

# Transformative Equitable Development for Healthy Communities

## PRESERVING AND CREATING CULTURAL CORRIDORS

Many neighborhoods across the Twin Cities region are characterized by a strong cultural identity where people of a particular race, culture, or ethnicity come together to share language, food, customs, and resources. These communities exist because people choose to live near family and friends who share their cultural identity. They also exist because of structural racism. In this context, communities of color and American Indian communities in particular often organize in specific geographies as a means of preservation and resistance.

The creation of cultural corridors is an intentional, strategic effort to build upon the naturally expressed assets of communities that have gravitated to an area due to choice or exclusion. These corridors are efforts to build healthier communities defined by wealth, access to art and food, revitalized public space, and the ability to thrive in the face of displacement.

At the Alliance's fifth session in our Transformative Equitable Development series, presenters shared how they are developing and revitalizing cultural corridors throughout our region by building on existing community assets and ensuring that infrastructure development enhances the vibrancy of these corridors. We discussed cultural capital and heard presentations about several local examples where culture is being used as an economic engine in communities of color.

**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.

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## USING CULTURE AS CAPITAL IN COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

How can culture become a protective factor in communities of color? Communities of color and American Indian communities own cultural wealth that includes experiences, knowledge, history, traditions, and relationships. According to researcher Tara Yosso, community cultural wealth comprises of an array of knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts people of color can use to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression.

In her paper *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*, Yosso offers a critical race theory analysis that describes the ways communities of color and American Indian communities nurture cultural wealth through various forms of capital:

**Aspirational capital:** The ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers.

**Navigational capital:** Skills of maneuvering through social institutions, especially institutions not created by or for communities of color.

**Social capital:** Networks of people and community resources that provide both instrumental and emotional support to navigate through society's racist, oppressive institutions.

**Linguistic capital:** The intellectual and social skills attained through communication experience in more than one language or style.

**Familial capital:** Cultural knowledge nurtured among family that carries a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition.

**Resistant capital:** Knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality. Grounded in the legacy of resistance to subordination and oppression by communities of color and indigenous people.

Whether intentionally or instinctually, all communities of color and American Indian communities hold these forms of capital. Cultural corridors use these forms of wealth to drive economic prosperity.

## CULTURAL CORRIDORS IN THE TWIN CITIES

Cultural corridors already exist in several communities in the Twin Cities region. Several of the corridors described below were created in response to the construction of the Green Line light rail transitway connecting the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Two years of construction at their front doors threatened already vulnerable small businesses in communities of color. Creating branded cultural corridors bolstered these communities throughout the construction process and lessened the threat of gentrification once the Green Line was up and running.

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Each of the cultural corridors described below offers a unique geographical, historical, and cultural context. But these communities share a history of oppression and have survived efforts to erase differences and assimilate residents into mainstream culture. These cultural corridors are bringing power back to communities of color and American Indian communities as they remain intact, visible, and self-sufficient.

### **Little Mekong**

Little Mekong is a business and cultural district along University Avenue in St. Paul, named after the Mekong River that runs through Southeast Asia. An initiative of the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA), Little Mekong's mission is to "develop the area around University Avenue and Western Avenue as an attractive destination for visitors and residents; to support and promote businesses; to share cultural traditions and activities; and to create a living, breathing, colorful district for all to enjoy."

The initiative began as a strategy to preserve Southeast Asian businesses along a major commercial corridor during Green Line construction. AEDA provided technical assistance, small business loans, and other services to help Asian-American business thrive during the disruption of construction.

The strategy worked. Asian-American businesses stayed afloat and now prosper along a new transitway that continues to create opportunity. AEDA branded the corridor into a Southeast Asian cultural district to attract new visitors by bringing more arts and culture to the area. Little Mekong draws thousands of people to the district through celebrations like the Little Mekong Night Market, a weekend street festival mimicking night markets very common throughout Southeast Asia. In partnership with other organizations, AEDA also created the Little Mekong Plaza, a vibrant outdoor gathering space which will host the Little Mekong Night Market in the future.

To learn more about Little Mekong, visit [www.littlemekong.com](http://www.littlemekong.com).

### **The Rondo Arts and Cultural Business District**

The Rondo Arts and Cultural Business District is a new effort to encourage cultural preservation and culturally-based economic growth in St. Paul's Rondo community through business development and cooperative ownership. The district specifically targets the needs and expertise of the African American community, with the dual goals of revitalization and prevention of displacement that can result from major infrastructure projects like the Green Line.

Aurora St. Anthony Neighborhood Development Corporation (ASANDC) is one of the lead conveners and coordinating agencies of this work. Started in 1980 as a crime-prevention group, ASANDC's work today focuses on rebuilding what the construction of Interstate 94 destroyed in the 1960s: an economically and culturally vibrant African American community.

"African Americans came to Minnesota from the south in search of jobs with the railroads and packing houses," said ASANDC Executive Director Nieeta Presley. "When we got here, we found out there weren't any jobs and we were systematically redlined to live in certain places, like Rondo. When our black professionals couldn't get jobs in other areas, they opened their own businesses here."

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When I-94 was built through the heart of this neighborhood, it destroyed much of the wealth in this rich African American community and displaced people. Residents are committed to rebuilding their community, and the Rondo Arts and Cultural Business District provides a new structure to do so.

To learn more about the Rondo Arts and Cultural Business District, visit [www.aurorastanthy.org/rondo-arts-cultural--business-district.html](http://www.aurorastanthy.org/rondo-arts-cultural--business-district.html).

### **Little Africa**

Little Africa is a cultural corridor that lines Snelling Avenue in the Hamline-Midway neighborhood of St. Paul. Launched in November of 2013, it promotes the art, economic development, and placemaking initiatives of the Twin Cities' rich African diaspora.

Little Africa was created by African Economic Development Solutions (AEDS), an organization that provides loans, technical assistance, and training to African entrepreneurs and business owners. AEDS wanted bring a greater level of visibility to the African-owned businesses along the corridor.

Today, Little Africa is a vibrant cultural district that is building community among the corridor's diverse African people. "It's about the people, the arts, and the cultural vitality," said AEDS Artist Organizer Lula Saleh. "We are building wealth within black communities."

Economic development, creative placemaking, and community building makes this project successful. Little Africa has hosted a series of creative placemaking events to stimulate economic vitality, including the Little Africa Festival, which features artists, performers, and entrepreneurs of the African diaspora. Other events like open mic nights and intergenerational dialogues promote networking for African entrepreneurs and artists.

AEDS and the St. Paul Riverfront Corporation are sponsoring a series of façade improvement workshops with the goal of increasing the visibility of the businesses along the Little Africa corridor. The project enables business owners to improve the exterior of their buildings with new signage, public art, exterior lighting, and more. Working with Midway Murals, three business owners have been able to add public art to their exteriors.

To learn more about Little Africa, visit [www.aeds-mn.org/tag/little-africa](http://www.aeds-mn.org/tag/little-africa).

### **American Indian Cultural Corridor**

The American Indian Cultural Corridor, which lines a portion of Franklin Avenue in South Minneapolis, is a commercial, residential, and cultural hub in the American Indian community. While the corridor officially launched in 2010, Franklin Avenue has been the heart of the American Indian community since the 1960s as a result of the Urban Indian Relocation Act. With the promise of employment, many American Indians across the United States left their reservations for major metropolitan areas. Many relocated to South Minneapolis.

Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI), is one of the organizations along the corridor committed to revitalizing the American Indian community. NACDI envisions the corridor as a destination that will provide jobs and economic opportunity as well as a sense of cultural identity and pride.

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According to NACDI Executive Director Robert Lilligren, land ownership is one of the things that has made the American Indian Cultural Corridor a success. “American Indian individuals and organizations own the land along the north side of Franklin Avenue,” said Lilligren. “If we did not have this level of control and ownership, the corridor would look much different than it does now. Having real estate, even in a small way, gives us a lot of agency and a stronger base to build from.”

NACDI and other Native organizations are working together to infuse the American Indian Cultural Corridor with opportunities for community wealth-building. “Native organizations and individuals are building an economic model that comes out of our traditions including activism, language, native ways, and spirituality. We are defining for ourselves what our participation in the 21st century economy looks like—a lot of that happens around food, arts, and culture.

Art and placemaking is a key component of the American Indian Cultural Corridor. Murals and banners line Franklin Avenue, indicators that art and presence of culture are important to this community. NACDI also runs All My Relations Art Gallery, a corridor destination that provides access to quality American Indian art that presents the contemporary American Indian experience in all its diversity. It has increased the visibility of American Indian art in the region and the nation at large, ensuring that Minneapolis and the American Indian Cultural Corridor are known as an important national destination for American Indian art and artists.

To learn more about the American Indian Cultural corridor, visit <http://aiccorridor.com>.

### **CULTURAL CORRIDORS PROVIDE MANY BENEFITS**

Cultural corridors present a unique way for communities of color to use cultural capital to generate wealth while preserving and benefitting from their unique expressions of art, culture, and spirituality. The more we normalize and affirm the experiences, knowledge, and cultural expressions of communities of color and American Indians, the more we can undo the structural barriers that separate these communities from economic opportunities.

Cultural corridors not only benefit communities of color and American Indian communities—they are an asset to the entire region. The evidence shows that cultural corridors play a role in growing the economic base of the region by creating more opportunity in communities of color and American Indian communities. This contributes to shared prosperity because people in those communities have the resources they need to thrive.