



Advancing Cultural Equity through Equitable Development

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

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The Equitable Development Plan for DC's 11th Street Bridge Park project includes four strategies aimed at securing job, small business, housing, and arts and culture opportunities for current residents of the neighborhoods east of the park's prospective footprint above the Anacostia River. Since implementation of the plan, park stakeholders have increasingly turned their attention to advancing two components that cut across all four strategies: power building and cultural equity. This brief discusses the cultural equity focus and is one of three publications that, together, compose the third installment of the Urban Institute's study to track Bridge Park's progress on its stated intention of being a "driver of inclusive development" for surrounding neighborhoods. The companion pieces are *Equitable Development and Urban Park Space: Year 4 Progress Report on Implementation of the Equitable Development Plan of the 11th Street Bridge Park* (Bogle, Cohen, and Torres Rodríguez 2021) and "Building Community Power for Equity" (Cohen 2021).

The ways rapid redevelopment of historically disinvested places can diminish the stock of affordable housing, job opportunities, and locally owned small businesses for longtime residents, who are often people of color and people with low incomes, has been thoroughly documented (Bogle, Diby, and Cohen 2019). A less-well-studied topic is how the culture of longtime residents of gentrifying neighborhoods is often displaced long before they themselves are forced out by economic circumstances, such as rising rents (Green et al. 2017). This brief unpacks the efforts of 11th Street Bridge Park leaders to advance cultural equity, concluding with lessons learned for the Bridge Park and

other equitable development projects across the country. The analysis presented here is based on performance data compiled for the year 4 progress report and 10 qualitative interviews.

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 (BBAR), 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 Cultural Equity?

Bridge Park uses an expansive definition of cultural equity that reaches beyond any one of its strategic goals, including its arts and culture goal. What is cultural equity, and why has preserving it become such a focus for the Bridge Park work?

The fourth strategic category of the Bridge Park Equitable Development Plan, arts and culture, charges that “the 11th Street Bridge Park will serve as a platform to celebrate the history and culture of communities on both sides of the Anacostia River, and, in particular, to amplify the stories, culture and heritage of neighboring African American residents.” The four objectives delineated under this category emphasize information sharing, affordability and accessibility, and artist-led programming, hueing closely to the definition of cultural equity provided by Americans for the Arts: “Cultural equity embodies the values, policies, and practices that ensure that all people—including but not limited to those who have been historically underrepresented...—are represented in the development of arts policy; the support of artists; the nurturing of accessible, thriving venues for expression; and the fair distribution of programmatic, financial, and informational resources.”¹ Tactically, this area focuses on using the project’s assets—such as current and future gallery and performance spaces, as well as online and other communication and marketing resources—to uplift the arts, history, and heritage of Ward 8 residents, especially the heritage of Black residents who settled and still live in Ward 8 (box 2). Activities under the fourth Bridge Park strategy also maintain community awareness of the other cultures that have shaped Ward 8, including that of the Nacotchtank Indians, the first people of color to be displaced from the area by European settlers after they arrived to colonize the Americas (Humphrey and Chambers, n.d.).

BOX 2

A Brief Cultural History of Ward 8, Anacostia, and Barry Farm

Beginning with Reconstruction and continuing well into the 20th century, Washington, DC, became a favored destination of Black people fleeing the Jim Crow south to seek better opportunities for their families.^a The waves of migration to the area created a Black cultural hub of arts, music, business, and civic engagement in DC and led to the area being aptly referred to as “Chocolate City.”^b Washington, DC, “stood out as one of the only cities in the U.S. which not only had an African-American majority, but a thriving black middle- and even upper-class, who held long-standing political power in the city, as seen through its succession of black mayors that presided over the city.”^c

Ward 7 and 8 demographics and culture shifted alongside these larger trends, driven both by new Black residents seeking community with other migrants and by explicit and covert policies and social pressures that displaced Black people from DC’s center and segregated them to “east of the river” neighborhoods that consequently became disinvested over time, fueling many of the large disparities in income, wealth, and health outcomes observable today. In the early 20th century, less than 5 percent of the DC population lived east of the Anacostia River, and those who did were mostly white. Neighborhoods such as Anacostia changed in composition from 1950, when 82 percent of the population was white, to 1967, when only 37 percent of the population was white.^c Wards 7 and 8 transitioned into a community of and for Black residents, and today, the neighborhoods are majority Black (92 percent of residents identify as Black).^e Over the past two decades, DC overall has become

increasingly wealthier, whiter, and younger, with neighborhoods like Navy Yard, west of the Bridge Park’s prospective footprint, experiencing the most profound demographic shifts in this direction.^f Though the neighborhoods east of the footprint are shifting more slowly, the fear among many residents is that this historical pattern of development and displacement is repeating itself, finishing the push of Black residents out of DC for good.

The history of Ward 8, Anacostia, and Barry Farm illuminates the importance of cultural equity for DC’s Black residents because so much of this history is unknown to many DC residents. Starting in the 17th century, many Black people were transported to the District of Columbia on account of the slave trade, but some moved to or resettled in what is now Ward 8 as “freedmen.” Though many from outside and even inside DC mistakenly refer to all of Wards 7 and 8 as “Anacostia,” this neighborhood and its elbow-shaped commercial corridor are only one small part of Ward 8. In the mid-1800s, Anacostia was a whites-only bastion known as Uniontown. Black people and immigrant groups such as the Irish were banned from living there. The great abolitionist orator Frederick Douglass—one of DC’s most famous residents—became one of the first Black residents of Anacostia when he bought his Cedar Hill estate, defying whites-only covenants. By the early 20th century, Anacostia had become a prospering commercial district, developed and led by Black entrepreneurs. Businesses extended down both “main streets,” which are today Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue and Good Hope Road. Hardware stores, grocery stores, and drugstores created a self-sufficient economic engine that provided independence from the city proper.^g

The Barry Farm community, a subdivision of today’s Anacostia, was officially founded in 1867. It was among the nation’s first neighborhoods where formerly enslaved people could move.^h Despite federal and local disinvestment in infrastructure and services, the area thrived economically, politically, civically, and artistically for some time. These successes were not achieved without challenges. In 1941, after extensive resistance from real estate, building industries, and white residents, the city met its need for new public housing by acquiring 34 acres and displacing 23 families of Barry Farm through eminent domain for the construction of the public housing complex Barry Farm Dwellings.ⁱ Today, the severely dilapidated public housing complex is under demolition again. In its place, various District agencies hope to build a mixed-income development with hundreds of market-rate units, offering residents, including those who have already been relocated temporarily, the option of moving into another public housing property or accepting a federally funded voucher to join the new community. Resident organizations, such as Empower DC and the Barry Farm Tenants and Allies Association, are at work to secure and amplify the return rights of current residents and to preserve the Barry Farm cultural legacy by granting it historic landmark status.^j

An important example of DC’s unique artistic contribution to American culture can be traced back to the Barry Farm Recreation Center, which is considered the birthplace of go-go music. Go-go is musically defined by Howard University professor Natalie Hopkinson as “an offshoot of funk, but there’s elements of Afro-Latin rhythms, percussion.... The singular sound of go-go is the beat, and that’s the conga drums.”^k See box 4 for more on go-go’s legacy in Ward 8 and DC.

^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 James Wright, “Chocolate City’ Is Older than You Think,” Afro.com, July 26, 2018, <https://www.afro.com/chocolate-city-is-older-than-you-think/>.

^c Willow Lung-Amam, “Ode to the Chocolate City: A Memoir of Change in Washington, DC,” accessed May 21, 2021, <http://www.willowlungamam.com/chocolatecity>.

^d “Making a Home: Reconstruction and Integration,” American Studies at the University of Virginia, accessed May 21, 2021, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~CAP/ANACOSTIA/recon.html>.

^e “2021 Demographics,” DC Health Matters, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://www.dchealthmatters.org/demographicdata?id=131495>.

^f Kate Rabinowitz, “A Decade of Demographic Change in D.C.: Which Neighborhoods Have Changed the Most?” DC Policy Center, March 2, 2017, <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/demographic-change-d-c-neighborhoods/>.

^g DC Historic Preservation Office, “Anacostia Historic District” (Washington, DC: DC Historic Preservation Office, 2007).

^h Grace Collins, “Barry Farm Residents Seek Historic Status to Preserve Community and Character,” Street Sense Media, May 6, 2019, <https://www.streetsensemedia.org/article/barry-farm-landmark-designation-dc-public-housing-new-communities-dcha-hud/#.YGduBGhKjb3>.

ⁱ Sarah Shoenfeld, “The History and Evolution of Anacostia’s Barry Farm,” DC Policy Center, July 9, 2019, <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/barry-farm-anacostia-history/>.

^j Collins, “Barry Farm Residents Seek Historic Status.”

^k Jonathan Wilson, “Go-Go is D.C. – D.C. Is Go-Go. Is that Changing?” American University Radio, October 29, 2019, <https://wamu.org/story/19/10/29/go-go-is-d-c-d-c-is-go-go-is-that-changing/>.

Irfana Jetha Noorani, the former deputy director of Bridge Park who led arts and culture programming during the planning and early implementation years, recalls how the project became more intentional about promoting a sense of belonging for longtime Black residents within its fourth strategy area, which was formally added a few years after the first three strategic categories: “As we went through more conversation, [the focus] became even tighter for us. We need to focus on the stories and culture of Black residents nearby. At that time, we were seeing what was happening in [Shaw, a gentrifying DC neighborhood], where residents no longer felt welcome in their neighborhood. I remember...realizing that that sense of not belonging in your own neighborhood had to be combated through cultural strategies.... In particular, we look at the arts and culture frame of amplifying the culture, stories, and heritage of neighboring Black residents as a curatorial statement about decisionmaking practices within our programming and who we are programming for as a priority.”

Bridge Park’s emphasis on cultural equity ranges beyond the arts and culture strategy. Over time, advancing cultural equity has become an overarching emphasis for the entire project, infused into numerous aspects of its mission to keep changing economic conditions from driving current residents out of the surrounding neighborhoods and to keep Black residents from being forced out of their neighborhoods yet again (box 2). Noorani points out how expansive the definition of cultural equity has become for Bridge Park stakeholders: “Culture and art are so multisector.... And often they’re overlooked in the conversation of displacement and antigentrification. We saw it as a huge gap from our original work. Community development is also super siloed. Housing and workforce exist in completely different places, and that’s not how communities face challenges; they face them all at once.”

Harold Pettigrew, CEO of Wacif, a community development financial institution and key stakeholder partner for advancing the Bridge Park’s small business development strategies, adds this insight: “I have a different, perhaps nuanced understanding of culture. There is culture, and then there is expressions of culture. I view art as an expression of culture. Culture itself is the barbershop, the cosmetology business, the hair salon, the retail shop, those places that are the anchors of a community. That is what you remember and what you connect back to, what you think of as home, and the embodiment of a culture. The artists, the musicians, and the painters have the fun task of expressing

that. Artists are the communicators of culture. But I don't see art as culture. It's what you smell, experience, what you shop for."

The definition of cultural equity that Bridge Park partners like Pettigrew implicitly 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. This definition recognizes that Ward 7 and 8 neighborhoods are a hard-won "home" for the Black families and individuals who have migrated to them over the past two centuries. Although this claim is not intended to bar other people and cultures from coming east of the river, it is insistent that Black people are not threatened with displacement from these "home places" simply because groups with more wealth—much of which has been gained at the expense of people of color—now wish to mine their potential value for themselves.

Pettigrew continues: "There is a utility to seeing [culture] this way because we tend often to not view the practical aspect of community development as part of a cultural conversation. That's the reason why I mention the barbershop first. It's easy for people to connect with a barbershop as culture.... To me, what we do, crafting loan programs specifically targeted east of the river and to African American business owners, to me, that is culture work.... [Cultural equity] is not a stated goal of [Wacif], but it is a result of what often happens. Our goal is to create economic opportunities for folks.... We invest in people [not places], who are creating an asset. [Although cultural equity] is not the filter by which we evaluate our work, it is frequently the conclusion that [our clients] help preserve culture in many ways."

Widespread agreement among stakeholders that the definition of cultural equity should go beyond any traditional interpretation of arts and culture has become a significant driver of numerous Bridge Park equitable development activities. Our year 4 progress report provides a thorough round-up of results attributable primarily to the arts and culture goal. Below, we discuss how cultural equity *as an underlying theme* cuts across all four of the project's equitable development goals.

Advancing Cultural Equity around the 11th Street Bridge Park

By adding arts and culture as the fourth EDP strategy area back in 2018 and by pushing for representation of Black culture across all four strategic emphases, the Bridge Park provides an important case study on how to leverage infrastructure reuse to preserve a place—and a sense of place—for the people who have long lived there. And indeed, over their years of planning and early implementation, Bridge Park leaders have come to see the park as more than a creative placemaking effort—typically thought of as community development processes that leverage outside public, private, and nonprofit funding to strategically shape and change a neighborhood's physical and social character using arts and cultural activities—to one of creative "placekeeping," which is about the "active care and

maintenance of a place and its social fabric by the people who live and work there.” This shift recognizes that placemaking can inadvertently hasten cultural gentrification and displacement, whereas placekeeping seeks to counter it.² What does this look like in practice? Here, we will examine three ways Bridge Park’s efforts to increase cultural equity for existing residents of the surrounding Ward 8 neighborhoods have played out.

Amplifying Black Voices and Leadership

Like its efforts to advance cultural equity, the efforts of Bridge Park leaders to build power for longtime Black residents of Wards 7 and 8 cut broadly across all four strategy areas. But efforts to amplify the influence of current residents can also be understood as important tactics within the even broader cultural equity emphasis.

BOX 3

The Effects of Cultural Preservation on Community Power

A brief on how Bridge Park has strengthened the influence of current residents on the policies and investments rapidly changing their neighborhoods has been published alongside this brief, in part because there is so much connection between the two topics. As the companion brief notes, “Large-scale public projects face two deeply interrelated forces: the project’s effects in shaping surrounding communities, and larger development forces in these communities. Projects cannot control the larger market forces, though as significant amenities, they do accelerate the market. Rarely are a project’s direct programmatic activities enough to 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.”^a A sense of community helps people come together to fight for shared goals. Cultural preservation work increases that sense of shared community and ownership over one’s community by highlighting and uplifting shared experiences, art, places, businesses, and relationships.

^aMychal Cohen, “Building Community Power for Equity” (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2021), 6.

Bridge Park’s emphasis on cultural equity acknowledges that the details matter when it comes to what longtime residents will use their voices to protect and demand. Current and longtime community members do not only want access to the new dwellings, jobs, and businesses that development will bring to Wards 7 and 8; they want to see their culture reflected in a significant proportion of those opportunities, as well.

Community Leadership and Empowerment Workshops (CLEW) are fostered under the Bridge Park housing strategy. These curriculum-based workshops strengthen the advocacy skills of community leaders, regardless of experience. At base, power-building activities such as CLEW build the capacity of local leaders to perform nonprofit, local government, and advocacy leadership roles, which strengthens community well-being and preservation. Such activities do not assume that current residents need their

neighborhoods to be “re-tread” for them but rather that they should take the lead in shaping their future.

Vaughn Perry, equitable development manager and organizer of CLEW, identifies an important connection between cultural equity and building power and influence: “When we talk about equity and power, it’s not just about financial resources. It’s also about social power, social capital, and how can we pull together as a community and not just be waiting on our municipalities or nonprofits to do the work. How can the people do the work?” For each EDP strategy area, the link between preserving culture and building power plays out differently around the common theme of residents seeing that they have a stake and a role in shaping the community’s future.

Preserving and Expanding Black-Owned Small Businesses

Since the late 1800s (box 1), small businesses have been an important expression of culture for Ward 8 residents. Kymone Freeman, cofounder of We Act Radio in Anacostia and Bridge Park entrepreneur partner, states, “The fact is, a one-block radius of Anacostia has more Black-owned businesses than any other block in the city. We deemed it the last Black Wall Street.... Small businesses are the backbone of employment in this country. It’s the largest employer in this country; not Walmart—small businesses. We have to make sure that we have a place that accommodates everyone. And we haven’t done that. We haven’t had a retention plan for longtime residents. We haven’t had a retention plans for small businesses.” He adds that this is why “we’ve had a number of small businesses who have participated throughout this [Bridge Park Equitable Development Plan] process. Because we are making sure that the Bridge Park benefits the existing businesses, not merely attracting new businesses.”³

Because small business has so much to do with cultural preservation and vice versa, Bridge Park’s small business strategies and the arts and culture strategies are intertwined; the two strategy areas are often difficult to distinguish from one another. For example, many Bridge Park cultural activities—such as artists’ markets and agriculture-focused celebrations—help creative entrepreneurs promote products, engage with larger audiences, and create consistent revenue streams. In 2020, Bridge Park elevated more than 20 local entrepreneurs and creatives by spending \$31,411 on artist fees and products. Metrics focused on artists’ earnings and other metrics that track the consumption of local artists’ outputs (e.g., performances) by residents from surrounding areas are among the tools Bridge Park uses to understand how cultural equity manifests across its goal areas.

During the pandemic, the overlap between the small business and arts and culture strategies became especially visible because the creative economy lost a disproportionate share of jobs (Florida and Seman 2020). The pandemic has been devastating for Black-owned businesses across the nation (Fairlie 2020). Bridge Park, funded by groups such as JPMorgan Chase and Target, as well as partners such as the Anacostia Business Improvement District and Wacif, provided immediate support to help small business owners address drastic revenue shortfalls and apply for local and federal relief programs. One Ward 8 entrepreneur notes that her business, which features products of cultural relevance to the local community, has benefited greatly from marketing and other supports provided by Bridge Park:

“They funded us before even COVID-19 hit. That type of support is paramount; they have advocated in a way that has brought new funds and relationships into my ecosystem.”

Bridge Park leaders have used the strong intersection between its small business strategies and its arts and culture strategies to counter the feelings residents often have of being disrespected and discarded when new development in their communities fails to be culturally equitable. John Johnson, founder of the local storytelling company Verbal Gymnastics, said, “The way [development] come[s] into the community, it makes the community feel like they are just there to get taken over economically. They use words like innovation, which actually come from art, creativity, and music. These are the things that have helped us overcome oppression and cultivate wisdom.” To counter this, Bridge Park strategies offer capital, space, and program support to local Black artists and small businesses so they can fully participate in the innovation process and profit from the investment they might otherwise be excluded from. In addition, Bridge Park strategies offer consumers greater access to the local creative economy via tactics such as subsidizing tickets to performances and purchasing products from local businesses to distribute during the pandemic.

A Ward 8 entrepreneur in creative commerce illuminates the role Bridge Park’s cultural equity emphasis plays in returning the value from rapid economic growth back to current residents: “For me, [cultural equity] is understanding and seeing the value and nuance of what is there. Exchange is used to build, heighten, bring awareness, and expand that culture.... In that process, there is respect for that culture. [There is a shift away from thinking] what can I take from this artist, experience, or community to how can I listen, ask questions, and bring capital.”

Preserving Stories

Many Bridge Park strategies advance cultural equity by preserving and highlighting stories and history specific to Ward 8 residents. These efforts recognize that storytelling is a natural and organic part of conversations between families and neighbors; it occurs daily at the dinner table, on the porch, and on the sidewalk. It is how memories, histories, and communal knowledge get made, transferred, and added to. The creative commerce entrepreneur reflects on a dimension of storytelling that is especially important to people of color: “When we are talking about Black people in the US, before we can hop over everything else, there should be some pocket where we talk about trauma, where we are allowed to have safe space to talk about trauma. Art can start that conversation and can be a vehicle for historical information and a creative outlook.” Within Bridge Park’s EDP strategies, storytelling—in its various visual, written, musical, culinary, and other forms—is the primary vehicle for providing that open space to communally process trauma, celebrate triumphs, and reflect the everyday joy of living as a Black person.

BOX 4

The Struggle to Keep Go-Go in DC

Storytelling is often a form of resistance and healing for marginalized communities. Building on the glimpse of Ward 8's rich cultural history provided in box 2, we look more closely at the history and current foothold of go-go in DC to provide insight into how crucial it is to fully integrate cultural equity into all aspects of equitable development work, including seemingly unrelated strategies such as growing small business and ensuring housing is affordable.

Go-go, which emerged after the murder of Martin Luther King Jr., frequently covers racial justice topics and has become a protest music genre. Although some think of go-go primarily as party music, famous go-go bands such as Chuck Brown and the Soul Searchers, Experience Unlimited, and Rare Essence have used the genre to tell stories of poverty, grief over gun violence, famous politicians, and the fight for racial justice.^a Today, go-go music is frequently played at Juneteenth celebrations and at Black Lives Matters protests, such as during the racial uprisings in the summer of 2020.^b

In 2019, go-go became the subject of a story involving cultural displacement in DC when a resident of a new luxury apartment building in the Shaw neighborhood convinced corporate T-Mobile headquarters to ask their local Metro PCS franchisee to turn the volume down on the go-go music the store owner had been playing from speakers outside his store—something the owner has been doing regularly since 1995 to promote cell phones and CDs and to keep the musical form alive in an area where go-go clubs have been replaced by chain restaurants and high-end retail. Longtime locals responded with outraged protests outside the luxury apartment building, motivating the chief executive of T-Mobile to tweet that the music should go on. These events inspired the ongoing social media campaign #DontMuteDC and community conversations about how longtime residents should respond when wealthy newcomers disrespect the roots, heritage, and practices of the historically Black communities they move into.^c

Echoes of these same concerns can be found among Bridge Park stakeholders. During a focus group, Black participants in the Ward 8 Homebuyers Club, a key component in implementing Bridge Park's housing strategies in partnership with Manna, expressed joy over having secured a place in their communities in Ward 8 as homeowners but also expressed concern that, as other middle-class people move in who may not value Black culture the way they do, art forms like go-go and other commonplace cultural expressions might be silenced in Ward 8 the way they have been in neighborhoods west of the river: "I see [preserving go-go] as the last resort for preservation of DC's history. When I was younger, I used to go to the go-gos all the time. But now I don't see it uptown. I can't go to 14th Street anymore. I used to go to the clinic where the Target is now, but I can't go over there and see the people playing dominoes in the park now. I can't see the mural that was burned down in 1997 before it became the Target. I don't hear go-go going down the street anymore. But I come here [Ward 8], it's good Backyard and Junkyard still playing." And indeed, a go-go concert closed out Bridge Park's virtual Anacostia River Festival in April 2021.

^a Alona Wartofsky, "On Their New Single, Rare Essence Won't Mute D.C.," *Washington City Paper*, May 24, 2019, <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/180136/on-their-new-single-rare-essence-wont-mute-dc/>.

^b Priscilla Ward, "Black Joy: The Power and Politics of Go-Go Music in the Era of Black Lives Matter," *Salon*, June 13, 2020, <https://www.salon.com/2020/06/13/black-joy-protest-go-go-moechella-dc-black-lives-matter/>.

^c Rachel Kurzius, "'This is The Sound of Florida and Georgia Avenue': Go-Go Fans are Trying to Bring the Music Back to Metro PCS," *DCist*, April 9, 2019, <https://dcist.com/story/19/04/09/this-is-the-sound-of-florida-and-georgia-avenue-go-go-fans-are-trying-to-bring-the-music-back-to-metro-pcs/>.

One Bridge Park stakeholder points to storytelling as a key element in winning the complex struggle to advance cultural equity for Ward 8 residents, especially because it is not simply a struggle that cuts along racial fault lines but also along class, geographic, and age divisions: “What I’m afraid is going to happen is, when you have a lot of us [Black] millennials moving in—I have my experiences from uptown, she has her experiences from the other side of Southeast, so if you put us together, we appreciate the gem in the area we live in. But how can we as well preserve what the older people left while still making it safe and fun to hang out. Will it stay? That’s a question I don’t know. I hope so. I hope we still have our Backyard, our TCB, our Rare Essence. I hope we still get to have that. But I definitely think it’s up to the newcomers who know about the history of DC to hold on to what the grandparent in the house around the corner has to say.” A small business stakeholder acknowledges this reality while cautioning that “there are some middle- and high-income Black people moving in, sure, but a [disproportionately] high amount of the low-income people who would be displaced happen to look like me, Black people. If Black people are displaced...there is a lot of the culture that is taken away in that process.”

One of the primary ways Bridge Park preserves the stories of residents, both living and passed on, is through community-driven storytelling and performance. In 2019 and 2020, Bridge Park partnered with local artist John Johnson and Scotland’s Glass Performance group to stage “Conversations with Grandpa,” a devised theatre piece that explores male relationships across generations. Three one-act segments, performed by real-life grandfather and grandson pairs, explore bonds between Black men in DC’s easternmost neighborhoods. Though the pandemic curtailed plans to offer four public performances in June 2020, an early rendering of the work was performed for a small audience in July 2019. Adjusting to pandemic realities, the artists have reimaged this storytelling effort as a virtual series of interviews with local residents about love—what it means, looks like, and feels like to them—to be released later in 2021. Johnson and his improv troupe also often partner with Bridge Park and others to create impromptu performances that uplift local culture and history. During public events, the actors ask DC residents to share their stories and then retell them on the spot through movement, dance, and acting. During past performances (both live and virtual), the actors and the audience have reflected together on everything from food traditions to pandemic challenges. In 2016, the troupe “played back” comments from Ward 8 residents about how unfortunate it is that “Southeast gets such a bad rap” during a Bridge Park-organized event to uplift the untold history of area. The event engaged 300 people who carried homemade lanterns from Yards Park in Ward 6 over a commuter bridge to Ward 8, honoring the courageous journey of some Black families of the 1860s, many of whom had only just been emancipated from slavery, when they moved to homes in the developing Barry Farm community (box 2).⁴

Though the cultural equity emphasis is not as pervasive in the Bridge Park workforce development and housing strategy areas as it is in the small business and arts and culture areas, notable elements are present. For example, a crucial output of Bridge Park’s housing work, the Douglass Community Land Trust (CLT), is named after Frederick Douglass, an iconic resident of Anacostia and famed statesman, writer, orator, and abolitionist who was formerly enslaved. The CLT’s website makes an important link between history and fair representation for disenfranchised residents of the District of Columbia, which is nearly majority Black: “The Douglass CLT is not affiliated with any private development entity. The

name also reflects the name chosen for the 51st state of the US, as our mission is to serve the entire ‘Douglass Commonwealth’ (DC).” In Bridge Park’s employment work, the cultural equity theme can be found in its emphasis on hiring longtime residents from surrounding neighborhoods and in activities such as iCAN, BBAR’s technical theater internship program at THEARC Theater, which teaches young people from surrounding neighborhoods technical theater skills, such as lighting and sound, while building their front-of-house hospitality, sales, and arts management skills. The contributions of iCAN interns to Bridge Park cultural programming include providing production support to the annual Anacostia River Festival stage and performances like Conversations with Grandpa.

Showcasing Local Black Arts and Agriculture

Bridge Park offers an array of other activities aimed at amplifying local Black art and food traditions for local residents. For example, Bridge Park partnered with Ward 8 resident Tendani Mpulubusi El to work with students from Ballou and Eastern High Schools to create four artworks for the Anacostia Riverwalk Trail that celebrate the Anacostia River, its history, ecology, and the communities who live alongside its banks.

Bridge Park also uses BBAR Farms—which includes the large THEARC Farm and six “Bridge Park Plots”—to lift up local agriculture and culinary culture. The various farms supply ingredients for dishes served at Bridge Park’s annual Taste of the Harvest festival, such as roasted okra and sweet potato fries with wasabi-pea dip. During the pandemic, the festival and its offerings were adapted for an online platform, featuring virtual live performances from the Verbal Gymnastics improv troupe and other activities, such as cooking workshops and community conversations about healthy eating. The Bridge Park Plots fan out into Wards 6 and 8 around the future footprint of the park. Each plot is maintained by a partner, such as a faith community, early childhood learning center, or public housing community. In addition to the nutritional value of growing produce in a food desert, the plots also offer cultural value, helping to preserve and foster nearby residents’ sense of place. Over the past several years, Bridge Park staff partnered with the ArtReach program at THEARC to work with parishioners from Union Temple Baptist Church, Allen Chapel AME Church, and Bethel Christian Fellowship, as well as other residents to create various artworks for their plots, including colorful stepping stones, benches with ladybugs, life-size portraits of residents, and a mural inspired by the ancestral kente cloth of parish families. At the Hopkins Garden and Orchard, a plot comprising 40 garden beds and 20 fruit trees that Bridge Park sponsors in partnership with the DC Housing Authority, Hopkins Apartments residents worked with two local artists to create a depiction of the apartment building alongside fanciful images of the garden’s plants.

Mural at Hopkins Bridge Park Plot



Photo courtesy of Ayanah George.

Lessons for the Field on Advancing Cultural Equity

The Bridge Park team has committed to advancing cultural equity as a key component of its equitable development strategies, and its efforts to promote Black arts, culture, and heritage are extensive—both under its fourth arts and culture strategy and including the workforce development, housing, and small business strategies. Bridge Park stakeholder efforts serve up lessons that can inform other infrastructure-reuse and large-scale park projects.

1. **Add advancing cultural equity as an explicit strategy or as a cross-cutting goal across other strategies.** Arts and culture became a formal part of the Bridge Park EDP about two years after the first three areas of workforce development, housing, and small business enterprises were named in the plan, mostly because Bridge Park stakeholders came to recognize that development cannot be equitable unless it fosters a sense of belonging for longtime residents. Now, this emphasis pervades the small business strategy and has gained a significant foothold in both the housing and workforce development strategies. The pursuit of cultural equity as a holistic concern that should cut deeply into economic development like small business growth—rather than simply a way to celebrate existing culture through song, art, story, and celebration—may come as news to many groups who are part of the wave of new infrastructure-reuse projects springing up across the country in and

around disinvested neighborhoods. We strongly advise that those who proclaim to be doing this work equitably study Bridge Park's journey to making cultural equity a dominant focus, not so much to replicate it but to consider how they might engage their own target communities in defining what cultural equity, in all its forms, might look like to them.

2. **Recognize the intersectionality of advancing cultural equity.** Culture is often expressed differently across gender, age, racial, ethnic, and class groups. Accounting for demographic shifts, it is only fair that those who pursue equitable development elevate and preserve the voices, commerce, and artistic expressions of the people who have struggled to make disinvested places like Ward 8 their home. For example, Bridge Park could offer forums in partnership with groups like Playback Theater to bring new homeowners together with longtime residents, many of whom are renters or live in public housing, to hold each other up as they preserve and create physical and psychological common spaces.
3. **Go deeper on metrics for cultural inclusion.** As evidenced by the detailed progress data presented in the companion report to this brief, Bridge Park works with evaluators like Urban to thoroughly document results and assess areas for improvement across all its strategies. Within the arts and culture strategy area, Bridge Park leaders and stakeholders count their activities to lift up artists (e.g., supporting gallery shows and performances), support revenue for local artists (e.g., artists' markets attached to festivals), and provide free or subsidized events to residents of surrounding neighborhoods. As economic growth continues post-COVID, Bridge Park and all projects focused on equity will need to double-down on such methods as local surveys and tools to track attendance at virtual events, not simply to gauge access to artistic expressions of culture but to monitor signs that authentic Black culture, as judged by local Black residents, has been retained across all public spaces and in retail, housing, and employment opportunities.
4. **Provide and protect dedicated spaces.** Go-go music came about only because of the existence of a public, communal space in which the community could congregate and innovate together. Although the Bridge Park itself will not be completed until 2024, the gallery, performing, and other creative spaces provided at THEARC and via initiatives such as the Bridge Park Plots (small-scale urban farms) scattered throughout Ward 8 and Ward 6 provide important platforms for expressing and sustaining local culture.

Notes

- ¹ “Statement on Cultural Equity,” Americans for the Arts, National Arts Marketing Project, accessed May 21, 2021, <https://namp.americansforthearts.org/about-americans-for-the-arts/our-statement-on-cultural-equity>.
- ² “Creative Placemaking, Placekeeping, and Cultural Strategies to Resist Displacement,” US Department of Arts and Culture, March 8, 2016, <https://usdac.us/blogac/2017/12/11/creative-placemaking-placekeeping-and-cultural-strategies-to-resist-displacement>.
- ³ The pull quotes in this report are taken from footage of the Equitable Development Plan Instructional Video, Pendragwn Productions, October 2018. The video incorporates points of view from Ward 8 residents who appreciated the Bridge Park efforts.
- ⁴ Christina Sturdivant, “Photos: 300 Lanterns Crossed the 11th Street Bridge to Honor Barry Farm’s History,” DCist, September 19, 2016, <https://dcist.com/story/16/09/19/latern-walk/>.

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