

Everyone's invited to the Birthday Party: A Conversation on Defining Equity

by Ella Sanders



Panel II: An interview on equity and community building

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

Both Tyler and Corrigan brought rich personal experiences with them to inform this discussion of equity. Nita Mosby Tyler is the Chief Catalyst of her organization, The Equity Project. Tyler grew up as a black woman in segregated Atlanta, GA and personally knows the impacts of both segregation and integration. Additionally, Tyler has over 30 years of experience in human resources, and in her current work, she uses this experience to help organizations and communities across the nation realize what the advancement of equity might look like within their sphere of influence.

Brian Corrigan is a creative strategist who focuses on the importance of creating fun, inclusive experiences in public spaces. Corrigan grew up in Anaconda, MT, a declining “brain drain” town, as he describes it. Corrigan recounts feeling unwelcomed in public spaces as a young gay man in Montana and feels that since then, there has been a market acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community.

After discussing the backgrounds and unique experiences of both speakers, Correll started the discussion with the question, “How do we communicate the comprehensive investment of a place, including all of its unique histories for different groups?”

Corrigan responded by reframing the question in an interesting way, “How do we get people authentically invited to the birthday party?” He explained that this starts with including people in the planning process and making sure that their voices are heard. Additionally, he emphasized the role of arts and culture in creating a place that is familiar for different groups of people.

Tyler took her answer in a different direction, discussing the danger of sanitizing histories in changing neighborhoods. She used the example of Five Points in Denver, a historically black neighborhood that has undergone significant demographic changes in the past few years. She emphasized the importance in identifying the asset that the community itself represents and the individual assets within the community. She gave an example of a white man who still lives in Five Points and has stayed in his home through red-lining, segregation, and now gentrification. In order to preserve these histories and avoid sanitation, Tyler says, community assets like this man must be preserved and elevated. Additionally, physical assets (such as historic buildings or landmarks) can help to give people something tangible to learn about the history of a place. Corrigan added that he felt progress looks like having these physical assets and community

gathering places integrated into new neighborhoods. For example, while gay bars used to be secluded into “gay-borhoods,” they are now ubiquitous across cities.

Next, Correll asked the question, “What is the responsibility of each person in intentionally planning for interaction and awareness?”

In answering this, Tyler addressed the importance of understanding what we mean by equity and inclusion. She reiterated, “Equity is not the absence of exclusion, but the presence of true inclusion.” She shared her personal criteria for determining inclusion: inclusive processes will be a win/win for the individual, for the community, and for your organization. We often miss the inclusion of the individual, she shared by assuming the individuals needs and desires rather than including them in decision making. We fear inviting people to the table as “tokens;” however, when they are not included, we miss their voice altogether.

Corrigan emphasized the importance of fun in planning for inclusion. While a community can be filled with individuals with different lived experiences and histories, creating opportunities for fun interaction in public spaces can create a level playing field and make everyone feel as though they have a place to belong. Additionally, Corrigan argues that this kind of fun in public spaces is pivotal in growing an abundance mentality rather than a deficit mentality. A deficit mentality causes us to think narrow mindedly, while an abundance mentality makes us feel as though anything is possible; it is a more inclusive point of view.

The panel ended this discussion by examining the role that the individual, place, the public sector, and private sector can take in addressing issues of equity. Starting with the individual and place, the panel agreed that it starts with meeting the individual needs of people. Tyler shared an insightful story of an employer asking her what it would take for her to feel welcome in Denver; within a week, they sent her a list of black hair salons, churches, and other things she needed to feel included. Corrigan added that as individuals we also have the responsibility of recognizing difference and asking what others may need without assuming. Especially in terms of creating public spaces and art, he emphasized the importance of actually creating community dialogue rather than checking the box on a project. Tyler agreed that the basis of creating inclusive spaces is to begin by listening—really listening.

One helpful exercise that Tyler shared was the Trusted Ten Exercise. In her work with organizations, she starts by asking everyone in the room to quickly identify their ten closest friends outside of their family. She then asks participants to consider what gender these people are, what race they identify as, what religion they practice, among other things. By the end of the exercise, participants realize that their ten closest friends are most often just like them. This exercise challenges people to recognize their implicit bias and begin making connections with those that come from a different background or lived experience.

Moving on to the role that the private and public sector can play in promoting equity, Tyler began with a powerful statement: “We have never seen a system of equity before in our country.” This makes creating equity within our public realm extremely difficult, but not impossible. Tyler proposes that organizations look to the healthcare system to learn how to create equitable systems; the CDC has begun including social determinants of health into their

work, and Tyler suggests that different systems (i.e. legal or planning) should take this approach to consider what social factors are getting in the way of an equitable future. Corrigan added that sustainability is incredibly important when building these systems of equity. To adequately effect change, we should be building these systems to last for years to come, and that takes persistence.

As the panel moved into the Q&A portion of the discussion, it was clear that the audience was wrestling with the definition of equity and the bounds and language we use around it. One participant voiced her disdain for the term “native” used so frivolously in the Front Range, when the true natives of this area were dispossessed of their land; should those who have been here longer have a bigger say in the direction of a community? Another participant argued that Corrigan’s encouragement to move away from a deficit mentality is nearly impossible for those who are living in systems of inequity; an abundance mentality requires the privilege to think that way, she pointed out.

Mrs. Tyler put it best: we have a difficult time defining equity because we can’t agree on a definition. We can’t agree on a definition because we’ve never seen a system of equity in our nation before. Gentrification and the danger of sanitizing the histories of neighborhoods and minority populations is still a prominent issue. However, this does not mean we should stop the dialogue within our communities in pursuit of equity. The panel members made several practical recommendations on how to create spaces within our communities to make people feel welcome to have their voices heard and work together towards a more inclusive community.