

Navigating Conflicting Priorities: Lessons from Redeveloping Community Spaces

By Bri Tollie

My placement was with Bread for the City, where I worked on a project as part of their initial pre-development process to redevelop their old office building into a space that meets the needs of the surrounding community.

Observing Conflicting Priorities

Through this experience, I observed the challenging dynamics of conflicting priorities among the community, the organization, and the funders. These challenges are particularly relevant to the broader theme of inclusive and equitable community and economic development. The process involves putting all ideas on the table to determine what feasibly meets everyone's needs. However, this can be difficult when stakeholders have different priorities. The organization aims for the best outcome for everyone, requiring creative solutions that align with both the community's needs and the organization's values.

One key learning was the necessity of tailoring development projects to the specific needs and priorities of the local community. Bread for the City's old office building redevelopment project highlighted the importance of integrating community feedback into every phase of planning and implementation. The diverse perspectives and needs of residents—from access to affordable groceries to spaces that foster local entrepreneurship—revealed the complexity of creating a space that serves the whole community equitably.

We faced a significant learning moment in balancing the community's immediate needs with long-term economic goals. For example, while some community members were focused on having a space that could provide direct services, such as a food pantry or social services hub, others saw potential in transforming the space into an economic incubator. This conflict underscored the need to find innovative solutions that address both immediate needs and future growth.

Another critical learning was the importance of inclusivity in community engagement processes. We learned that hosting multiple, accessible community sessions was crucial for gathering a broad range of opinions and ensuring that all voices were heard. This approach helps to build trust and ensures that the development aligns with the diverse needs of the community. Additionally, discussions about whether to pay community members for their participation in these sessions highlighted the need to respect and value their time and contributions, reinforcing the importance of fair and equitable engagement practices.

The redevelopment process also emphasized the need for creative problem-solving and compromise, particularly when incorporating social justice and community safety principles. We had to think innovatively to integrate these principles into the project's framework. This meant considering how the space could serve as a platform for both social justice and economic opportunity, balancing the need for immediate community support with long-term sustainability.

Embracing Conflict as a Catalyst for Innovation

But what I learned is that conflict is not inherently bad; it can actually be a catalyst for growth and innovation. When people bring in diverse ideas and perspectives, it opens up opportunities for

more comprehensive and inclusive solutions. This situation requires a delicate balance of meeting the community's needs while securing necessary funding. It demands ongoing dialogue to ensure everyone's voice is heard, compromise to find common ground, and innovative thinking to align the diverse priorities of all stakeholders involved. By embracing conflict and leveraging it constructively, we can create outcomes that are more equitable, sustainable, and beneficial for the entire community.

Deepened Interest in Urban Planning and Community Safety

This fellowship has deepened my interest in exploring the intersection of urban planning and community safety through the lens of community development, particularly in addressing the needs of marginalized groups. My work in community safety and violence prevention has given me a profound understanding of the social injustices and systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect Black and Brown communities, leading to socio-economic disparities and increased urban violence. Recognizing these deep-seated injustices has fueled my commitment to reimagining how urban spaces can be designed to foster safety and inclusivity for all, particularly those who have been historically marginalized.

The experience has emphasized the importance of creating systems and environments that genuinely serve and protect these communities, rather than perpetuating cycles of exclusion and violence. I am committed to ensuring that spaces are community-informed and incorporate healing and transformative justice models. This means that as we create change, we must also make sure that long-standing community members are not displaced and that they have equitable access to the benefits and resources that come with new developments. By focusing on empowering individuals who are often overlooked in traditional planning processes, I hope to be a part of a process that promotes equity, safety, and true community well-being.

Conclusion

Overall, my experience at Bread for the City has been transformative in shaping my understanding of community and economic development. It has reinforced my commitment to pursuing a career in nonprofit leadership, where I can continue to engage in the delicate work of balancing diverse stakeholder interests and driving initiatives that are both equitable and sustainable. I am grateful for the guidance of Toshora, the COO of Bread for the City and CAM Morris the Racial Equity Manager of Bread for the City, whose ability to navigate these complexities has provided me with valuable insights that will inform my future career.