

# CONSIDERATIONS FOR ACHIEVING AUTHENTIC, EQUITABLE COMMUNITY BUILDING STRATEGIES

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## Panel II: An Interview on Equity and Community Building



This essay is a critical reflection on the panel discussion conducted on October 25, 2019, as part of the conference titled *Squeezed out: Challenges of diversity and affordability in Colorado communities*. The panel participants were Nita Mosby Tyler of The Equity Project, LLC, Brian Corrigan of Futures United Network, and the panel was guided by Katherine Correll of Downtown Colorado, Inc.

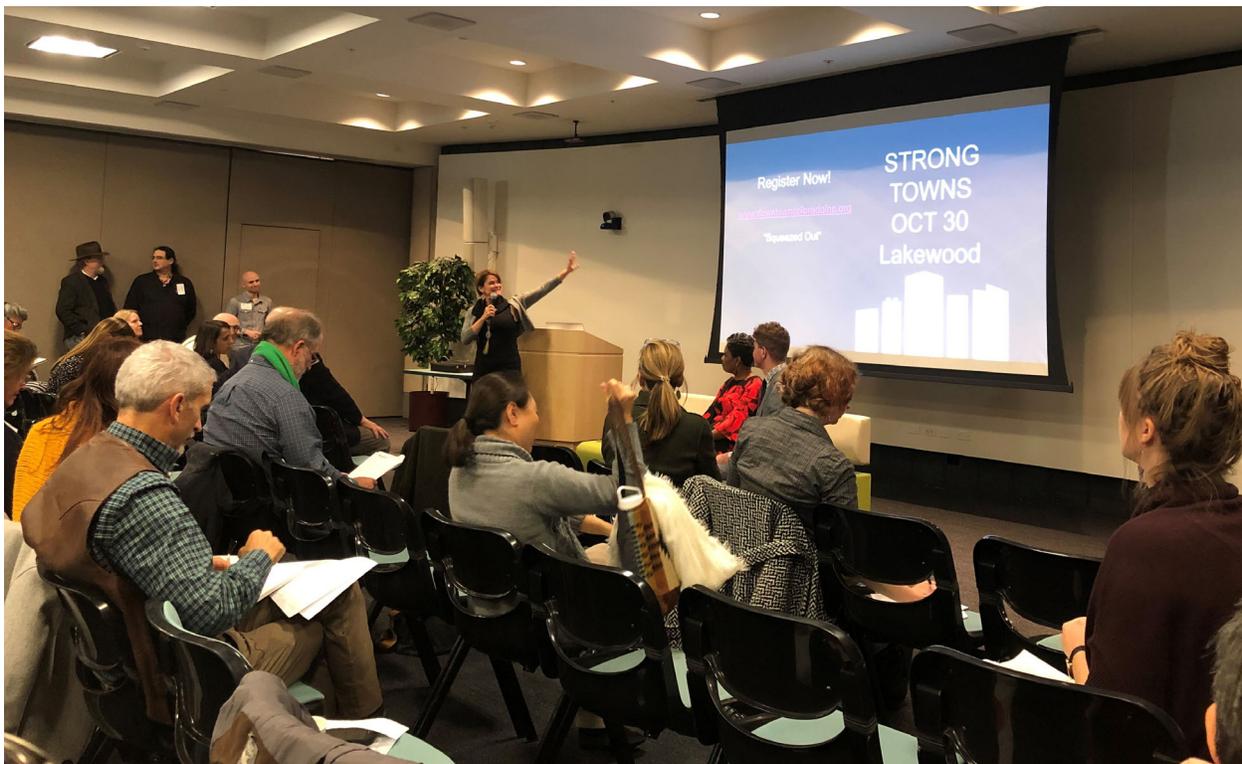
This panel focused on incorporating strategies and opportunities for building authentically inclusive community spaces and the responsibilities of the individual, place, public sector, and private sector in planning for equity. A genuine system of equity has never existed in America and repairing this problem is a many pronged issue that will require many solutions. This is especially true in planning and community building where achieving equity among community stakeholders in the planning process can be tantamount to success. The panel was formatted as a question and answer discussion, where questions were directed to Tyler and Corrigan and the conversation was guided by Correll. At the end of the panel, questions to the panelists were asked by audience members. The panel began with the question of “what are your perspectives on equity, how has it changed over time, and what are your suggestions for people looking to integrate equity into their perspectives and for behaviors moving forward”?

Nita Mosby Tyler, the first panelist, has a background in human resources and was from Atlanta, Georgia before moving to Denver. Her upbringing in the South has shaped her view of equity and her work on The Equity Project allows her to advance the concept of equity nationwide. Tyler mentioned the challenge of equity planning when there is not a clearly understood or agreed upon definition of what it means to be equitable. Brian Corrigan of Futures United Network, the second panelist, is a community development professional, originally from rural Montana. His perspective on equity comes from growing up in a town with a “deficit mentality” and the new market acceptance of formerly marginalized LGBTQ persons that is gaining traction. Deficit mentality is a false characterization that those in the “other” category, be it upbringing, cultural norms, ethnicity, race, gender, or sexual orientation etc. inherently lack the ability to achieve just because of their otherness. “A myopic focus on the problem is a deficit mentality” Corrigan explained, meaning focusing on the problem of the perceived ability or information gap ignores the value of the heterogenous experiences brought by the other and fails to recognize the potential value of inclusion.

Panelists were also asked how to design for interaction in community building and how to create public spaces that have authentic inclusivity. Corrigan responded to this question by highlighting that the process of community building is often more important than the outcome. By engaging all members of the community and individuals outside that would like a voice, channels of dialogue are opened no matter what the final planning outcome. Another form of authentic

inclusivity is the incorporation of art and community culture as a strategy for inclusion and community building. By uplifting a community's authentic story of place through original and public art, a community story that is both welcoming and spurs inclusivity can be preserved even as the community changes and grows.

For the final portion of the panel, Tyler and Corrigan were asked about the responsibilities of the individual, place, public sector, and private sector in promoting equity in planning. Tyler responded with the importance of calling to hear from the voices of individuals who are both already in the community and those who are not in the community. This recognizes that occasionally individuals may feel their voice inherently does not matter because they are on the outside but by intentionally asking for their input, they may feel included. Corrigan pivoted off Tyler's answer with another thought- the invitation to be in proximity. Making individuals feel welcome and included doesn't have to be an overt invitation to provide input, but the simple allowance or invitation "to be in proximity" within a space or community can be the important catalyst needed to achieve true inclusivity.



It would have been promising to leave this panel discussion with more concrete examples or suggested policy changes that would improve and promote the concept of equity planning in Colorado. What are lawmakers, policy makers, and planners on the ground incorporating that makes future plans and community spaces more equitable? One equitable policy example in the public sector that was provided by Tyler is focused in the city of Aurora. Aurora has a practice of aligning new jobs at certain salary levels with new housing development that conforms to those

specific needs. By considering job growth and housing in tandem, a more equitable outcome is achieved that avoids housing deficiencies at one end of the market spectrum.

Planning is continually borrowing from other disciplines to shape the profession. Another lesson that Tyler provided is from the healthcare industry. This paradigm could be successfully adapted to achieve equity in community planning and is known as the “social determinants of health.” The social determinants of health consider all external and demographic factors that drive health outcomes. These include a range of factors from safety, race, environment, education, income, neighborhood, crime, etc. Examining these factors and understanding their relationship to a whole host of outcomes, not just health, could help achieve successes in equity.

Many of the examples provided by the panelists to improve equity in planning were most helpful when considered on the level of the individual. These ideas would be best adopted as a mindset and way to think about planning proscriptions before acting. The best advice on being more inclusive as individuals sprung from Tyler’s exercise where she asked each audience member to consider their “trusted ten.” Think of your top ten closest friends or companions that are not family. Now consider each of those ten. What is their gender, ethnicity, marital status, educational status, disability level etc.? Likely these answers are similar to your own characteristics. By considering affinity bias more carefully, it is possible to begin to understand moments where these biases shape actions. More importantly, it is possible to understand how these biases shape the policies and programs that planners advocate for or against. This advice is not unlike the simple and generally useful advice that Corrigan gave earlier in the panel. He encouraged everyone to check for bias before entering a community or participating in any planning outcome. This is sound life advice for most situations, even outside of planning.

Perhaps this panel is only the beginning stage of this type of mentality reaching the mainstream and is an important stepping-stone toward the furtherance of equity in planning. The fact that a whole panel session was devoted to this topic is, a very hopeful and positive outcome.