



Unedited Transcript
M Pact Podcast Episode 76

Displacement is More than Housing

With Dr. Kathryn Howell, Director of the National Center for Smart Growth and Associate Professor, University of Maryland

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Grace Crunican (0s): Welcome to the M Pact Podcast. This is Grace Crunican, Interim CEO of M Pact, formerly known as Rail~Volution. More than a year ago, we launched our new name and tagline, M Pact: Mobility Community Possibility. We are a national organization working at the intersection of transit, related mobility options and community development. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of voices as we go deeper into how we leverage transit to make communities better for people.

Jeff Wood (43s): Hey there. I'm Jeff Wood, Principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. This month on the M Pact podcast, we're joined by Dr. Katherine Howell, Director of the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland. We talk about her daily e-bike commute, organizing around the Purple Line, the importance of eviction data and commercial displacement. Stay with us.

Dr. Kathryn Howell, welcome to the podcast.

Kathryn Howell (1m 15s): Thanks. I'm excited to be here.

Jeff Wood (1m 17s): Before we get started though, can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Kathryn Howell (1m 20s): Sure. I direct the National Center for Smart Growth at the University of Maryland. I'm also an associate professor there, and previously I co-directed and co-founded the RVA or Richmond Virginia Eviction Lab at Virginia Commonwealth University, where I was also a professor.

Jeff Wood (1m 35s): Awesome. Well, so I'm interested also like how did you get into this field of study of interest? Was it something that happened when you were a small child or was it something that you kind of fell into Like many of us did.

Kathryn Howell (1m 49s): I would say that's a mixed picture. I grew up, actually, we were originally in Ohio and sort of in that rust Belt dumps out into the Sunbelt. We moved to Georgia in the eighties and moved to the suburbs and that was my first rural suburban experience. And I started to kind of look around and go, Hmm, something's not quite right here. But of course, you know, who knows what urban planning is when you're 12 and, and in fact I didn't know until I was much older than that, that urban planning was a thing. And I worked in housing largely. I was worked with a nonprofit organization in the summers during college doing home repair in Central Appalachia.

And then after college and graduate school I was working for state and local government in housing and community development particularly. And when I started to look for PhD programs, I was a little unscientific about it. I had a master's in public policy and so I looked at public policy programs and they didn't quite fit. And someone said, Hey, you should check out Texas. I was like, okay. So I Google University of Texas housing and I found my PhD advisor. And I think what was really important to me was that they were working at the scale and at the level of engagement that interested me.

So housing to me, you know, there is great national policy around housing and that's really important, but housing happens at a very personal level and a very community level. And so I appreciated that that's where they were working and they were very community engaged, which that was part of why I wanted to get a PhD was because I was working in DC government, local government, and we were finding that while we had a lot of research needs and a lot of research interest, we didn't have a lot of research capacity because we were all sort of working flat out trying to do a lot of different work. And I would map things as I could, but it was just really hard to get really in-depth work done.

And so when I went to go for a PhD, I wanted to be really community engaged. I wanted to be community serving. And so that's actually really kind of how the career trajectories happened. But getting into planning was definitely a Google search to be honest. And, and really I was looking for something that fit what I was doing.

Jeff Wood (3m 47s): Who was your advisor, by the way?

Kathryn Howell (3m 48s): Elizabeth Mueller.

Jeff Wood (3m 49s): Oh yeah, she was mine too. Michael Loden and Liz actually watched over my master's report, so That's cool sharing that in comment too. Yeah,

Kathryn Howell (3m 56s): Absolutely.

Jeff Wood (3m 57s): How was your time in Austin? I'm interested in that as well. It's changed obviously since we were both there, but

Kathryn Howell (4m 2s): It has, you know, I went back, I don't know, maybe a year ago I was blown away about two things. One was that the downtown, it was recognizable and I can't even imagine if you grew up in Austin how it must feel to sort of look around downtown. And it's completely different. And I mean, I think it was pretty developed when I was there, but not that much. But what was even more striking was actually that the areas outside of downtown looked like they, like they were frozen in time and sort of the, the zoning was, has protected those areas and they were remain these single family areas.

And it was just sort of really striking how much things had changed downtown and just immediately south the river and in east Austin. But you know, the neighborhoods that had, you know, sort of power and influence when I was there had retained that power and influence and they had retained their single family detached housing and everything looked the same. They could just walk to more things.

Jeff Wood (4m 54s): Yeah, I'm sure we could do a whole episode on that, but we'll, we'll stop there. Yeah. I also read your recent commute diary at Greater Greater Washington. And how is that bike commute going?

Kathryn Howell (5m 6s): Fantastic. I get real joy out of it. I have to be honest. It's a 10 and a half mile each way commute. And I am really lucky. I live in Capitol Hill in DC and it's about three quarters of a mile from the Anacostia Trail, like it runs along the river. So I take that and I am on street for about three quarters of a mile on one end, and about three quarters of a mile on the other end. I'm off street for the entire rest of the ride and I get to see the wildlife and the river and it's just been truly stunning and a just a great way for me to clear my head.

And I love cycling. I will say I did buy an e-bike. You know, I, I love cycling and I wanted to love it at the end of the week when I, I went on nights on the weekend, and I think sometimes when it's your commute and it's, you know, 20 miles in a day, it's a lot. But it's been a lot of fun and a lot, it's just interesting to have conversations with people about it. And I, like I said, I just, it's there. I, I see herons, I see foxes and a very fat marmite, a lot of deer. Pretty cool.

Jeff Wood (6m 5s): Yeah, it's, it's just fascinating to, you know, once you're kind of on the ground with a place and feeling it through that slower and not that a eBikes necessarily slow, but you know, for me, like for example, like I ran track in high school and in college and I knew like 10 miles from the University of Texas every single road because I, I run them all. And so I feel like you get that kind of experience being on a, on a bike or even running or walking that you don't necessarily get when you're driving a car.

Kathryn Howell (6m 30s): Yeah, I always really enjoyed that. I, I've always felt very detached in a car in a way that I don't, I never really felt comfortable with, you know, you, you sort of are detached from the people around you, the sight, the smells, the sounds, and being on a bicycle,

out running, I used to love going to cities and running before my cartilage decided it didn't, didn't want to stick around. But, you know, the ability to really see that level of detail in a city, it's unmatched on foot or on a bike. And that's one of the beautiful things about my day is that I, you know, I see some of the same people, some of the same workers going to this park that I go through every day.

It's the same confus me people, we smile, we say hello, it makes the world feel a little bit smaller than it did. And it, it just, I'm outside, which is, is, I think there's a mental improvement to that. Right? Yeah. So I feel really lucky that, that that's something that I can do. And, and I know not a lot of places can do that. And I will say being, you know, I'm a d I've been a DC resident in DC's, bike infrastructure has come a long way in the past 15 years, past 20 years really since I started biking in the city. Population has also grown and traffic has also grown, but, but the biking has improved.

But, you know, I'm biking into the suburbs and actually I spend a lot of time going to meetings. Part of my job within the National Center for Smart Growth is meeting with elected officials, meeting with community partners and others. And I used my e-bike to get to all of them. And there's, there was one that was a little challenging, I will say, but by and large, the suburban areas, particularly inside the beltway here in Montgomery County and Prince George's County have been really expanding their bike lanes. And you know, I, I traveled to the Netherlands, I don't know, three years ago, and I watched all these kids biking to and from where kids, you know, eight years old all the way up through high school doing this on their own.

And I kind of thought like, wow, why do American parents like make work for themselves, right? Like I feel like every American parent should be like dying for really great biking infrastructure so they don't have to sit in the drop off line or they don't have to take their kids to every single event. It always astounded me. I was just, I walked watching, I got stuck behind a group of middle schoolers going to school one day and I was like, wow, universality of middle schoolers is incredible. I think that it does offer a lot more independence and I think people think about cars independence, but ultimately, you know, I, I can park anywhere, I can get somewhere pretty quickly.

I get to be outside. I don't have to wait on traffic. And that's the beauty of it, I think of, of good transit and good bike lanes. I think it creates a whole, whole lot more independence at all age levels.

Jeff Wood (8m 59s): Yeah, I like that idea of adult independence too, from their kids and thinking like that. I think that's something that Chris and Melissa Brulet talked about in one of their books as well. Obviously they live in the Netherlands now and they were like, oh, we can do stuff that where we don't have to worry about whether our kids are going to get to where they're going to go. It's amazing. And I think that there's a lot of folks that feel that way, and you're right, that we make ourselves do more work than maybe we have to. Well, you've been at the National Center for Smart Growth for less than a year. What do you think of, I know this is kind of a tough question to start off with, I apologize, but what do you think of the term

smart growth and how does it still work and, and maybe what are some of the issues that you've come across?

Kathryn Howell (9m 35s): You actually hit a great question because this is one that I have wrestled with a lot. So I come from a, you know, my background really is in thinking about tenant rights and anti displacement and community power. And so when I've told friends that I'm coming that I was moving to this job, there were a few reactions, like some people who know me and know kind of how I can take things, they're like, oh, that's really cool. And other people were like, oh, interesting. And I think that it speaks to kind of what smart growth has missed in a lot of ways.

You know, smart growth really started as a movement and it was really thinking about these questions of environmental sustainability and community sustainability. And even early in that time, there were activists that were saying, Hey, look like we've got to think about community benefits and they've got to be evenly, evenly spread. You know, they were looking ahead at this time and frankly in the nineties when smart growth really took off, you know, the nineties was not exactly a time when people were like, yeah, I'm moving downtown. Heck yeah.

You know, folks, were not flocking to cities. All of this norm, this norm that we have right now. And I, when I teach, I have to remind myself that most of the young people that come into my classroom grew up at a time when cities were always cool, right? They were born after friends, right? And cities were always cool, and it was always the place you were going to go at least for some point in your life. And that really wasn't a foregone conclusion in the nineties, you know, my dissertation was looking at the Columbia Heights neighborhood in DC that was really the planning process for which kicked off in the late nineties, and they were begging McDonald's to come.

And McDonald's is like, yo, I don't think so. Like, I'm not interested in that. And you know, they were begging people to come and be anchor institutions, and now that's not the problem. But it's hard for people to understand that, that saying that, look, we have to make sure the benefits are equally spread out. You know, that was a, that was an important thing to say, but there were people who were seeing it, and I think we always forget in the field that there was debate in the moment ish of ideas, right? And so this is one of those that like, there was a movement, there were people saying these important things about anti displacement, but as sort of development moved into cities and realized it was lucrative, smart growth ends up becoming a bit more of a development strategy than a sort of meaningful movement, you know, where we say, yeah, we want a little, you know, downtown outside of the city, we want, you know, the city to be walkable bikeable.

And we forgot that that's, it's not really sustainable, it's not really smart if it doesn't include people who've been there. If it doesn't include thinking about the meaning of that place and how do we incorporate existing residents and in fact center existing residents in the work because they're the ones who are most vulnerable when displacement happens, frankly. So I've been thinking about this a lot, quite honestly. Yeah. And so in terms smart growth, you know,

there's really that question for me of, you know, do we lean in and and actually claim what smart growth was supposed to be? Or do we say, you know what, we're going to find something else and figure out what what we are that is not, does not have all the baggage.

And, and honestly, it's something that I wrestle with in this job all the time.

Jeff Wood (12m 38s): It's interesting your comment about kind of a, you know, a debate at the time is really interesting too, because that's about the same time when new urbanism as a movement was coming around, there was this regionals discussion, but it's interesting to think about, you know, the ideas that went out in the end, but then also how they evolve over time or change over time. And I think that's a really interesting part of the discussion as well, because it did start out as that movement, but then kind of maybe tapered off in, in the popular imagination of planning schools or other places as well.

Kathryn Howell (13m 5s): Well, and it's, frankly, movement work is hard. Hmm. It requires money that doesn't exist. You know, we don't do a great job of funding advocacy work. We don't do a great job of funding organizing and mobilization. You know, our funders want very clear results. They want metrics that they can take back to their donors. They want real things that they feel like are making a big impact. And I think they don't often look at the long game. And, and there's some that are increasingly doing that.

So I do, you know, want to credit that there are increasingly some that are doing that, but the long game is that if you don't mobilize and, and build at the community level, you're going to end up with a situation where we've displaced a lot of people in our move to build sustainably. Which, you know, I, I will say as a side note, since we both know Michael Oden, he used to talk about, you know, if you've displaced somebody out of a city, you know, because you build sustainably, so you bring somebody in, you've displaced somebody who's probably got a less efficient car, who has, you know, all of these things in a less, you know, sustainable house.

Have you really gotten any net benefit from your sort of sustainable efforts? I think that's, to me is always, you know, even if you aren't as concerned about the human rights and the human, the sort of community power issue, the sustainability issue should be salient.

Jeff Wood (14m 27s): That's one of my kind of theories on some of, you know, obviously transit ridership in US cities is, is dropping in part because of the pandemic and part of the work from home and all those things. But there's another kind of one that I've seen in mostly in places like Los Angeles and others where it's interesting to think about that sustainability part where if you're pushing somebody out who used the bus every day, for somebody who only uses the bus once a week or once a month, that's a drop in transit ridership. And that's a big difference. And then those folks that get pushed out have to use their cars, and then they're likely to have an issue getting to the places that they need for work or get stuck in traffic.

And so their quality of life dissipates as well. And so it's kind of an interesting thought about that idea that Michael is talking about, which I, I don't think I've ever heard him talk about that,

but my time there might've been kind of before these discussions started popping up as well. Maybe that's my problem is I'm too old for the, I'm too old for the good discussions that happened later on. Well, what does the National Center for Smart Growth do then?

Kathryn Howell (15m 19s): So we have several different programs. I, I would say, you know, first of all, we were created around the time that Maryland was putting their smart growth goals into policy. So Maryland was an early adopter of smart growth ideas with the priority funding areas, which the idea was that we were directing state funding to particular growth nodes, right? We know that, you know, we want to keep growth growth here because there's all this open space we want to preserve and we want to reduce commutes and all of those things that was watered down over time with different administrations, politics being what they are.

But the idea was there that that's how we should be directing our funding. And so we were created to sort of support that, those ideas. And over time we've really expanded a lot. And I think this question, you know, the previous director, Garrett Knapp, you know, he was thinking about all of these issues and the impacts of smart growth. And so one of the, you know, in addition to our research on transportation and on housing more generally is, you know, we've, we work with the Purple Line Corridor Coalition. They're one of our programs under the National Center for Smart Growth.

And the PLCC is a wide community-based network of organizations, you know, partnering with enterprise community partners and funders, as well as with local organizations. We have Habitat for Humanity and National Housing Trust and several others who are engaged in this with the goal of preserving affordable housing and small businesses on the corridor and preventing displacement ultimately because we understand that Displacement is More than Housing, right? You can be in a place, but if you can't do the shopping and the community things that are really important to you, that's a form of displacement as well.

And so it was a really forward-thinking way. It has been up and running for about 10 years. Now. The purple line, I probably should explain that. I forget that some folks are not involved in this long saga of the Purple Line, but the purple line is essentially a light rail line that is meant to connect several ends of the DC metro system in the suburban area. So there's currently no rail transportation between many of our counties outside the DC Metro, but there's a lot of commuting that goes between those two. So particularly between Montgomery County Maryland, which is just north and west of DC and Prince George's County, which is north and east of dc.

And so the purple line is meant to connect these, it's been much delayed, very much delayed, but it is supposed to be up and running in 2027. And so the coalition was really developed because we knew that trans oriented development often has a displacing effect because it does raise rents. Yes, it increases the amount of housing, which is wonderful, but it's often in spaces that have been previously disinvested and therefore more affordable for low and moderate income households, particularly in our case, immigrant populations, black households and non-English speaking groups.

Jeff Wood (18m 13s): I'm wondering why it's important for the coalition to focus on these things like affordable housing and small business retention, because it's kind of an interesting process of thought that I feel like you're perfectly situated to think about, obviously. But I don't know if that's something that gets targeted when we're building these kind of large Transit projects.

Kathryn Howell (18m 31s): We often don't. I mean, I think increasingly there's a real focus on what's called what's ETOD or Equitable Transit Oriented Development. That's increasingly a conversation that's happening within the Transit field, and it's really focused on thinking about not just the outcomes. Yes, it's affordable housing because it's not very smart, it's not actually transit oriented, as we talked about, you displaced somebody to somewhere, but they can't take transit anymore. And so the idea is that, you know, we have to focus on the anti displacement element as we are growing, right?

We know these impacts. We've got decades of research saying that this is an impact of some of the investments that we've been making in our transit areas. And businesses are, are sort of the same, right? Rents go up for businesses as much as they go up for housing. We do demolitions of old shopping centers as particularly relevant in this case, which is in the suburban areas. We have all these old shopping centers that came up in the seventies and the eighties and the nineties that were very car-centric. So huge parking lots, big anchors, or one story that don't really match what's going on with a transit node and the ability to really could be, because at the same time we know that transit stops are most successful where there is density.

And so the combination of those things mean you have to be really attentive to who lives there. But when you get started and who's working there and who's owning businesses there, because it's, it, you know, when you do a demolition and build a new building, it's really hard to keep those spaces affordable for existing businesses, legacy businesses. It's hard to keep it affordable for a business that is, you know, a mom and pop running a restaurant. You know, you see a lot of that in the corridor, particularly in Prince George's County. But even across the corridor we see these really, I would say some of our best restaurants and shops are along the corridor.

We have just amazing, the whole world is happening along the purple line corridor and it's a really beautiful thing, but it's also getting more expensive. The rents are rising For, those folks who are running businesses, it's the same's happening For, those who are renting or owning homes on the corridor. So, you know, whether it's an apartment building that maybe it was built in the post-war period, it's a brick building might be in great shape. It's three stories, maybe it's not in great shape, you know, someone's going to buy. And the land itself is actually often more valuable than keeping the building.

And so based on what the rents you could do and the density that you could have at that space. And so, you know, those buildings are full of, in our case, they're full of immigrant families who are moving here, single adults who are working often in the area taking transit, who are, you know, working construction. They're owning businesses and they ultimately need to be able to

have affordable housing. And that's something that it's tough to do without really, really being intentional about it because there is a lot of land value there.

Jeff Wood (21m 18s): I find that small business one super interesting too, because we do talk a little bit about displacement and, and obviously the discussion about EO has taken off over the last several years, but I just saw actually research yesterday in the Twin Cities Finance and Commerce that was done by Dr. Fan at the University of Minnesota talking about kind of Displacement that happens, or you know, business shutdowns that happens during road construction and that could include, you know, Transit and things like that, but it actually impacts areas that are more urban, that are more suburban. I find that really fascinating too, because these are kind of businesses that have come up in these areas that have been low cost in the past, but then as soon as you make an improvement, they have trouble kind of keeping up with the increases in prices and increases in values and things like that.

And so, you know, one of her suggestions basically was that maybe we should extend some of the funding that we give them during construction till after, until they can kind of settle in. And I think that that's a really interesting kind of thought about, you know, housing businesses and this displacement problem that we have when we make improvements to areas.

Kathryn Howell (22m 14s): Yeah, I would say we, we often don't talk about businesses and I, I, it's really interesting because businesses are often, when you, when people talk about why they love their communities, yeah, there's probably, parks are maybe a big piece, but people love to go to walk to the coffee shop or go to a restaurant or go to the, the local corner store. There are things that make your neighborhood feel like home. And actually one of the other programs in the center, the small business anti-displacement Network is, is really thinking about this on a national level and they're asking questions about can we, you know, can we go beyond technical assistance, right?

We, we, we as, as the director will along a mom said to me, she's like, they're all like, we've been technical assistance to death, right? We've, we've all done it, we've all tried, but at the end of the day, right, the rent's going up and right now there's just construction that's, that's incredibly disruptive for these businesses and it's not evenly spread out, which is something that we've been talking with our local jurisdictions about that, you know, giving out all of that construction money at the same time to the same level is not really helpful because there's some businesses where it's really hard to get in the front door and there's some businesses, it's just kind of hard to drive down the street.

There's a difference there, right? And as you say, right, should we be thinking about this in the long term of how do we get situated in a new normal after construction? You know? And I think one of the things that the small business anti displacement network or SSB band, what they've been thinking about is, you know, can we think about collective ownership of buildings in the same way that we think about, you know, cooperatives and housing? Is there a way to kind of take the, the land outta speculative cost increases and make it so that it can be, you know, the the cost can be more predictable over time.

And I think that's something that's, it's, we've gotta be, do some creative work around businesses because we aren't thinking about it. For some reason, businesses tend to exist in this kind of ether of well, that's the change, that's how it goes. And I think, I think probably a lot of it has to do with the way that economic development, it tends to think, it tends to think in terms of new and investment. And I think that's, it's a changing perspective. I, I think is, especially as we watch these communities change, but that's been a really big piece of what ssb, a n and PLCC have both been working on PLCC at a hyper-local level n SB band and a national sort of network approach.

And they had their conference in, I believe, November, early November, they brought folks from all over the country thinking about these issues. And it was, it was really exciting and energizing to see people start to look around and go, oh, you're having the same problem I'm having. Let's talk about this. And the CDFIs were showing up and they're like, Hey, we can, we can work with you on this, and here's what we're doing that's creative in this part of the country. And it, it was really exciting. And that creativity, I think is, is a, is a big piece of I think what's needed in that space.

Jeff Wood (24m 56s): Yeah. It makes me think of like, you know, some of these smaller spaces are places of innovation even in, in food and, you know, businesses and retail that you can't do and if you have to pay more rent, right? Yeah. I think of places like, and I, I don't know if this is necessarily the case, but it's the thing that popped in my head and, and you might know more than I would, but Beaufort Highway in, in Atlanta, like thinking about kind of the food innovation that's happened there, just to the point where it gets, you know, nationally recognized as a place to go if you're into food. Yeah. But it, it started out as like a, you know, just kind of a few people starting businesses because they could on a, on a highway.

Yeah. And so, you know, those types of ways of innovating and also the cultural memory they create as well, that you don't want to take away the, the ideas that you don't want to make your life disappear that you remembered, right? Yeah. It's kind of those things happening as well.

Kathryn Howell (25m 41s): Absolutely. It was interesting. We went, I went to lunch with a couple of community partners and our director of the PLCC Sheila Ache, and we went to this Indian place there, and she's like, oh, my parents always come here. And she's from, she's right from that area that we were in. And she's like, my parents always come here for their takeout. And I was like, oh, okay. Like, and they, you know, they've been in the community for a long time and it, it was just sort of this, these touch points of places and, you know, another person being like, oh yeah, no, I remember this place from, you know, this, this thing. And, and it, it was really, it's really interesting as I've gotten to explore more and get to know the work that folks do in the center, it's an exciting, exciting spot to be.

Jeff Wood (26m 20s): Yeah, I mean, it's, it's really cool. Well, the previous podcast that we just released from the conference in Phoenix focused on, on health in all places, it's about major

healthcare providers like Kaiser Permanente and philanthropy, like the Pew Charitable Trust, thinking more about health and transportation and housing, have you collaborated much with the healthcare and philanthropy communities in the area where you're at?

Kathryn Howell (26m 41s): A little bit. I mean, so we've been, Kaiser Permanente has been a really strong partner with us over the years, and they've been, I mean, they've been a really big supporter of the PLCC because they realize this, right? This is this idea of of keeping people in place so that they can realize the benefits of being in walkable, Transit rich communities that remain culturally relevant and that remain connected both from a community standpoint, but also to services and amenities and doctors and all the things that people need in their daily lives.

So it's been actually really exciting to have that partnership over the years. And we haven't done as much with others as I recall. So again, I'm still pretty new, so I don't know all the partners, but Kaiser has been a really great, great partner for exactly these reasons. I think they recognized exactly what we were trying to do as an organization. Yeah,

Jeff Wood (27m 33s): I just, I feel like it ties together a number of threads that we've been talking about. Your research in the past is focused on physical and cultural displacement, which we just talked about a little bit. But I'm wondering, you know, kind of what connections we can make between allowing businesses to thrive, people to thrive, but also the health outcomes. I mean, it feels so important. It makes me think of Dr. Mindy Fulla love's idea of root shock, right? Like the whole thing of like, you could have these adverse health impacts just from leaving a place that you loved for a long time.

Kathryn Howell (27m 59s): Well, in the work that I did in Richmond around eviction and housing displacement there, I mean, we really found that the more we researched that actually the threat of having to move that sort of constantly having that over your head was, was a huge stress. You know? And when you talk to people who have been through an eviction and then the eviction follows you around, I mean, there are very few places in this country where your record is sealed after an eviction. And so that means that your next landlord will hear about it. And someone described it as worse than a criminal record. And if you can imagine the stress that that has on on you, that the lack of stability, that the feeling that you might be unstable, that is huge implications.

I can only imagine how parents must feel if they know, you know, their kids' whole social networks, their social networks, their parents, if they're in a multi-generational household schools and all of those things make a huge difference. And I mean, I think we, we discount a lot of times where we live as being really important and, and For, those of us who are very housing stable, you know, many of us have chosen to move. I've, I've moved, I've moved, you know, something like 23 times in my life, but I've chosen it every time.

And so yeah, it's destabilizing, but it was my choice. And so I was able to make a decision about where to live, what kind of job I was looking for, all of those great pieces. But when the choice

isn't yours and you don't actually know when it's going to drop the mental health, which I think really translates into physical health is huge. And then if you are displaced or you lose something that is an anchor for safety or like right now, you know, in the, in the corridor we've been discussing, you know, the, the roads are so torn up, you can't really walk.

It's like I, watching people with strollers try to get over a, you know, sidewalk that's been ripped up. It's appalling. But right. Walking is a huge part of, of health. I've biked it. So I also am aware that it's not a hoot for biking. So, you know, I just think about the, the health impacts from a physical health of this disruption of losing these touch points for the mental health. It can't be oversold. And I, I really appreciate that healthcare is, is thinking about these things finally, right? Like this is this disconnect between housing and health, right?

We talk a little bit about physical housing conditions and, and health, right? All those connections to asthma and lead, those have been ones that we've been talking about for years, mold, all of those things. But I think we often don't look around that and think about what does it mean and, and to our health to be housing stable? What does it mean to be housing unstable? What does it mean to be community unstable? If your community's constantly changing, you are losing your networks because people are moving away. Maybe you own your house and you are not, you know, paying a mortgage anymore, but your neighbors are going and your neighborhood doesn't really feel comfortable to you anymore.

All of that has real, real implications on the body.

Jeff Wood (30m 49s): I was thinking about this. I I lived in the same place for about 16 years and I feel like it was pretty stable. Obviously I was there for 16 years, but 'cause I was renting it, it was always a threat kind of hanging over my head of, oh, will this be the year that I have to leave? Or will this be the year that I have to leave? And so even being stable, I could feel that, you know, weight and I can't even imagine what it would be like if it's, you know, more real over time. Somebody gets evicted or somebody gets displaced because of the rents rising or things like that. So it is a real threat and I think that maybe we discount it to our detriment over time.

Yeah.

Kathryn Howell (31m 22s): Well and I think we also look at, we say well, you know, just go own a home. Which, which for so many reasons I think that's, that's, I'm

Jeff Wood (31m 30s): Almost laughing because it's Right, yeah. Laughing because he's comical,

Kathryn Howell (31m 33s): Right? Because not everyone, first of all, not everyone is, is in a place to own a home. If you don't have time to deal with home repairs, then just, it's a lot. Like I always joke, my partner and I went on our like third date to go buy a new water heater for him and, and you know, I, I laugh about it now, but of course like, like really this is what we're doing. But, but I think that there's, there's really a, there's a stress to that of course. But we don't,

we'd sort of say home ownership. That's the answer to instability. Well, the answer to instability is what the rest of the world has been doing for decades, which is tenant protections.

And so that people have predictable rent increases. So they, they know that if they pay their rent and they don't violate any rules, then they can stay, right? Because the landlord can't just sort of say, you know what, we're not going to renew this year. And in a lot of places that's not the norm. I mean, you know, DC has what's, it's a just cause eviction law, so you can't be evicted that your landlord has to renew your lease if you're following all the rules. But Virginia, Virginia, you can be doing all the things that are right and the landlord decides they don't want you there anymore and you're out.

Yeah. And that's not counted in the eviction numbers, but that's still a forced move. I mean, many places in the country, that's, that's the norm. And, and I think we have to really reimagine housing tenure and that renting is not just a step to home ownership for a lot of folks. It's actually a sort of lifetime situation. And that doesn't have to mean that you have to be unstable. I think we have to really reimagine that.

Jeff Wood (32m 59s): Yeah. Well, with all the work at the center on the purple line, small businesses and active learning, what are you finding out about the structures or policies you need to really push for community involvement and good community outcomes?

Kathryn Howell (33m 11s): Hmm. That's a big question.

Jeff Wood (33m 13s): I'm

Kathryn Howell (33m 13s): Looking for a number between one and 1 billion.

Jeff Wood (33m 18s): We're trying to get all the answers in one podcast. I know. Ah,

Kathryn Howell (33m 20s): See I think we talked about this. I don't have all the answers.

Jeff Wood (33m 24s): I don't either.

Kathryn Howell (33m 26s): Well, I think some of the, you know, there's some microlevel things that we've been working on and I think that really some of our partners have been pushing, which is questions around how do we protect tenants in changing places. I think I've worked in DC for the past 20 years, but the counties have also been really making strides and thinking about how do they do rent stabilization so that there's predictable rent increases. And that's been a really exciting thing to watch. You know, I think we often think about rent control as some, you know, friends thing where you're paying \$300 for rent for this enormous apartment that you inherited from your grandmother.

That's rent control. And that's a very different thing, the rent stabilization, which says, look, we can't, just because the market goes up, it doesn't actually follow that you need to, or just

because we have a housing crisis does not follow that. You need to increase the rents by 10, 20% year over year. And so it allows for predictable increase. So usually sort of tagged to some level of inflation, right? And I think that's been really exciting to watch that the counties who are recognizing that the rent increases have just been too much.

At the same time, I think we have to work on preservation of affordable housing. I think that's always been one of my big areas that I found really important, partially due to my, where I started, but I think an exciting thing to see across the country is people, more people talking about a right of first refusal, which is when either a jurisdiction or the tenants themselves have the right to purchase their building when it's up for sale, pay the same price, all of those things. But just that they're, they can actually keep it affordable if they, if they choose. And I think that's been an important tool in the toolbox in terms of preservation, of course, funding.

And then on the other side is we have to work on our supply. There's a lot of places that have been, you know, all going back to circling back to Austin, you know, there's some places that have been allowed to be frozen in time while we up zone, you know, places like East Austin with populations that are the most vulnerable to change. And so we have to start saying, look, we can't just up zone where we think we aren't going to get the huge community opposition or lose donors. We've gotta really be bold and actually look at, you know, where are our transit stops? We cannot have a one story shopping center atop a metro stop in dc but yet we do because it's an area that's worth high income.

People who have historically been able to fight anything that looks like density. And so we've got to be bold because we need to be producing more housing and we know where the demand is, right? If, if you're looking at price as a function of demand, I am just going to go with the basic analysis and I, I'll let all the economists tell me how, how wrong I am. But because we also know that race plays a role and all these other things play a role. But if we're saying that price is a function of demand, well the highest prices are in some of these neighborhoods, and yet we are not building where those, the, the demand is we're building and creating demand somewhere else.

And I think that's something that is a real problem because if you build in the area where the prices are the highest, the people who might otherwise then keep moving somewhere else more affordable are going to be able to stay there. You know, you're going to start to start to actually work on your supply problem without doing it on the backs of low and moderate income households. And so I think that that's to me is really important in our, you know, it's not just density, yes, density, but also where are we doing it and how are we doing it and to whom. And I think that's, that's a big piece of it.

You know, everybody wants a walkable community and one of the ways you get walkable communities with retail is having some sort of density that guarantees some people want to spend the money there.

Jeff Wood (36m 57s): Total number of rooftops for single businesses and more rooftops mean more businesses. And I, I think that's pretty simple math to a certain extent,

Kathryn Howell (37m 6s): Typically. Yeah. It's hard to, it's hard to convince somebody to come in and open a business where there's like three people who can walk there. Right. And no parking.

Jeff Wood (37m 13s): You came to the center from Virginia Commonwealth University and you've co-founded the RVA eviction lab. What parts of your work from there carry over to your work at the center now?

Kathryn Howell (37m 23s): I mean, I think a lot of what I just talked about is really thinking about these questions of what does it mean to be housing unstable? Who is the most vulnerable to, to instability, eviction, gentrification, displacement. They're, they're all connected. You know, they're different stages of, of a speculation process, I'll be honest. Right. Many times, you know, and this is again disclaimer, not all landlords are evicting at the same rates, right? There are some landlords that are evicting at extraordinarily high rates and some that don't, that barely do any evictions and actually try to avoid it because they may know that they may know their tenants or they're just not interested in, in doing that.

And when you map that out, there's a geographic component to it and you find that the areas where you have the highest levels of evictions are areas with poor quality housing, with high percentages of low and moderate income, particularly renters of color, right? Even even controlling for income, controlling for things like home value and other, other issues. Racial composition is actually the strongest predictor of neighborhood eviction rate. Something like double the, the impact of any other factor we're seeing that happen in areas that the prices have been depressed over time, largely through things like racialized zoning and historic pieces that have, that have, that have shaped our built environment.

Things like our urban renewal and disinvestment and all of those things. And so, you know, we're seeing that as a speculative piece. So people will buy a building, not put a lot of money into it, and are able to then kind of churn through tenants pretty quickly. And the fees are actually often quite lucrative. And I think I would say, you know, many people have done a lot of research on this in Atlanta and in obviously Princeton has, has put out a heck of a lot of research on this on a daily basis. But, you know, a lot of folks are finding the same thing.

It's not just us that there are particular kinds of landlords and those are often the ones who are doing a lot of speculative work. And so when we come back to this question of gentrification, right? A lot of these areas where we are building and where we are upzoning and creating demand are areas that were previously disinvested for. All of these reasons I talked about in terms of the speculative market for housing. And there are all forms of housing instability. And so for me it wasn't a real leap to see the same things that are, that are impacting instability for renters in Riverdale Park.

Maryland is the same thing that's, that's at its root what's impacting renters in parts of Richmond, Virginia and on the south side of Richmond. So that was really important for me to understand and understanding the, the factors and the data that lead to that. You know, my colleague Ben, Theresa and I who ran the center, Ben still runs it. We, you know, we, we came to eviction from two different directions and I was thinking about anti displacement work and, and he was thinking about financialization of housing, but we met eviction because, you know, there was a community need.

We, we, we were not sort of seeking out eviction as a topic. We were brought in with community partners who were looking for data, better data on, on the work. And so we were really there for that. And so, you know, for me, I keep that, that larger question about anti displacement and community power in the back of my mind as I'm doing most of my work.

Jeff Wood (40m 35s): And it's interesting how you all put together all that data mapping everything and, and it tells you a, a fuller story of, of what's going on, which I think is really important. You know, the data was there but didn't exist in the, the way that you all, you know, were able to collect it and, and tell the story. And so I think that the ways that you all came at it actually ended up being this beautiful kind of connection that created a wellspring of information that is needed for learning about evictions.

Kathryn Howell (40m 59s): Oh, absolutely. You know, it's interesting, we were often quite stymied, Virginia data is only released at the zip code level and we actually released is a loose term. It was actually scraped by some partners, but it's still only at the zip code level. And you know, if you're, if you've ever done much work in, in this area, zip codes are not particularly helpful unless you just sort of want to point at something and say, ah, there's a thing there, which is codes, which Right, right. Zip codes

Jeff Wood (41m 26s): Are so unique as a data analyst and mapmaker myself, zip codes were the bane of my existence, honestly.

Kathryn Howell (41m 31s): Exactly. You just feel like, oh really? Yeah, but, you know, elected officials, sometimes that's helpful for them to be able to track things generally, but not to be able to do much action. And, and we were working with partners who wanted to know, you know, we had service providers who were like, we want to know where to go and, and use our resources. We want to know where to send, you know, our people who are trying to work with kids and the organizers were like, we want to know who owns what building so we can make these connections. We want to make connections to other things and we want to know where we reach out and, and try to organize the tenants.

And you can't get that from zip code level data. And so we're sitting there one day in a meeting and we're just like, what if we started the other direction and started with the parcel database from the city, fill in the data after that. And that's what we ended up doing initially just for the city of Richmond. And we expanded to the two surrounding counties and then we built a partnership with University of Virginia who has some fantastic data scientists connected to the

equity center there. And we were able to develop the Virginia Victors catalog, which put the data out at the landlord level with a few caveats.

We still have, obviously everything's kind of hidden behind LLCs, but we did do a lot of fuzzy matching and learning these terms to, to sort of collapse some of the data categories. 'cause you'd have a lot of different people under slightly different names. They were the same entity, et cetera. But the idea being that, look, you know, we aren't interested in pathologizing tenants. Right. There's a larger issue going on there. But what we are interested in is looking at these high evicting landlords because again, it's not uniform. Some landlords are not evicting very much and others are evicting a lot.

And we have to really kind of think about the structures that are in place and what are the incentives in place. And we can't do that without really understanding who and where and how it's happening.

Jeff Wood (43m 19s): I love that your data collection actually got a lot of evictions thrown out of court because of rules in the Caress Act too. That's an interesting kind of thing that happened.

Kathryn Howell (43m 28s): Yeah. That brought a lot of joy. We, and we didn't hear about that until I, I think like six months later. No. So we were able to, because, so Ben brought in this information about financialization and his dissertation work and early research was looking at rent control buildings in New York City and really doing a, a financial deep dive into these buildings. 'cause New York has just a wealth of data and he included who financed the buildings. And so as we were thinking about developing this database, we said, why don't we just add, like, he's like, why don't we should just add this in there too, you know, who knows if we'll need it, but we'll just, let's just go ahead and add it in there because it's an important data point for all these reasons.

But the upshot was that then when the Caress Act passed, which meant that any building that had been financed through the federal government, Fannie Freddie, that they could not evict their tenants, but in exchange they could actually extend their loans. And so we were able to run a, the first and only at the time list in the country of buildings that were covered under the CARES Act in the city of Richmond. You know, the other folks were scrambling to do it. We had to, the reason was because we had had developed the data in this sort of surprisingly forward, forward thinking way.

And so we, we gave that list to all of our community partners, largely the, particularly the, the tenant attorneys and the, those who were working on emergency rental assistance and emergency issues with tenants. We were on a phone call months later and one of the attorney attorneys was like, oh yeah, we got a whole bunch of the cases thrown out because of that list. So we really appreciate it. We're like, oh my God, I wish you would've told me this. Like we, it was like the best, most amazing day, right? This is, this is a community engaged researchers' dream is to be like that useful that you actually get, you know, cases thrown outta court.

'cause it's just so rare that we really have that kind of direct impact on tenants, at least that we see it. And so it was really, really energizing for us. And it was energizing for all of our staff members and we're like, Hey, this, this matters. And we had a few of other of those incidents moving through that it really just, it was so important. And you just think about the data often gets treated like it's not connected to people. And particularly data science is often very sort of theoretical. Like, oh, let's try, let's, let's get all the data. But you know, I think if you're thinking about who you're making, who you're putting data together for, who's it being designed for?

And it's being designed for communities, you can actually have a huge impact on the work that is happening in our communities. And, you know, our communities partners knew exactly what to do with it. You know, we, we gave some spreadsheets to a couple organizers who took that and ran with it. And it was phenomenal. It's

Jeff Wood (45m 57s): Great. Also, how do you train your students, you know, to think about the history of place and people and those types of things that are connected to all of the things that we've talked about.

Kathryn Howell (46m 6s): So I teach a history and theory course for graduate students. I love it. I'm sure you're sort of like, Ooh, did I just take that class? Yeah, I did. And planning theory, students planning.

Jeff Wood (46m 16s): I, I like planning

Kathryn Howell (46m 16s): Theory. You love. Oh good. Oh good. Well see, there you go. We're good. You should see

Jeff Wood (46m 20s): My bookshelf behind me. I have all the,

Kathryn Howell (46m 22s): The, the books, I mean, a lot of students dread it. They come into class and I ask, you know, I was like, well, what do you want to get outta class? And, and it's okay if the answer is to get out of the class. And Yeah. There's no small number of students who are like, well, it's required. I have to take it. And they come out actually really enjoying it. And part of it is because I do connect in history, history, history and theory to me are super intertwined. Theories don't arise out of a vacuum. They arise out of something that's happening at the time. Right. This is why smart growth is interesting to talk about, right?

This idea that like what's happening in the seventies, eighties, nineties matters for how smart growth ultimately evolves and in many cases is derided. And for, you know, you mentioned new urbanism that was coming out around the same time. And, and I think it's the same sort of thing, right? What were we trying to solve for at the time? And so I do a lot of really digging into, you know, original sources. I always think that's really important. I also dig into the debates that are happening at the time. I mean, whether that's around urban renewal, which I

think is really in slum clearance and all of those things that were happening at the turn of the century.

Like why did they, did people think that this was actually a, an answer? What was sort of the, the, the debate happening? Because I think otherwise you sit there and you're like, oh, it just happened and we've evolved since then. And if you don't understand that actually the same fights over weather and how, and for whom and to whom we redevelop were happening in the 1930s and fifties and sixties as they are today, the same kind of players are involved unless you understand that you can't really make a good look and honest look at what's going on.

And I think you end up approaching each new thing a little, a critically. And I think that that to me is really powerful is that there were fights over, over urban renewal. You had, you know, on the one hand you had historic preservationists who were like, well, we've got all these great historic assets that we're losing. And you have some planners who were like, you gotta be careful. We tear down. There's life between buildings. They're saying all these really things that we think about today. You have Jane Jacobs who's talking about the street ballet and the importance of eyes on the street. And then you have the American planning association's like, you know, the problem with urban renewal is not the displacement, it's that it's not big enough.

We should actually do more urban renewal and connected to highways. And so we did. And so, you know, there's some real, there were actually real debates going on. And then I think it's important to acknowledge that as an idea. Urban renewal didn't just sort of happen to win. You know, there, there was a fight there and communities were rising up and saying, this is not cool. There were real protests. I think DC's a great spot to look at that, or Baltimore, you know, where Barbara McCully got her start standing in front of bulldozers in, in, in Little Italy.

And you know, that's why 83 comes down from Pennsylvania, goes through Baltimore and dumps right to the inner harbor. There's a reason why Baltimore's or by DC has a, a highway that stops at New York Avenue. It was a real fight. It was a real protest. And I think that's really important to teach students about kind of what's happening in the contemporary time and how that influences the way we think about community engagement, community power and voice. Whose voice and what's the nature of that voice? I always organize, I organize around a few questions and, and they really are about who had power in the situation and where these ideas come from in the first place.

Jeff Wood (49m 42s): What are students most surprised by that they didn't know before?

Kathryn Howell (49m 45s): You know, what Pre 2020, I probably would've had a different answer. 'cause you know, I, I came back from the summer of 2020 and my students were just a different group. But, you know, I think they're often surprised some of these debates really surprised them. Like, wait, there was somebody saying that it was wrong. Wait. And I think often it's kind of the, you know, I take, actually one of the interesting things was we, when I was teaching it in Richmond, I had, we had a, an alum of our program to, I had asked her to take

students on a tour of the Chaco bottom neighborhood in Richmond, which is the oldest neighborhood in the city.

And it was also the center of the second largest slave trading area in the country from 1845 to 1865 due to Louisiana purchase and the depletion of soil in Virginia. And I think they get really surprised by what Prezoning life was like. They sort of don't really understand that actually there was a, a health and safety, there was a really complicated conversation happening around housing and health happening at, at the turn of the century because cities were not healthy places to be, you know, and, and zoning arose for a reason.

And that, you know, some of those reasons were really good. You know, it wasn't healthy to be, you know, seated next to a tallow factory and all of these things and not have great sanitation. All of these sort, you know, all this, these pieces. It wasn't great to not have building codes. Right. We, we brought building codes in for a reason. It's because otherwise we had an unregulated market that was going for highest profit on construction. And then, so the construction was not great. You know, there are all these reasons that when you watch them kind of get that connection, you're like, yeah, these sort of conversations are long right.

Planning has been responding to what's, what happened at the turn of the century for a century, you know, for, you know, seriously. We've been really thinking about, you know, what happened in the, in the 19th century and trying to react to that for, for a hundred years. So I think that's, that's often the surprise is the, the kind of what things were like the reason for these things evolving. 'cause right now, you know, we tend to poo-poo zoning and we tend to poo building codes because they increase the cost of housing and they increase the cost. Like, and I think maybe the lesson is often that, you know, ideas can be used by anyone and that that power actually matters in these conversations.

You know, zoning was, was almost immediately used for racialization of cities to harden the lines of race in cities. But it was also used and, and and really was promoted by folks who were trying to deal with health and safety. And so ideas and how they evolve and that they're not new. We all like to think when we're, we're in our twenties that we're, we got it all. We got the newest idea.

Jeff Wood (52m 27s): That's that's what I was thinking when I was in my twenties. Yeah. Now I know. I don't know anything.

Kathryn Howell (52m 31s): I know nothing. I know nothing.

Jeff Wood (52m 34s): So, last question, what are you looking out for in 2024?

Kathryn Howell (52m 38s): Hmm, great question actually. 'cause I'm in the middle of trying to figure that out. One of the things, you know, I'm, I'm new in the job and so I've done a lot of learning over the first six months or so and looking forward to more of that and really getting a sense of where the centers should, should go in the next, you know, next few years. We're

thinking a lot about data. We talk about the things that I carried with me from, from Richmond. Just thinking about data and how we can use data to support our partners is a, is a big one that I'm looking forward to exploring.

Really thinking about the connection between and really making explicit the connection between cultural landscapes and smart growth. You know, we do it through PLCC, through SSB a n in very implicit ways, but I think the center needs to be really explicit about the ways that we are thinking about smart growth. Is it, you know, what is what, what is it? So for me that those are the things that I'm looking out for on a, on a personal level. And through the center, obviously there's some exciting conversations happening locally in terms of the politics and, and what's changing.

So I, I hope to see a lot of those good decisions continue and kind of expanding access. And there's some really exciting national conversations going on as well around housing and, and transportation that like I would never have guessed would've happened frankly, even five years ago. So it's reason for hope that we're having different conversations about housing justice and we're having different conversations about transit access and environmental justice than, I mean, we ever would've imagined having even five years ago.

So I think it's an exciting thing to watch and I look forward to, to seeing where it goes.

Jeff Wood (54m 20s): Awesome. Well, Kate, thanks for joining us. We really appreciate your time.

Kathryn Howell (54m 24s): Yeah, thanks for the invite. This was fun.

Grace Crunican (54m 38s): Thanks for listening. Find out more about our work by visiting our website, mpactmobility.org. That's M as in Mobility and Pact as in agreement mpactmobility.org. Thank you.