

# ERASING RED LINES

JANUARY 2020

## EPILOGUE WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Russell Weaver

### INTRODUCTION

Around the time that the final installment of the Cornell University ILR Buffalo Co-Lab's three-part Erasing Red Lines series was going to press, Miriam Axel-Lute, the Editor of Shelterforce magazine, published an article titled "The Opposite of Deficit-Based Language Isn't Asset-Based Language. It's Truth-Telling."<sup>1</sup> The context for the article is that researchers and practitioners who work in community development and its allied fields tend to use terms like "blighted," "at-risk," "vulnerable," and "distressed," among others, to describe the neighborhoods where they focus their efforts. One issue with this "deficit-based" language is that it "risks reinforcing some of the same negative stereotypes and perceptions that the organizations using the language are actually fighting against."<sup>2</sup> At the same time, it "can communicate the idea that these are inherent characteristics and not the result of circumstances."<sup>3</sup>

These difficult realities tend to send community development folks off on searches for comparably asset-based language to reframe problems as opportunities. While this sort of reframing can have its upsides, Axel-Lute observes that "relentless positivity culture has been called out as unhealthy and unhelpful to social justice work."<sup>4</sup> So, if it is problematic to use deficit-based language to refer to spaces targeted for community development,<sup>5</sup> and it is unhelpful to simply put a more positive spin on deficit-based language, then how do the parties involved in community development work communicate with one another, let alone with their diverse audiences? Drawing on a panel discussion from the 2019 Opportunity Finance Network conference, Axel-Lute offers the following poignant advice:

#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
SYSTEMIC PROBLEMS REQUIRE SYSTEMS THINKING	2
SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY WEALTH FOR ALL	6
SYSTEMS-CHANGE STARTS WITH US	10
NOTES	11



“The way to avoid the problem of having the struggles of individual people or places represent something inherent and immutable is to explicitly point out the systems at work—past and present—that cause them. If you’re talking about a problem, use language that reflects that systematic disparities and communitywide problems in fact have systemic causes, that harm has been done, and that these are not self-caused problems, and explicitly describe those systems whenever possible.”<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely this call to action to which the Erasing Red Lines series was responding. While the reports spoke of “distressed communities” and places experiencing “decline,” the core message—threaded through all three reports—is that patterns of “distress” and “decline” are products of a flawed and discriminatory political economic system. The formal act of mid-20th Century redlining was chosen to animate this core message because it is tangible and recognizable, and because its legacy is still so visible on the map today.<sup>7</sup> Yet, to conclude that redlining is the sole reason, or even the main reason, for contemporary patterns of spatial inequality would be to misread the reports. Rather, redlining is merely one, albeit (in)famous, example of a biased system at work, reinforcing its biases.

On that note, how should the reports be used? And where do we go from here? This Epilogue tries to succinctly answer these two questions by recapping the essential themes, tools, and takeaways from Erasing Red Lines.

### **Systemic Problems Require Systems Thinking**

To follow Axel-Lute’s advice and commit to “telling the whole truth”<sup>8</sup> about why some places appear to be more distressed than others, it is essential to engage with and explicitly identify as many characteristics of the system(s) responsible for producing those patterns as possible. Unfortunately, following through on that commitment can be daunting and difficult. Systems are complex, colossal phenomena that perform most of their functions outside of view. Complicating matters further is that most of us are conditioned to respond only to what we see and experience.

Access the entire  
Erasing Red Lines  
series at DC@ILR  
Buffalo Commons

For example, we are quick to call for the demolition of vacant or abandoned structures that contribute to neighborhood blight, and decision-makers are often content to heed those calls;<sup>9</sup> however, reacting to individual occurrences of vacancy and abandonment does nothing to expose and interrupt the processes that are likely to produce more of those occurrences over time.<sup>10</sup> In other words, we whack moles as they appear at the surface, but we do not address the underground network of tunnels from which the moles emerge. Part 1 of Erasing Red Lines made a case that we need to shift our focus from the surface to the tunnels, and Part 2 introduced a tool to help us do just that: the iceberg model of systems thinking.

Recall that systems thinking involves asking ever-deeper probing questions about how different parts of a system interact and influence one another, and how those interactions lead to consequences that can be seen or felt on the ground. In other words, systems thinking challenges us to go “below the surface” to uncover the systemic (e.g., structural, cultural, and political) characteristics that produce what we see “above the surface.” The iceberg model is a visual aid for asking those questions. Shown in Figure 1, the model suggests that, like an iceberg, what we see on the ground is only a small fraction of the system that produces observable outcomes. Most of what we would like to see and know lies beneath the surface. Just under the surface is where we are likely to find patterns of a certain outcome in space or time, which would indicate that what we see is part of some larger scope or longer-term tendency. Regularly occurring tendencies, such as persistent patterns of segregation and poverty, rarely happen by accident. Rather, they are produced or enabled by mechanisms that are baked directly into the structure of the system in which we are operating.

The structural elements of a system include its institutions of government and governance, the interrelationships within and between those institutions, multi-level sets of laws and regulations, decision-making protocols, and the competitive modes of allocation, production, and consumption that are ubiquitous in market economies. Despite the well-known propensity for, especially, these latter structural elements to produce inequitable individual-, group-, and place-level outcomes,<sup>11</sup> they have endured as seemingly permanent fixtures in our political, economic, and social systems. The reasons for their staying power lie at the bottom of

**Systems thinking involves asking ever-deeper probing questions about how different parts of a system interact and influence one another, and how those interactions lead to consequences that can be seen or felt on the ground.**

the iceberg, in society's mental models, or the "attitudes, beliefs, morals, expectations, and values that allow structures to continue functioning as they are."<sup>12</sup> While there are too many of these mental models to list and unpack here, some of the most durable—and arguably most dangerous—include:

- that all forms of competition are good for society, and that economic actors are inherently competitive and motivated purely by financial incentives;<sup>13</sup>
- that all economic agents are equally capable of "winning" resources and status in a competitive political economic system;<sup>14</sup>
- that government should stay out of market competition—its roles are to support market functions and protect private property;<sup>15</sup>
- that progress in society is evidenced by quantitative economic growth, that all economic growth is therefore good, and that economic growth can occur unabated, without regard for ecological carrying capacities or related constraints;<sup>16</sup>
- that impoverished people and places are to blame for their circumstances;<sup>17</sup>
- that affluent people and places are self-made entrepreneurs who are likewise responsible for their circumstances, regardless of the extent to which entrepreneurial success depends on infrastructure (e.g., accessibility on a transportation network, utility provision, availability of high speed internet, presence of unique or noteworthy amenities, etc.) that is provided by nature or society, not by the individual entrepreneurs; and, among others,
- that current generations are not responsible for undoing the harms of past generations—including but not limited to practices of genocide and slavery<sup>18</sup>—despite the evident legacies those past practices have left in the form of vast, persistent, and transcendent racial wealth and employment gaps, racial disparity within the criminal justice system, and countless other contemporary inequities.<sup>19</sup>

...unpacking mental models...

As a tool for systems thinking, the iceberg model challenges users to think deeply about these and related beliefs, values, norms, and goals, and to call them out where and when they appear in the structural components of a system in order to illustrate how their presence gives rise to patterns of inequitable outcomes. The pro-capital, racialized beliefs and goals that motivated and informed 1930s and 1940s redlining offer clear examples of base-level mental models manifesting in the structure of governance, leading to decision-making that exacerbated patterns and trends of spatial inequality that can still be seen in many places today.<sup>20</sup>

Beyond its value for helping users to “tell the whole truth”<sup>21</sup> about observable phenomena like neighborhood “distress” and “decline,” Figure 1 illustrates how the iceberg model also provides a critical lens through which to view policies, programs, campaigns, and related attempts to address pressing social and environmental issues. In particular, the four zones of the iceberg correspond to four broad classes of responses to observed problems.<sup>22</sup> At the surface level, responses are immediate reactions to particular events. For example, when a city commits to demolishing housing units following public ire over life-threatening injuries sustained by a firefighter at a neglected vacant home, that city is reacting with a measure that is unlikely to affect the extent to which more units become vacant or abandoned over time—the moles that pop up get whacked, but the ones that are tunneling to other corners of the yard are still there, ready to break through the surface at any moment.<sup>23</sup>

**...think deeply about these and related beliefs, values, norms, and goals, and to call them out where and when they appear in the structural components of a system...**

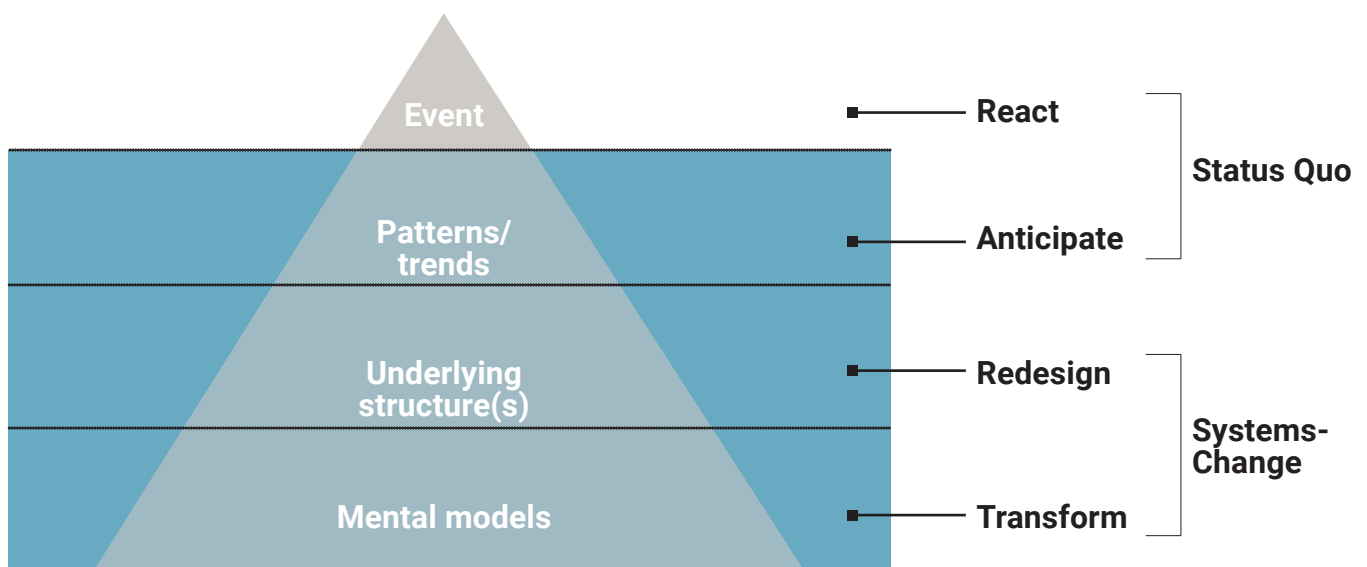


FIGURE 1 The “iceberg model” of systems thinking<sup>27</sup>

One layer down, responses that anticipate and aim to lessen the impacts of certain events are undeniably more proactive in their execution, but they tend to be equally as reactive in their substance. For example, anticipating that homeless persons might contribute to perceptions of “disorder” in a given place, most major cities now have or have previously passed laws<sup>24</sup> that criminalize sleeping in public places, soliciting for donations, and numerous other activities that aim to invisibilize homeless persons by “annihilating the spaces” that they must necessarily occupy.<sup>25</sup> While certain cities have celebrated instances where these laws seemingly help to increase the aesthetic appeal of targeted areas—in other words, the regulations anticipated where visible “disorder” would occur and sought to prevent it<sup>26</sup>—the regulations certainly have not affected the manifold, intersecting causes of homelessness, nor have they lessened the extent of homelessness. Rather, they merely function to relocate a systemic issue that is held in place by mental models which prioritize aesthetics, private property values, and competitive, market-based policy instruments—in other words, paving over the backyard to keep the moles from popping up there doesn’t mean that they won’t soon tunnel their way to the front yard.

Responses that merely react to events—whether those events are observable in the present or anticipated to happen in the near future—tend to preserve and reinforce the status quo (Fig. 1). By retaining the essential structure and logic of the existing system, they allow the same events and patterns to occur in other places and at different times. This observation leads to the second key takeaway from the Erasing Red Lines series: truly impactful systems-change requires a combination of transforming mental models and redesigning system structures to match those transformations (Fig. 1).

## **Toward a System that Builds Sustainable Community Wealth for All**

One of the recurring arguments made in Erasing Red Lines was that the current political economic system prioritizes quantitative growth over qualitative development—that it is characterized by an overarching goal of [financial] capital accumulation, and that its market mechanisms push people and places to compete endlessly as they attempt to achieve more (i.e., grow their) private wealth and status relative to their peers. Crucially, any system whose design

**...impactful systems-change requires a combination of transforming mental models and redesigning system structures...**

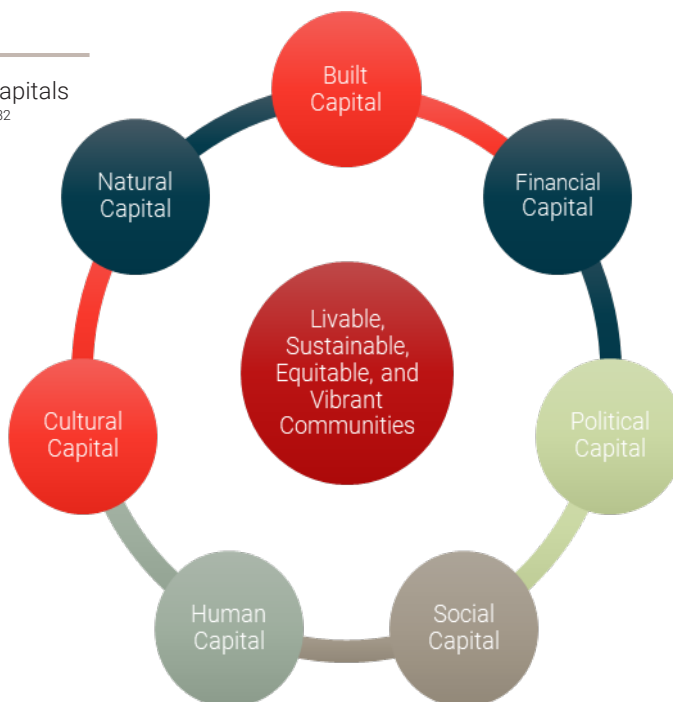
promotes competition as a virtuous means and private wealth-maximization as a noble end is bound to create persistent and inhumane patterns of inequality.<sup>28</sup> The only way to overcome such outcomes is to collectively transform the desired ends and then redesign—or craft entirely new—means that align with those ends. That is, we need new, more humane mental models from which to (re)build cooperative structures that reflect and advance us toward more equitable futures.

The Erasing Red Lines series spotlights several alternative mental models that are,<sup>29</sup> or at least appear to be,<sup>30</sup> influencing on-the-ground experiments in structural change in the City of Buffalo, NY. Chief among those mental models is the view that market-driven economic growth does not deserve to be the benchmark of success in public policy, nor in society at large. Instead, as suggested by the influential community capitals framework (Fig. 2), society is made better off when we point our compass toward building and maintaining collective community wealth. More specifically, when collective well-being becomes our lodestar, “successful” communities are no longer the ones where income or property values soar ever higher; instead, they are the communities that are characterized simultaneously by: (1) livability (high quality of life for all residents); (2) sustainability (ecological health and integrity); (3) equity (even distributions of resources, wealth, and (dis)amenities);

**The Erasing Red Lines series spotlights several alternative mental models that are, or at least appear to be, influencing on-the-ground experiments in structural change in the City of Buffalo, NY.**

**FIGURE 2**

The community capitals framework (CCF)<sup>32</sup>



and (4) economic vibrancy (good jobs that pay living wages for all members of the local labor force).<sup>31</sup> In other words, successful communities are the ones that have high, well-connected, and equitably distributed levels of the seven tangible and intangible forms of community capital identified in Figure 2 and defined in Part 3 of this series.

A redefinition of “success” that is grounded in notions of equity and collective wealth, as opposed to economic growth and private property, is a useful starting point. However, it is difficult to imagine that society can be pushed and pulled toward new ends without also altering the means that have given us our present circumstances. Along those lines, Part 1 observed that:

“It is all but certain that the insiders who drew the... (in)famous [red lines of the 1930s and 1940s] came from privileged social positions and put the needs of capital ahead of the needs of people and communities. In the nearly nine decades that have passed since that time, volumes of scholarship, as well as countless lessons learned from practice, suggest that it will be inclusive, representative, forward-looking groups of [residents] working together who will erase those lines and start to solve the wicked problems of persistent decline and spatial inequality.”<sup>33</sup>

Put another way, the type of systems-change espoused in Erasing Red Lines will require shifting attention toward process—toward ensuring that residents are viewed as potential partners in community governance and community development, who have unrivaled local knowledge, but who face multiple, diverse, and intersecting barriers to civic participation. Instead of mistaking lack of participation for lack of interest, new mechanisms for eliminating barriers to inclusive participation in democratic processes must augment or replace the mechanisms that allow technocratic processes to implement “expert”-driven solutions, regardless of what residents—the true local experts—might think of those “solutions” or want for their communities. Likewise, instead of viewing conditions of “distress” as deficiencies with a community, comparatively asset-based approaches that explicitly acknowledge, and aim to connect, reinforce, and mobilize, the multiple tangible



and intangible stocks of capital that exist within communities must replace market-based strategies that seek to redevelop spaces by way of appeals to external developers and other outside interests.

The preceding paragraphs implicated at least five interrelated spheres where changes in mental models can work together to inform the structural changes that might finally begin to Erase Red Lines of persistent spatial inequality. Figure 3 summarizes those spheres and compares the mental models that prevail in our current, Low Road system to those that might replace them in a next, High Road system. Whether in 25-block urban areas largely controlled by visionary community-based organizations,<sup>34</sup> or in radical overhauls of local government policy programs,<sup>35</sup> these sorts of shifts are

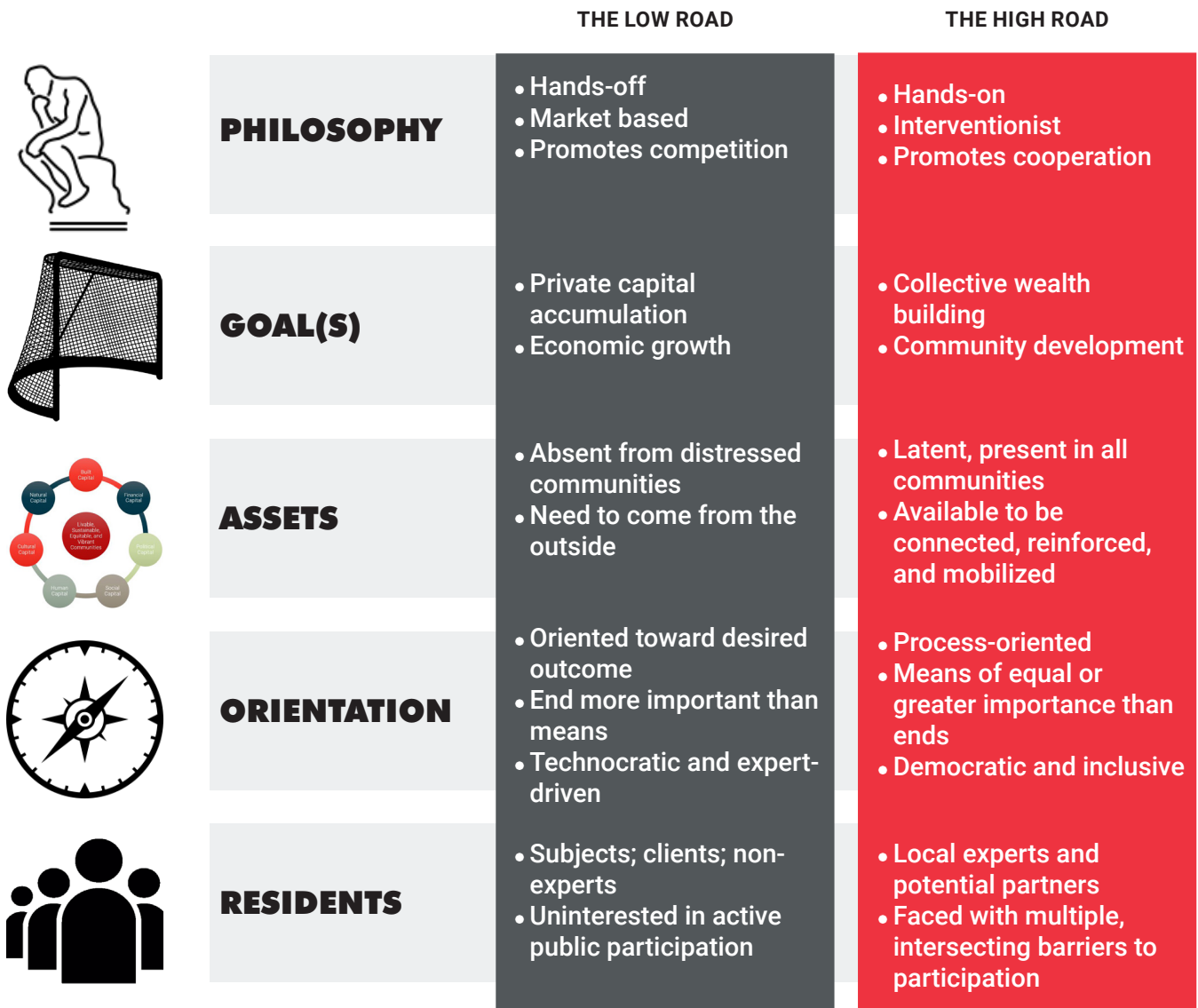


FIGURE 3 Changing systems as changing lanes: Five exits off the Low Road

beginning to take root. The great challenge ahead will be to nurture the soil around them, and to create more hospitable environments that allow them to grow and disperse their seeds to the fullest possible potential.

## Systems-Change Starts with Us

To conclude this series, it is perhaps over-idealistic and even utopian to suggest that by simply changing ourselves, we can change our flawed system. But, if systems thinking can teach us anything, it is that small interventions, when made at the right leverage points and mixed with the right feedback effects, can produce big changes.<sup>36</sup> In that sense, we are all potential leverage points that are connected to countless other potential leverage points. We all exist in multiple roles—as neighbors or coworkers, parents or teachers, students, voters, parishioners, and limitless others. The more we adopt, embrace, and embody High Road mental models in all of our various roles, the larger is their potential to diffuse throughout the bottom layers of our social iceberg, until what emerges at the surface breaks through with enough force to finally expel persistent, centuries-old red lines of decline and spatial inequality from the landscapes that we share with one another. The tools and concepts presented throughout Erasing Red Lines are intended to help initiate this long-term, collective project. They are intended to help us become part of the solutions to a flawed system by questioning and understanding how we might inadvertently be part of its problems.

To return to a running analogy from this Epilogue: why is it that we whack the moles that pop up in our yard, and why do we create physical barriers to prevent them from emerging in other spots? Is part of the reason that we have a deep-seated belief that mole hills are ugly and make our yards less aesthetically pleasing? Do we worry about aesthetics because of what the neighbors might think, or because most municipalities or subdivisions have rules designed to prevent yards from becoming unsightly? Do we fear the formal or informal sanctions that are built into these structures of government and governance?<sup>37</sup>

What if we didn't take those beliefs as given? What if, instead, we conceptualized yards, or even just small portions of yards, as collective landscapes that we share with moles and innumerable other species? What if we mobilized our neighbors, friends,

**...small interventions, when made at the right leverage points and mixed with the right feedback effects, can produce big changes.**

coworkers, and other network connections around that (re) conceptualization? How might the surface look different—and how might the structure, including the amount of time and resources spent on dealing with “pests,” look different—if we did away with entrenched, competitive, status-seeking mental models?

Erasing Red Lines was an attempt to get readers asking these types of deep, systemic questions of the everyday realities that we too often take as given—as being fixed in place, incapable of movement. If the series of reports even marginally succeeded in its attempts, then readers ought to know by now that no matter how large they are, the icebergs of the everyday are far from immovable. We are all leverage points, and by applying pressure to our mental models and the structures that rest atop them, we can, together, make systems-change a reality. You now have a starter kit of tools and case studies to help you take part in this ambitious, collective project.

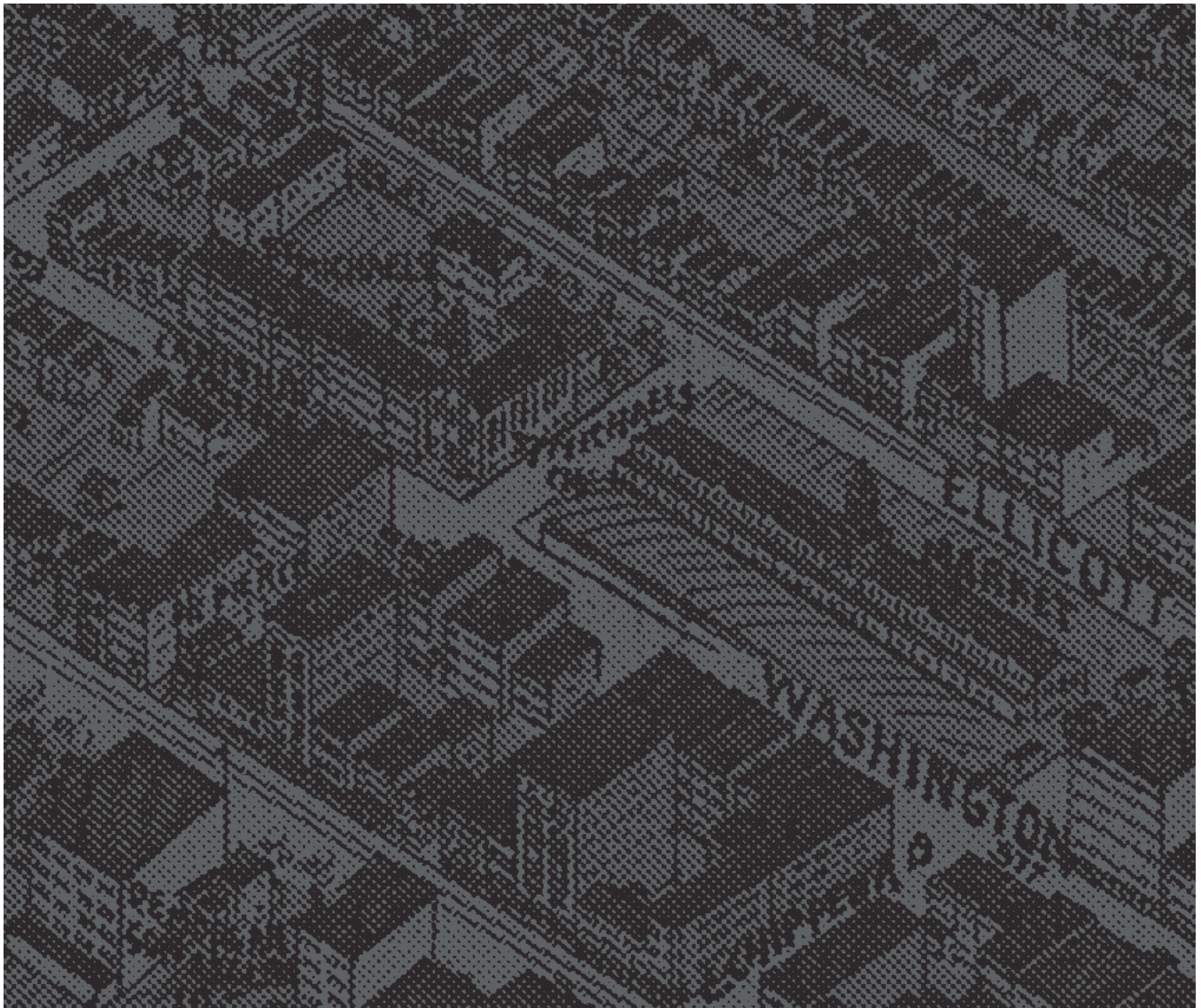
# PASS IT ON.

## Notes

- 1 <https://shelterforce.org/2019/11/12/the-opposite-of-deficit-based-language-isnt-asset-based-language-its-truth-telling/>
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid. Axel-Lute cites the following articles in this quote: <https://www.byrdie.com/positive-thinking-psychologists> and <https://jezebel.com/is-the-power-of-positive-thinking-bullshit-5369467>
- 5 Note the attempt at avoiding deficit-based language.
- 6 <https://shelterforce.org/2019/11/12/the-opposite-of-deficit-based-language-isnt-asset-based-language-its-truth-telling/> (emphasis in original).
- 7 See Erasing Red Lines Part 1: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/buffalocommons/415/>
- 8 <https://shelterforce.org/2019/11/12/the-opposite-of-deficit-based-language-isnt-asset-based-language-its-truth-telling/>
- 9 Knight, Jason, and Russell Weaver. “Strategic demolition for shrinking and shrunken cities: A case study from Buffalo, NY, USA.” *Journal of Urban Regeneration and Renewal* 13 (2020): Forthcoming.
- 10 Weaver, Russell, and Jason Knight. “Can Shrinking Cities Demolish Vacancy? An Empirical Evaluation of a Demolition-First Approach to Vacancy Management in Buffalo, NY, USA.” *Urban Science* 2, no. 3 (2018): 69.
- 11 Erasing Red Lines Part 1.
- 12 Northwest Institute. A Systems Thinking Model: The Iceberg. Available online: <http://www.nwei.org/assets/A-SYSTEMS-THINKING-MODEL-The-Iceberg.pdf>.
- 13 Weaver, Russell, Sharmistha Bagchi-Sen, Jason Knight, and Amy E. Frazier. *Shrinking cities: Understanding urban decline in the United States*. Routledge, 2016.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Daly, Herman E., and Joshua Farley. *Ecological economics: principles and applications*. Island press, 2011.
- 17 <https://shelterforce.org/2019/11/12/the-opposite-of-deficit-based-language-isnt-asset-based-language-its-truth-telling/>

- 18 <https://www.gq.com/story/mitch-mcconnell-ancestors-slave-owners>
- 19 Powell, John A., Connie Cagampang Heller, and Fayza Bundalli. "Systems thinking and race: Workshop summary." (2011); Lebaron Sims. *Bound: How Race Shapes the Outcomes of American Cities, Prosperity Now* (2019).
- 20 See Erasing Red Lines Part 1
- 21 <https://shelterforce.org/2019/11/12/the-opposite-of-deficit-based-language-isnt-asset-based-language-its-truth-telling/>
- 22 Northwest Institute. *A Systems Thinking Model: The Iceberg*. Available online: <http://www.nwei.org/assets/A-SYSTEMS-THINKING-MODEL-The-Iceberg.pdf>.
- 23 Weaver and Knight (2018).
- 24 Saelinger, Donald. "Nowhere to go: The impacts of city ordinances criminalizing homelessness." *Geo. J. on Poverty L. & Pol'y* 13 (2006): 545.
- 25 Mitchell, Don. "The annihilation of space by law: The roots and implications of anti-homeless laws in the United States." *Antipode* 29, no. 3 (1997): 303-335.
- 26 Vitale, Alex S. *City of disorder: How the quality of life campaign transformed New York politics*. NYU Press, 2008.
- 27 Adapted from Weaver and Knight (2018) and Northwest Institute (n.d.).
- 28 See Erasing Red Lines Part 2: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/buffalocommons/417/>
- 29 Erasing Red Lines Part 2
- 30 Erasing Red Lines Part 3: <https://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/buffalocommons/418/>
- 31 Godschalk, David R. "Land use planning challenges: Coping with conflicts in visions of sustainable development and livable communities." *Journal of the American Planning Association* 70, no. 1 (2004): 5-13.
- 32 Flora et al. (2018).
- 33 Erasing Red Lines Part 1 (p. 10).
- 34 Erasing Red Lines Part 2.
- 35 Erasing Red Lines Part 3.
- 36 Meadows, Donella H. *Thinking in systems: A primer*. Chelsea Green Publishing, 2008.
- 37 <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/anthropology-in-practice/the-american-obsession-with-lawns/>





# WHERE THE HIGH ROAD WORKS

**ILR** Buffalo Co-Lab

[ilr.cornell.edu/buffalo-co-lab](http://ilr.cornell.edu/buffalo-co-lab)

617 Main Street, Suite 300  
Buffalo, New York 14203

© 2020 ILR Buffalo Co-Lab