site towards considering how they wanted to participate in potential future decision-making around the site.

Trauma as Claim in a Government Process

Following the workshops, we created a presentation to Roanoke City Council, suggesting that the City codify principles of community engagement that would allow the community to feel heard and to begin to heal broken trust between the government and residents, similar to how the Friends formed relationships with the student facilitators of their workshops. Theo was to make the presentation before Council.

However, the presentation culminated in a public conflict and rebuke of the Friends group and their attempt to request an alternative approach to community engagement. The scene is presented in vignette form in [Box 1](#).

Box 1. Bringing Emotional Pain into the Public Realm

Theo, a faculty member of planning at a nearby university is standing before seven City Council members. He has been sponsored by two of the members, along with the City's Equity and Empowerment Advisory Board to present on his experience over the previous six months with his students' workshops with the Friends. Today, his goal is to try to explain why residents have not been satisfied with the way community engagement for the updated area plan has been conducted and suggest a path towards transforming the adversarial relationship between the neighborhood and mainstream planners. He begins:

I am here to represent a process that my students and I went through with the group the Friends of Evans Spring. Although the group has very specific goals with respect to the future of that area, the topic of my presentation today is actually community engagement... I was aware that the Friends of Evans Spring were up against some real challenges in their goal to preserve that area as a nature park... However, I volunteered to use my graduate course, "Collaborative Planning and Community Engagement" to help the group. Over the 15 weeks [of storytelling-based, emotionally engaged workshops], we all found ourselves changed by the process of deep community engagement... In short, if the process of deep community engagement we went through with the Friends of Evans Spring could change us...we believe it could also point to a path for the City to transform its legacy and reputation of distrust in its public decision-making processes.

Theo's presentation is personal and emotional. He weaves together narratives gathered through the workshops: the trauma of Urban Renewal, the deep symbolic value of the Evans Spring forest, and finally, residents' emotional reactions after hearing his students tell their stories back to them at the final workshop.

Theo describes how, upon feeling seen and heard by the students, the members of the Friends, once staunchly against any development of the site, began to open to discussing the preservation of public green space alongside development, and being involved in future engagement with the City and developers. The approach succeeded in the transformation of the students into empathetic neighbors, in residents' learning about planning and policy processes, and in building trusting relationships between the two groups.

The presentation then shows a slide of principles that the students found useful in achieving these outcomes¹. Theo explains that the Friends have suggested that Council consider adopting similar principles so that community engagement can result in more productive outcomes, a kind of public healing of the trauma.

Theo continues, "this is the kind of relationship that the residents we worked with would like to cultivate with their elected officials, government staff, and anyone asked to "engage community" in a public decision-making process –" However, midsentence, he is dramatically interrupted by the Mayor banging his gavel on the dais to stop the presentation. A member of the Friends yells from the audience, "Let him finish!" to which the Mayor questions the expertise of the presenter not "staying to the issue and the facts" of Evans Spring, referring environmental impacts and cost-benefit analysis. He suggests that the council members who co-sponsored the presentation were attempting a "backdoor way to trying to get something else done" (Weir, City of Roanoke). Theo steps down from the podium. The following morning, the local newspaper reported on the City Council meeting on its front page, highlighting the conflict and outrage of the Mayor at the presentation. The Friends feel angry and humiliated on behalf of Theo and their own efforts to change the culture of the city.

Following the scene described in [Box 1](#), two other members of City Council rejected the validity of the Friends' claim that Evans Spring made them recall the feeling of Urban Renewal during later deliberations. One council member insisted that likening the development of the Evans Spring properties to Urban Renewal amounted to "spreading misinformation." This council member challenged the Friends' assertion that the external consultant's community engagement had felt manipulative and thus unsatisfactory, saying, "I've been to the community meetings myself... I know that we have plenty of information from those community engagement outreaches" (Roanoke City Council Meeting on Feb 5, 2024, [2024](#)). This council member rejected any emotional meaning that "Urban Renewal 2.0" carried for residents, such as grief and loss, and was only willing to accept its technical meaning.

However, bringing the claim of trauma to the public sphere did resonate with some. The Vice Mayor was joined by another council member in paraphrasing the group's message that the purpose of community engagement was to establish trusting relationships, and not merely to extract information from the community. He said,

What has been uncovered... is that there is... a lot of trauma that hasn't been addressed... I agree that storytelling is a contributor to healing. And I think that we need to model healing practices throughout this process... I would encourage us as a city to think about the wholeness of our city

and these healing practices that are emerging... Lastly, I'll say it takes courage to share stories. It takes courage to build trust... let this not be the end of that work.

Yet the positive reactions to trauma as claim were largely overlooked by the members of the Friends and in the media. The focus on the mayor's dramatic rebuke resulted in some members of the Friends interpreting the City Council meeting as a re-traumatization, stirring up feelings of being ignored and devalued by their elected officials.

Trauma as Claim in Broader Public Discourse

In the media and broader discourse, trauma as claim was effective at mobilizing attention and support of the Friends' cause. The framing of the Evans Spring area plan as Urban Renewal 2.0, and the connotation of harm that that slogan carried, resonated politically. While some considered the emotional conflict at the City Council presentation "traumatic" (with the mayor banging his gavel, audience members shouting, and some feeling silenced), the conflict actually served to catalyze the resolve of the group, and bring additional press coverage of the Evans Spring issue. The press coverage spread the phrase "Urban Renewal 2.0" to feature prominently in the subsequent City Council election campaign. Although the consultant-prepared plan for Evans Spring was narrowly adopted by the sitting City Council members in February 2024, by that July, all seven candidates running for Roanoke City Council elections were referring to the Evans Spring area plan as Urban Renewal 2.0, recognizing the inadequate community engagement that the Friends wanted changed (Gendreau, 2024).

However, some members of the Friends were wary of the indiscriminate use of trauma as claim in the media. For example, at one of the student-run workshops, residents frankly shared their resentment at how the media focused too much on high levels of gun violence and its traumatic effects in the community. They believed that narratives about the community's deficiencies were intentionally spread to devalue land, making it easier to acquire and hence displace residents and continue to ignore their concerns.

Table 3 summarizes the outcomes associated with the utilizations of trauma as condition and trauma as claim.

Table 3. Outcomes and roles associated with utilizations of trauma in a planning case.

	Realms	Roles for planners	Roles for community organizers/activists	Successes	Cautions
<i>Trauma as condition</i>	Psyche: Personal – interpersonal	Facilitate, listen, be an empathic and trustworthy representative of the planning profession. Implement trauma-informed practice.	Identify when internal group healing and bonding is the priority for action	Personal and group meaning-making, relationship and trust building	Weak connection to systems change
<i>Trauma as claim</i>	Public: Interpersonal – System	Advocate, interpret change, recognize claims	Identify when moving trauma into public sphere is the priority for action	Public recognition, spreading of awareness of injustice through salient messaging	Risks retraumatization, including experiences of silencing or dismissive responses; and unintended consequences associated with deficiency narratives

Discussion: Lessons for Planners Working in Contexts of Trauma

Our analysis shows that distinguishing trauma as condition from trauma from claim offers an alternative theory of change than the assumption that healing trauma at personal or interpersonal levels is the pathway to stopping systems of harm. Political change occurred through a different mechanism: through trauma as claim, in a distinct public arena. The case shows the public arena may continue to silence marginalized voices, which some might consider “retraumatizing.” Dismissive interactions accepted in the public arena are the norms of the oppressive system that produced the marginalization.

Our experiences parallel the ambivalences in the literature around the therapeutic ethos. While trauma as claim gave the Friends legitimacy, questions were raised about who actually had agency over victimization narratives, and whether such narratives would inadvertently cause a loss of agency over the neighborhood’s image. Rieff (1966), Lasch (1979), and MacIntyre’s (1981) critiques of the therapeutic ethos point out its lack of a teleological vision, a communally accepted desired outcome.

The therapeutic ethos would emphasize the emotional safety of individual members of the Friends over collective efforts (no matter how noble) that had the potential to cause distress or harm. We could have anticipated that silencing of the Friends’ vulnerable stories might occur when trying to engage with City Council. Trauma-informed principles would have suggested that we should limit our engagements to the largely positive outcomes achieved with the student-facilitated workshops, where we could control norms around power and voice, rather than risk interactions with larger political structures that had the potential to retraumatize.

Instead, we suggest that Kingian nonviolence reframing of the experience is useful because it combines a teleological vision of the Beloved Community with recognizing harm and violence (Buck, 2024). Kingian nonviolence is aligned with collective action and the human rights frame of trauma as claim. In contrast to trauma-informed principles’ emphasis on the avoidance of re-traumatization (as condition), Kingian nonviolence states that conflict can be generative. Niamke drew on these principles to solidify conviction for action (trauma as claim) for the Friends. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr was clear in his understanding in the development of nonviolence that its purpose was to be enacted on a public, political stage, for the purpose of transformation. He understood “the dramaturgical language of performance, scripting, staging, setting, production, and mediation” and that the provocation of harm and violence were instrumental to political transformation (Stacey et al., 2026, p. 17). Kingian nonviolence principles consider interpersonal relationship as core to transforming systems, and the framework promotes empowerment and healing from within the community that is most directly affected by a history of injustice, trauma, and violence. However, Kingian nonviolence principles also reflect the vision of King’s Beloved Community, a community so steeped in righteous indignation, *agape* love, justice, peace, and nonviolence, that racism, poverty, and militarism are no longer tolerated. Kingian nonviolence maintains acceptance of “self-chosen suffering and sacrifice” as one way that transformative possibility can be achieved.

In our case, the rebuke at the City Council meeting indeed did function as a “stage” that subsequently drew attention to the problematic way that community engagement was conducted in the City. Ultimately this did lead to change – through the establishment of a new program, Engagement Ready Roanoke in 2025, and in 2026, City Council eventually did revise

the Evans Spring plan, removing the planned interstate exchange, and allowing the areas designated for commercial retail to be used as parks and outdoor amenities (Freund, 2026).

Conclusion

This article suggests that trauma in planning can be considered as condition and as claim, and each serve distinct functions in planning processes. In our case, *trauma as claim*, and its roots in human rights and justice, provided a distinct theory of change for social justice efforts but it has largely been overlooked in planning theory, which often focuses on the psychoanalytic roots of *trauma as condition*. Evans Spring showed that consideration of trauma in planning may be paradoxical: acting according to trauma-informed principles to avoid retraumatization may discourage political action to change the systems of harm. Like other service providers, planners may do less harm to communities if they understood trauma-informed practice principles; but the political process of supporting communities in their goals to achieve justice in the public sphere is more within the wheelhouse of planners than is acting as emotional healers. This has implications for planning practice and education: when and how can planners work with community leaders to understand the intra-group healing benefits of imagining the future, reconstructing the past, and building cohesion? When and how can planners support communities in risk-taking (and potential re-traumatization) to move social change? The research has challenging implications for planning theory and ethics, and how we think about harm and trauma in the context of achieving change.

When working in contexts of trauma, planners should begin by acknowledging the paradoxical nature of addressing trauma as condition and claiming trauma in the public sphere with community members. The planning scholars in this case learned to take inspiration and instruction from our community partners' adoption of Dr. King Jr's idea of nonviolence and its unique combination of *agape* love and views of the roles harm and violence in the public sphere. But ultimately community leaders, and not outsiders or the mainstream institutions of planning, need to decide whether the risks of retraumatization and harm are warranted. In our case, the enactment of a vision of the Beloved Community was sufficient for such a trade-off to be made. Above all for planning practice, supporting the agency of those who have experienced trauma may serve as a guide to navigating the paradoxes of trauma as condition and trauma as claim.

Notes

1. Principles shown on the slide were sourced from Patricia Wilson's 'Mindful Action Rules for the Participatory Change Agent' (Wilson, 2019, p 221):
 - (1). When I'm sure I know what needs to happen next, I take a look at my assumptions.
 - (2). When I'm judgmental about what is happening, I question my assumptions and open my heart.
 - (3). When chaos breaks out, I stand calm and confident, knowing that something beautiful will emerge beyond what I could have imagined or planned.
 - (4). If I notice I'm trying to control, I let go.
 - (5). When I feel myself wanting to tell others what to do, I ask them what they see as possible.
 - (6). If I let ends become more important than means, I step away.
 - (7). If I begin to doubt, I remember to trust in the collective process.
 - (8). If this begins to flow, I know I'm meant to do this.
 - (9). If people are praising me for my work, I know I have failed to make it their success.
 - (10). I remember that I am working with them to realize their evolving vision, not my own.

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