

Actualizing Equity through Cultural Corridors & Placekeeping

Place and culture are intimately linked. From locally owned businesses to gathering places for the arts, the physical spaces in our communities make up the fabric of our lives. They signal who is included in our vision of thriving and what we collectively value and invest in. For years, BIPOC-led organizations have been elevating cultural corridors and “placekeeping” as tools for anti-displacement and equitable development — and, from Brooklyn Park to East St. Paul, the movement is growing in the Twin Cities. At our October 2023 Actualizing Equity event, we discussed cultural economic strategies with Denise Butler from African Career, Education, and Resources Inc. (ACER), Va-Megn Thoj from Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA), and Mary Anne Quiroz from Indigenous Roots.

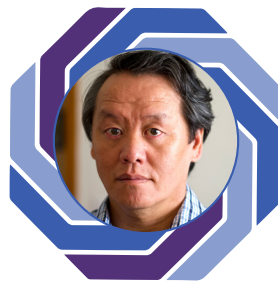
The Social and Economic Power of Culture



Denise Butler

African Career, Education,
and Resources Inc. (ACER)

“Culture is the way we live. A place in which people resonate with each other. And the way they are together is where their social capital lies... Although Africans are spread out all throughout the Twin Cities, no matter which part of the state they live in, everybody knows Brooklyn Park and Brooklyn Center. Everybody shops here, plays here, and a lot of folks live here. So when we talk about these issues, that’s how powerful culture can be. We’re now talking about two cities that are majority Black people. And we’re hearing more conversations that culture is something that we can build an economic engine around.”



Va-Megn Thoj

Asian Economic Development
Association (AEDA)

“In our organization, culture is also what we value, what’s important to us. Especially for Southeast Asian communities, many of us are children of immigrants. So we’re multi-cultural and culturally fluid in that sense. For instance, when I’m with my mom I speak in Hmong but when I’m out of the house all I do is speak English. But there are core values to being a Hmong person, and it’s important to define and understand what that is. For me, it’s really about respecting the past and respecting the older generation in the fact that they carry that cultural history with them. That’s important. “



Mary Anne Quiroz

Indigenous Roots Cultural
Arts Center

“Culture is inter-generational life ways. It’s what we’re creating, what we’re making, what we’re building together. Here in the Twin Cities, we’re really blessed to have cultural backgrounds from everywhere in the world. So, yes, we need spaces where we’re able to preserve and practice and share and exchange our cultural life ways. And we also have a lot of young people, generations of mixed race and mixed cultural backgrounds. We need multi-cultural spaces so we don’t have to keep saying “I’m half this, and I’m half that.” We’re not half anything. We need to be able to come as our full selves.”

From Cultural Corridors to Cultural Economics



Anthony Taylor

“Often a former business district that was prioritized and valued by the majority culture is abandoned as people move somewhere else. And then, cultural communities move into those areas because they’re available. They’re affordable. There’s an opportunity to use culture to build an economy — and that organizing culture becomes an identifying aspect of the way those communities are experienced.

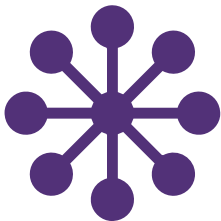
But it’s not just cultural corridors. It’s thinking about cultural economics. What are the principles, practices, strategies that are culturally grounded in our relationship to money?”

COLLECTIVISM



From “a susu” in African cultures to “tanda” in Latinx communities, informal savings practices allow people to pool their resources and take turns drawing from the collective pot. For many who don’t have access to traditional loans or financing, this can mean a significant sum to pay off part of a mortgage or start a small business. “These rotating savings among friends and families and relatives is how we survive and thrive and continue to build our own capital,” Quiroz says. “That sharing of abundance is one of our cultural assets.”

COOPERATION



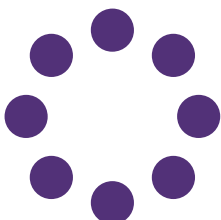
From that ethic of collaboration and because of the barriers to traditional capital, cooperative ownership is gaining traction across the Twin Cities. “As a culture, we’re not coming from this American capitalist mindset that breeds individualism,” Butler says. “Something we’ve always done, even in the African American community, is work together cooperatively so everyone can have a voice. That’s another model that our cultural businesses and start-ups can use to help for that growth and sustainability.”

OWNERSHIP



While cultural communities patron and support their businesses, many of those businesses do not own or control the property they occupy. By coming together, cultural communities are demanding a voice in how their neighborhoods grow and change. “We want to be able to control the developments in our neighborhoods,” Thoj says. “We want to decide what types of businesses are in our community so we can support the cultural programming, the culture activities and the cultural flourishing that reflects us.”

STEWARDSHIP



Instead of individual ownership, many Indigenous cultures focus on stewardship. “Even to own the building was something I struggled with,” Quiroz says, “because no one should own the land. But then when we think about the game of building generational wealth, we’re enslaved to a system where we can’t prosper and we can’t get out. So when I think of wealth, I’m not thinking of a mansion on a lake. I’m thinking of our cultural neighborhoods and a healthy economy where we can take care of ourselves and one another.”