



*Empathy is the capacity to see, hear, and feel what another person is experiencing, from within their frame of reference. More than pity or sympathy, which can disconnect us from people, empathy fuels a better connection with the people we serve. This connection is what inspires the creation of creative, positive, and community-focused solutions.*

# EMPATHY

Transportation professionals are trained to solve problems, but we're often so focused on the solution that we forget the people for whom we're planning and designing. Kids can't walk to school safely? To a planner or engineer, the next move might seem obvious: add a sidewalk. But for neighbors near the school, it might seem equally obvious that there's no safe way to get to the proposed sidewalk. When the "experts" hired to deliver a project don't account for these kinds of variables, we end up building this:



For almost 100 years, members of the transportation industry have relied on the conventional three E's of engineering, education, and enforcement to do our jobs. At the start of every transportation project, we dutifully gather data about existing conditions. We meet with stakeholders, advocates, community members, and the public. We take notes, summarize, and return to our desks with a broad, big picture view of the task at hand. Then we refine the problem, analyze the data, and refer to manuals and warrants and formulas to develop the "improvements."

These steps are absolutely important. But we can't focus on expertise so much that we overlook the needs of the people our work is meant to serve.

## **We need a human-centered approach**

How can transportation planners, designers, and engineers ensure that the end user is the focus of our work? How do we engage with people to understand their true needs, and appreciate how their transportation needs intersect with other issues well outside our areas of expertise – such as housing, personal safety, health, nutrition, etc. – so that we can develop the best solutions?

We need to develop the ability to see, hear, and feel what another person is experiencing, from within their frame of reference, not our own. In other words, we need to practice empathy.

Empathy is often confused with sympathy. Best-selling author

and researcher Dr. Brene Brown<sup>1</sup> says sympathy is feeling sorry for someone's pain, while empathy is feeling another person's pain. She goes on to make a distinction that's important to our work: empathy fuels connection while sympathy drives disconnection, even though the intentions behind expressions of sympathy are good. Empathy can help to build a connection and greater trust between people, whereas sympathy can be synonymous with pity and a lack of understanding of someone's situation.

Consider how we often view older adults in transportation planning. We typically call them seniors or the elderly; assume they use

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evvgu369Jw>



*Listening, learning, and getting involved in community projects can help establish a deeper and more understanding connection.*

wheelchairs, walkers, and canes and that they need more time to cross the street; and view them as people who deserve our sympathy. My colleague Carol Kachadoorian, who specializes in transportation for older adults, encourages setting these notions aside and engaging older adults with empathy. Doing so quickly leads to a reminder that they are in fact multi-faceted people with a range of vitality and

Empathy is becoming a big emphasis area in many professions and disciplines, including in the field of User Experience (UX), which focuses on the needs, values, abilities, and limitations of users of the digital realm. UX experts think about empathy on a spectrum where “understanding and engagement” make up one axis and “effort” defines the other. At the bottom of the spectrum, low effort and low

In essence, the act of connecting with others to understand them facilitates what psychologists call “prosocial” or positive action. That’s what empathy is all about.

### **Bringing empathy into transportation work**

Empathy can and should inform every stage of a transportation project. We can make this happen by following these steps.

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abilities. They are our parents, our grandparents, our neighbors. Many of them don’t need extra time to cross the street, but they may need a bench to sit on during the long walk to the public library.

understanding result in feelings of pity (I’m sorry for you) and sympathy (I feel for you). As the level of effort to engage and understand people increases, one moves towards empathy (I feel with you) and compassion (I am moved by you).

1. As practitioners (and experts), we need to start projects without our own preconceived notions of what the outcome should be. We must approach our work in an expansive and open-minded way that allows for a sense of discovery about the outcome. We cannot allow preconceived ideas to stifle creativity or straightforward practicality in the solutions we pursue.

2. We must acknowledge that our own emotions and experiences distort our assessment of other people's feelings and situations. A favorite quote of mine comes from Anais Nin's *Seduction of the Minotaur*: "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are."
3. We must keep the focus of our work centered on people—the end users of our plans, projects, and programs. We must problem-solve and identify potential solutions from the perspective of the user. The magic of empathy comes when planners and designers intersect and connect with their design audience.

So often our knowledge and our expertise, coupled with our culture, world view, opinions, and even outmoded thinking will get in the way of truly empathizing with our audience. Going back to the hypothetical sidewalk near the school, it may seem that those

neighbors don't know anything about building sidewalks, but did anyone ask? Did anyone look to tap into their understanding of the issue, their local knowledge, their experience of living there, the potential impacts? Will Fanguy, a UX designer, says we practice empathy<sup>2</sup> "by putting aside our own preconceived ideas, adopting humility, and choosing to understand the ideas, thoughts, and needs of others instead."

Practicing empathy often means removing our expert hats. It's one thing to be an expert on paper, but it's quite another to use that expertise wisely in dealing with people. The latter requires us to put ourselves in other people's shoes.

Fanguy goes on to say that "walking in another person's shoes sounds easy enough, but moving past a

<sup>2</sup> <https://medium.com/inside-design/4-essential-steps-to-designing-with-empathy-ee09e358fe0b>

perfunctory grasp of one's situation takes time, effort, and a willingness to abandon one's ego that is difficult to achieve."

**Project Examples: what we thought we knew, and what we learned**

Below are a handful of examples of opportunities to practice empathy—and reminders of its importance—that have come up in recent Toole Design projects.

For the **Clinton Nonmotorized Project** on Whidbey Island, a ferry-serviced community near Seattle, County and State transportation department staff saw the lack of bicycle-pedestrian connectivity between the local park-and-ride and the ferry terminal and set out to create a shared use path to connect them. Much to their surprise, the community said that a shared use path was not their priority. They were much more concerned with the fact that the road between the park-and-ride and the ferry terminal—a state highway—was practically uncrossable, creating a huge barrier and dividing the small community in half. In this example, a lack of empathy misled decision-makers into defining a problem the community didn't see. Luckily, the project was redefined, and the project team developed two crossing roadway treatments to help knit Clinton back together.

On our **5<sup>th</sup> and Cloverdale** project in Seattle, neighborhood activists obtained a grant to hire Toole Design to design a short sidewalk segment at one entrance to their neighborhood, a light industrial park located a few hundred feet from highway on- and off-ramps. On the



*Events like the Detroit Slow Roll can both shed light on barriers between people and help break them down. One of the Slow Roll's founders, Jason Hall, explained, "We've created these barriers like Eight Mile and the suburbs, but our people have always wanted to see what's on the other side. When we started Slow Roll, that's where it came from. It came from everybody finally being able to see what's on the other side."<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.hourdetroit.com/community/the-rapid-rise-of-slow-roll/>



**KRISTEN LOHSE, ASLA**  
*Senior Urban Designer*

“Empathy—listening to others openly and with compassion—allows us to truly understand people’s needs and set aside our own biases. Empathy is essential to accomplish our work in a way that’s centered on the people who use our transportation systems each day. And that’s the point, right?”

face of it, the project was about making a safe and comfortable place for people to walk. But in the discovery phase, Toole Design found that the neighborhood was facing larger personal crime and security problems, coupled with a longstanding lack of public investment—the issues were much larger than a simple sidewalk.

We saw that the sidewalk project was an opportunity to create a gateway to the neighborhood, with traffic calming and street trees. More importantly, it was an

opportunity imbue a sense of dignity and worth to this overlooked corner of the City. The design team looked for ways to leverage planned utility work in the area to expand the scope of the project and were successful in getting the City to expand the project to both sides of the roadway.

During the development of the **Jacksonville, FL Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan** an older bus user was an active participant in all the public meetings and advisory group meetings for the project because early on in the process, he

felt he was heard in relation to an issue he’d been raising for a while. Jacksonville has a serious problem with pedestrian safety and when the transit agency overhauled their bus schedules, they created a number of bus transfer locations at very large, very dangerous intersections. Elderly and less mobile patrons were physically unable or unwilling to cross 7 to 10 lanes of traffic on large suburban highways with inadequate crossings and protection for people on foot. Effectively they could no longer use the bus system. The end user had been overlooked.



*It’s one thing to offer to help a community build a new connection, but it’s another to know what problems actually need solving. In Whidbey Island, WA, a safer way to cross the state highway that separated the park-and-ride and ferry terminal mattered more than building a shared use path.*



Jacksonville is the sixth-deadliest city for pedestrians in the U.S., and Florida is the deadliest state.<sup>4</sup> When we design transit and pedestrian facilities, realities like these should inform our work. We should strive to understand why things are this way and ask residents what they think needs fixing.

<sup>4</sup> <https://news.wjct.org/post/report-jacksonville-6th-deadliest-city-pedestrians-florida-deadliest-state>

### Let's put empathy front and center

How can we move toward a more collaborative approach and design with our users in mind? It starts with us. We can choose to trust in the expertise of our potential project users. Instead of fearing pushback from the people we engage, we should strive for empathy, and be open to repositioning our work if

the people who will use it show us a better way. We should include them in an iterative design process, as we can only improve our plans and designs if we seek guidance from our target audience. Involving the communities we serve in the design process gives them the opportunity to shape the results, and it makes us—the so-called experts—better informed.

Even for transportation practitioners who are deeply focused on the user experience, it can be easy to think we have the right ideas and answers to the questions we tackle in our work. It's human nature to think that everyone thinks the way we do and has the insights and lessons we have learned from years of work. So it's important to challenge our own assumptions about the "right" solution, and to understand the perspective, experiences, and motivations—both emotional and physical—of the people for whom we design. We must move from an "us and them" to a "we" mentality.



*It is not possible to create streets and public spaces that are safe, comfortable, and enjoyable for all without listening to people who live in a community when they speak about their experiences.*

***We must move from an "us and them" to a "we" mentality.***

## RESOURCES

Why Use Empathic Design in Landscape Architecture? by Jolma Architects (1/20/19)

<https://land8.com/why-use-empathic-design-in-landscape-architecture/>

The Human-Centered Design Toolkit, The international design company, [IDEO.org](http://www.ideo.com)

IDEO has published the *Field Guide to Human-Centric Design*, which is available as a [free download on their website](#)

<http://www.designkit.org/mindsets/4>

Design Thinking: Getting Started with Empathy by Rikke Dam and Teo Sing, 2018

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/design-thinking-getting-started-with-empathy>

How to Develop an Empathic Approach in Design Thinking by Rikke Dam and Teo Siang, 2018.

<https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/article/how-to-develop-an-empathic-approach-in-design-thinking>

Psychology Today, The Neuroscience of Empathy, 2013: [https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201310/](https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201310/the-neuroscience-empathy)

[the-neuroscience-empathy](#)

Inside Design by InVision, 4 essential steps to designing with empathy (Will Fanguy), 2018.

<https://www.invisionapp.com/inside-design/essential-steps-designing-empathy/>

Empathy, Brene Brown. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evvqu369Jw>

Keep Empathy in Mind, by Jason W Birkevold Liem, 2019. <http://executivesecretary.com/empathy/>

Toward Livability Ethics: A Framework to Guide Planning, Design, and Engineering Decisions. Appleyard, Bruce, Christopher E. Ferrell, Michael A. Carroll, and Matthew Taecker. Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board, No. 2403. TRB of the National Academies, Washington, D.C. 2014. Pp. 62-71. Accessed from <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0BwqU3nswWnMPNFFUNVvxUGVDRm8/view>