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FROM RUBBLE TO REVITALIZED: The Perspectives of Black Placemakers and Park Equity Advocates

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Overview

There is an extensive history of community residents acting on their interests and passions to address concerns in their community. One approach community leaders in southwest neighborhoods of Springfield, OH, took was engaging in Black placemaking through the revitalization of public spaces in pursuit of park and green space equity. This approach often entailed an entrepreneurial journey navigating systems and accessing needed resources to revitalize vacant lots into neighborhood pocket parks, green spaces, and community gardens. In an effort to better understand efforts and interests in transforming vacant properties into vibrant spaces, neighborhood leaders, residents, and partners were invited to share their perspectives and experiences. Findings illuminated a deep sense of pride, civic responsibility, and measurable impact by improving the built environment of neighborhoods that have experienced redlining and a lack of investment. Challenges were also raised regarding navigating public policies, acquiring resources, property development and maintenance, and technical assistance for hyper-local grassroots placemaking initiatives.

Framing the Conversation

What is Black placemaking?

The term placemaking began gaining traction in the 1960s as a way to describe a hands-on process of reimagining public spaces in ways that strengthen the connections between people and places. The approach of placemaking considers the physical, cultural, and social identities of a particular community, allowing placemaking practitioners to create great places using designs based on the interconnectedness of people and public spaces (Project for Public Spaces, 2007). Using creative approaches to mitigate residents' displacement and apathy, Black placemaking is defined as how Black Americans cultivate physical spaces for endurance, belonging, and resistance through community-building (Hunter et al., 2016). Through this process, practitioners are able to translate local interests into direct action that can result in the development of social capital. These placemaking sites can be used to fight against negative stereotypes, gentrification of neighborhoods, and discriminatory practices of governments, banks, and private entities.

What are pocket parks?

One form of placemaking is the development of pocket parks, a concept that first surfaced in New York in the 1960s. Pocket parks, also referred to as mini-parks or parklets, are small-scale open spaces that provide safe environments for residents and visitors. They are accessible to the public and are typically located on previously vacant lots that do not exceed a half acre in urban neighborhoods (Bruce, 2018). They can be permanent or temporary and are most impactful when designed with residents to meet the specific needs of the neighborhood and geographical location in which they exist. Such designs can include green spaces, playgrounds, gardens, waterfronts, landmarks, and more to provide opportunities for park visitors to sit, play, socialize, and relax outdoors (Trust for Public Land, 2021).

What is park equity?

Park equity ensures that all residents, regardless of their background or zip codes, have access, agency, and safe travel to high-quality public spaces and the benefits they provide within walking distance.

What are land banks?

The severe depression of the 1970s and 1980s brought about a decline in job opportunities, which led to a decrease in population and property values, particularly in Rust Belt states. The impact of shrinking cities and abandoned properties raised concerns that led to the creation of land banks. The first iteration of land banks can be traced back to St. Louis as early as 1971, and the concept has continued to evolve as innovative approaches were implemented throughout the Midwest. In 2004, Genesee County, Michigan, catalyzed the establishment of a second-generation of land banks across the nation to be charted as a quasi-governmental agency with a public responsibility to acquire, hold, demolish, and repurpose unproductive tax-delinquent properties (Rokakis & Frangos, 2020; Tappendorf & Denzin, 2011).

The Landbank Revolution (2011) documents Ohio's efforts to address the foreclosure crisis by passing Ohio Senate Bill 353 in December 2008, which became one of the most robust land bank bills in American history, with Cuyahoga County (i.e., Greater Cleveland Area) serving as a prototype. Ohio's strategy has interjected billions of local, state, and federal dollars into tax-delinquent and distressed properties to restore lost property equity and the cultural fabric of communities. While land banks are one way for placemaking practitioners to acquire parcels, there are also other local mechanisms that exist to acquire properties through the government. Such methods include mow-to-own programs and lot links programs.

Environmental Context of Southwest Springfield

The City of Springfield is home to 58,877 residents, with the racial and ethnic demographics being 74.9% White, 17.2% Black, 6.0% with two or more races, and 4% Hispanic or Latino (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). The detrimental impacts of depopulation across the country and state are also readily apparent in Springfield, as the city's population has steadily declined since 1970 with a 10.6% decline from 2000 to 2018 (Greater Ohio Policy Center, 2019). This can be contributed to several factors, including gaps between earned income and median rent, lack of affordable housing for extremely low-income renters, and the cost-burden rate of renters being at 39% and 10% for homeowners, all of which impact quality housing stock and market-ready growth neighborhoods (Greater Ohio Policy Center, 2019).

The target area of southwest Springfield is geographically outlined within South Limestone Street, West John Street, South Yellow Springs Street, and West Pleasant Street in the 45506 zip code, encompassing three different census tract neighborhoods. This area has 1,350 children, a median household income between \$18,000 and \$23,000, a 29% college graduation rate, and between 71% to 77% of individuals remaining in the same community they were raised in once they reach adulthood, with 19% to 29% of individuals staying in the same census tract where they were raised (Opportunity Atlas, 2021). Southwest Springfield, in particular, is a minority-majority area, which can be linked to the city's historical legacy of redlining and anti-Black housing discrimination through the practice of deed restrictions and planned neighborhoods (The Historical Marker Database, 2018).

¹ Also referred to as legacy or post-industrial cities is where depopulation leads to the increase of vacant and blighted structures such as houses, factory sites, and businesses.

² These programs allow an adjacent homeowner or concerned citizen to enter into an agreement with a city to maintain the property for without compensation for a specified amount of time, in which the city will transfer the property for low cost once all terms are met.

Additionally, the residential vacancy and vacant parcel rate is disproportionately high within southern neighborhoods of the city, as is the number of tax delinquent properties and code enforcement violation properties. Thus, southwest Springfield can be classified as a distressed neighborhood because underlying factors prevent the development of market-rate housing without significant subsidies, which makes neighborhood revitalization and stabilization efforts critical (Greater Ohio Policy Center, 2019).

Organizational Problem of Practice

This research study examines the absence of an advocacy framework that addresses inadequate public policies, resources, and technical assistance for neighborhood-based organizations and Black placemakers in southwest Springfield neighborhoods that are establishing pocket parks and community gardens. More specifically, The Conscious Connect CDC (i.e., community development corporation) which is conducting this research, acquires properties from the Clark County Land Bank (i.e., Springfield is the county seat of Clark County). The Conscious Connect CDC has two pocket parks and one green space within the geographical location of this study. Although the organization's efforts have yielded demonstrated impact, this was accomplished without any framework for successfully transforming vacant land into public space and navigating public-private partnerships for placemaking.

The adverse impact of not having an advocacy framework are substantial, as the condition of some transferred properties by the land bank has regressed to unproductive status due to a lack of resources, technical assistance, and subject matter expertise. Further, there is a lack of philanthropic investment for the development of park equity, a knowledge gap for Black placemakers due to a lack of technical assistance, and a deficiency of resources because of restrictive public policies and hierarchical government practices. The problem of practice has resulted in standard policies by land banks (including Clark County) to establish deed restrictions that allow the agencies to pursue legal action against acquiring nonprofit organizations or residents to seize properties that are not properly maintained after the property transfers.

Grounding the Study

Given the aforementioned challenges, the research method for this study utilized one-one-one qualitative interviews with participants. This data was utilized alongside other secondary sources and personal experiences from the principal investigator. Further, the research is grounded in ontological foundations that leverage interpretative approaches because the study is based upon subjective phenomenological experiences, understanding, and processes through small-scale interactions to reclaim physical spaces as acts within solidarity movements (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Moreover, the epistemology of this study was rooted in symbolic interactionism with an aim to understand the meaning that people place on these pocket parks and gardens (Hesse-Biber, 2017). As a result, the questions of the study examine the motivations of Black placemakers, the neighborhood design and development process, community impact, and challenges to sustainability of these sites.

Results

Motivation of Black Placemakers

*Guiding question:
What motivated you to
take on a placemaking
project?*

- Grew up in the neighborhood or larger community
- Wanted to make a positive difference
- Wanted to provide youth, families, and seniors with an outlet

Pocket park practitioners in southwest Springfield began to engage in placemaking practices based on residents' feedback from community surveys and needs assessments. Practitioners acknowledged that they did not have any placemaking experience before embarking on their initial projects, although they all had some level of community organizing experience. Practitioners were able to leverage their community experience and close relationships with residents to make a difference in their community, return properties back to productive status in the neighborhood they grew up in, and fill community needs. Viewing it as part of their civic responsibility, practitioners sought to address neighborhood concerns that government entities and financial institutions are partly responsible for producing. Community leaders also acknowledged the substantial progress that has been made while also recognizing the need to address additional structural, systemic, and procedural barriers and opportunities moving forward.

“We all just came together basically, tried to redevelop that area and get it back to where you know we feel safe. We knew business owners, we knew everybody in the neighborhood and we're just trying to get that feel back.”

— RYAN, ORGANIZATION AND NEIGHBORHOOD LEADER

Neighborhood Design & Development Process

*Guiding question:
What is the design
process in
establishing pocket
parks?*

- Leveraging Community Voice and Anti-Colonial Organizing
- Collective Efforts and Community Assets
- Entrepreneurial Fact Finding and Development

Placemaking practitioners acknowledge the deep-seated mistrust for government officials and City Hall, which was also echoed by government officials themselves. Oftentimes, residents can be reluctant to provide vulnerable answers about what they desire for their neighborhood and generally provide very superficial answers when interacting with government officials. Practitioners are community leaders who are able to serve as liaisons between residents and the government due to their trusted relationships, credibility, and upbringing within the neighborhoods. This demonstrates the need and impact of placemaking projects led by neighborhood organizations with pre-existing relationships and shared experiences with residents.

Practitioners worked closely with the Clark County Land Bank to ensure success of the placemaking process. This primarily includes assistance with identifying properties and low-level placemaking (e.g., beautification, tree planting, etc.). The City of Springfield has also supported rezoning properties for pocket parks, and occasional transfers of properties. The process to establish new zoning precedents for pocket parks through conditional use and variances amendments was inspired by residents that wanted a commercial grade basketball

“I don’t believe that this project would have been as successful and well-received by our neighborhood if it was done by the City.”

— JARED, NEIGHBORHOOD HOMEOWNER

court on a property owned and managed by The Conscious Connect Community Development Corporation. These types of public-private partnerships and policy modifications are necessary to reduce barriers for placemaking efforts and to elevate voices of those that have been excluded from decision-making processes and neighborhood planning.

In addition to (quasi) government, community leaders and residents described a village approach to supporting the maintenance of the property and cultivating an environment of pride, appreciation, and respect for the communal spaces. Placemaking practitioners discussed leveraging in-kind services with minority-owned businesses and other organizations to clear overgrown brush and

remove hazardous trees. Additionally, residents and community volunteers have donated time towards landscaping. Community leaders discussed how these in-kind services have saved money, time, and energy with limited bandwidth and resources.

Practitioners indicated that they learned a lot of costly mistakes along the way that could have been prevented if technical assistance was provided by a knowledgeable community organization, subject matter experts, or the government about the process from ideation to implementation. Practitioners also noted the importance of beginning the planning process by engaging residents within the immediate proximity of the identified properties. Practitioners developed design concepts catered directly to the neighbors' aspirations. This includes elements such as installing benches, landscaping, free little libraries, trashcans, basketball courts, to just greening the lot with grass if neighbors indicated that they did not want permanent amenities and would take ownership of the property. As Black placemakers, practitioners emphasized they engaged residents that have been marginalized by traditional community engagement and planning processes or outrightly rendered invisible without a seat at the table or a voice.

“We felt very informed and involved in the process of the park.”

— MISTY, NEIGHBORHOOD HOMEOWNER

Community Impact

*Guiding question:
How have pocket parks changed the neighborhoods if at all? What are the results and outcomes?*

- Increased community pride and intergenerational relationship building
- Decreased in trash, blight, and perceptions of illegal activity
- Increased mental wellness of residents
- Increased tree canopy
- Increased homeownership
- Intangible benefits of development

As a result of collective impact that centers residents, southwest Springfield has reaped the benefits from the proliferation of neighborhood pocket parks, green spaces, and community gardens. This has created an environment of pride, appreciation, and respect for the communal spaces. Due to these collaborative public-private partnerships, pocket parks have the ability to transform neighborhood perceptions, improve safety, increase property values, instill hope, and serve as multi-generational community-building spaces and safe-havens.

“We all had been waiting so long for these houses to be torn down. We didn’t know anything about a park or anything, but we’re glad it’s in our neighborhood.”

— JARED, NEIGHBORHOOD HOMEOWNER

Residents near one pocket park stated that they enjoyed connecting with pre-teens and teens that frequently visited that park. The neighbors indicated that on the rare occasion that teens display undesired behaviors, that they politely correct them. Residents, community leaders, and government officials alike all spoke about the parks and greenspaces being a point of pride for the neighborhood.

Further, the efforts of Black placemakers reduced street trash and reformed lots connected to alleys that became sites for illegal dumping of excessive trash and bed mattresses. Many of these parks were also formerly dilapidated houses known to be inhabited by squatters and rodents. The revitalization of these spaces led to residents having improved mental health and wellness outcomes. Residents indicated that they used to despise looking at abandoned houses. Practitioners also made a concerted effort to increase tree canopy with new trees to improve air quality and reduce urban heat islands in the neighborhoods. The addition of neighborhood pocket parks led to multiple adjacent properties transitioning from long-term rentals to owner occupied houses at two sites. Lastly, it was also noted that many of the benefits of the placemaking efforts are hard to quantify in tangible terms.

“The very first thing is, is that psychological importance, that change-making importance of a pocket park placemaking development that's being proposed. It's more than just taking a vacant lot and putting something there so that it's not a vacant lot, it really changes the way a 10-year-old sees his neighborhood.

It really changes the way, you know, somebody coming back for Sunday dinner at grandma's house sees the neighborhood. It changes the walk from school back to home. It's what I call the intangible benefits of development. It's hard to assign a dollar value, but that psychological intangible benefit is the, that's the headline, that's the lead.”

— DIANE, GOVERNMENT STAFF MEMBER

Past & Present Challenges to Sustainable Development

Guiding question: What are the challenges with the development, improvement, and/or sustainability of the pocket parks in Southwest neighborhoods (if any)?

- Adverse Banking Practices
- Government (In)Actions and Detrimental Public Policies
- Post-Industrialization and Aging Populations
- Shifting Demographics and Changing Neighborhoods
- Lack of Technical Assistance, Capacity, and Financial Support

Participants stated that discriminatory banking practices by local financial institutions were and are contributing factors to racism, neighborhood decline, and socioeconomic disparities that impact quality of life metrics. Banks foreclosed properties during the 2008 recession but never reclaimed ownership through the proper channels, according to multiple government staff members and a former elected official. As a result, the county continued to bill the previous owners for unpaid property taxes, as the banks also allowed the properties to fall into disrepair. An elected official and neighborhood leader also stated that banks redlined southwest Springfield and still continue to decline home loans to prospective homebuyers and repair loans to current homeowners to upkeep and improve their homes.

“You're not going to repave the road where only two people live. But if you don't repave that road, if you don't invest in that water and sewer infrastructure, no one else is ever going to live there, so what are you doing, you're making a cornfield in the middle of a town.”

— DIANE, GOVERNMENT STAFF MEMBER

These inequities have been exacerbated by City planning approaches that prioritized economic, infrastructure development, and homeowners over neighborhood development for decades. Public planning approaches of the City government deprioritized the southwest quadrant of the city. One neighborhood leader stated that the City's zoning codes also prohibited commercial and mixed development in the southwest quadrant, which resulted in a rapid decline in the physical infrastructure and social fabric of southwest neighborhoods. The lack of multigenerational investments has caused city-

produced inequalities that are influencing the living conditions of current and future generations to come.

Lasting influences of redlining practices, city-produced inequalities coupled with the racial and ethnic concentrations of poverty create a perception of southwest neighborhoods as being unsafe places to develop, live, and/or play. In addition, due to the post-industrialization of cities and the aging of homeowners, many young adults in the mid-70s through the 80s did not stay in the neighborhood after high school graduation or return after college graduation due to declining job opportunities.

With a dwindling group of older adults remaining, it became difficult to carry on neighborhood traditions, and a sense of pride slowly diminished over time as older residents focused on dealing with their own challenges around aging. Considering the shift in neighborhood demographics, ongoing repairs, maintenance, and home improvements serve as more laborious tasks for older homeowners, leaving many neighborhoods in disarray. Likewise, additional challenges related to code enforcement violations and tax-delinquent properties became readily prevalent as senior citizens passed away. Many times, government employees stated that they have difficulty identifying relatives of homeowners who had passed away or relatives were unwilling to pay stiff fines for properties that were already tax-burdened. This, coupled with out-of-city and out-of-state investors, has caused the number of renters to skyrocket while the number of residents that contribute to the social cohesion of the neighborhood to decline.

Black placemakers and community leaders of southwest Springfield are working tirelessly to address the detrimental impacts of the government, financial institutions, and outside actors. As practitioners continue to address these inequities through innovative strategies, they still face a litany of challenges. These barriers include a lack of technical assistance and knowledge on how to navigate bureaucratic systems and archaic policies, a lack of capacity as most organizations are volunteer-led, and a lack of financial support from various sectors to develop, sustain, and program the parks.

Critical Stakeholders

Guiding question: Who are the important stakeholders needed to support the development, implementation, and sustainability of pocket parks in southwest neighborhoods?

The strategy to advance park equity in southwest Springfield is rooted in bottom-up grassroots approaches that center the desires, needs, and skills of residents. The Conscious Connect hired resident advocates. Advocates are responsible for educating residents about park access as it

relates to the People, Parks, and Power (P3) initiative. This includes outreach services, attending meetings and advocacy training, and relationship building. Resident advocates serve as the voice of the community.

Community mobilization tactics also included assembling a neighborhood coalition known as the Unified Collective. Unified Collective is a multifaceted coalition of independent nonprofits, businesses, and community change agents championing diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice through collective impact strategies. The coalition focuses on south Springfield neighborhoods and serves as a catalyst for multigenerational action and advocacy between residents, organizational and business leaders, government officials, and decision-makers. The coalition has two additional founding organizations including Young Black Professionals and Businesses of Springfield and DreamVision. Additional groups that have joined the cause include 1159 South CDC, Auburn J. Tolliver Sr. Project, Clark County Citizens Climate Lobby, Green Environmental Outreach, Gammon House, Melrose Acres, and Springfield Promise Neighborhood. The group is convened by The Conscious Connect CDC.

Further, placemaking practitioners continuously reiterated how important it is to work closely with the City and Land Bank to ensure successful processes and results. They shared how the Land Bank assists with identifying properties, that they could help with property designations that a prospective organization may be unaware of, and that the Land Bank also still maintains several properties. The land bank also has the capability to transfer properties to adjacent homeowners and individuals not associated with a 501(c)3 through a different price structure to acquire properties. The City of Springfield is also a critical partner from a land, policy, and funding perspective. The National Trails Parks and Recreation District is also a vital ally and partner in increasing park access and improving pre-existing park infrastructure in adjacent neighborhoods to the target area.

Additional stakeholders include foundations and private sector philanthropists, ark and green space advocates and allies, urban planners and developers, elected officials, policymakers, landscape architects, artists, activists, property managers, cultural preservationists, environmentalists, and action researchers.

Next Steps

A pocket park framework that centers Black placemaking is critical to addressing the issue of vacant lots, hazardous structures, park, and green space inequity, discriminatory public policies, siloed community development, and environmental racism. More specifically, a racial equity framework can 1) enhance Black placemaking efforts and policy action to establish sites of belonging within systematically disenfranchised neighborhoods; 2) provide technical assistance to Black placemaking practitioners to identify, establish, and sustain pocket parks; and 3) mitigate the regression of transferred properties, 4) cultivate a community-based coalition for collective impact. Further, a core vision of The Conscious Connect CDC seeks to establish a pocket park ecosystem to ensure that all southwest Springfield residents are within walking access to parks and green spaces (The Trust for Public Land, 2021). As a result, this action research study was necessary to cultivate, accelerate, and sustain best practices and collective impact strategies across multiple sectors.

People, Parks, and Power (P3)

This work is being advanced through the People, Parks, and Power (P3) initiative. P3 is a first of its kind in the nation to seek to advance deep-seated park inequities in Black, brown, and Indigenous communities through policy action. The Conscious Connect CDC is one of 14 national sites to advance P3. The Unified Collective has played a vital role in advancing the following P3 objectives:

Objective 1	Build power and strengthen the capacity of residents and allies on land use, zoning and park equity, including transformation of vacant lots and deteriorated properties.
Objective 2	Conduct participatory action research to advance park and green space equity in Springfield, OH.
Objective 3	Develop a strategic communications plan to support project goals and objectives.

Conclusion

Experiences of placemaking practitioners in southwest Springfield reveal many challenges that must be addressed to achieve procedural, distributional, and structural park equity through policy action. Such actions include centering the development of a pocket park advocacy and frameworks that advance localized best practices for street-level organizing, and strategic recommendations for policy action and public-private partnerships that address systemic structures and root causes that produce racial, socioeconomic, and geographical inequities. To achieve this, targeted recommendations should be developed with practical methods that leverage government resources and mitigate challenges Black-founded and Black-led organizations face. These strategies can collectively provide a foundation for immediate action and future considerations of equitable access to parks and green spaces in southwest Springfield, and beyond.

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Contact Information

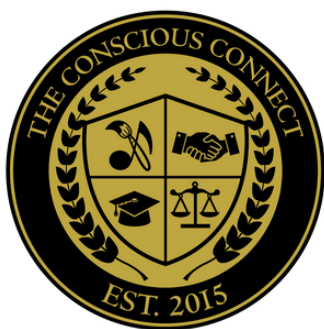
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