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2021

## Black and Brown Centered Placemaking Rooted in Identity and Ownership

Ebony Walden

Virginia Commonwealth University, [ebony.walden@gmail.com](mailto:ebony.walden@gmail.com)

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<https://doi.org/10.21974/ckhm-4s54>

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# Black and Brown Centered Placemaking Rooted in Identity and Ownership

EBONY WALDEN

*Diversity, Equity & Inclusion Consultant & Urban Planner, Ebony Walden Consulting*



As a Black woman who grew up in New York and has now lived in Virginia for 18 years, I've seen racial differences written into every landscape of my life for as long as I can remember. I began to notice these differences when I was around 8 years old. As I rode through my working-class Black and Latino community in Hempstead, NY into Garden City or Rockville Center, white communities directly north and south respectively, everything changed. The corner stores, liquor stores and modest homes transitioned into larger homes with bigger lawns, better shopping and better schools; better everything, it seemed. That shift in the built environment signified wealth and whiteness, which was quite the contrast from some of the struggling neighborhoods in my community. If I had just interpreted what I saw in these differences, I would have surmised that there was something better about white neighborhoods, white schools, and white shopping areas. Maybe even that white people were better. I never really believed that, though my eyes told me otherwise as I looked at the streets and observed larger society. I always sensed that something was awry in the world around me, that I lived in a twilight zone, where Black prosperity seemed the exception and white thriving the rule. However, I knew that there wasn't anything intrinsically better about those communities or the white people that lived in them. I'd been bused to an all-white school for a few years when I lived in Queens. I was the only Black girl in my class. I felt out of place, I didn't talk much and was almost left back. It wasn't until I went to a Black and brown school district in Long Island, that I moved up several reading levels and began to thrive. They saw me. The white school had more resources and wealthier parents, but a Black environment supported my thriving.

Though I grew up around hardworking Black and brown folks, the places I lived were labeled "distressed" and I was considered "disadvantaged," because I lived in single parent household where we struggled to make ends meet and was enrolled in a low performing school district. In order to flip my "disadvantaged" status on its head, I strove to become the epitome of success by graduating at the top of my class and going off to Georgetown University in Washington, DC. Now, as a successful Black entrepreneur who "beat the odds," I am considered an exception. I, however, am not satisfied with being an anomaly. Even under the worst oppression, there were some Black people that were successful. What would be exceptional is if Black and brown prosperity were the norm. What if we had a system that encouraged Black and brown prosperity? What if we had a system that valued and invested in it, and removed the greatest barriers to it: systemic racism and economic inequality—both of which feed into each other. What if we had neighborhoods and communities that displayed, supported and celebrated Black and brown prosperity rooted in property and business ownership and a robust cultural identity?

I went into urban planning because I wanted to create these types of communities, where Black and brown prosperity was written into the landscape. I wanted to see more Black and brown communities with renovated buildings, grocery stores selling healthy food, quality housing, and successful businesses and commercial buildings owned by the people who lived in the neighborhood. Neighborhoods where Black and brown presence and culture are celebrated, not seen as signs of degradation. **This is still my hope; to help create a racially equitable Richmond that is absent of starkly visible differences in streets and streetscapes, parks, housing, services, schools and**

### Black and Brown Centered Placemaking Rooted in Identity and Ownership

**business districts between the mostly Black and brown communities in the East End, North Side and South Side—and those in the West End—wealthier and whiter.**

To do this, we must intentionally acknowledge and address the racial inequities that have become the norm in our community. Data outlined in [Richmond 300](#) (the city's master plan) [Insights Report](#) and RVA Green 2050 (the city's climate resilience planning process) [Equity Index](#) show that the wealth, health, school performance, housing and homeownership and environmental disparities are racial, economic and geographic – the neighborhoods that are not thriving are Black and brown and in certain sections of the city. I'd bet there has also been disparities in city capital improvement spending in Richmond, otherwise sidewalks and street repairs and streetscape improvements would be more equitably distributed.

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We have to be diligent and vigilant in unmasking and disrupting white supremacy and the ways it has shaped our urban environment. We know the history of redlining, highway construction through Jackson Ward, concentrating public housing, and how Black and brown communities were targeted for subprime lending and experienced the greatest impact on wealth, foreclosures and homeownership from the Great Recession. Black wealth is at an all-time low; we have lost 3,600 Black homeowners in Richmond, and our city is gentrifying. We are far from "ONE" Richmond. We are, like most places, a tale of two cities, one prospering and white, and the other mostly struggling and Black and brown. I am not sure what we need is unity. We need to be comfortable with difference, to celebrate diversity and to make sure those that are marginalized are at the table and have power. We need to work to upend

the disparities that have been associated with our differences for far too long. My equitable Richmond includes thriving Black and brown communities centered on and celebrating cultural identity and ownership in intentional neighborhood-centric ways. **Creating neighborhoods and communities rooted in Black and brown cultural identity, while supporting ownership and entrepreneurship will be keys to advancing racial equity in our city.**

#### Create Communities Rooted in Black & Brown Identity & Excellence

We may not be initially aware of it, but we have created spaces and institutions that cater to and reflect whiteness. What if we also intentionally created Black spaces, and other cultural spaces that reflected the broad diversity of our community. When I travel, there is a natural draw for locals and tourists to Chinatowns, Little Italys, Koreatowns or other neighborhoods rooted in specific identities and cultures but are also welcoming and attractive to visitors and residents of all types. What if Richmond had the 21<sup>st</sup> century equivalent to a Jackson Ward at its height, representative of Black prosperity? What if we uplifted Latino businesses and culture in the South Side, in our placemaking? Local projects that I have worked on as an urban planning consultant that desire to reimagine once prosperous Black neighborhoods in our current landscape have craved this rootedness in cultural identity, art, business and prosperity. These values and ideas were reflected in the recent [neighborhood plan](#) for the area of Jackson Ward North of 95 and the [Staff Hill Small Area Plan](#) that I worked on in Charlottesville's Vinegar Hill, a Black community razed by Urban Renewal. Both projects' values and goals were rooted in equity and Black prosperity and created a vision for homeownership, entrepreneurship, and cultural arts rooted in African American history and culture. There are models for this type of placemaking around the country. There is [Domino Park](#) in Little Havana in Miami, a park infused with art, community and play specifically for Latinos; or [Homecoming, an](#) art project that preserves and celebrates Black stories and presence in the Hill Neighborhood in Pittsburgh.

### Black and Brown Centered Placemaking Rooted in Identity and Ownership

We must be intentional about creating, visioning and cultivating these places or the default will be market driven neighborhood development rooted in whiteness and promoting gentrification, which often has the form of “diversity” but not the substance. In such places, you may have a diversity of food and culture, but the businesses, buildings and homes are not owned by people of color and perhaps they can’t even afford to live and run businesses there anymore (which is one by-product of gentrification). Though gentrification is technically creating multi-racial, mixed-income communities, however, when the majority of the white folks are higher income and the people of color are lower-income and/or if displacement takes place, it is actually harmful. We need culturally centered neighborhoods, parks, business districts and arts and culture that celebrate communities of color in Richmond. These things will make our city rich and attractive to visitors but also more home to those who live here. We need to make sure that 50% of Black and brown people can stay here and call it home.

I am advocating for investing in existing communities of color, not as the only viable option, but a key effort worth investing in. We are systemically set up for the disparate racial results that we achieve. So, we must systematize Black

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and brown prosperity, write it into our policies, programs and our neighborhood development efforts, not just move people around. Jackson Ward was racially segregated, but had income diversity that contributed to its thriving legacy. We can also have integrated neighborhoods that are culturally centered, but we must work towards income AND racial diversity. And even then, we must be still be vigilant, as the racial bias of whites in mixed-race thriving neighborhoods can still have a negative impact, [especially on Black boys](#), because the underlying issue we must address is racism.

### Support Black & Brown Ownership & Entrepreneurship

We know the key to prosperity in this country is wealth creation, which is connected to ownership – of land, capital

and capacity to leverage resources. Thus, in order to catalyze communities of color in this generation and the next, we should focus on ownership of these resources. A more equitable Richmond would increase the homeownership opportunities as well as business ownership and entrepreneurship of Black and brown folk in the city. A recent [PolicyLink report](#) focused on COVID-19 recovery in cities, suggests creating a Community Reparations Program that supports Black homeownership. Evansville, Illinois, established a Restorative Housing Program fund to provide Black residents with \$25,000 grants for homeownership as a form of reparations for housing discrimination via racist zoning in place from 1919 to 1969. In July 2020, Asheville, North Carolina, began establishing a program focusing on redressing the harms of its urban renewal program in the 1960s and 1970s. Recognizing the significant and irreparable harms to Black residents created by past city policies, many other cities are considering local reparations programs. Richmond should as well, in addition to collaborations with nonprofits and private industry to support and bolster Black Homeownership, helping new homeowners and stabilizing existing homeowners.

That same PolicyLink report suggests cities create “inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems”—comprehensive systems of business support to help people of color start and scale up businesses. The Nowak Metro Finance Lab describes five key approaches 1) Providing entrepreneurial support through intermediaries that effectively serve business

### Black and Brown Centered Placemaking Rooted in Identity and Ownership

owners of color; 2) Increasing access to capital through new products and community navigators; 3) Expand supplier diversity by building the capacity of subcontractors and connect purchasers to vendors; 4) Strengthening commercial corridors in communities of color; and 5) Growing and diversifying sectors through targeted efforts to support and scale people-of-color-owned businesses in growing, higher paying sectors.

Additionally, programs like [Buy the Block](#) (a crowdsourcing platform to support local businesses) can also help longstanding Black businesses stay in the neighborhoods and acquire the buildings their businesses inhabit. I live near Brookland Park Boulevard, a haven for both Black-owned businesses but also gentrification. As the market gets hotter, those long standing businesses will be vulnerable to push out. Business programs that support property ownership will be key to stabilizing Black business, which equates to ownership and wealth.

This emphasis on supporting Black and brown centered identity, community building and ownership opportunities may seem extreme to equity skeptics, but what we have experienced for the past 400 years is privileging and centering whiteness in both our racist and race neutral policies from federal to local policies, to the private market. To counteract that legacy, we need to work harder to invest in marginalized communities of color – from a placemaking, neighborhood planning and economic development perspective. We must start now, unmasking racism in ourselves, our communities and institutions, unlearning it's ways and tricks and being midwives to the new equitable Richmond that is waiting to be born.

#### Ebony Walden

Ebony is the Founder and Principal Consultant at Ebony Walden Consulting (EWC), an urban strategy firm based in Richmond, Virginia. At EWC, she works with a wide range of organizations to design and facilitate meetings, trainings, strategic plans and community engagement processes that explore race, equity and the creation of more just and inclusive communities. Before founding EWC, Ebony worked in local government and for non-profit organizations dedicated to citywide and neighborhood level revitalization. Currently, Ebony is an adjunct professor at Virginia Commonwealth University where she teaches Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the City. She holds a Masters in Urban and Environmental Planning from the University of Virginia and a Bachelors in Business Administration from Georgetown University.

Ebony's work has been featured in [The Hill](#), [Richmond Times-Dispatch](#) and [The Nature of Cities](#).