

## **How We Change the Black East Side: From the harder we run to Black neighborhoods matter**

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The *Harder We Run* report indicated that Black Buffalo had not progressed in 30 years. Tonight, we will show you how to change this “no progress” reality of running hard but going nowhere. The most significant lesson we learned from the **Harder We Run** is that **Black neighborhoods matter**. They matter because underdeveloped neighborhoods are the primary cause of Black Buffalo’s “no progress” challenge.

The root problems of *substandard rental housing, inadequate education, low wages, joblessness, poverty, wealth extraction, and poor health* are inextricably tied to underdeveloped neighborhoods. *Black neighborhoods matter*. The evidence that Black neighborhoods play a significant role in determining their residents’ socioeconomic and health outcomes and shaping their life chances is irrefutable and based on a mountain of research and data.

**Why is the Black East Side so underdeveloped?** In the United States, the system of neighborhood development is designed to recreate the racial hierarchy as a neighborhood hierarchy that continually reproduces Blacks as low-wage workers or prison laborers. Under racial capitalism, the *neighborhood* is a structural component of systemic racism, and it is responsible for locking Blacks in the labor market’s low-wage sector and reproducing the racial hierarchy. Therefore, we cannot change Black Buffalo’s socioeconomic and health realities without radically transforming the places where they live. Black neighborhood development is, therefore, an act of dismantling systemic structural racism.

In 1990, when the UB Center for Urban Studies released its landmark report, *African Americans and the Rise of Buffalo’s Post-Industrial City*, Black leaders understood how structural racism underdeveloped the Black community. In the preface to the report, George K. Arthur, President of the Buffalo Common Council, Leroy Coles, President of the Buffalo Urban League, and Dr. Robert Palmer, Vice President of Student Affairs at the University at Buffalo, said that this “report not only diagnoses the problems and challenges confronting Black Buffalo, but it also puts forward a bold vision of the type of Black community we should build.” These leaders then outlined Black Buffalo’s dream of the neighborhoods they wished to create.

“In New Black Buffalo, the poor will live in good housing located in neighborhoods filled with amenities and crime-free streets. They will work hand in hand with the middle-class and higher-paid

workers to build a better life for themselves and their families. This is both a dream and a blueprint for the future. It is the prize for which we fight.” This type of **rebel neighborhood** was designed to deconstruct the racial hierarchy, disrupt market forces, unite Black folks and advance the freedom struggle by breaking the chains of intergenerational racialization and exploitation. Today, we call this type of residential area the *neighborly community*, and following the spirit of *Sankofa*, we measure *Black progress* by the rate of our advancement toward its realization.

The challenge is that Black Buffalo’s vision of the *neighborly community* **contested** the traditional White neighborhood model and the current city-building strategy. The *neighborly community* is designed as a harmonious place where people from across the class and income spectrum live in a residential setting based on inclusion and belonging. In this neighborhood, low, moderate, middle, and upper-income groups are fused together by a linked destiny and shared vision of the type of community they seek to build. The *neighborly community* model, then, is based on inclusion, diversity, equity, belonging, and social justice. **In contrast**, the traditional White neighborhood model is based on homogeneity, exclusion, segregation, and inequity. This model aims to bolster housing values, individual wealth accumulation, perpetuate socioeconomic privilege, and reproduce the racial hierarchy. Therefore, neighborhoods based on the use of owner-occupied housing as an instrument of individual wealth production **will always** trigger exclusion, homogeneity, and economic racism.

## **The Alternative Model of Neighborhood Development**

Black Buffalo cannot use the traditional White model of neighborhood development to solve the root problems facing African Americans. So, we developed an alternative that uses a people-centered approach to neighborhood development. This approach prioritizes residents’ needs, aspirations, and participation in shaping their communities’ growth and development. It views neighborhood development as a holistic act that aims to enhance the residents’ long-term well-being while protecting the natural and built environment.

### **The Core Values**

Six interactive core values will anchor the alternative model of neighborhood development: *unity, community control, shared ownership, cooperative economics, community wealth accumulation, and inclusion and belonging*. These core values will guide the neighborhood planning and development process and direct it toward our ultimate goal of building the *neighborly community*. I will now briefly describe each of these core values. **Unity** is critical to carrying out a neighborhood development strategy that actively engages residents in all phases of decision-making, planning, and implementation. Therefore,

uniting the community behind a shared vision of the neighborhood they seek to build will be our highest priority.

**Community control** empowers the residents to guide the neighborhood development process and ensures that planning and development is a bottom-up strategy aligned with the principles of participatory democracy. Community control is particularly important on Buffalo's East Side, where residents do not own the land on which their community is built. Community control is, therefore, the first step in "freeing" the land and creating neighborhood stability, a prerequisite for building a prosperous and sustainable community.

**Shared ownership** is the strategy that moves the Black East Side toward realizing its goal of owning the land on which the community is built. It stresses residents pooling their limited resources to obtain ownership and control over the vacant lots and commercial and residential properties in their community. Shared ownership models such as community land trusts and cooperative housing build solidarity and social cohesion, create community wealth, and *frees* the land from outside ownership.

**Cooperative economic development** is aligned with shared ownership and refers to the strategy of capturing neighborhood dollars to generate jobs and opportunities for community residents and emphasizes the development of cooperatives, worker-owned businesses, and social enterprises. In economic parlance, the aim is to increase the capture rate of neighborhood consumer spending to generate additional jobs, opportunities, and resources to enhance the community-building process.

Shared ownership and cooperative economic development will lead to the **accumulation of community wealth**. Community wealth refers to the collective assets, resources, and capacities possessed by residents and consists of the social, physical, and economic capital that contributes to neighborhood well-being, prosperity, and resilience.

Lastly, we view **inclusion and belonging** as interactive forces that connect residents by building meaningful relationships, finding common ground, forging a shared vision, and planning and working together to build a *neighborly community* where compassion, empathy, mutual support, social cohesion, and collective well-being are the normative standard.

### **So, how are we going to make this happen?**

First, operating within our core values, we will establish a people-centered approach to neighborhood development based on *comprehensive neighborhood planning, community organizing, community engagement, targeted universalism, and market control*. **Comprehensive**

**neighborhood planning** is vital to the Black neighborhood transformation process because the root problems confronting the Black East Side consist of a mutually reinforcing system of underdevelopment.

Consequently, piecemeal, single-sector or helter-skelter approaches to neighborhood development are ineffective because they do not address the interactive nature of the root problems facing the Black East Side.

**Community organizing** is the animating force that drives this comprehensive neighborhood planning process. It mobilizes and encourages residents to take ownership of the neighborhood transformation process. The aim is to turn the neighborhood into a sophisticated community organization held together by a shared vision and residents willing to advocate and fight for the policy changes and reforms needed to address root problems.

This moment is where **community engagement** comes in. The aim is to maximize the participation of residents, block clubs, community-based organizations, and informal groups in all phases of decision-making, planning, and neighborhood development. The deep involvement of residents will make possible the realization of our anchoring neighborhood planning principle--*From the people to the people*. **Targeted universalism** is the fourth element in our neighborhood planning strategy. It refers to setting and achieving universal neighborhood goals through **targeted** and **individualized** approaches.

Finally, the *neighborly community* development model will eventually attract developers and land speculators as market demand increases. Therefore, we must create mechanisms for monitoring and **controlling market forces**. The unbridled market will trigger increases in property value, rents, and cost of living. It will intentionally change the neighborhood's character and identity and alter everyday life and culture. Therefore, controlling market dynamics is essential for promoting equitable development, empowering residents, and fostering sustainable neighborhood development.

Second, the neighborhood planning process will focus on seven targeted development areas that correlate with the root causes of neighborhood underdevelopment and health inequity: *Neighborhood governance, fixing the actual existing rental housing, education and skills training, housing and property ownership, youth development, the visual image of the physical neighborhood, and health*. A neighborhood visioning session will frame these seven development areas into a shared dream of the community's future.

During the comprehensive neighborhood planning process, a roadmap with solutions, proposals, action plans, performance indicators and measures will be created to guide the community development process. We theorize that the development of these seven areas will trigger the transformation of the entire community. These seven development areas will be framed within three highly interactive dimensions to facilitate the neighborhood planning and development process: **People, housing, and neighborhood**.

Then, neighborhood planning, based on targeted universalism, will be carried out within and across these three dimensions. Within this strategic approach, we have established four priority areas: *fix the actual existing rental housing, reading, on-the-job training, and health*. Solving these four root problems is pivotal to the East Side's radical transformation. So, our initial intervention strategies will focus on attacking these four root problem.

## **The Pilot Neighborhood**

We aim to create a model of neighborhood development that can be used to transform the Black East Side into a great place to live, work, play, and raise a family. However, first, before attempting to transform the entire East Side, we need to build and perfect that model in a single neighborhood. The reason is simple. The Black East Side is a large, complex community with thousands of residents and over thirty neighborhoods. Such a large place is too complicated to launch a neighborhood transformation project until we have constructed a neighborhood development model based on a deep understanding of the city-building process under racial capitalism.

Of course, selecting a neighborhood as the site for this pilot study will not be easy. Black East Side neighborhoods vary in population composition, socioeconomic challenges, and physical condition. Moreover, although every neighborhood experiences some underdevelopment, the socioeconomic and physical challenges in some communities are more significant than others. So, we have developed a methodology to guide us in the selection process.

In selecting the finalist for the pilot study, we used the census tract as a neighborhood surrogate and based the selection on the neighborhood's level of socioeconomic hardship, strategic location, and our perception of the gentrification threat level. Using this approach, we selected five census tracts: (1) Census Tract 42 in the Kensington-Bailey; (2) Census Tract 34 in Delavan-Grider; (3) Census Tract 35.01 in MLK Park; (4) Census Tract 33.02 in Masten Park, and census tract 166 in Broadway-Fillmore.

We established four criteria to guide the final selection of the pilot neighborhood: (1) the socioeconomic hardship level, (2) the gentrification threat level, (3) the readiness of block clubs, community-based organizations, and other institutions to participate in the demonstration project, and (4) the resident's readiness to support a movement to change their community radically. This phase of our work will require extensive research in each of the five neighborhoods, including conducting house-to-house surveys and exploring the neighborhood's physical environment. This phase of our work has already started, and it will be completed in about four to five months.

In closing, I want to stress that **Black Neighborhoods Matter**. The key to the ability of Black Buffalo to meet the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to build healthy, nurturing, and prosperous

communities that help our people grow and become the best they can be. That is our mission, our destiny.  
And if not us, then who, and if not now, then when?