The Politics of Commemorating Dr. King

African American Activism

Naming streets for King is part of a movement to recognize the often neglected historical achievements of African Americans. Street naming campaigns are often conducted by local chapters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (an organization that King once led), and various other black-led community improvement associations and coalitions. A strong relationship exists between the likelihood of a city or town identifying a street with King and the relative size of its black population. On average, African Americans constitute 37 percent of the population in a place with a MLK street.

What’s in a Street Name?

Street naming incorporates history into the fabric of everyday life such as addresses, maps, business cards, and, of course, road signs. Street names are unique memorials because of their connectivity; their ability to unite different people and places under a common point of identity. However, it is this potential to touch diverse communities that also makes street naming controversial. People differ in the extent to which they relate to King and wish to have their street associated with him. Perception plays a major role. As journalist Jonathan Tilove observed: “For many whites, a street sign that says Martin Luther King tells them they are lost. For many blacks, a street sign that says Martin Luther King tells them they are found.” Either way, the naming of streets for King creates public discussion of ongoing issues of race and identity in America and forces us to acknowledge, and try to overcome, our differences.

Politics of Location

Naming streets for King is a controversial process for many communities, often exposing continued racial divisions. Many African American activists argue that the civil rights leader’s legacy is not limited to the black community and hence should be placed on prominent streets visible to everyone in the city. Local governments are often reluctant to rename major roads, citing the cost of changing signs and opposition from potentially affected business and property owners. Although King’s name can be found on thoroughfares, public opposition, frequently from whites, often leads to the naming of minor streets or portions of roads localized entirely within African American neighborhoods. Location is not incidental to the street naming process but plays an active role in shaping the meaning and politics of King’s commemoration. Even black leaders sometimes disagree over which street to name in honor of the civil rights leader.

King idea creates a division street

Renaming road for MLK stirs controversy

A Tale of Two Streets

"To name any street for King is to invite an accounting of how the street makes good on King’s promise or mocks it."
- Jonathan Tilove, Along Martin Luther King

New Bern, NC

The City of New Bern renamed Clarendon Boulevard to Dr. M. L. King, Jr. Boulevard in 2000. Contrary to the prevailing view that King’s name is always found in poor, economically marginalized areas, New Bern’s street is a major commercial thoroughfare, a numbered US highway, and the location of over 200 non-residential establishments. These include national chain stores, a shopping mall, Wal-Mart, car dealerships, and two soft drink bottling plants. When some business owners on Clarendon protested the cost of an address change, city leaders gave them a year to make adjustments before officially renaming the street on King’s birthday. The event was marked by a celebration involving many sectors of the community.

Greenville, NC

The City of Greenville changed West Fifth Street to Martin Luther King, Jr. Drive in 1998. Originally, African American leaders wanted all of Fifth Street renamed - not just part of it - but residents and business owners on the eastern end strongly opposed the proposal. King’s namesake marks an area that is predominantly black whereas East Fifth Street is mostly white. More recent attempts to expand the commemoration of the civil rights leader have failed. Greenville’s King Street has limited commercial development and is part of a new revitalization plan to replace substandard housing and dilapidated properties with new homes and infrastructure improvements.