



Building Community Power for Equity

A Discussion Paper for Year 4 of the 11th Street Bridge Park Equitable Development Evaluation

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The vision for the 11th Street Bridge Park is to create a lively pedestrian span across Washington, DC's Anacostia River, connecting Ward 6 neighborhoods on the west bank (e.g., Capitol Hill and Navy Yard) to Ward 8 neighborhoods on the east bank (e.g., Anacostia and Congress Heights). The project's overarching goals are to produce recreational, cultural, and environmental value for the entire DC community while bringing greater economic opportunity and inclusion to longtime Ward 8 residents, who are mostly Black and have experienced centuries of systemic racism and chronic economic disinvestment. The 1,200-foot bridge is slated for completion in 2024. A collaborative of Bridge Park leaders, nonprofit partners, residents, underwriters, and other city stakeholders is now entering its fifth year of implementing the project's Equitable Development Plan (EDP). The plan includes strategies aimed at securing jobs, small business opportunities, and affordable housing and preserving Black cultural heritage for legacy residents.

This brief is part of a series evaluating Bridge Park's current work to create equity. A companion report provides an overview of the EDP efforts and Bridge Park's partnerships. This brief focuses on Bridge Park's commitments to building power in the communities surrounding the park. I discuss what power building is, why it is critical to equitable development, and Bridge Park's efforts so far to build power with residents. This series will close out with a discussion of the importance of cultural equity in the EDP.

BOX 1

About the 11th Street Bridge Park and Its Equitable Development Plan

The vision for the 11th Street Bridge Park is to create a lively pedestrian span across Washington, DC's Anacostia River, connecting Ward 6 neighborhoods on the west bank (e.g., Capitol Hill and Navy Yard) to Ward 8 neighborhoods on the east bank (e.g., Anacostia and Congress Heights). The Bridge Park is a key initiative of Building Bridges Across the River, the organization that manages the nationally recognized Ward 8–based Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC), a \$60 million, 16.5-acre property that features performing arts facilities and galleries, a large urban farm, and 14 resident partners such as schools, health care providers, and other service providers focused on recreation, the arts, workforce development, and environmental inquiry. The Bridge Park project's overarching goals are to improve public health disparities, reengage the community with the river, reconnect the neighborhoods on both sides of the river, and be an anchor for inclusive economic opportunity for the entire DC community. The 1,200-foot bridge is slated for completion in 2024. A collaborative of Bridge Park leaders, nonprofit partners, residents, underwriters, and other city stakeholders is now entering its fifth year of implementing the project's Equitable Development Plan. The plan focuses on facilitating greater economic opportunity and inclusion for longtime residents of communities east of the park's prospective footprint, who are mostly Black and have experienced centuries of systemic racism and chronic economic disinvestment. To that end, the plan includes strategies aimed at securing jobs, preserving small businesses, providing affordable housing, and amplifying the arts and culture of current residents in the Ward 7 and 8 neighborhoods.

For information on how the Bridge Park project and its Equitable Development Plan came to be, see our [first comprehensive report](#).^a For an in-depth review of Bridge Park progress from 2017 to 2018, see our [second report](#).^b For a thorough review of results, including arts and culture results, from 2019 to 2020, see our [most recent report](#).^c

^a Mary Bogle, Somala Diby, and Eric Burnstein, *Equitable Development Planning and Urban Park Space: Early Insights from DC's 11th Street Bridge Park Project* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2016).

^b Mary Bogle, Somala Diby, and Mychal Cohen, *Equitable Development and Urban Park Space: Results and Insights from the First Two Years of Implementation of the Equitable Development Plan of DC's 11th Street Bridge Park Project* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019).

^c Mary Bogle, Mychal Cohen, and Sonia Torres Rodríguez, *Equitable Development and Urban Park Space: Year 4 Progress Report on Implementation of the Equitable Development Plan of the 11th Street Bridge Park* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021).

What Is Power Building?

The Community Engagement Spectrum and Power Building

Unlike the other areas of Bridge Park's EDP, power building defies straightforward definition. Rather, it exists on a spectrum of community engagement activities. Community engagement, an oft-used phrase in the development world, is a way for projects to connect with the surrounding community, conduct outreach for community programming, and better understand residents' needs. In the realm of equitable development, community engagement is a prerequisite for understanding community conditions. But all community engagement is not equal. A spectrum tool developed by Rosa González of Facilitating Power identifies six steps, from ignoring the community and its needs to deferring to the

community in decisionmaking. Similarly, the Spectrum of Public Participation by the International Association of Public Participation ranges from informing the community about activities to empowering the community with ownership of the final decisionmaking.

TABLE 1
Spectrums of Community Engagement

Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership	Spectrum of Public Participation
Ignore	Inform
Inform	Consult
Consult	Involve
Involve	Collaborate
Collaborate	Empower
Defer to	

Sources: Movement Strategy Center, “[The Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership](#)” (Oakland, CA: Movement Strategy Center, n.d.); and International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), “[IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation](#)” (Denver: IAP2, 2018).

Both tools identify community-led work as the strongest form of engagement. Power building creates organizational structures that allow for community ownership and develops community capacity to lead projects and activities. Not all projects progress past the initial stage of superficial engagement, and other projects may start with light engagement and progress to deeper engagement. Larger projects like the Bridge Park may have components that sit at different places along the spectrum, depending on focus area or program needs. Few initiatives eventually build community-owned projects, where the project itself is governed, led, and structured to directly benefit residents.

The Evolution of Engagement to Power Building in the 11th Street Bridge Park

From the outset, the Bridge Park team’s goals have been aligned with longtime Black residents of the Ward 8 neighborhoods east of the proposed Bridge Park. This direct acknowledgement of a specific population and their deserved equity is unique among large-scale public works projects, which often rely on broader, generalized appeals to diversity. Centering residents who have deep roots in Ward 8, who stand to gain the most from equitable development and who have the most to lose from inequity and displacement, is a critical pillar to evaluating the EDP.

From its inception, the Bridge Park team has heavily engaged with the communities surrounding the planned park. Bridge Park staff held more than 200 meetings with community members even before designing the park. They wanted to know whether community members wanted a park, what they wanted out of the space, and what they feared the park might do to their community. These initial community conversations informed whether there would even be a park. Engaging community members and incorporating them into decisionmaking informed everything from the park’s design to the EDP.

That initial community engagement and the early EDP work created a framework for the Bridge Park team to develop its thinking around power building. One of the lessons highlighted in the Urban Institute's second-year report (Bogle, Diby, and Cohen 2019) is the importance of building resident voice and power. Bridge Park's goals and strategies for building power are not explicitly named in the EDP, but the concept of building community power underlies a growing share of its activities. Within the housing strategies, the Douglass Community Land Trust (CLT) was created as an organization with a board composed predominately of community members and residents. The Bridge Park team also developed tenant-focused know-your-rights trainings in partnership with Housing Counseling Services. As part of its arts and culture and workforce activities, the team has built capacity among local artists and content creators, increasing their capacity for community-based storytelling.

The Community Leadership Empowerment Workshop (CLEW) is the culmination of the Bridge Park's evolution from community engagement to community power building. That it does not feature explicitly in the EDP is a testament to the emerging nature of power building as a strategy. The 11th Street Bridge Park's EDP and power-building efforts are in conversation with past community development initiatives that help explain why power building is so important to achieving equity goals.

BOX 2

Why Is Power Building Important?

The Bridge Park exists within a long history of development in DC. Development that exacerbated inequity and drove displacement is a common theme of that history. Such projects often deliberately either undermine resident input or use engagement to deflect attention away from community concerns. A deep dive into race, development, and equity in Wards 6 and 8, which bookend the west and east sides of the future park, can be found in the second-year report.^a But the examples below show how development absent community power can generate negative outcomes for residents.

Urban Renewal of Southwest DC

One of the earliest examples of this dynamic in the 20th century was the Federal Park and Planning Commission's Urban Renewal of Southwest DC. Federal planners led the effort to eliminate alley dwellings in Southwest DC, the quadrant that passes through Wards 2 and 6. At the time, Southwest DC held a large share of the city's Black population, and many of those folks resided in alley dwellings. Using the poor living conditions as a pretense, planners indicated that new housing would be built in existing neighborhoods to accommodate those displaced, but this housing never materialized, and many residents were displaced into Ward 8 and surrounding counties in Virginia and Maryland. When residents do not have a voice in development, and when development promotes racist assumptions about residents, the results can be catastrophic for Black residents.

Racial Covenants and Disinvestment

Until the US Supreme Court declared them unconstitutional in 1948, racially restrictive petitions or deeds prevented Black Washingtonians and others from purchasing or living in homes in several DC neighborhoods. According to data compiled by Prologue DC, numerous homes in the Uniontown subdivision, which included the area east of the current Anacostia Freeway and bounded by Good Hope Road, W Street, and 16th Street Southeast, were deed restricted.^b After deed restrictions were struck down, many white residents, aided and encouraged by residential redlining, left DC for the suburbs. A 1937 Federal Housing Administration map designated Uniontown and adjacent neighborhoods as "type F,"^c indicating they were no longer a "good residential investment,"^d adding that these places were "showing effects of negro [sic] occupancy; many of the structures are in poor condition and are rapidly tending to become slums if they are not already in that category." This racist characterization undermined the economic development of these communities and prevented Black homeowners from building wealth for decades.

^a Mary Bogle, Somala Diby, and Mychal Cohen, *Equitable Development and Urban Park Space: Results and Insights from the First Two Years of Implementation of the Equitable Development Plan of DC's 11th Street Bridge Park Project* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2019).

^b "From Restrictive Covenants to Racial Steering: A Special Exhibit on the Fight for Fair Housing in Washington, DC," Prologue DC, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.mappingsegregationdc.org/>.

^c "Residential Sub-Areas, Federal Housing Administration (1937)," Prologue DC, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://www.arcgis.com/apps/StorytellingSwipe/index.html?appid=40eb06c548f9400b8413798feb4dc22e>.

^d Division of Economics and Statistics (DES), "Housing Market Analysis, Washington, DC, July 1937" (Washington, DC: Federal Housing Administration, DES, 1937).

The results of power-building activities are not easily measured through metrics. Power building certainly includes measurable efforts such as new partnerships, community engagement events, and

outcomes of organizing trainings (e.g., number of graduates). But true community power exists not only in creating relationships but in deepening them as well. Trust, a difficult concept to define or quantify, is required for an organization interested in building community power, particularly one driving a large public infrastructure reuse project. Vaughn Perry, the equitable development manager at Bridge Park, defined power as providing not only financial resources but social power and capital. This also requires an understanding of the resources, knowledge, and power communities already have. The Anacostia neighborhood that connects with the Bridge Park and the wider Ward 8 community have faced long-term disinvestment and have access to fewer resources and amenities. But Ward 8 culture has an outsize impact on broader DC culture. Building power with the community means boosting what already exists.

BOX 3

The Connection between Cultural Preservation and Community Power

A brief on how Bridge Park has approached cultural equity and the preservation of culture in the neighborhoods around the Bridge Park has been published alongside this brief, in part because there is so much synergy between the two topics. As the companion brief notes, “The definition of cultural equity that Bridge Park partners...use extends beyond preserving arts, history, and heritage as outputs—often for the consumption of audiences of several races and ethnicities—to one that ensures inputs of capital, resources, and place-keeping power for all Black DC residents, especially those who live in the surrounding neighborhoods.”^a

^aMary Bogle and Sonia Torres Rodríguez, “Advancing Cultural Equity through Equitable Development: A Discussion Paper for Year 4 of the 11th Street Bridge Park Equitable Development Evaluation” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021), 5.

To create truly equitable outcomes, projects must move to a stage where residents build power and where the project creates opportunities for those residents to take ownership of equity creation.

Power Building around the 11th Street Bridge Park

Community development without resident voice can worsen the outcomes projects proprot to improve. Large-scale public projects face two interrelated forces: the project’s effect on surrounding communities, and larger development forces in these communities. Projects cannot control the larger market forces, though as significant amenities, they can accelerate the market. Rarely are a project’s direct programmatic activities enough the counteract the market. This is why building power—an apparatus to similarly accelerate communities’ ability to push for their needs, to shift other projects, and to advocate at the city level—is critical for projects seeking equity.

The Bridge Park team is expanding power building as an emerging body of work, so what can its efforts so far tell us about power building as an equitable development strategy? Here, I review Bridge

Park's definitions of power building, the processes by which it seeks to build that power, and review how Bridge Park's efforts to increase community power have played out.

Creating Space for Community Member Decisionmaking

In reviewing Bridge Park's strategies for power building, it is important not to overlook the decision to create spaces for the community to lead. Many community development projects never get past engaging the community to simply inform or consult on decisions. Indeed, large-scale projects with significant effects in the community often fall into either an antagonistic relationship with the community or a one-sided informational exchange. Their engagement practices are designed either to placate community concerns or to extract information on what the community wants to inform the organization's internal decisionmaking.

Bridge Park staff members said there is no single decision point that led them to start articulating the goal of building community power and no specific document that outlines their power-building strategy. Rather, it is viewed as the next step of their articulated goals around creating equity with a focus on longtime Black residents. But if one moment brought power building to the forefront, it was the creation and structuring of the Douglass Community Land Trust.

Land trusts are generally thought of as a community-focused housing model. Their boards are more community focused, and they are structured to create long-term affordability for rental, homeownership, commercial, and cooperative units. But within that framework, community land trusts can have wide variation in leadership, structure, and focus. Much of the effort related to the Douglass CLT during this period has solidified these elements.

The details surrounding the creation of the Douglass CLT are well documented in the second-year report (Bogle, Diby, and Cohen 2019). The idea for a land trust originated from community conversations Bridge Park hosted. Residents were interested in having more ownership over affordable housing development. Bridge Park partnered with City First Enterprises to scope out the possibility of a land trust. Residents, housing experts, and business owners composed the Community Land Trust Advisory Committee to guide the development of the land trust.

Bridge Park led the process of developing the Douglass CLT. The team's commitment to power building helped the group navigate several decision points in a way that created significant space for community leadership. One such decision was how much decisionmaking power the advisory committee (and later the board) should have over organizational strategy and development choices. Some committee members thought such decisions should be made by members with technical expertise in housing development and organizational management. Bridge Park staff members were proponents of the community board having decisionmaking power within the organization. Of those early conversations, Vaughn Perry said, "There was some early resistance or hesitancy to handing over power/authority to residents. Because they didn't want the CLT to fail." Perry believes the advisory committee was able to overcome this fear that resident leadership might lead the CLT to fail because they focused on building the skill sets of residents on the committee. Rather than eliminating space for

community leadership because of a perceived lack of knowledge and capacity, Bridge Park sought to increase community capacity. It was important “to redistribute power and give [the community] the option to succeed or fail.”

That commitment to redistributing power to residents for affordable housing development helped inform the Douglass CLT’s current structure. The resident-led advisory board selected the Douglass CLT’s first executive director, Ginger Rumph. Many members of that advisory board went on to form the first formal board for the Douglass CLT, which has five lessee board members who live in Douglass CLT properties, five community board members who are local resident leaders, and five public representatives that bring technical knowledge and expertise. The Douglass CLT also has a citywide, open membership, which offers another avenue for residents to directly engage and shape decisionmaking within the organization through such activities as voting for board members.

BOX 4

Douglass Community Land Trust Categories

Lessee representatives. Lessee members, whose primary residence or place of business is a property owned, in whole or in part, or is otherwise being stewarded by the corporation

General representatives. General members, who “live, work, or have a demonstrated community affiliation in DC” and who share in and affirm the corporation’s purposes

Public representatives. Public representatives, who bring technical expertise such as development finance, deep knowledge of the community land trust structure, housing development and policy, organizational management, and other such professionals.

Source: “Our Board of Directors,” Douglass Community Land Trust, accessed April 5, 2021, <https://douglassclt.org/#Team>.

That Bridge Park’s housing strategy is centered in a community-led organization is a direct result of the team’s commitment to creating opportunities for community leadership. But building power requires work beyond opening the door to community leadership. It requires an investment in residents’ capacity and skills so they can succeed in these leadership roles. The next section details Bridge Park’s activities in building capacity and skills in community leadership and organizing.

Building Skill Sets around Community Leadership and Organizing

Bridge Park’s work in bringing the Douglass CLT to fruition and ensuring it functions as a community-led project demonstrates a commitment to resident leadership. Within the advisory board for the Douglass CLT, that leadership was possible because of the direct training the Bridge Park team helped bring in. This ideal—that you must both create opportunities for community leadership and develop the skills necessary for community members to feel prepared to take on that leadership—inspired additional skill-building work in the bridge park’s equitable development efforts. The creation of CLEW,

an organizing training workshop for people interested in learning community organizing skills, developing personal leadership skills, and understanding planning and development, is rooted in this ideal.

Organizing others in a community is a critical part of power building. Mobilizing friends, family, neighbors, and organizations to respond to and advocate for community needs is a skill that can be developed. It is a skill that Black communities have relied on to preserve their communities, push authority toward action, and keep their communities safe. Bridge Park's efforts with CLEW are meant to train community members and to help them develop these organizing skills. The need for CLEW was highlighted in the Douglass CLT advisory committee. In addition to the skill building around housing needs and organizational development, Bridge Park found that some residents were less comfortable engaging in the discussions. It was not enough to simply create the space but to provide folks the tools to participate.

Bridge Park engaged longtime community organizer Bob Hoffman to build a curriculum for community organizing. Part of what allowed the Bridge Park team to introduce this new element of the EDP was its preexisting relationships with the community. The first cohort of CLEW included members of the Community Land Trust Advisory Committee, nonprofit leaders, Bridge Park staff members, and Ward 8 residents. Residents who participated in CLEW noted that the workshop better prepared them to "engage with people and that it was necessary to be engaged."

Since the initial cohort, the program has continued to grow, piloting new structures and opportunities for graduates to apply their skills. In its second year, 2019, CLEW piloted a "train the trainer" cohort in which participants working primarily at organizations east of the river participated with the goal of leading future cohorts in their communities. This approach provided another opportunity to continue building community leadership capacity while ensuring CLEW's long-term sustainability. Six of the 10 initial participants graduated, and 1 became a cofacilitator for the next cohort. Three graduates of the CLEW "train the trainer" cohort facilitated sessions for the second cohort, which kicked off with 16 participants, including organizational representatives from Community College Preparatory, DC Central Kitchen, DC Greens, and Bread for the City. Thirty-eight participants have completed the CLEW training since its inception.

Interviews with community members who graduated from CLEW highlight how the workshop improved their ability to engage their neighbors. One interviewee said, "You can share all the information you would like with a person, but if it doesn't connect on a personal level, then it doesn't work. CLEW helped me bring a calmness to those conversations." Building power within the community relies on relationship building, and interviewees felt like CLEW built the skills necessary to have the conversations needed to build relationships.

In the second CLEW cohort, participants could apply for funds to implement a capstone project that applied lessons learned from the program. Funds could be used for community groups, events, or new projects. Each participant was eligible to receive a \$500 award to implement a project, but participants could also work together and combine funds. Vaughn Perry and three community members reviewed

the proposals and made awards to projects. One of the proposals described a youth awards and recognition summit that would bring together 50 to 100 youth leaders ages 18 to 24 from the DC area to come together in identifying ways to make positive community change. Another project proposed a workshop to foster self- and community awareness to make community change. Activities would include stress management techniques, food demonstrations, and a conversation about how to apply techniques of self-balance to community change. The final proposal was for a community forum for residents of Stoddert Terrace about plans to redevelop properties. The forum would bring together government officials, public housing advocates, and community members for a presentation and discussion about the scope and plans for redeveloping public housing properties.

Bridge Park's approach to building power encapsulates strategies to create space for resident leadership, train residents to develop skills and knowledge to lead, and, with its focus on the capstone and train-the-trainer additions to CLEW, equip residents to engage and teach others in their community. There are several ways this model can improve upon its strengths and inform other public projects seeking to engage their community in power-building work.

Lessons for the Field in Building Community Power

The Bridge Park team has committed to building community power as a key piece of its equitable development strategies, and its efforts with CLEW and the Douglass CLT have demonstrated that commitment. The team's progress highlights several strategies for building community power that it can build upon in its own work and that can help inform other large-scale park projects.

- **Add power building as an explicit strategy or as a cross-cutting goal across other strategies.** The language of power building is still nascent in Bridge Park's EDP work. Nevertheless, the concept has underlied the EDP from the beginning. As such, the natural next step for power building would be to articulate it as an explicit focus area within the EDP framework. Here, Bridge Park's efforts across its other strategies can help inform the process. In other areas, the Bridge Park team engaged community leaders to define equity-focused goals. They could follow a similar path by identifying organizers and residents leading power building work in Wards 7 and 8 and working with them to identify goals. This strategy could then inform methods for remaining accountable to the community for the power-building goals, including tracking progress. It would also communicate to residents, staff, and external stakeholders that building power and creating opportunities for community leadership is a core element of Bridge Park's equitable development strategy.
- **Create opportunities to build and practice power-building skills.** CLEW participants were excited about the opportunities to practice the skills they gathered and wanted more ways to use these skills. For projects focusing on power building, Bridge Park's funding of capstone organizing projects offers an example of how to support opportunities for community members to practice organizing and building power. Bridge Park could also offer ways for CLEW graduates to immediately plug into neighborhood campaigns, using the skills and techniques

developed through the workshop. Multiple residents were focused on the effects of gentrification. The Bridge Park could connect residents with ongoing power-building opportunities. This could be a natural follow-up to the capstone projects.

- **Let community members lead.** Bridge Park helped guide the Douglass CLT toward a governance structure that incorporated directly affected residents into organizational leadership. Projects can learn from the Bridge Park team’s willingness to trust community members to lead the work, while providing them the resources to step into leadership roles. Projects often talk about building trust with communities, but it is also important for these projects to trust community members to lead the work.

Reference

Bogle, Mary, Somala Diby, and Mychal Cohen. 2019. *Equitable Development and Urban Park Space: Results and Insights from the First Two Years of Implementation of the Equitable Development Plan of DC’s 11th Street Bridge Park Project*. Washington, DC: Urban Institute.

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