The building and expansion of American cities in the 20th century was truly one of the great marvels of the modern age. Just a few decades after horse-drawn wagons brought pioneers to the farthest, least-settled reaches of the still-young United States, those settlers’ grandchildren had designed and built what are now some of the world’s great centers of commerce and culture.

Today, most of us live in or near these great American cities, driving to and from home and work along massive highways or moving around on buses and trains.

But with progress came inequity. We now recognize that the benefits of urban planning and expansion have not been equally shared.

People living in low-income ZIP codes — disproportionately communities of color — historically have been shut out of planning and often do not directly benefit from new infrastructure as it’s built. Instead, new interstate highways, rail lines and other large-scale projects often divide communities and further limit their access to opportunity, resulting in outcomes that can include poor health, unemployment and limits to economic advancement.

“Historically, it’s much easier to build highways and other infrastructure through neighborhoods where people of color live,” says Chris Kabel, deputy director of The Kresge Foundation’s Health Program.

‘NAME IT AS THE CENTER’: BRINGING RACIAL EQUITY TO THE TABLE

Changing the Infrastructure from the Bottom Up

Atlanta artist Fahamu Pecou in front of his mural, “Rise Above,” at MARTA’s King Memorial Station. WonderRoot’s En Route project creates meaningful, aesthetically imaginative, high-quality, text-based murals at Atlanta train stations that explore issues of access, mobility and public transportation.
As observers estimate that $3.6 trillion of infrastructure investment is needed in the U.S. before 2020, a bold national initiative, funded in part by Kresge and integrating five of its program and practice areas, seeks to change the trajectory. Focusing on Atlanta, Georgia; Chicago, Illinois; Los Angeles, California; Denver, Colorado; Memphis, Tennessee; and the San Francisco Bay Area, the Strong, Prosperous and Resilient Communities Challenge (SPARCC) is investing $90 million over three years. Each locality will receive $1 million in combined grant and technical assistance funds over the next three years to support their infrastructure efforts. Collectively, SPARCC sites will have access to about $70 million in financing capital and $14 million in additional program support.

The goal is to ensure that the cities’ new infrastructure investments benefit all residents — not just a privileged few. “With SPARCC, we’re trying to flip the script and ensure that people with low incomes and people of color are at the table,” Kabel says, “shaping these infrastructure decisions so there’s more equity in terms of who pays and who benefits.”

**Bold Way Forward**

The SPARCC initiative took more than two years to develop. What began with a collaboration among Enterprise Community Partners, Low Income Investment Fund, Natural Resources Defense Council and the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco expanded to include five prominent foundations, including Kresge.

Soon, with the foundations’ financial backing, the SPARCC team identified a core mission to help regions invest in infrastructure and transportation projects that improve racial equity, community health and climate resilience. Never before had
a national development initiative of this magnitude boldly called out racial equity as a central priority.

“It became really clear that it was important for us to name it, and name it as the center,” says Brian Prater of the Low Income Investment Fund. “There was power in that, and we wanted people to know we value that.”

The approach that emerged hinged largely on leveraging regional, multidisciplinary networks in each of the six cities — what SPARCC’s founders call “collaborative tables.” They include participants from a diverse collection of nonprofits, foundations and businesses. These networks would seize on “catalytic moments” in their regions to identify and influence infrastructure spending to benefit all residents.

Solutions would be locally driven and community powered, with those residents most affected by proposed infrastructure projects — or least likely to benefit — at the table to participate in the decision-making process for their own neighborhoods.

Infrastructure and transportation in cities intersect with many indicators — from health to culture to ecology. SPARCC was designed so that stakeholders in each region could work collaboratively toward solutions rather than independently. For instance, representatives from five Kresge teams — Arts & Culture, Environment, Health, American Cities and Social Investments — have been involved in its design and implementation.

“Most organizations structure their programs very vertically — you can only talk about the environmental challenge or you can only talk about the health challenge,” Kabel says. “It became obvious that SPARCC, as it was being designed, was something that could yield multiple benefits — not just in one field or sector, but across many.

“That’s why we have leadership from multiple programs involved in its creation.”

**Traction in Atlanta**

For years, Atlanta nonprofits Southface Energy Institute and WonderRoot worked in different circles — silos, some would say. Southface focused on promoting sustainable development, alternative energy and green building that could respond locally to challenges presented by climate change. WonderRoot was hard at work inspiring local artists and communities to spark social change in a metropolitan area of almost six million people.

Their paths had never crossed until both were at the same table for a meeting of the TransFormation Alliance. That’s the SPARCC-
supported community partnership working to change how transit
and community development investments shape the future and
offer all residents opportunities for a high quality of life. In the
months that followed, WonderRoot and Southface joined forces on
an innovative project to explore climate and cultural resilience in
Atlanta’s Lee Street corridor. WonderRoot hired a staff member to
engage community members in assessing the culture, arts and built
landscape of their neighborhood.

Southface Executive Director Alex
Trachtenberg says the question the Lee
Street process aims to answer is twofold:
“How do we implement Creative
Placemaking that tells the story of the
place and gives it an identity and is done
in an aesthetically pleasing way, but also
communicates that this is an area that
needs intervention in the form of green
infrastructure?”

The genius of the TransFormation
Alliance is its ability to bring unlikely
partners to the table to think about how
their work intersects, says Brandon
Jones, head of Creative Placemaking at
WonderRoot.

“These are dialogues and discussions
that we are not accustomed to having,”
he adds. “This is not the norm.”

A significant portion of the TransFormation Alliance’s work in
Atlanta focuses on equitable development around transit stations.
WonderRoot’s En Route project creates meaningful, aesthetically
imaginative murals at train stations that explore issues of access,
mobility and public transportation.

Alliance member Soccer in the Streets is expanding Station
Soccer, a program that installs soccer fields on unused parcels in and
around transit stations and engages a diverse
cross section of youth through sport. The
alliance also works to strengthen local policy
around development and transportation,
has developed a tool for evaluating the needs
of communities around transit stations,
and is launching a six–module course that
leaches residents how to advocate for better
transportation.

Odetta MacLeish-White, who was hired as
managing director for the TransFormation
Alliance in October 2017, says each of these
initiatives flows from an ecosystem rooted
in individual education and community
solidarity. That, she says, flows into
infrastructure planning.

“How do we get people involved not just
in saying what they want,” she asks, ”but in
decision–making?”

Learning how to make bottom–up
infrastructure development work here in
Atlanta — and in the other five SPARCC sites —
promises to be a model for other communities
around the country.