

Four Shifts to Heal Communities

Advancing Health Equity and Racial Justice in Land Use Planning and the Built Environment

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Health has a lot to do with where we live—and how the land where we live is used. Affordable housing, parks and green space, public transit, pedestrian safety, and other resources related to land use provide the foundations of community health. These are health-supporting resources that all communities deserve. But land use processes that prioritize political influence over community need have resulted in place-based inequality that threatens Black and Brown communities. And political and agency norms that often shroud land use decisions from public participation have prevented community members and community-based organizations from holding decision makers accountable for unjust outcomes.

In 2020, the issue of racially biased land use decisions has come to the fore. The COVID-19 pandemic and the racial inequity it has revealed have forced policymakers to acknowledge that Black and Brown communities have been made more vulnerable to chronic and acute health crises because of generations of environmental racism, wealth destruction, and unjust institutional biases. At the same time, the movement to end racialized police violence has created an opening—and perhaps political will—for those who want to reverse racial injustices in all institutions, with land use agencies being no exception.

This brief describes four shifts in land use policies and practices that have the potential to fix the broken land use planning system and reveal the full potential of land use decisions that prioritize community needs to contribute to health equity, racial justice, and place-based healing. They are:

SHIFT 1: Embed health equity and racial justice in every land use decision

SHIFT 2: Make *Community Land for Community Benefit* the primary driver of land use decisions

SHIFT 3: Look to community leadership for the solutions

SHIFT 4: Uproot *pay-to-play* politics from land use decision-making

These shifts derive from the experiences of the Healthy Equitable Active Land Use (HEALU) Network—and the range of coalitions it contributes to—which was formed to insist on inclusion, transparency, innovation, and justice amongst all entities that shape our built environment. HEALU partners work to shift land use funding patterns, uplift community-driven solutions, and push back against disingenuous planning processes.

Shift 1: Embed Health Equity and Racial Justice in Every Land Use Decision

From the accessibility of housing stock to the siting of green spaces or pollution sources, the racial justice challenge before us compels every planning decision to be judged based on how it fosters inclusivity or exclusivity. Infrastructure investments and development projects can harm or fail to benefit communities of color because the analysis behind them is rooted in dominant, mainstream perspectives and analysis, or ignores the impact of racism and cultural difference altogether. Changing this necessitates a new or improved habit for public entities—understanding specific economic and health vulnerabilities of distinct population groups and engaging in forthright discussion of these within decision-making processes. Some key methods for putting this shift into practice include:

- **Analyze land use implications for Black and Brown wealth creation.** Development strategies that undermine existing businesses, generate extractive profits for outside investors, or intensify competition for housing and commercial space perpetuate a long history of Black and Brown displacement and wealth destruction. Planning that moves at the pace of grassroots collaboration can help to ensure that investment capital is accountable for community benefits and that complementary policies are developed to support residents and local businesses.
- **Map health, resource, and environmental inequities.** Visualizing the uneven distribution of burdens and benefits across urban landscapes helps to clarify whether a land use strategy will merely reinforce existing inequalities or close gaps. Overlaying these indicators with race and

Health Equity means that everyone has a fair and just opportunity to attain their full health potential and that no one is disadvantaged, excluded, or dismissed from achieving this potential. Health equity requires the removal of systemic obstacles to health.

Racial Justice would be attained if racial factors no longer served as fairly robust and reliable predictors of key measures of health, safety, economic stability, or other important societal outcomes. This means the elimination/reversal of the policies, practices, norms, and messages that reinforce differential outcomes by race and a transformation of the systems and structures that uphold/reinforce persistent and widening inequities.

income also tells an unmistakable story of who the land use system has served to benefit historically. An example is the LA Countywide Parks Needs Assessment, which played a crucial role in making the case for large-scale parks and greenspace investment in low-income, high park-need communities of color, and remains an invaluable reference for upholding accountability in the grantmaking processes for public financing of parks.

- **Consider land use decisions with a past-present-future equity lens.** Land use strategies should proactively address the unjust disparities that have harmed Black and Brown health and wellbeing for generations, including practices that insulated white communities from environmental

impacts and enabled racially exclusive housing practices. Planning processes must also address current factors that undermine authentic engagement with community members, ignore and obstruct grassroots power, and skew decision-making in favor of monied vested interests. Furthermore, unintended outcomes must be evaluated, addressed, and monitored to avoid compounding inequity.

- **Advance equity in distributional, procedural, and institutional decisions.** The default practice of dividing resources evenly by Council or Supervisorial districts hasn't and won't resolve health inequities or achieve racial justice. This form of political expedience only serves to reproduce unjust differences. Rather, public and private investment must prioritize communities that have been unfairly burdened and excluded. Public entities must also abandon top-down decision-making that ignores community vision and priorities and an overemphasis on technical knowledge. Rather, they should lean further into cultural competency, broadly inclusive engagement, and community-driven planning processes. Entities in all sectors must also commit to the deeper work of improving representation among staff and leadership, and dismantling internal biases that presuppose what is rational, beneficial, and possible for where and for whom.
- **Apply equity in practice.** A true equity orientation seeks processes where all people have a fair opportunity for health, wellbeing, and the outcomes that reflect them—regardless of who they are or where they live. Decision-makers and agencies cannot ignore or be silent on race or systemic injustice. Upholding an equity analysis

in the midst of discomfort or opposition may be the only reliable approach for countering narrow self-interests and building political support for sustainable and resilient land use strategies that further regional wellbeing, rather than perpetuate vast land use and environmental inequity.

Shift 2: Make *Community Land for Community Benefit* the Primary Driver of Land Use Decisions

In a rush to get the dirt moving on development projects, planners, developers, agencies, and politicians too often base decisions on a superficial analysis of the community's land use needs, if not a complete steamrolling of the community's expressed priorities. Unchecked, this habit creates regulatory giveaways on a mass scale—trading community control for private profits, uprooting the economic and cultural fabric of neighborhoods, and wasting the community-benefiting value potential of land that would promote health, resilience, and wealth creation in Black and Brown communities.

If *highest and best use* (i.e. most productive and beneficial from a narrow perspective) is the default basis for most land use decisions, it means little if we don't add ... *for who and how* to capture human and social value in the analysis. Staff reports and planning commission discussions that are neutral on questions of historical injustice, neighborhood identity, and grassroots leadership inevitably skew decisions toward presumptive solutions and the prerogatives of powerful outside interests. Equitable development can be a viable (re)investment strategy for Black and Brown communities, but only if planning agencies are detailed and unwavering in framing equity implications, and if decision-makers act affirmatively on this knowledge.

A *community land for community benefit* approach also refuses the kind of false choices that Black and Brown communities are often presented with and moves planning processes towards “yes, and...” solutions. Over a range of issues (including housing, parks, stormwater, transit, and pedestrian safety), we’ve seen agency analysis unilaterally prioritize one need at the expense of another community priority. However, these challenges have also spurred advocates to work collaboratively across issue areas, press for more innovative multi-benefit projects, and help craft balanced and contextualized policy proposals. All communities deserve the consideration and respect of this kind of comprehensive approach.

Shift 3: Look to Community Leadership for the Solutions

Since Arnstein’s *Ladder of Citizen Participation* was published 51 years ago, progress from tokenism to citizen power in land use decision-making has been frustratingly slow and tenuous. This is not owing to a lack of engaged residents and advocates. Recent decades have witnessed a concerted build-up of neighborhood and issue-based organizations that sustain attention to environmental justice and equitable development concerns. Many of these organizations have the organizing and analytical capacity to disrupt inequitable projects and policy, and provide the critical theory and imagination that advance the planning field’s more notable innovations.

A community-driven model redefines grassroots participation—from providing input to leading the process, and from generating participation to holding power. The way toward land use policies that achieve justice, healing, and resilience is guided by community organizations that do this work.

We suggest four key methods for investing in the capacity and stability of these organizations:

- **Regularize authentic engagement methods within public agencies.** Though collaborative outreach partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs) are becoming more commonplace, growing pains abound and agency- or officeholder-led outreach processes often still occur with minimal strategy or collaboration. The public sector must work more with CBOs to grow the muscles of power-sharing, trust-building, and developing shared knowledge. It should also follow the lead of innovative cities that have adopted engagement standards and oversight bodies, which serve as important reference points for both agency staff and grassroots advocates.
- **Streamline granting processes and technical assistance to be more accessible.** Local nonprofits sometimes function as stand-in funding applicants in fiscally challenged jurisdictions, pursuing infrastructure and program grants that are beyond the reach of overburdened agency staff. This valuable role should be acknowledged and reinforced by structuring granting processes to be less cumbersome and by compensating nonprofits for the sunk costs associated with developing proposals. Lack of tailored technical assistance is also an important barrier to equitable funding and must be addressed with commensurate resources for applicants in low-income, under-resourced jurisdictions.
- **Scale up operational funding to build and strengthen nonprofit organizational capacity.** Community-based organizations navigate a problematic funding landscape that neglects their long-term needs and rarely compensates for the

infrastructure and development costs that make them viable participants to begin with. A key part of the land use equity challenge before funders lies in funding reliable base-building and analytical staff capacity, incubating strong CBOs in more neighborhoods where nonprofit investment has been neglected, and sustaining organizations that stay focused on community-driven priorities.

- **Recognize and fund non-aligned planning initiatives.** Though still uncommon, there are recent examples of community-based organizations facilitating local planning processes that were independent of, but parallel to, those administered by local governments. These “people’s plans” generate constructive pressure for legally adopted land use policy that is more reflective of grassroots knowledge and priorities. CBOs are well-placed to do this work because of their valuable capacities, relationship networks, and contextual knowledge and methods. Providing scaled, consistent funding can help support this kind of innovative planning model.

Shift 4: Uproot Pay-to-Play Politics from Land Use Decision-Making

Thirteen years after its Planning Commission issued a set of *Do Real Planning principles*, Los Angeles’ broken land use system reached a nadir in 2020—with a sitting Councilmember, a recent Councilmember, and a recent Commissioner facing federal corruption indictments involving multiple large-scale development approvals. The indictments describe elected officials deliberately obstructing the consideration of project proposals, accelerating the proposals of conspiring interests, overriding equitable housing and labor concerns, and disregarding commission and staff analyses.

This role of gatekeeper to the city’s land use authority is perhaps the most vulnerable to corruption in all of local government, and rests at the crucial intersection of profit-driven speculation and community-benefiting development. The widespread practice of developers donating to campaigns and favored charities is an undemocratic threat to authentic community concerns and grassroots advocacy and makes an uphill struggle for race-informed equitable development doubly hard. Long-overdue proposals are emerging to counter this form of influence, including:

- Restricting the power of elected officials to override or rewrite the decisions of planning commissions or other advisory boards
- Narrowing the legal parameters for granting zoning variances and other discretionary entitlements, which encourages adherence to adopted land use policy deriving from community engagement
- Enacting stricter rules for campaign and favored charity donations applicable to elected and appointed gatekeepers and private entities with vested land use interests
- Establishing an independent inspector general or other oversight office to monitor corruption and misconduct

Cultivating healthy places has always depended on access to the political and economic power that influence decisions. Over the last 35 years, community power to shift land use decisions has gained momentum steadily. Voter support for equitable built environment funding and policy solutions has also grown, and many public agencies have made steps (albeit tentatively) toward more inclusive and authentic community engagement practices. The four shifts described here go deeper to transform practices

and assumptions on the path toward authentic systems change—work that must be embraced to repair harms done to Black and Brown communities.

We've arrived at a moment where the systems that produce and sustain inequity in our cities are under mass scrutiny—with decisions made every day to act for reform or hide and wait. What happens next can

mark a turning point for the healing and resilience our neighborhoods need, or merely add another footnote of skepticism about our broken land use system. We are hopeful that public agencies, funders, and grassroots organizations are inspired by these shifts, as we continue to advance them in Los Angeles.

This brief was written by Prevention Institute with input from Healthy Equitable Active Land Use (HEALU) Network core partners. To learn more about the HEALU Network visit www.preventioninstitute.org.

