

# Transformative Equitable Development for Healthy Communities

## GROUNDED IN PLACE

Communities are not monolithic. Every community possesses its own set of rich assets including culture, arts, wealth, knowledge, and relationships. At the same time, many communities—particularly communities of color and American Indian communities—also suffer from chronic disinvestment due to a long history of structural and institutional racism.

The good news is that many people—residents, community leaders, elected officials, other public officials, and nonprofit staff—are working for transformative equitable development (TED). TED ensures that public and private investments create the opportunities that every community needs to thrive. People committed to TED are organizing and advocating for jobs, housing, education, and other opportunities. They are also making sure that economic investments increase access to parks and recreational opportunities, the arts, and health and wellness benefits.

TED recognizes the importance of choice in housing and values in-place investment in both core cities and suburbs, understanding that people do not need to move to wealthier, whiter areas to find opportunity. Opportunity can and should exist everywhere.

At the second session in the Alliance's TED series, presenters discussed the current opportunities and challenges facing organizers and advocates of in-place development that does not displace residents.

**The Alliance**  
ADVANCING REGIONAL EQUITY



The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability is a coalition comprised of 34 members working to advance racial, economic, and environmental equity in the way growth and development occurs in the Twin Cities region. We work at the intersection of these issues, understanding that a holistic approach to equity will lead to a more vibrant region. Our integrated approach has secured major victories for transformative equitable development.

# *Transformative Equitable Development for Healthy Communities*

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## **COMMITMENT TO PLACE**

When policymakers and developers hold a deficit-based lens towards residents of color, it can open the door to an array of decisions that harm community members. Terms such as “racially concentrated areas of poverty,” ‘at-risk,’ and ‘opportunity areas,’ even when used with the best of intentions, define and stigmatize certain people from that place, positioning them as a problem.

Solutions to deficit-based frameworks often propose to change the people—either by improving or moving them— rather than implicating systems that have created and perpetuated the cycles of poverty. Effective conversations about addressing poverty must be grounded in a solid analysis of the historical and ongoing nature of institutional and structural racism, redlining, and public and private sector disinvestment in communities of color.

In the 1990s, the population of color began to grow in the suburban cities of Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. The arrival of immigrants from Southeast Asia and West Africa brought change to these historically white communities, including an increase in the poverty rate. Instead of analyzing and dismantling the cycle of poverty experienced by new residents of color, Brooklyn Park city officials framed poor individuals and families as a flaw in an otherwise functioning system. They chose not to solve the problem of poverty and instead proposed policies that would displace low-wealth residents and destroy affordable housing in the Zane Avenue Corridor.

In response to the city’s egregious plan, people came out in force to organize, says community member and African Career and Research leader Nelima Sitati-Munene. Residents prevented the full destruction of affordable housing in the corridor, but the community still lost 500 units of affordable housing. “Even though the city promised to replace the units at some point, they never did,” said Sitati-Munene.

At the same time the city of Brooklyn Park waged war on the poor, it financed the expansion of a Target Corporation campus on the north side of the city. Though this investment was praised for creating jobs and providing other community benefits, the \$20 million tax abatement the company was given has had no trickle-down effect to low-income residents, says Sitati-Munene.

This raises an important question: who should benefit from public investment? If the needs of existing community residents are not actively considered in the decision-making process, investments will attract new, wealthier residents and make communities more vulnerable to displacement. To ensure efforts to increase opportunity are beneficial for all residents, decisions must be made with the leadership and support of community members who will be affected by changes in policy and infrastructure development.

## **ADVOCATING FOR EQUITY IN PLACE**

Equity in Place (EIP) is a group convened by the Alliance and comprised of community partners from place-based, housing, and advocacy organizations. The group formed in 2012 as the Metropolitan Council was completing a regional assessment called the Fair Housing and Equity Assessment (FHEA), a process that would identify where opportunities existed in the Twin Cities Region.

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EIP members insisted that the community have a role in creating the assessment. “We saw this as an opportunity to have a conversation around race and place,” said Owen Duckworth, coalition organizer for the Alliance. “We saw the need to look at the history of structural racism in the Twin Cities as well as within the Met Council. And we also wanted to identify the existing assets that are already in communities.”

Over the next year, EIP members began to map out ways to influence regional investments through the FHEA. The group insisted that the report highlight the history of disinvestment in the Twin Cities through structural racism, destruction of wealth, and regional planning. It also advocated for an asset-based framework that would lift up all of the positive characteristics of communities of color. “The term ‘racially concentrated areas of poverty’ only tells one story about someone’s community,” Duckworth said. “We need to lift up more complete narratives.”

EIP members offered a counter-narrative to the ‘racially concentrated areas of poverty’ language used by the Met Council. The group asked the agency to consider the impact of the region’s racially concentrated areas of wealth. This change in perspective pushed back on the scapegoating of people of color as an economic drain on the region and placed the onus on affluent white communities to desegregate. “Why do white people move out of a community when people of color move in?” Duckworth asked. “Why do the public sector and financial institutions stop investing in these communities when whites move out?”

EIP members found that by telling a better story about place and the people that inhabit their communities, they can advocate for necessary investments from a place of strength. Instead of having community needs defined by academics or government institutions, residents are positioned to define those indicators and demand specific outcomes.

Duckworth says the question at the core of EIP is, “What would it look like for communities of color and low wealth communities to define housing issues and priorities for themselves?” With that shift in power, we would see communities defined by their assets. We would see the implication of racist, oppressive systems instead of the problematizing of individuals and communities. We would begin to truly see equity in place.

## ABOUT EQUITY IN PLACE

Equity in Place is a diverse group of strategic partners from place-based, housing, and advocacy organizations. We believe that everyone in the Twin Cities region deserves to live where they want to live and have access to opportunity. Our region benefits from many assets, but we continue to be unable to translate these benefits to everyone, specifically to communities of color.

Equity in Place engages community-based organizations in influencing planning and investments that will shape the future of the Twin Cities region.

We believe: Equitable growth is good for everyone—individuals, communities and the greater region; Equitable growth requires intentional planning, policymaking and implementation; Government plans about communities of color need to be completed in partnership with communities of color.

## PRESERVING PLACE STRATEGIES

There are many strategies to ensure that investment in communities of color works. Here are just a few that were lifted up in the Grounded in Place Session:

### ART AND PLACEMAKING

#### Juxtaposition Arts

Juxtaposition is fighting against gentrification in North Minneapolis by taking an arts-based approach to community engagement. The organization focuses on developing youth social enterprise through art and graphic design. It envisions the youth of North Minneapolis entering the creative workforce as problem solvers and innovators with the expertise they need to accomplish their individual goals while also adding value to their communities. Juxtaposition provides training programs and apprenticeship opportunities that enable youth to harness their skills while also earning an income. It also has an artist cooperative that offers emerging and established community artists a space to work on their craft.

Not all opportunity is good opportunity. We believe that it is necessary to look at the values and class analysis of developers to ascertain whether or not their motives are good when they come with so-called opportunity. Residents should be in a position where we are the ones who determine the good things that should be a part of our community and the things that shouldn't be here. Things shouldn't be funder-driven. We need to say what we want and what we don't want and then hold funders and decision-makers accountable to upholding our vision.

—Roger Cummings,  
Juxtaposition Arts Executive Director

### HOMEOWNERSHIP AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

#### Urban Homeworks

Urban Homeworks is a faith-based developer providing affordable housing in low-wealth neighborhoods of the Twin Cities. As development projects pop up in the community, Urban Homeworks fights gentrification by setting its rental rates below market rate so that they stay affordable even as the cost of housing rises in other parts of North Minneapolis. It also has a program that provides homeownership opportunities through a partnership with City of Lakes Community Land Trust. Like other land trusts, City of Lakes owns the land in perpetuity while homeowners own the home. Because they do not have to pay for the land, the cost of buying a home is more affordable for the homeowner.

Narrative is really big when it comes to how we talk about our own communities. How do we talk about our communities in a positive way instead of embodying a very negative, deficit based one? The reality is that there is a lot of wealth in our community including small businesses. The question is how we merge our assets together to create a market.

—Shannon Jones,  
Urban Homeworks

## CULTURALLY-SPECIFIC BUSINESS DISTRICTS

### Asian Economic Development Association

Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA) is a nonprofit organization located in the Frogtown and Rondo neighborhoods of St. Paul. AEDA is working on small business and economic development opportunities for the Asian Pacific Islander (API) community. Founded in 2009, AEDA organized community leaders, business owners and activists in response to the building of the Green Line to make sure that they were not displaced from the corridor during the line's construction.

AEDA fought gentrification by launching the Little Mekong Asian Business and Culture District. Little Mekong is an asset-based economic development strategy, created to attract customers to the corridor by uplifting art and cultural initiative and creating a traditional night market that draws people to the corridor.

Little Mekong's Night Market brings people to the corridor to spend money but it also creates a sense of place and fosters community. Art and culture are important pieces in claiming our identity. We get a chance to define who we are instead of having Frogtown and Rondo defined by outside perceptions.

—Va-Megn Thoj,  
Asian Economic Development Association  
Executive Director