

COUNTERING DISPLACEMENT THROUGH EQUITY & COMMUNITY BUILDING

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Panel II: An Interview on Equity and Community Building



This essay is a critical reflection on a panel discussion that took place on October 25, 2019, as part of the conference titled *Squeezed out: Challenges of diversity and affordability in Colorado communities*. Panel II interview participants included Nita Mosby Tyler of The Equity Project and Brian Corrigan of Futures Untied Network. Katherine Correll of Downtown Colorado, Inc. acted as the panel interviewer. Tyler contributed her expertise on equity perspectives, and Corrigan contributed his expertise on community development.

SUMMARY

The aim of the panel interview was to consider wealth management and remodeling the power structures as the key components to community building. These key components are essential to achieving truly equitable communities. For this reason, the panel implied that equity and community building should be framed as strategies that work in tandem. When equity is not considered a key component to community building, there is a risk that displacement will occur. In these scenarios, social equity concerns surface as a reactionary responses to displacement. With displacement, the uniqueness of the community that binds it together is lost, and it becomes harder to achieve equity goals.

During the beginning of the interview, Tyler expressed a frustration with inadequate definitions of equity. She explained that “equity does not mean inclusion—equity means belongingness.” Inclusion is an element of equity building, but it must be authentic inclusion. To achieve authentic forms of inclusiveness, all actions must be a win-win for individuals, organizations, and the community. Moreover, she stated that inclusion often becomes a form of tokenism, and there is an over assumption that individuals are included in the process of community building.

The relationships established in the process of community building is a determining factor of whether inclusion is authentic or not. Therefore, people must be invited and encouraged to join the process of community building in ways that avoid tokenism and include all community members. For this reason, the panelists stated that invitation should not be focused solely on who is invited, but rather what the invitation is trying to achieve (i.e. its intentionality).

The panel was largely concerned with the roles both place and people have in achieving concurrent equity and community building. To truly achieve this dual process, an equity pledge must be decided upon by the community in order to bind people-to-people and people-to-place. This equity pledge can serve as a guide to community building, while also generating an authentic community building process.

The Role of Place:

Corrigan suggested that culture and art can be authentic means to invite members into the process of community building. More generally, he stated that our built environment can encourage authentic forms of inclusion which lead to authentic forms participation. In this respect, spaces should be planned to open interactions and build awareness in the community. They should be designed for friction rather than to avoid friction between community members, as they often are. Avoiding friction is favored by some for its comfortability, but it contributes to growing and reinforcing unjustifiable biases—further fracturing communities both physically and socially. In its most grotesque manifestation, avoiding friction can lead to displacement.

Breaking the physical boundaries of friction results in authentic experiences. These authentic experiences can help members of the community better understand other community members by exposing the whole community to its true, un-sanitized, collective narrative. Furthermore, these spaces can help communities overcome the “deficit mentality” by turning challenges into opportunities. When challenges are addressed authentically, it does not only produce a shared sense of responsibility, it also produces a shared sense of success.

The Role of People:

The panelists approached the role of people from both the public and private sector perspectives. First, they asserted that the public sector must accept that inequity is both historical and structural. It must ask the question “what social factors obstruct equity?” and then work towards eliminating those barriers. There must be a recognition that equity systems are linked together and that no one agency or sector can achieve equity goals alone. In this respect, Tyler suggested that the public health model can be extended into other areas like planning. She also stressed that the public sector needs to rethink sustainability because the implied goal does not necessarily translate into social equity. Rather, the goal should be a thriving community that is both fun and helps build social capital. To achieve this goal, the public sector needs to work with the creative sector to further creative placemaking as a way of marketing community engagement.

Second, the panelists agreed that the private sector needed to take more responsibility in building more equitable communities. The private sector role is mostly concerned with the impact that employment has on the community, so the panelists stated that hiring processes need to be designed to help build communities up. It should not be considered universal processes. It should be tailored to every community relative to their needs and their historical context. Hiring local should be a top priority, and the hiring process should begin before a business goes live in the community. Furthermore, the private sector must consider the markers of wealth and how they affect biases in the community. Businesses have a responsibility to catch the potentials for these negative effects before they happen. The panelists used the example of Whole Foods being connected to educational achievement levels to illustrate this point.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the panelists effectively unpacked the roles that places and people play in achieving more equitable communities. Much of their recommendations relied upon an assumption that displacement is caused by an uneven distribution of resources and power. If equity entails belongingness, any strategy that attempts to combine equity and community building should be grounded in placemaking that is conscious of these unequal distributions. The panelists demonstrated that if displacement is to be avoided, planners must strive for a process that is equitable and plan for spaces that help achieve this goal by fostering authentic experiences.

Planners have a deep understanding of how places and people are interwoven. Therefore, planners play a crucial role at both ends of the process: place and people. In an equitable community building model, planners are responsible for coordinating the interweaving of these two elements of the community in a manner that is conscious of historical and structural inequities. By doing so, planners can help develop more equitable processes and places that counter processes and places that can cause and exacerbate displacement patterns.

The word authenticity was explicitly and implicitly attached to many of the recommendations made during the interview. Perhaps authenticity is at the heart of all successful equity strategies and can be applied to other areas of planning beyond community development. If this is the case, planners should be continually asking themselves if both processes and places are authentic. Unfortunately, there is no objective scale for measuring authenticity. Judging authenticity can indeed be a subjective endeavor, but it is only through a process of striving for authenticity that it can be discovered.