DECODING EQUITY IN A COMMUNITY
by Ali Pfenninger

Panel II: An Interview on Equity and Community Building

What is equity? The definition of equity is the quality of being fair and impartial. This discussion set forth to evaluate and discuss the idea of equity as the overarching theme to further incorporate into successful community development. Several speakers started off the panel by discussing what equity meant to each of them based on their backgrounds and personal experiences. The first speaker, Katherine Correll, began by discussing the idea of place—how people can love their place, how places can be inclusive, and how you tell the story of place. The second speaker, Nita Tyler, who works for the organization The Equity Project, pushed forth the notion of the importance of really understanding what equity really is. Brian Corrigan, the third speaker, works in community development, drew from his perspective and life experiences based on market acceptance over time. These overall ideas provided by each speaker set the discussion for the rest of the panel.

Katherine addressed the question, "What do you think of the comprehensive investment for the collective histories and experience that a place holds for all groups? How do we communicate the comprehensive assessment of a place?" Brian, arriving from a creative background, responded in a way that related the question to the idea of creative placement and put emphasis on the matter of—process over product. Nita spoke to the two things we can do to assess a place. These would be to know what asset the community itself represents and to also know what assets are in the community. She emphasized the importance of acknowledging both in order for a community to be collectively understood over time.
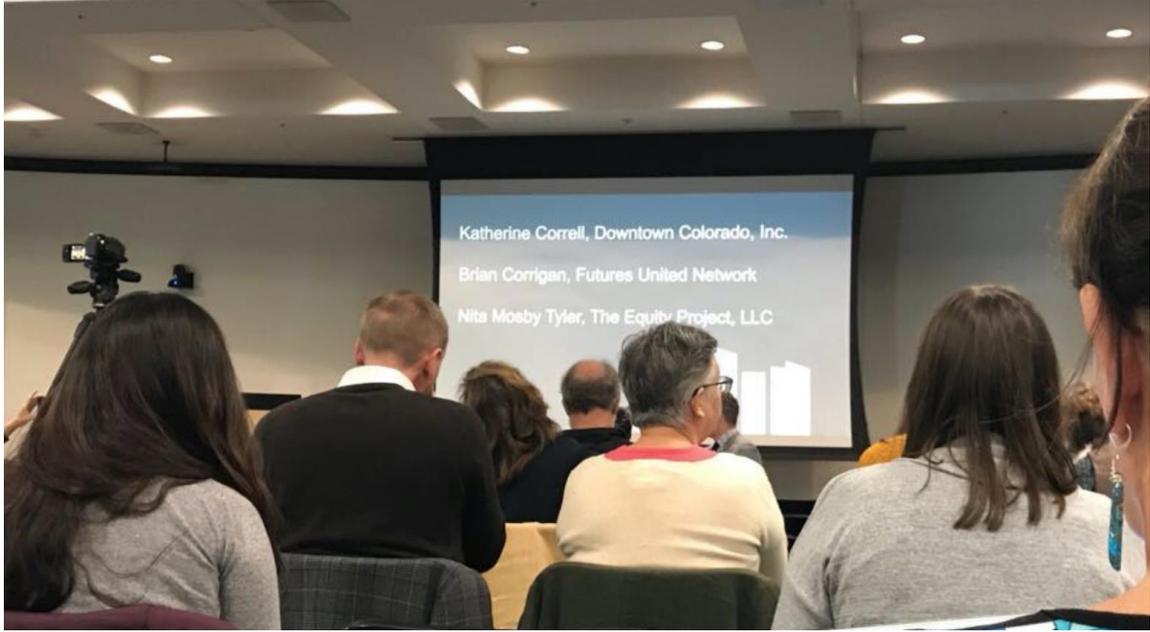
The idea of a person's responsibility towards intentional interaction and awareness within a 'place' was brought up next. Both speakers who answered the question focused on the response of an individual and the importance of inclusiveness for the individual. One of the speakers specifically emphasized the need for designing intentional interactions as a way to promote fun. Taking away from this, a 'place' exists in that it has many layers. These layers exist of individuals, history, conflict, and common ground. Brian emphasized the need to bring groups and individuals together, in terms of an intentional interaction, through design. Whether this be the individual, the organization, or the community, speaker two emphasized inclusiveness and the need for multiple facets of filters to be met between the different stakeholders of a place.

 To achieve a sense of equity, the discussion focused a lot on the importance of individual inclusion first and foremost and how that works in a community. The speakers discusses separate experiences in which they felt included in a community whether this be through

the company that had hired them or the community that they spoke with. Again, emphasis was put on the individual level in this discussion as the catalyst for where the idea of equity and inclusion begins. Both contributors in the discussion make the point in this section that through these feelings of inclusion during these scenarios, they had to realize at some point that they were different. They were different from the community they were moving into as well as the community they were stepping into to speak with. This could be understood with the notion of how important it is to at least attempt to understand a place and the people of that certain place before just walking in with eyes closed. Inclusion comes with open-mindedness as well as communication. To communicate effectively with a new group of people in a new place, one has to be open-minded and is responsible for this on the individual level.

The conversation then spins to the idea of place and again with that comes individual responsibility. Brian brought up the idea of murals in Denver. He described how murals, for example, are a form of community activation in that they tell the rest of the world what Denver may be about. He saw this as a positive way to combine all of the layers of a place in a way that people would be excited about and would then be willing to engage in conversation about a place. Nita again emphasized the need for community engagement as well so that different stakeholders in the community could voice their differing opinions of what a specific place meant to them. The key point to this section was bringing up how different groups can be tied together cohesively in one place. I agree that this is important in any place. We live in a city where change is occurring exponentially and as a result, skyrocket growth can create large gaps of distance. Agreeing with the speakers, I believe it is necessary to try to stabilize some of the growth right before it takes off – to have a voice for each part of the community and to know what the needs of the 'first' group are before the 'second' group arrives.

The panel and the discussion amongst the contributors here really made the audience think about what equity means and how it may stand as just a word or idea, but has many different branches touching different aspects of a community and there is emphasis put on the necessity for this idea as well as inclusion to be understood as a means of interpreting the history and future of a given community. This all seems to go back to the idea of perception and our perceptions as humans—how we view each other, how we view a place, how we view ourselves. It appears that this panel, overall, put emphasis back on community engagement and relationship building as the core factor and importance to take away from. Without understanding, patience, and listening at several different levels in the community—the community will be susceptible to non-inclusion. As cities and towns grow at a greater quicker rate as they do today, it becomes of dire importance to keep equity in mind.