

Changing the system through relationships: Collaborative governance for generational change





The built environment touches every aspect of life, but systemic barriers have excluded Black, Brown, and low-income communities from the benefits and access that everyone should be able to enjoy—no matter where they live. The legacy of racist land use policies has eroded trust and confidence in government institutions and decision-making processes among Black and Brown communities.



Silos within government also hinder lasting relationships between the public sector community members they are charged to serve, as transportation, land use and development, community planning, climate resilience, and public health are often treated as separate entities. This undermines the ability of the government to distribute funding and serve the needs of society as a whole.

To build trust and achieve equitable outcomes for communities, particularly disinvested communities, collaborative governance—or the involvement of the government, community, and private sectors in decision-making—can be leveraged to foster inclusive dialogue and change. Intentional spaces for information sharing are needed—both inside government agencies and directly with community members—to encourage partnerships between generations and the equitable outcomes each group is working toward. Youth-led organizing is also critical to build strength, empowerment, and partnership across generations.





Key discussion points

-  Historical land use policies, such as redlining and racial zoning, enforced segregation by restricting where people of different racial and ethnic backgrounds could live, own property, or access resources. These policies created spatial divisions and entrenched patterns of segregation that persist in many communities today. As a result, decision-making processes are siloed along racial lines, with certain communities excluded from meaningful participation in planning and development initiatives. Decision-makers in power must acknowledge that the inequities felt in Black and Brown communities today are a result of discriminatory and racist policies and decision-making of the past.
-  Political distrust and siloed decision-making further exclude communities and keep lasting systems-wide change out of reach. Actively working to undo the legacies of the past and promoting inclusive decision-making requires a culture change from the top down. Practitioners must create steps in the process to consider aspects from the other disciplines while also centering youth perspectives and leadership

Key discussion points

-  3 Intergenerational leadership is essential in moving the pendulum forward toward the future we are collectively envisioning. Youth-led organizing is crucial for the movement and sparks an opportunity to leverage strength, empowerment, and partnership across generations.
-  4 Innovation is required in how federal funding is dispersed to ensure that it is being accessed by communities in the way that they need it. Small, grassroots environmental justice and community-based organizations do not always have the capacity to navigate bureaucratic federal grant processes. These barriers need to be addressed to expand resources, technical assistance, and guidance to communities that are already overburdened.

Questions to ask

-  1 How can current planning and government agencies support each other in achieving their goals, and how can they work together to identify barriers to implementing change?
-  2 What considerations or checkpoints, such as long-term mitigation strategies, community feedback sessions, and public surveys, are factored in when taking into account the effects development and plans will have on a community for future generations?
-  3 How can decision makers ensure that information is readily accessible and available to communities? How can those in positions of power seek to build trust with advocates?
-  4 What are the linkages, redundancies, and gaps between current systems of governance? For example, between systems of public health, transportation, land use planning, and local governance? Who are the “keepers of the keys” who bridge these systems together?



“It's of crucial importance that the baton is passed to [youth leaders] and that we're able to advocate for decisions that we would like to see, the change that we would want. But that isn't done in a vacuum. That's done with communities, organizations as well as people who are still in power.”

– Rhea Goswami, Founder, Environmental Justice Coalition

What's Next?

- Community Leaders:** Build solidarity through creative approaches that can tap into shared cultural memories of communities. This offers a foundation to build upon and collectively envision a future. Place-making should be conducted in a way that builds power through a grass-roots movement and allows for local ownership.
- Government Agencies:** Engage your local BID, other government departments, community leaders, or the like, and reach outside of the typical bounds of your purview. Be intentional about seeking input from youth leaders. Talk to one another, gain insight and different perspectives, and build coalitions that are multi-dimensional.
- Community Orgs/Advocates:** Knowing where the origination of harmful plans and the history of similar plans in the past, will make it easier to halt a project. People in the community know the issues of the community more than anyone. Showing up to the community meetings with issues and possible solutions will go a long way.
- Planners:** Start planning for the long term (more than 10 years). This kind of long-run planning necessitates engagement with groups that are not normally involved in the planning process (i.e. not just engineers, local representatives, and community groups). It will also create a space for emerging leaders to have a seamless transition when those plans come to fruition, giving electeds a formal document or planning regimen to point to **when implementing policy changes**.

Recommended resources



Read: This article on [Cross-Silo Leadership](#)

An article on [how Breaking Down Government Silos Empowers Placemaking](#)

This report on [Breaking Down Silos: Transportation, Economic Development, and Health](#)

Research: Inclusive development that [enables sustainable development at the local level through voluntary local reviews \(VLRs\)](#)



"We just have to think about relationships, beyond the silos, and try to get that message to others."

– Gov. Parris Glendening,
Former Governor of Maryland

Check out: The [Environmental Justice Coalition](#)

Learn more: About the [Hip Hop Caucus](#), a storytelling non-profit who uses the power of cultural expression to empower communities impacted by injustice.