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Neighborhood Self-Determination and the Vision for Racial Equity

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I'm attending a conference in Washington, D.C and it's finally lunch break. I've been inside one room all morning and this break is my first opportunity to grab a bite to eat and hopefully, sit near a window with some sun. Conference attendees are milling about, and as most breaks during conferences go, conversation with other attendees is a high likelihood. However, if you're like me, you'd much rather find a nice seat alone and scroll through email or social media. Fortunately for me, my wish doesn't come true and another attendee grabs a seat across from me. He immediately jumps into conversation. He's a seasoned community organizer out of New York City, with experience globally and domestically. We exchange introductions and he proceeds to ask, "So, what brings you to this work?" Given we're at a conference focused on public housing and resident organizing, I give a response related to this subject-matter:

"I'm interested in dismantling structural racism in housing policy and preserving housing for existing residents."

Unenthused with that response, he reframes his question:

*"What about **you** do you bring to this work?"*

I really just want to finish my lunch, but I think a bit more about his question and proceed to go into detail about my personal journey and the values I seek to carry along with me. He affirms my response, but still wants to dig deeper:

"Where do these values you carry come from?"

This lunch is not getting eaten. I begin discussing my time in different cities, my experiences in college, the town I grew up in, and the church I attended.

"That's it! That's where you first experienced this work. The church!"

Lunch ends and the sandwich I had is barely touched. And on top of that, I'm left asking myself the rest of the day, "What does church have to do with my work in affordable housing policy?" Throughout the rest of the day, I'm reflecting on that conversation, until I finally understand what he was attempting to teach me.

Perhaps similar for some of you, the Black Baptist church was foundational to my upbringing. It was this multi-generational, familial place that shaped my understanding of the world around me. And it was also the place that unknowingly shaped my interpretation of what it means to advance racial equity in the [built environment](#). The Black church was the first place I experienced the values that have sustained Black families and communities for generations. Values such as:

- Respect of elders;
- Solidarity in the pursuit of joy;

Neighborhood Self-Determination and the Vision for Racial Equity

- Trust and love of your neighbor; and
- The determination for collective liberation.

Now, I'm not a pastor and don't intend to be, so I won't go into a sermon. I also recognize that we all have various relationships to the institution of church, so I don't necessarily assign these values solely to the institution. However, I do believe these values can serve as a guide to how we model racial equity in our methods of engagement, decision-making, and economic investment in Richmond neighborhoods.

The voices and perspectives of elders are critically important. Without their stories, their traditions, and their guidance, our work isn't adequately rooted.

Respect of Elders

Essential to building an equitable city is the understanding of what inequities your city is seeking to address. Yes, investing in well-researched analyses of these inequities is important, but if these analyses are not fully understood and embraced by those who have experienced these inequities first-hand, the work of achieving real equity falls short. That's why the voices and perspectives of elders are critically important. Without their stories, their traditions, and their guidance, our work isn't adequately rooted. And in a city like Richmond, where the Black population decreased 7% from 2000-2016, the opportunity to capture and build upon these voices is slipping by.

How do we embody respect when engaging our elders in a neighborhood planning process? What opportunities do we have to strengthen intergenerational learning and collaboration? One example I think of is the [community planning process](#) implemented in the Hill District neighborhood of Pittsburgh by the [Neighborhood Resilience Project](#) (formerly known as FOCUS Pittsburgh). I was fortunate to work in the Hill District during this time and to this day, this particular planning process remains the most respectful, healing, and democratized planning I've ever witnessed. The planning work focused on one particular block—2900 block of Webster Avenue—and included all residents and institutions that called that block home. Many of the residents were older and were either born in the Hill District, or had raised their families there. With such a rich and nuanced perspective on the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities for the Hill District, gathering their input during this process required something often not endorsed in the work of planning and developing a community: patience. Patience meant spending time on the front-end building trust and communion, independent of a particular outcome. Sometimes patience meant suspending roles and titles, allowing the space to be free of real and perceived hierarchy. And crucially, patience meant allowing the process to evolve naturally, providing residents the time to follow their own path towards a sense of ownership and trust of the process. And in the end, the members of that community unveiled their plan in one of the most inspiring community meetings I've been fortunate to be part of. The sense of pride amongst their block was palpable.

This work of engaging our elders is not only possible in Richmond, but imperative.

Solidarity in the Pursuit of Joy

As Audre Lorde famously quoted, "there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives." Consider the many identities you may hold. Perhaps you identify as African American, but also identify as a Trans youth. Perhaps you identify as a Black woman, but also a Black woman that is elderly and physically disabled. These complexities exist in all our neighborhoods and it's the complexity that makes our neighborhoods

Neighborhood Self-Determination and the Vision for Racial Equity

as vibrant as they are. However, when we work to advance racial equity in neighborhood planning, how do these complexities get represented? For example, when we talk about expanding access to affordable housing in our neighborhoods, are we considering the accessibility of housing for [Trans youth](#) in our community? Or the accessibility of housing for [renters with children and disabilities](#)? Patient, deliberate community engagement allows us to uncover these complexities and truly build solidarity in our work of advancing racial equity. Thankfully, we have models existing in Richmond in which to build from. Models such as the [Youth Empowerment Through Eviction Research \(YEER\) Initiative](#) developed collaboratively by Advocates for Richmond Youth, Six Points Innovation Center, Virginia Community Voice, RVA Eviction Lab, VCU School of Social Work, and VCU L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs. Informed, led, and shaped by youth throughout Richmond, this initiative exemplified [intersectionality](#) and put into practice the work of building solidarity across different identities, particularly in the context of housing justice. **Building a more equitable Richmond will require our full, complex selves to show up securely, and this initiative presents a model in which to build from in the neighborhoods we work within.**

Trust and Love of Your Neighbor

“Turn to the person next to you and say neighbor...” If like me, you’ve heard that phrase hundreds of times growing up in the Black church. Yet, it was this past year of the pandemic where this phrase became increasingly significant outside of the church, with many of us looking to our neighbors for either emotional or material support. In Richmond, we saw countless examples of that support, from [grassroots organizations](#) in Gilpin Court to institutions such as the [Richmond City Health District](#) and their neighborhood resource centers. But as we build from COVID-19 and seek to retain the practices of mutual aid that were so vital during the past year, how do we leverage these practices to inform our conversations regarding essential neighborhood-serving organizations? As noted earlier, Richmond’s racial composition is shifting. According to [Richmond 300](#) and The Partnership for Housing Affordability’s [Locality Data](#), in 2000, Black residents made up 57% of the City of Richmond’s population, compared to 38% for White residents. Fast forward to 2016, and the Black and white population of Richmond sits at 47% and 46%, respectively. Additionally, home sale prices in the City of Richmond are increasing faster than anywhere else in the region, with the average home being 56% more expensive than it was in 2009. These high home sale prices are disproportionately impacting Black homeowners, specifically in historic Black neighborhoods such as Jackson Ward and Church Hill. In 2017, estimates showed that the City of Richmond had lost 3,600 black homeowners since 2000.

Market volatility within neighborhoods can have a myriad of [health-related impacts](#) on existing residents. Retaining trust amongst neighbors is vital to successful neighborhood engagement and development. It requires a trusted neighborhood-based institution focused on carrying out the vision of the residents in which it serves. Organizations such as [Southside Community Development and Housing Corporation](#) (SCDHC) have been serving that role for families in South Side Richmond since 1998. In subsequent years, SCDHC has seen the impact institutions such as theirs can have in sustaining and building trust within its community. Therefore, as we build beyond COVID-19 and embed practices of mutual aid in our approach to racial equity, SCDHC asks a critical question: [Where are all the Black community development corporations?](#)

Determination for Collective Liberation

[Freedom Corner](#) marks the spot in which Hill District residents organized and stood their ground against the demoralizing and destabilizing forces of urban renewal. Already reeling from the loss of 8,000 residents due to the demolition of their Lower Hill community, the members of the Hill District could endure no more and demanded no more demolition come into their neighborhood. Freedom Corner not only stands as a physical representation of resistance and determination, but a symbol for political strength and will for a neighborhood rich in pride.

Neighborhood Self-Determination and the Vision for Racial Equity

Here in Richmond, we have our own standard for neighborhood self-determination: Jackson Ward. Well-known for its role creating Black economic sovereignty and wealth, particularly via Maggie L. Walker, Jackson Ward also stands as a neighborhood that has fought consistently since Reconstruction against state-sanctioned [discrimination and disenfranchisement](#). Although Jackson Ward has undergone significant demographic changes, the roots of Black political, economic, and social capital still exist. Currently, these roots are being tended to by new initiatives such as [The JXN Project](#). The work of the JXN Project to honor untold and overlooked truths of Jackson Ward reinforces our interpretation of what Black self-determination and agency means in our city. Through the enhancement of context and narrative, the JXN Project presents a new framework of dialogue to build upon. What will we do with this opportunity? **Will we honor the legacy of Jackson Ward through ceremonial acts, or will we allow this legacy to live its fullest expression, informing the principles of engagement, planning, and investment in neighborhoods throughout the entire city?**

Conclusion

Racial equity does not seek to dominate, alienate, or perpetuate social displacement. It isn't rooted in scarcity, nor does it seek to compete. At its core, racial equity discerns, reflects, and leans upon the wisdom of those that have come before. This, I believe, is what Richmond neighborhoods desire in the work to advance racial equity. A desire to listen to the wisdom of those who've walked this path before; a desire to be joyful in the full expression of themselves; a desire to know there are neighborhood-based organizations looking out for their well-being; and a desire to know their voices are what's guiding the future of their neighborhoods.

Let's give ourselves the opportunity to lead. Let's give ourselves the opportunity to model how a globally recognized city with a history in enslavement and the Confederacy heals and repairs. And let's model these principles and practices at a neighborhood level, leaning upon the wisdom of individuals and institutions that have yet to see these ideals fully materialize.

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Michael H. Smith, AICP, serves as Director for Community Investments and the Built Environment at the Richmond Memorial Health Foundation (RMHF). In this role, Michael oversees the Foundation's work in creating community partnerships that explore and improve connections between the built environment and improved health outcomes in the Richmond region. His duties include leading the Foundation's education, policy and outreach work with regard to the built environment; overseeing strategy and grantmaking for this focus area; and helping to create and support financial investments in the built environment.

Prior to joining RMHF, Michael led real estate development and urban planning work in the nonprofit, government and private sectors in Pittsburgh, PA. Most recently, Michael served as Project Manager for TREK Development Group, managing the Bedford Dwellings/Hill District Choice Neighborhoods Planning Grant. Prior to that role, Michael worked in the Pittsburgh Department of City Planning, managing the city's affordable housing task force. Michael came to Pittsburgh after working for four years in Charlottesville as a neighborhood planner.

Michael completed a Bachelor's Degree in Urban and Environmental Planning from the University of Virginia. He is a member of the American Planning Association, the Neighborhood Funders Group, and serves on the Community Advisory Board of Virginia Public Media.

Neighborhood Self-Determination and the Vision for Racial Equity

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