THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

100 YEARS OF GRANTMAKING

Lessons Learned from The Kresge Foundation's Centennial Convenings

OCTOBER 2025

About The Kresge Foundation

The Kresge Foundation is a private, national foundation that works to expand equity and opportunities in America's cities through grantmaking and social investing in arts and culture, education, environment, health, human services and community development, nationally and in Detroit, Memphis, New Orleans and Fresno. In collaboration with our partners, we help create pathways for people with low incomes to improve their life circumstances and join the economic mainstream.

About Four Corners

Four Corners Global Consulting Group, LLC, is a woman- and LGBTQ-owned social impact consulting firm that believes with the right tools and resources, organizations of all sizes can tackle tough challenges and build a better world. With over 50 years of collective experience in the social sector overseas and in the United States, Four Corners brings a values-based approach to its work, one that is firmly rooted in social equity principles. As experienced human rights advocates and practitioners, we partner with academic institutions, philanthropies, nonprofits, and businesses to help them advance meaningful social change, and provide services in four mutually reinforcing areas: measurement & data, strategy, growth, and leadership & culture.

PREPARED FOR
The Kresge Foundation
Troy, Michigan
kresge.org

PREPARED BY
Four Corners Global Consulting Group, LLC
Chicago, Illinois
fourcornersglobalgroup.com

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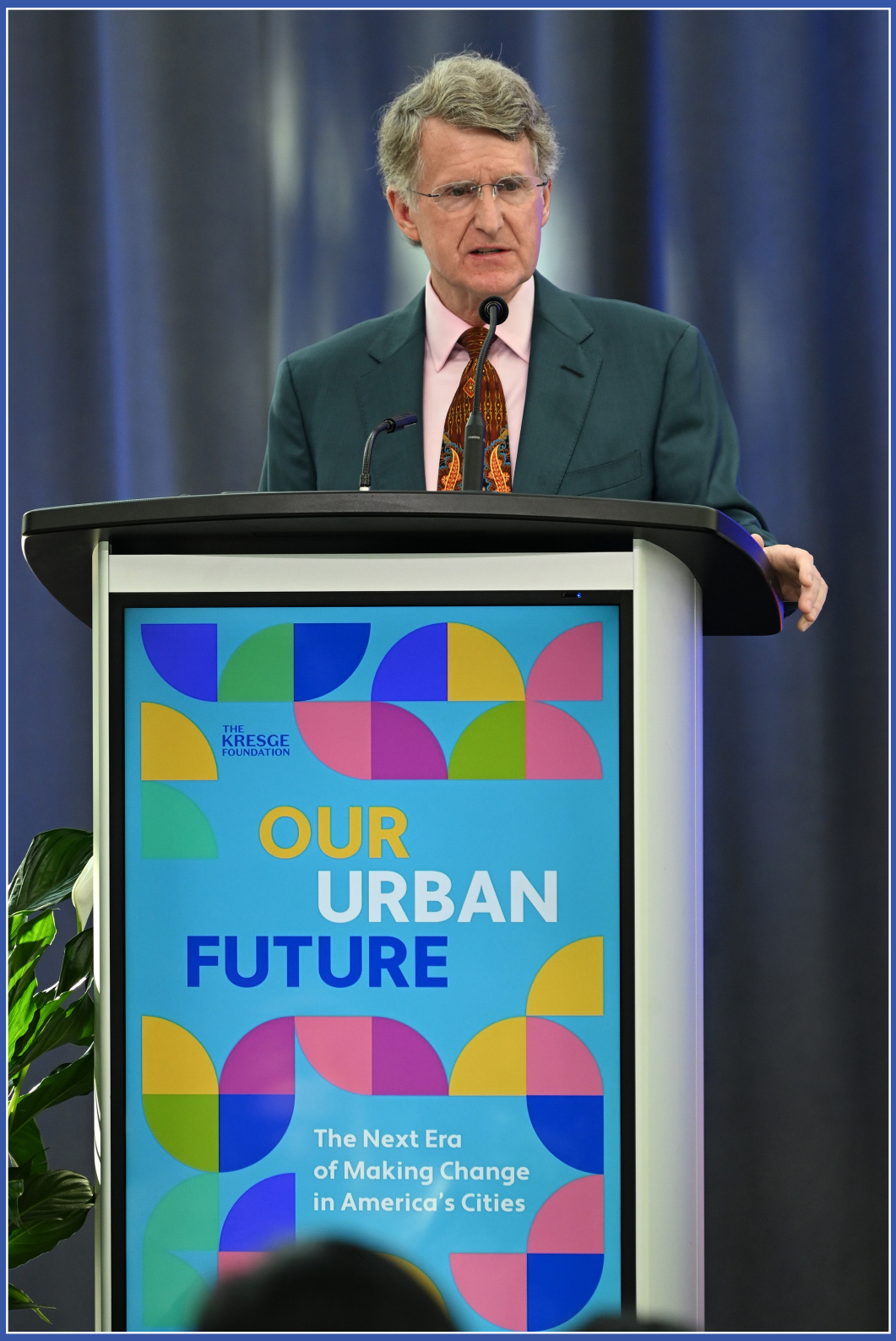

Kresge President & CEO Rip Rapson

A little over a year ago, I addressed 300 partners, peers, and friends at Kresge's Our Urban Future conference, the last of several events marking the Kresge Foundation's Centennial. I told the group:

> **"Let's use our time together to fire our imagination to conceive of a bolder, more equitable urban trajectory. I am optimistic that we can do that. . . . And, under the circumstances, being anything other than an optimist strikes me as a profoundly unproductive use of our time."**

The last year has provided innumerable invitations to pessimism, resignation, even despair. I acknowledge the accumulated and deep losses and remaining challenges, but still I stand by the spirit of my words. We can conceive of a bolder, more equitable urban trajectory that amplifies and honors the gifts of our cities: diverse populations, neighborhood assets and unbowed civic and community leaders. We see people envisioning and implementing this trajectory every day.

So even as we mourn the careless destruction of pillars of civil society, the families and communities destroyed by deportation, the hateful rhetoric and violent action visited upon our cities, we also hope. We hope because we know what we have done and what we can do to move toward greater equity and opportunity in cities.

During our Centennial year, we gathered on several occasions to celebrate the progress of our grant partners, especially in Detroit, and hear from people we know and respect about their approaches to four issues that cities must address in the near term:

1. **Racial equity and reparative community development and the ways that social, spatial and economic equity can advance healing.**
2. **Climate change as an "everything issue," central to every dimension of urban life, with a particular focus on environmental resilience, health, and community development.**
3. **People-centered urban economies that support equitable wealth creation and multi-generational economic mobility.**
4. **The power of cultural placekeeping and placemaking that draws on wisdom, intergenerational exchange and respect for difference.**

We also hosted smaller intensive sessions on early childhood education and infrastructure.

These are still core issues for equity and opportunity in America's cities. Yes, there has been whiplash around funding. Loud voices have denigrated and dismissed prior efforts, tried to erase history and stopped the flow of information that helps measure progress. But you haven't stopped, and neither has Kresge. That's why we're publishing this Centennial convening summary now. The work still matters.

When we combine what we heard during our Centennial convenings with our own understanding of how change happens in cities, we see three themes for city building and civic problem-smashing emerge. Cities need:

- A multi-sectoral, pluralistic approach and the right leadership to organize and maintain it
- Community self-determination and creative use of assets
- New and strengthened systems to deliver diverse forms of capital

Over the past year, we've seen continued progress on each of these themes. Our grantee partners tell us they are putting more energy into convening, collective action, collaboration and building stronger networks, especially with groups that have not historically engaged with their issues.

In the face of efforts to uproot and isolate vulnerable people and describe them as outsiders or threats, people are rallying to defend their neighbors. New communities of practice are emerging, such as one that Kresge supports to help city residents secure quality employment, improved income, and health insurance.

As federal dollars abruptly disappear, people are imagining new ways to engage the private markets to accelerate real estate investment in disinvested areas and creating community-owned infrastructure that can operate independently of political shifts. Kresge is providing resources to nonprofits to help them become more resilient and manage their funds for longevity and impact.

Like you, the Kresge Foundation will not deviate from our mission of strengthening the building blocks of equity and opportunity in American cities. While partners and friends might have to adjust methods or even make excruciating decisions about where to move forward and where to pause, we are all steadfast in our commitment to our shared purpose and the shared vision of our urban future.

The summation below of our Centennial year is not a postcard from a vanished era. Instead, I hope it is a galvanizing reminder of the variety of ways that people across the country are still, continually moving every day towards great equity and opportunity, and even joy, in America's cities.

The work has never been easy. You are not alone. Let's keep going together.

- Rip

SCAN TO LISTEN TO RIP'S OPENING REMARKS FROM THE OUR URBAN FUTURE CONFERENCE, WHERE HE SHARES A HOPEFUL VISION FOR AMERICAN CITIES.

100 Introduction

Introduction

American cities stand at a critical juncture, facing interconnected challenges of economic inequality, climate change, racial injustice and the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Currently, a volatile and uncertain political environment is threatening longstanding investments addressing these systemic challenges. As a result, philanthropy, local and state governments and civil society must imagine new approaches to urban development that integrate multiple sectors and perspectives, while centering community voices, and working toward systemic change.

In 2024, the Kresge Foundation celebrated a century of grantmaking by hosting four convenings that commemorated its long history and uplifted the impact of its grantees in urban centers across the country.

- The first event, "Integrative Practice: Equitable Community and Economic Development, Climate Action, and Public Health in Place," was co-hosted by the Kresge Foundation and the Urban Institute from April 8-10, in Washington, D.C. The focus of the event was on integrating economic development, climate action, and public health in order to produce tangible opportunities.
- On June 11, the Kresge Foundation hosted "Detroit & the American City," a symposium that featured local and national experts who looked to the past to build systems of resilience and health, painting a picture of joy and healing for Detroit's future.
- From August 1-2, the Kresge Foundation partnered with the U.S. Department of Education, the Ballmer Group, the Raikes Foundation, and the Stuart Foundation to host "Strengthening Whole Child Communities: Raising the Bar from Cradle to Career." The convening brought together policymakers, practitioners, advocates, philanthropy leaders, youth and community-based organizations to reaffirm the importance of public education as a driver of opportunity and socioeconomic mobility for children and youth from low-income backgrounds, their families and their communities.
- Finally, from September 11-12, the Kresge Foundation hosted, "Our Urban Future: The Next Era of Making Change in America's Cities." The event focused on five themes: reparative community development, climate action, economic equity and culture and community power building.

Through an analysis of conversations and insights from diverse stakeholders including community leaders, policymakers, philanthropic partners, and urban practitioners who participated in the convenings described above, three key themes emerged for advancing equitable urban development and reimagination:

- **Theme I: Sustainable Urban Reimagination Requires a Multisectoral, Pluralistic Approach**
- **Theme II: Root Causes of Inequity Must Be Addressed Through Community Self-Determination**
- **Theme III: Philanthropy Must Transform Systems, Enable Community Power and Creatively Deploy Assets**

This report examines how urban development practitioners, organizations, philanthropies and communities navigate complex, systemic challenges while working toward transformative change. The examples highlighted demonstrate lessons learned from practical approaches to equitable, integrated, community-centered work to create measurable impact across diverse communities.

100 Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

Theme I: Sustainable Urban Reimagination Requires a Multisectoral, Pluralistic Approach

Monica Valdes Lupi, managing director of Kresge's Health Program, speaks on stage at Our Urban Future with Dr. Judith Monroe.

In today's complex urban landscapes, the most transformative initiatives share a common foundation: they transcend traditional boundaries to forge meaningful connections across sectors, communities and generations. This theme explores how successful urban reimagination efforts are built upon intentional trust-building and a commitment to pluralistic approaches. Successful cross-sector work requires understanding how different sectors can complement each other, listening deeply to the communities most impacted, and building and maintaining trusting relationships with clear shared goals and objectives.

At the "Our Urban Future" convening, Dr. Judith Monroe, president and CEO of the CDC Foundation highlighted four key factors for building trust: "humanity, transparency, reliability, and capability." While Dr. Monroe was speaking primarily about the public health field, these principles have proven to be foundational to fostering productive collaboration across all sectors that are working to make a meaningful and tangible difference in a community. Dr. Monroe emphasized that trust-building requires intentional relationship investments and effort, stating that "when so many different partners are at the table, taking time finding alignment and shared values is essential." Panelists at all four Centennial events in 2024 reflected on the fact that trust-building must be proactive rather than reactive, and that leaders must build relationships within and between sectors early on so that potential crises can be averted entirely or managed more quickly.

The programs explored at the Kresge Centennial convenings demonstrate how the principles of trust-building and collaboration across diverse sectors, racial and ethnic communities and generations can yield tangible and lasting results. Drawing from compelling case studies like the Marygrove Conservancy in Detroit, Houston's Economic Growth Collaborative, Louisville's innovative tenant organizing, Texas' climate justice initiatives and youth-led initiatives in Detroit, we uncover a powerful framework for lasting change. These examples demonstrate that when diverse stakeholders invest in relationship-building as a foundation, they create resilient civic infrastructures capable of addressing our most pressing urban challenges – from education to affordable housing, to fair wages, climate change and beyond. The lessons presented here offer practical guidance and different models for breaking down silos and mobilizing collective action toward shared visions of equitable, sustainable urban futures.

Working at the Speed of Trust: Marygrove Campus Multi-Sector Partnership

Building trust was essential to The Marygrove Conservancy's ability to quickly identify where unintended consequences could potentially come into play – and to develop structures to mitigate them in advance. The Marygrove Conservancy created a unique cross-sector collaborative model transforming a 53-acre former Catholic college campus into a cradle-to-career educational ecosystem that serves as both an education center and economic catalyst for the surrounding neighborhood.

Tom Lewand, CEO of Marygrove, explained that they built an unprecedented partnership structure bringing together Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD), the University of Michigan, The Kresge Foundation, IFF (a Community Development Financial Institution), multiple bank partners and local community organizations. Conservancy leadership also engaged in extensive community outreach, involving residents in planning discussions. Lewand described their approach as "open source community development," explaining: "We started with the educational core of cradle to career, and then we launched into a series of conversations with a number of stakeholders, folks who were artists on campus, homeowners in the neighborhood... parents... business owners along two of the commercial corridors, and so a lot of conversation about what would you do with the resources here? How would you use it? What could we do with it?"

The partnership has created a comprehensive educational ecosystem where children can enter as early as six weeks old into early childhood education, progress through K-12 education, and access post-secondary programming, all on one campus. The project has also yielded the following significant benefits for the broader community including:

1. **Economic development:** The Marygrove campus now houses the "powerhouse center for Black entrepreneurship," which, according to Lewand, works with "organizations in the city that do work with entrepreneurs, bringing those resources out to the neighborhood, and then working with local business owners, entrepreneurs and those whose businesses are at different stages of scale" to provide mentorship and growth opportunities.
2. **Job creation:** The Marygrove event center generated "over half a million dollars in events without any kitchen space" in its first year, with renovations underway to make it "a multi-million dollar venture." The center is intentionally powered by Black-owned businesses, creating economic opportunities for local entrepreneurs.
3. **Family retention:** The campus helps achieve the goal of "keeping families in neighborhoods that would have otherwise left the city for better educational opportunities, addressing the problem of 30,000 students that leave Detroit every day go to school in the suburbs.'" By providing high-quality education within the community, the project helps stabilize the neighborhood demographically and economically.
4. **Neighborhood-centered design:** The early childhood center demonstrates "what quality programming and bright spaces look like, and outdoor spaces look like for children." As Jonathan Hui, senior program officer for Kresge's Detroit program, explained, while "we can't build 100 more of these," the center serves as a model for "families and providers and policymakers" to see what children and families deserve.
5. **Improved educational outcomes:** According to Machion Jackson, a Deputy Superintendent of DPSCD, "Our state results just were published, and the school has outperformed the state on our math, science, and social studies scores."

Michelle Liberatore, senior program manager of Corporate Social Responsibility at Verizon, spoke on the "Organizing for Civic Problem-Smashing" panel at Our Urban Future.

Overhead shot of the main stage at Our Urban Future convening in Detroit, September 2024.

Trust-Building Through Private Sector-led Partnerships: Houston's Economic Growth Collaborative

The Houston Economic Growth Collaborative was established by Verizon in 2023, bringing together foundations, corporations, nonprofits, and neighborhood partners who are committed to pooling resources, information, and opportunities to achieve a community-led vision for localized economic prosperity and systemic change. Unlike the Marygrove Conservancy, this is still a relatively new initiative that is learning important lessons as it navigates multisectoral planning, development, and trust-building. Moreover, unlike many civic infrastructure initiatives that struggle to engage corporate partners early on, this collaborative is distinguished by being initiated by a corporate entity. For professional guidance, FSG (a global social impact consulting firm) and a local consultant with 25 years of Houston experience were engaged to guide the collaborative's development, bringing both national expertise and deep local knowledge to the initiative.

Michelle Liberatore, Senior Program Manager of Corporate Social Responsibility at Verizon, explained at the "Organizing for Civic Problem-Smashing" discussion at the "Our Urban Future" convening" that Verizon played the role of initial convener, bringing together approximately 25-26 key stakeholders including other corporations, the Regional Chamber of Commerce, nonprofits, and philanthropic organizations. Liberatore shared that Verizon intends to eventually shift from a leadership to a participant role as the collaboration matures. The collaborative adopted an innovative approach to funding, recognizing that relationships without resources often fall flat in collaborative efforts. Verizon provided grants to nonprofit organizations to support their participation in the collaborative, acknowledging the opportunity cost of their time spent co-developing strategy rather than pursuing their own programs. Without waiting for perfect alignment or a complete strategy,

Angela Glover speaks at the Detroit & the American City Symposium held in June 2024 in Detroit.

the collaborative made several million dollars of investment in infrastructure initiatives that could potentially benefit any neighborhood they might eventually select. These investments were directed toward developing models for community advising, listening, engagement, and new approaches to connecting communities to services–creating a toolkit that could later be deployed in specific neighborhoods. As John Harper, CEO of FSG, emphasized, this approach differs from many collaborative efforts where "the money is this thing that we'll get to once we figure out how we're going to get there two years later." Instead, the collaborative moved resources immediately while continuing to work on relationship-building and strategic alignment.

Several significant challenges emerged during the collaborative's development. First, Houston's culture of impatience made the deliberate pace of relationship-building particularly difficult. Second, the collaborative wrestled with balancing financial resources and authentic relationship development, recognizing that "money is transactional at the end of the day." At the time of discussion, they had not yet engaged public officials, citing historical distrust and a desire to center community voices first. They also grappled with defining neighborhood boundaries in ways that respected residents' perspectives rather than institutional designations and acknowledged the difficulty of engaging underrepresented sub-communities.

The Houston Economic Growth Collaborative offers the following valuable insights into effective civic infrastructure development.

1. **Resources can flow concurrently with relationship-building rather than waiting for perfect strategic alignment, preventing the disillusionment of "planning without implementation."**
2. **Building civic infrastructure demands patience and persistence through difficult processes, even when immediate outcomes aren't visible.**
3. **Financial resources alone cannot create lasting change; authentic relationship-building remains the foundation for sustainable impact.**
4. **Community definitions of boundaries and priorities should take precedence over institutional designations when determining areas of focus and intervention.**
5. **Early investments can build credibility and demonstrate commitment, even while longer-term strategies are still evolving.**
6. **Creating space for nonprofit participation requires acknowledging and compensating for the opportunity costs they incur in collaborative work.**

Multiracial Coalition Building

Successful urban reimagination requires building and sustaining diverse coalitions. At the "Abundance: Economic Equity" panel discussion at the "Detroit & the American City Symposium," Angela Glover Blackwell, founder in residence at PolicyLink, shared the belief that the greatest power comes from building broad coalitions. She explained that a multiracial democracy will require strong and steady leadership, access to power, and a vision rooted in a just economy. This perspective was reinforced when Toni L. Griffin proposed at "Our Urban Future" that "rather than urban planning, practitioners engage in community planning." To do so, it is important to "build and mobilize trust-based, multiracial coalitions centered around shared values."

Integration of Climate, Health, and Economic Development through Multiracial Coalitions: The Texas Climate Jobs Project

From the "Integrative Integration Practice" convening, participants emphasized that "just because we are in a climate crisis doesn't mean that we should compromise job quality. Keeping equity, justice, and sustainability always at the forefront is important." The Texas Climate Jobs Project united traditionally opposed groups around a shared pro-worker, pro-climate agenda while conducting rigorous research on working conditions to inform policy change. Bo Delp, Executive Director of the Texas Climate Jobs Project, explained they were "founded because unions were fighting amongst themselves, and they were fighting pro-environment groups about what to do about climate change." They brought together 20 different labor unions with diverse membership including SEIU (representing primarily African American women working in airports and as janitors), steelworkers (from oil refineries), power plant operators, solar installers, and environmental groups.

The organization then partnered with Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations to document actual working conditions in the clean energy sector, surveying 1,200 workers at solar and wind sites across Texas.[1] The research revealed serious equity and safety concerns and allowed them to make a compelling case for change. For example, Black solar workers reported making $8,500 a year less when compared to wage data reported by surveyed workers of other races, solar workers that submitted surveys in Spanish reported being paid $5,900 less than workers that submitted surveys in English, and female workers reported being paid $2,700 less a year than male workers.

The Texas Climate Jobs Project focused specifically on addressing the intersection of climate impacts, worker health, and economic disparities. Texas faces among the nation's highest rates of uninsured workers (17%), has a minimum wage of just $7.25, and shows significant racial pay disparities, with Latinas earning about 46 cents on the dollar compared to white men.[2] Their approach has emphasized that climate solutions must improve economic conditions for workers–particularly workers of color–rather than recreating existing inequities. As Delp emphasized, "When you have a union, what you have access to is justice. On the job site, you've got a steward who can hold your employer accountable for safe working conditions, or they could get wage theft."

The project has achieved several concrete outcomes:

1. **Development of the Texas Clean Energy Fund with labor standards attached.**

1 Texas Climate Jobs Project & Cornell ILR, "Working Conditions in Texas' Solar and Wind Industry" (August 2024).

2 Texas Climate Jobs Project, "About," https://www.texasclimatejobs.org/about.

(Left to right) Texas Climate Jobs Project Executive Director Bo Delp.

Kresge Foundation American Cities Managing Director Chantel Rush Tebbe then moderated a fireside chat with Heather McGhee, author of "The Sum of Us."

2. Implementation of project labor agreements for solar and battery installations at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs).
3. Creation of a workforce development program using the multi-craft core curriculum that graduated 39 people and placed them in community jobs.
4. Development of pathways for immigrants and others into apprenticeship programs.
5. Establishment of evidence-based wage and safety standards for clean energy projects.
6. Creation of a model showing how union membership provides both economic benefits and workplace protections in the clean energy sector.

Empowering Youth Leadership Development through Multigenerational Engagement

Sustainable urban reimagination requires engaging multiple generations. The "Strengthening Whole Child Communities Summit" highlighted the power of community, the importance of intergenerational organizing, and racial equity as a fundamental driver of social change.

Detroit Area Youth Uniting Michigan (DAYUM) exemplifies youth-led activism by fighting for "accountability from leaders, justice for communities, and a seat at the table for all marginalized youth." Founded after organizing Detroit's March for Our Lives in 2018, DAYUM operates as a youth-run organization that provides training, campaign development, and direct-action coordination for issues students are passionate about.[3] Their structure empowers high school students to lead initiatives addressing issues ranging from contaminated water in school drinking fountains to developing an Online Learning Bill of Rights during the pandemic, demonstrating how youth can collectively leverage their power to create immediate change rather than just preparing for future leadership.[4]

482 Forward implements youth integration through its Youth Organizing Committee, which consists of representatives from each youth action team and direct youth members of the organization.

3 Allied Media Projects, "Detroit Area Youth Uniting Michigan - Allied Media Projects," https://alliedmedia.org/projects/dayum-2

4 Riverwise Magazine, "Compassion, Solidarity, Care: Detroit-Area Youth Respond to the Pandemic," https://riverwisedetroit.org/article/compassion-solidarity-care-detroit-area-youth-respond-to-the-pandemic/

As part of 482 Forward's broader network structure, the organization employs "Action Teams" as their basic building blocks, responsible for training members to lead local campaigns, conducting community outreach, and implementing advocacy initiatives. Through this structure, 482 Forward embodies its founding principle that "those who are most affected by the problem should help create the solution," ensuring students and families are "in the driver's seat" of education reform efforts.[5]

Both organizations recognize that integrating youth into decision-making processes creates more effective advocacy. 482 Forward provides structured pathways for youth involvement through neighborhood-based teams and network committees that support policy development, research, and voter engagement. Similarly, DAYUM's approach to youth leadership demonstrates that when young people identify systemic issues and develop their own solutions, they can achieve concrete policy changes. These organizations show that authentic youth engagement isn't merely about token representation but requires youth-driven decision-making that elevates voices of lived experience, creating a model where young people are valued as "essential to civic society" with the capacity to "negotiate and change their environment for the better."[6]

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5 482 Forward, "About 482Forward," https://482forward.org/about-482forward/

6 Let's Detroit, "Education - 482Forward - Let's Detroit," https://letsdetroit.com/spotlight/482forward/

Theme II: Root Causes of Inequity Must Be Addressed Through Community Self-Determination

The current state of American cities reflects intentional, longstanding policy choices grounded in systemic racism and classism, affecting critical mechanisms like lending practices, access to capital, education funding, and the valuation of homes and neighborhoods. As emphasized at the "Regeneration: Repair & Restoration" session at the "Detroit & the American City" symposium, these systems can serve as levers for either the status quo or transformational change. Creating lasting impact requires what Kresge President and CEO, Rip Rapson, described as "a new municipal pluralism – in which the community's impulses toward opportunity, healing, and justice are translated and animated by distributive authorities and responsibilities." At the foundation of this approach is the recognition, articulated by Jesús Gerena, CEO of UpTogether that "our economic position is not dictated by the people, but by the systems."

Moving beyond what Gerena called the "scarcity mentality," requires building on community strengths and capabilities while ensuring that those most affected by systemic inequities have central roles in decision-making processes. As former U.S. Department of Education Deputy Secretary Cindy Marten noted, addressing these challenges demands a place-based approach: "To truly connect with and support our families, it takes a village, and the village is wide, broad and beautiful." This perspective aligns with former Assistant Secretary of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development for the U.S. Department of Education, Roberto Rodriguez's vision of "the power of place, of co-creating with families and communities a vision that is going to help them thrive." When communities gain control over development, planning, and cultural expression, they can transform systems of inequity into pathways for opportunity, healing, and self-determination.

The models described in this section share an important element; they place decision-making power directly in the hands of those most impacted by systemic inequities. In Los Angeles, Destination Crenshaw transformed an above-ground Metro line that would have disrupted the neighborhood into an "unapologetically Black" cultural corridor celebrating local heritage while creating economic opportunities for residents. Similarly, in San Jose, a school of arts and culture transformed into a true community center to address immediate needs in a moment of crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, Detroit Future City's approach to vacant lots combines immediate community-driven actions with long-term planning, to transform spaces into community assets. These initiatives demonstrate that lasting change requires not just understanding root causes of inequity but actively redistributing power to communities to determine their own futures.

Reimagining Community Power and Place: Destination Crenshaw Cultural Preservation

Addressing systemic issues requires fundamentally reimagining how communities function. As former Assistant Secretary Rodriguez noted at the Strengthening Whole Child Communities convening, "The vision we want to embrace is the power of place, of co-creating with families and communities a vision that is going to help them thrive." During the "Breaking the Doom Loop" panel at the "Our Urban Future" symposium, Jason Foster, president and CEO of Destination Crenshaw described the program's work as a transformative cultural infrastructure project that redefined community power by centering Black residents as the primary decision-makers along Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles. Foster said that the project was born from community response to controversial plans

for an above-ground Metro line that would bisect their neighborhood. Rather than accepting this disruption, local leaders including City Council member Marqueece Harris-Dawson engaged the community to reimagine the development as an opportunity to celebrate Black culture while boosting economic development and environmental healing.[7]

Kresge President & CEO speaks about a "new municipal pluralism" at the Detroit & the American Cities Symposium in June 2024 in Detroit.

The project reimagined place by reclaiming public space through the creation of a 1.3-mile cultural corridor featuring pocket parks, public art installations, and community gathering spaces that celebrate the area's rich Black cultural legacy. With its "unapologetically Black" approach, Destination Crenshaw transformed ordinary urban infrastructure into what organizers describe as "the largest Black-centered public art display in the United States," featuring more than 100 commissioned works from Black artists with ties to Los Angeles, culturally significant landscaping with over 800 new trees, and storytelling elements throughout the corridor.[8, 9]

Beyond physical transformation, Destination Crenshaw established new economic power structures through job creation and investment in local talent. The initiative includes an "unprecedented commitment to local hiring" while creating a pipeline of Black talent in construction trades and supporting entrepreneurship along the corridor. This approach demonstrates how cultural projects can serve as vehicles for economic justice by intentionally circulating resources within historically underserved communities. As Jason Foster explained, the project represents community ownership: "It's a way for our community to actually embrace folks coming and celebrating what this community is, but also for other communities to acknowledge that this community exists."[10]

The Power of Culture in Transforming Place: School of Arts and Culture at Mexican Heritage Plaza, San Jose, CA

The Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose, California stands as a powerful example of how cultural institutions can evolve to address complex community needs. Located in the heart of East San Jose, this cultural center has transformed from a site focused primarily on arts and culture programming to become a vital community resource hub in a predominantly Latino and Vietnamese immigrant

7 Christian Science Monitor, "From overlooked to must-see. Black-centered art boosts a Los Angeles community," June 17, 2024.

8 Roadtrippers, "Destination Crenshaw tells the soulful stories of a Black Los Angeles community," March 1, 2023.

9 Studio-MLA, "Destination Crenshaw," January 4, 2024.

10 Christian Science Monitor, "From overlooked to must-see. Black-centered art boosts a Los Angeles community," June 17, 2024.

working-class neighborhood that has historically experienced significant disparities. As Jessica Paz-Cedillos, executive director of the School of Arts and Culture at the Plaza, emphasized, "As a cultural institution in the heart of East San Jose...we have a responsibility to respond to its needs."[11]

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Plaza exemplified this commitment by dramatically expanding its services when its community needed them most. At the Closing Plenary of the "Our Urban Futures" event, Paz-Cedillos shared, "the Plaza transformed into a true community center, doubling its service capacity at a time when other institutions were closing. In a community that has suffered from redlining and other unethical policies, the Plaza became a place where people felt a sense of pride, ownership, and belonging." The Plaza quickly transformed into a critical public health resource, offering free COVID-19 testing with capacity for up to 300 tests per day and later becoming a vaccination site serving approximately 500 people daily. These services were particularly crucial in an area that experienced some of the highest COVID-19 rates in Santa Clara County – with the 95116 ZIP code where the Plaza is located reporting about double the county average of cases.[12]

Beyond pandemic-specific responses, the Plaza continues to serve as a multifaceted community center offering food distribution through partnerships with organizations like Second Harvest of Silicon Valley, while maintaining its cultural mission through free summer camps where children learn folkloric dance. In a community that has faced historical challenges including poverty and overcrowding, the Plaza has become what Paz-Cedillos describes as "a trusted center" and "an accessible center" where residents experience a sense of pride and belonging. Former San Jose city councilmember Magdalena Carrasco emphasized the Plaza's critical role, noting of its community services: "This may be what saves the community."[13]

Community Determination of Neighborhood Development: Detroit Future City's Land Use Transformation

At the "Building a Local Collaborative Network to Promote and Take Climate Action" panel at the "Our Urban Future" convening, Kimberly Faison, the vice president for Thriving, Resilient Neighborhoods at DFC explained how Detroit Future City (DFC) repurposed vacant lots throughout the city into productive climate-adaptive spaces while ensuring community ownership of the process. DFC created a granting program that supported neighborhood-based organizations in turning land into productive use, providing a toolkit for community members, gathering data and insights directly from the community, connecting local community partners and residents to develop solutions as well as conducting research to develop a Land Conservancy to protect properties from speculation.

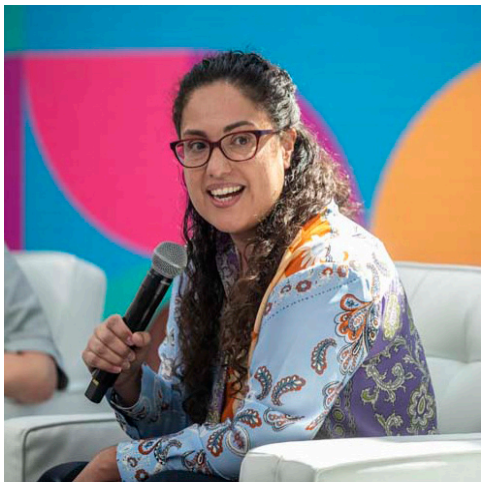
Faison shared a specific example: "DFC recently completed a project with community and with place-based organizations, transforming a one-acre site and doing cleanup. Now it is an urban forest, and it serves many purposes, and hopefully will also serve as a testing ground." Their work has increased tree canopy, reduced water runoff, and created climate-resilient spaces while giving communities control over their neighborhood development.

What makes DFC's approach unique is their commitment to both short-term and long-term land use goals. While empowering individual actions on single lots, they simultaneously work toward a

11 San José Spotlight, "East San Jose's Mexican Heritage Plaza has a bright future," August 1, 2024.

12 NBC Bay Area, "COVID-19 Testing Now Available at Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose," October 12, 2020.

13 San José Spotlight, "COVID-19 vaccination clinic brings hope to East San Jose," February 7, 2021.



(Left to right) Jessica Paz-Cedillos, executive director of the School of Arts and Culture at the Plaza.

Kimberly Faison, the vice president for Thriving, Resilient Neighborhoods at Detroit Future City, speaks on a panel at Our Urban Future in Sept. 2024.

comprehensive 50-year vision outlined in their Strategic Framework. This vision aims to transform a significant portion of the city's vacant land into "a robust, integrated open space network that supports the stabilization and growth of the city, provides opportunities for revenue generation, and improves the quality of life, health, and ecology."[14] The Framework balances immediate community needs with long-range planning that benefits the entire city.

The success of DFC's community-centered approach is evident in projects across Detroit's neighborhoods. Residents like Myrtle Thompson-Curtis, who founded Feedom Freedom Growers in 2007, exemplify how community ownership of vacant spaces transforms neighborhoods. Through their work, they have transformed a vacant space into a vibrant community space that provides food production, beautification, education, youth development, community building, and organizing around other neighborhood issues. Their approach shows how transforming vacant lots can be not just about physical improvement but about fostering community power and self-determination.[15] The Canfield Consortium, a community development nonprofit on the east side of Detroit, has built flower gardens and a community pavilion on lots purchased through the Detroit Land Bank Authority.[16] These examples demonstrate how DFC's programming empowers community organizations and residents to take ownership of their neighborhoods' future through creative land reuse strategies.

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14 Center for Community Progress, "Two new resources to inform short- and long-term vacant land reuse," communityprogress.org, November 30, 2021.

15 Detroit Equity Action Lab, "Thompson-Curtis, Myrtle - Voices from the Grassroots," voicesfromthegrassroots.org, July 5, 2023.

16 Outlier Media, "A guide to buying neighborhood vacant lots in Detroit," outliermedia.org, January 12, 2024.

Theme III: Philanthropy Must Transform Systems, Enable Community Power, and Creatively Deploy Assets

The philanthropic sector stands at a critical inflection point, challenged to evolve beyond traditional grantmaking practices to address the complex, interconnected challenges of our time. As communities face cascading crises–from climate change to economic inequality to systemic racism–forward-thinking foundations are pioneering new approaches that fundamentally reimagine their role and relationship with communities. These emerging practices reflect a profound shift in philanthropic philosophy, moving from treating symptoms to transforming them, from prescribing solutions to enabling community power, and from risk aversion to creative deployment of assets.

This evolution in philanthropy reflects a growing recognition that lasting change requires more than financial resources–it demands new forms of partnership, innovative financial instruments, and deliberate shifts in power dynamics. The following case studies illustrate how philanthropic organizations are breaking from convention to develop holistic approaches that center community wisdom, leverage institutional assets in creative ways, and dismantle structural barriers to resources. These examples offer valuable insights for the sector as it strives to maximize impact and advance equity in addressing today's most pressing challenges. They demonstrate that when philanthropy embraces its full potential as a catalyst for systems change, it can help create pathways to more just, sustainable, and thriving communities.

Leveraging Crisis for Systems Change: The Families and Workers Fund

The Families and Workers Fund, a $33 million collaborative of diverse funders including tech philanthropies, legacy foundations, corporate foundations, and individuals, was initially launched in 2020 as a rapid response effort providing cash relief to 215,000 of the hardest-hit workers and families during the pandemic.[17] However, the organization quickly recognized that addressing individual needs without tackling underlying systemic issues would not create lasting change. On their website, the Fund acknowledged that "COVID-19 revealed the struggles workers and families have long faced in the United States – and the ways our economy so often traps talent and potential on the sidelines and out-of-reach of opportunity."[18] This realization prompted a strategic pivot toward addressing fundamental systems rather than just their symptoms.

The implementation of this systems-change approach is guided by a clear philosophy articulated by Sarah Mostafa, program director at the Families and Workers Fund at the "Leveraging Climate Action for Job Creation" panel at the "Our Urban Futures" convening: "Our philosophy, fundamentally, is that we are not here to fix workers. We are here to fix the systems that serve workers. So, we never think about workers as needing more training, for instance. It's more about, how are these systems going to be more accessible?" This philosophy manifests in the Fund's emphasis on measuring and rewarding outcomes that matter for workers, including advocating for the public workforce system to track job quality through new data collection approaches and data linkages that create mean-

17 "Blog Post: Catching up with the Families & Workers Fund," Workforce Matters, July 20, 2021, https://workforce-matters.org/blog-post-catching-up-with-the-families-workers-fund/

18 "HOMEPAGE - The Families & Workers Fund," Families and Workers Fund, https://familiesandworkers.org/

In a spoken-word performance, Asali DeVan Ecclesiastes described deep and wide chasms that can separate our desires and intentions from our realities.

ingful accountability measures.[19] The Fund works collaboratively, builds strategic partnerships, and relies on the firsthand experience of impacted people to guide equitable solutions that address systemic barriers.

The results of this systems-change approach are evident in significant structural changes to workforce development systems. The State of Pennsylvania created a statewide fund to support inclusive training programs, demonstrating how policy can be influenced to prioritize equity. Additionally, the development of sectoral roundtables has brought together employers, training providers, and community stakeholders to collaboratively map skills needed for clean energy jobs. These systemic efforts align with the Fund's broader investments, including an $18 million partnership with the GitLab Foundation to propel workers into high-growth careers and over $12 million awarded to underinvested communities to fill workforce gaps as the clean energy transition accelerates. By focusing on changing systems rather than "fixing" workers, the Families and Workers Fund is creating sustainable pathways to economic security that can benefit far more people than individual assistance alone.[20]

Shifting Power Dynamics to the Community: The Cleveland Foundation

During the "Organizing for Civic Problem Smashing" panel at the Our Urban Futures convening, Keisha González, senior director of Social Impact Investing and Economic & Community Development at the Cleveland Foundation spoke about the foundation's relocation to the historically divested Hough and Midtown neighborhoods. She shared that this relocation represented a transformative approach to commercial development that intentionally centered community voice. Rather than simply moving its headquarters, the foundation established a deliberate engagement strategy by forming resident committees and youth coalitions that participated in crucial decisions about the

19 "Strengthen workforce system metrics to deliver results for workers and businesses," The Families & Workers Fund, November 5, 2022, https://familiesandworkers.org/job-quality-report-2/digging-deeper-7/

20 "The Families and Workers Fund," Families and Workers Fund, https://familiesandworkers.org/

Sarah Mostafa (left), program director at the Families and Workers Fund, and Meishka Mitchell, president and CEO of Emerald Cities Collaborative, were featured speakers at the Leveraging Climate Action for Job Creation panel.

building design and surrounding streetscape. González shared that these community groups were not mere advisory bodies but active participants empowered to shape their neighborhood's transformation. The youth council took ownership of the streetscape development that would serve, according to González, as "a welcoming runway into the residential fabric," even securing federal TIGER grants to implement their vision.

This approach to community-centered development extended beyond physical infrastructure to address wealth creation and equity. The Cleveland Foundation established a commercial land trust with a resident-led board and provided them with $1M in capital to purchase land. While acknowledging this was a learning journey with mistakes along the way, the initiative has shown promising results. In one case, a property acquired for approximately $250,000 is now generating $4 million over 40 years through a land lease, with proceeds flowing directly back into the community-controlled land trust. This model represents what González calls "the realization of wealth" and demonstrates how community voice can shape development in ways that ensure residents "cash in on the opportunity" rather than being displaced by rising values.

Central to the Cleveland Foundation's approach is what González described as a "behavior change" in how philanthropic institutions engage with communities. Rather than limiting themselves to traditional grant-making, they deployed their full organizational assets, including borrowing against their endowment to finance development. More importantly, they recognized that meaningful community engagement requires shifting power dynamics and embracing discomfort. As González emphasized, the foundation aims to empower residents with the tools to hold institutions accountable, believing you've "done your job really well in the mobilization, community development space when you've given people the ability to hold your feet to the fire." This case demonstrates how commercial development can simultaneously transform physical spaces while building community capacity and ownership when resident voices are genuinely centered throughout the process.

Innovative Financial Instruments: Kresge Foundation's Balance Sheet Guarantees

The Kresge Foundation has strategically expanded beyond traditional grantmaking by implementing balance sheet guarantees as a powerful financial tool to unlock capital for community development. Rather than directly distributing funds, Kresge leverages its strong financial position by providing guarantees that reduce risk for other investors, allowing the foundation to comple-

ment its grantmaking efforts with innovative social investing approaches.[21] Through guarantees, Kresge pledges its balance sheet to promise repayment under specific conditions, offering protection for another investor's returns and saying, "If this project doesn't generate the returns we expect, we guarantee you will be repaid" up to predetermined amounts.[22]

Audience engagement during a session at Our Urban Future in Detroit in September 2024.

The Kresge Foundation used these innovative financial tools to make the Marygrove campus project viable. Tosha Tabron, director of originations, from the Kresge Foundation explained at the "Innovative Financing for Neighborhood Anchors: A Marygrove Case Study" discussion at "Our Urban Futures": "We believe in the model. We believe in folks who are at the table figuring out how we imagine this campus... we can step in and use our balance sheet as a backstop to make you comfortable, to put your capital on the line." Kresge provided multiple types of guarantees across different project phases, including construction guarantees, bridge financing for tax credits, and guarantees for the "most risky part" of the financing that others wouldn't cover. The guarantees enabled a $60 million deal for the combined dorm and program building, leveraging $12 million from the state with historic and new markets tax credits. According to Tom Lewand, Marygrove Conservancy CEO, this financial structure made it possible to create "a closed loop economy around this educational core."

Breaking Barriers to Funds: The Minneapolis Foundation's Approach to Inflation Reduction Act Accessibility

During the discussion portion of the "Building a Local Collaborative Network to Promote and Take Climate Action" at the "Our Urban Futures" event, the audience and panelists discussed how the Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) created unprecedented funding opportunities for environmental justice initiatives, but many community-based organizations faced a significant barrier - federal grants typically required upfront costs that smaller organizations couldn't afford.[23] A member of the audience, who is a staff member at the Minneapolis Foundation shared that, recognizing this challenge, the Minneapolis Foundation stepped in to bridge this critical gap, ensuring that grassroots organizations working directly with disadvantaged communities could access these transformative resources.

Selected by the EPA to serve as a Regional Grantmaker under the Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking program, the Minneapolis Foundation received $50 million to distribute to community partners throughout the Midwest region. This innovative approach responded directly to "community feedback about the need to reduce barriers to federal funds and improve the effi-

21 Grants & Social Investments," Kresge Foundation, January 29, 2025, https://kresge.org/grants-social-investments/

22 "Philanthropic guarantees: What you need to know," Kresge Foundation, September 26, 2017, https://kresge.org/news-views/the-power-of-the-guarantee-2/

23 Mendonsa, Chantelle Ella. "Shifting Federal Funding to Communities: ECJ Program Could Be a Historic Opportunity." NRDC, September 21, 2023. https://www.nrdc.org/bio/chantelle-ella-mendonsa/ecj-grant-could-shift-historic-ira-federal-funding-communities

ciency of the awards process" for communities that have historically faced underinvestment.[24] The Foundation created a tiered grant structure, including smaller capacity-building grants of up to $75,000 that required no matching funds, allowing resource-constrained organizations to participate without financial barriers.[25]

Through partnerships the Minneapolis Foundation established a program specifically designed to "distribute $40 million in grants to support priorities identified by local communities" across the Great Lakes region. Their approach prioritized "community-driven solutions that amplify diverse voices, dismantle barriers to opportunity, and respond to emerging needs," creating pathways for previously excluded organizations to participate in environmental justice initiatives.[26] By providing dedicated support resources, including webinars and direct assistance through their helpline, the Foundation ensured that community partners received the guidance needed to navigate what had previously been prohibitively complex application processes.[27]

24 "Biden-Harris Administration Selects the Minneapolis Foundation to Receive $50 Million to Fund Environmental Justice Projects in the Midwest as Part of Investing in America Agenda." EPA, December 20, 2023. https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/biden-harris-administration-selects-minneapolis-foundation-receive-50-million-fund

25 "Great Lakes Environmental Justice Thriving Communities Grantmaking Program." Minneapolis Foundation. https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/great-lakes/

26 "$40 million Available for Environmental Justice Grants." Minneapolis Foundation. https://www.minneapolis-foundation.org/stories/climate/40-million-available-for-environmental-justice-grants/

27 "Cultivating Change Together." Minneapolis Foundation. https://www.minneapolisfoundation.org/together/

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Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion and Recommendations

Reimagining American cities requires innovative approaches that integrate multiple sectors while centering community voices. An analysis of the Kresge Foundation's centennial convenings reveals that effectively confronting today's interwoven challenges demands a shift away from isolated interventions toward comprehensive strategies that recognize the interconnectedness of economic opportunity, environmental justice, and social equity. Successful initiatives demonstrate a fundamental reorientation: from addressing symptoms to transforming underlying systems, from dictating solutions to amplifying community agency, and from risk aversion to creative deployment of institutional assets. These approaches succeed by establishing collaborative foundations, intentionally involving diverse stakeholders from inception, and creating decision-making structures that position historically marginalized residents as central architects of neighborhood transformation.

The case studies examined throughout this report collectively challenge conventional wisdom about urban development. They demonstrate that sustainable change emerges when philanthropies extend beyond traditional grantmaking to leverage their full institutional assets, when private and public sectors align around community-determined priorities, and when grassroots organizing builds multiracial, multigenerational coalitions focused on concrete material interests rather than abstract ideals. From Marygrove's cross-sector educational ecosystem to Destination Crenshaw's cultural corridor, from Louisville's tenant organizing to Houston's corporate-initiated collaborative, these examples illustrate that lasting transformation occurs at the intersection of economic development, cultural preservation, climate resilience, and public health. They point toward what Kresge Ppresident Rip Rapson describes as a "new municipal pluralism" – a fundamentally different approach to urban development that distributes authority, centers healing and justice, and recognizes communities as repositories of wisdom rather than problems to be solved.

The path forward requires reimagining not just physical spaces but the underlying power dynamics and resource flows that shape urban landscapes. Organizations succeeding in this environment demonstrate nimbleness in navigating complex systems, flexibility in deploying diverse resources, and holistic approaches that address root causes rather than isolated issues. Initiatives like the Cleveland Foundation's commercial land trust, the Minneapolis Foundation's tiered grant structure for environmental justice funding, and Kresge's balance sheet guarantees illustrate how institutions can dismantle structural barriers to resources while building community capacity for self-determination. Together, these approaches offer a blueprint for urban development that treats trust-building, multigenerational engagement, and community ownership not as ancillary considerations but as fundamental requirements for meaningful change. By embracing these principles, practitioners can help create urban futures characterized by equity, sustainability, and shared prosperity rather than continued extraction and displacement.

Based on the convening insights, we offer the following recommendations for urban development practitioners, philanthropies, policymakers, and community organizations:

1. **Invest in trust-building as foundational infrastructure:** Allocate dedicated time and resources for relationship development across sectors and communities, recognizing trust as essential infrastructure rather than a secondary consideration.
2. **Center community self-determination in decision-making:** Establish governance structures that empower residents most impacted by inequities to control development decisions in their neighborhoods.
3. **Deploy innovative financial instruments beyond traditional grantmaking:** Expand philanthropic tools to include balance sheet guarantees, bridge financing, and other creative capital deployment strategies.
4. **Build multiracial, multigenerational coalitions around shared material interests:** Focus organizing efforts on concrete issues affecting diverse communities rather than abstract ideals.
5. **Create accessible pathways to federal and institutional funding:** Develop tiered grant structures with reduced barriers for grassroots organizations, including capacity-building grants without matching requirements.
6. **Integrate economic development, climate action, and public health:** Design initiatives that simultaneously address multiple challenges through collaborative approaches.
7. **Establish youth leadership structures with decision-making authority:** Create pathways for young people to influence policies directly affecting them through dedicated committees with real power.
8. **Leverage institutional assets beyond financial resources:** Deploy organizational reputation, relationships, and convening power to influence systems change.
9. **Prioritize community cultural preservation and expression:** Incorporate cultural infrastructure that celebrates local heritage while creating economic opportunities for residents.
10. **Measure success through community-determined metrics:** Develop accountability systems that track outcomes most meaningful to impacted communities rather than institutional priorities.

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