

The Answer

SHELTERFORCE

Q: Is it time to bury racially loaded planning and development terms?

A: Yes!

One of the ways that implicit racial bias is reinforced is through loaded language. *Shelterforce* has gathered some racially loaded terms that are common in our field. We suggest you use these sparingly and carefully, if at all. We acknowledge that it's not always easy to find replacements—usually the best answer is “spell out what you actually mean.”

BLIGHT

“A facially neutral term infused with racial and ethnic prejudice. While it purportedly assessed the state of urban infrastructure, ‘blight’ was often used to describe the negative impact of certain residents on city neighborhoods,” according to Wendell Pritchett in “The Public Menace of Blight.” See also City-Lab’s “The Meaning of Blight,” found at bit.ly/2trgqWJ. Instead say what you actually mean—high levels of vacancy, crime, substandard housing (and make sure you aren’t making assumptions about those things based on residents’ race).

INNER CITY

This imprecise term lets us ignore history by making the results of long-term racist policies sound like an accident or blaming the victim. “Inner city,” in effect, has meant the areas to which Black Americans were—and in many ways still are—restricted. Instead say core or central city, if that’s what you mean, or low-income areas, areas that have suffered from disinvestment, or other terms specific to what you mean.

MINORITY

In so many places, the people described by this term are not actually in the minority, whether it’s California, or your neighborhood. Saying “majority-minority” is nonsensical. Instead, “people of color” is appropriate, sometimes it’s more appropriate to describe the specific racialized groups in question or most affected.

URBAN PIONEER

Much as the term “pioneer” in American history writes out the presence of Native Americans already living on the lands Europeans took over, “urban pioneer” paints a picture of urban areas that are being “discovered” by young, mostly white people of means as having actually been empty of any meaningful community or assets before. (Thanks to reader Sarah Greenberg for nominating this term.)

URBAN PATHOLOGY

This term does not have suburban/rural equivalents, implying without evidence that there’s something about urban areas (or certain kinds of urban areas, with certain people in them, since “urban,” as in fashion, is often code for “Black”) that inherently causes problems like crime or drug dealing, or that those crimes are worse in that context.

WORKFORCE HOUSING

What could be wrong with providing housing for “the workforce”? Nothing except this phrase is usually used to mean housing for people making moderate incomes, implying that people with very low incomes are not part of the workforce at all, which is far from the case. Instead say moderate-income housing.

