



# Protecting and preserving culture during change

## Equity Forum: Upending Cultural Displacement Discussion Guide

Communities across the country are experiencing significant changes driven by reinvestment, disinvestment, rising housing costs, and the changing climate, all of which have a significant impact on community culture, cohesion, and belonging. **Cultural displacement occurs when new residents' tastes, norms, and desires change and replace those of incumbent residents**, resulting in residents being pushed out or barred from moving in, and the loss of historic and cultural pillars of the community.<sup>1</sup> **Displacement can also take various forms**; it can have a physical and/or economic impact on communities, and it can affect various groups of people, including race, gender, religion, and behavioral interests.<sup>2</sup>

*Smart Growth America's Equity Forum: Upending Cultural Displacement* was a thought-provoking continuation of our year-round equity programming—anchored by the Equity Summit, which focuses on advancing racial equity through Smart Growth. The Forum was full of valuable insight and guidance from visionary leaders on the deep relationship between cultural displacement and Smart Growth, as well as effective strategies for preserving and protecting neighborhood culture during investment and neighborhood change.

Here are some key takeaways from the event and a few guiding points and key questions to help you continue the dialogue on cultural displacement and preservation in your community.

## Key discussion points



**1 It's not about fighting displacement, but preserving community culture and vitality:** Communities across the country are experiencing significant changes driven by reinvestment, disinvestment, rising housing costs, and the changing climate, all of which have a significant impact on community culture, cohesion, and belonging.

**2 The Smart Growth movement has led to some unintended consequences related to culture:** Many technical approaches to planning and design have unanticipated consequences for neighborhood culture and change, influencing how people move and where they live, work, and play. These consequences can mean that not everyone feels that the movement is beneficial for them, especially when Smart Growth efforts lead to gentrification and displacement. This frequently prevents us from gaining allies in various spaces and can have a significant impact on coalition building, community trust, and apathy.

**3 There's an intrinsic connection between creativity and culture:** Arts and culture bearers can help connect with the community and employ artistic and creative processes that aid in the creation of policies and programs that advance community goals, equity, and culture.

*"Artists, culture bearers, and designers are necessary for our communities. They help us make sense of the world and offer different ways of thinking, feeling, and being. They're a source of inspiration and innovation and are critically important to our well-being, our ability to recover, and protecting our humanity and community culture."*

**- Dr. Maria Rosario Jackson,**  
Chair, National Endowment  
for the Arts (NEA)

1. National Community Reinvestment Coalition  
2. Urban Displacement Project



# Questions to ask

- 1 What effects do reinvestment/disinvestment, rapid development, changing housing costs, and displacement have on your community's culture? Are there unintended consequences? How can you help to bring these impacts to light and advocate for policies and better decision-making?
- 2 Have you conducted an audit of your organization/agency's past projects to determine the impact these projects have had on cultural displacement? If any of your past work led to cultural displacement, why did this happen and what can you do differently in the future to ensure a different outcome?
- 3 What can you do in your community to help support and build cultural vibrancy and sustainability? Who are your community's culture bearers and what do they need to thrive?

## What to do next

### Planners and policymakers

- Analyze and audit current displacement risks for renters, homeowners, and businesses at the start of any new project so that anti-displacement efforts can be tailored to the reality on the ground.
- Refocus anti-cultural displacement efforts on policies and projects that support culture bearers (funding and space for cultural institutions, permitting for cultural events, small business support) rather than on solely naming new projects after displaced culture bearers.
- Recognize that residents living through neighborhood cultural change may feel these changes deeply even if residential displacement is not occurring. Work to find the language needed to connect with these residents and address their concerns.

### Community coalitions

- Connect with your communities' culture bearers and incorporate them into your coalitions
- Help create spaces of healing and belonging
- Think about the conditions (funding, space, connections, housing, etc.) needed to support your communities' cultures, and work towards ensuring these conditions are met.

## Recommended reading



**What are displacement and gentrification?** The Urban Displacement Project's explainer series helps paint a clear picture of displacement and its long-term impacts and explores ways communities can use new investments to expand healthy and equitable opportunities to help mitigate gentrification. [Learn more>>](#)

**Cultural Displacement: Gentrification in New York City's Chinatown:** Throughout the past decade, Chinatown has experienced rapidly shifting ethnic and racial demographics, soaring housing prices, and a lack of economic opportunity that is rapidly displacing longtime residents. [Read more>>](#)

**Reimagining the Civic Commons: A new way of working:** Public spaces can connect people of all backgrounds, cultivate trust, and create more resilient communities. Reimagining the Civic Commons collaborates with communities across the United States to achieve ambitious social, economic, and environmental goals by revitalizing and connecting public spaces. [Learn more>>](#)