

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

GROUNDING JUSTICE:

Toward Reparative Spatial Futures in
Land and Housing

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Setting the Compass:

Foreword from Michael McAfee*

Spatial injustice shapes entire lives and communities. When I was a child in the 1960s and 70s, Black neighborhoods across the country were being systematically targeted and torn apart to make way for urban renewal projects and highway construction. My own community in Kansas City, Missouri, was fractured by the construction of a new freeway. While my parents were able to move our family to a better neighborhood, many others were not as fortunate, and those who stayed were cut off from opportunity and locked into a new geography that did not value their lives or livelihoods. Like many Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities, the spaces we had built around us were restructured to disrupt, displace, and exclude.

Reparative spatial justice offers us a way of confronting these past harms so that we can begin the task of designing our futures. From the recent return of ancestral land to the Tongva people in Los Angeles, to the housing reparations program established in Evanston, Illinois, we are seeing the beginnings of a movement of repair and redress in land and housing policy.

The Spatial Futures project is a commitment from PolicyLink to reckon with the foundational injustices that have shaped land and housing policy, so that we can begin to repair and transform these systems. Our inaugural Spatial Futures Fellowship is an opportunity to uplift, support, and elevate those who have committed to this undertaking. I see them as the founders of a new America grounded in rigorous love for our communities. We cannot get to equity without repair, and we cannot get to repair without love. This is soul work, and it will require all of us.

Michael McAfee, EdD

President and CEO

PolicyLink

*This is a condensed version of the original Foreword that appeared in the full report.

Commonly Used Terms

Community Land Stewardship: Refers to the collective governance and management of land by the community, primarily for communal benefit. This model of stewardship is designed to ensure that the use, development, and management of land go toward serving the long-term interests of the community, particularly those of marginalized groups.

Land Rematriation: Refers to the return of Indigenous lands to Indigenous peoples. This involves both restoring sacred relationships between Indigenous peoples and their ancestral lands, and reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty.

Settler Colonialism: Refers to a system in which a foreign colonial power occupies a territory with the aim of permanently replacing the existing people, culture, and society with its own. Settler colonialism involves a persistent effort to erase and replace Indigenous populations and ways of life.

Reparative Spatial Justice: A transformative approach to rectify historical and ongoing injustices in the allocation and use of space, housing, and land. It is aimed at reconfiguring spaces where historically marginalized communities can reclaim their connection to land and gain restitution for enduring racist policies and practices. This approach involves rectifying past wrongs and shaping inclusive, equitable spatial futures, with a focus on communities' active participation and agency in creating their own environments.

Structural Racism: Structural racism refers to the mutually reinforcing systems, institutions, policies, practices, and social norms by which societies foster and perpetuate racial inequity. It is not dependent on individual acts of discrimination but rather embedded within the legal, cultural, and social frameworks that produce adverse outcomes for Black, Indigenous, and people of color, while conferring opportunities and advantages to white people. It manifests in various sectors, such as health care, education, employment, and criminal justice, in a self-sustaining cycle.

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The spaces and places where people live and work are not just physical, but are deeply political, and for too long, have been structured in ways that limit the resources and possibilities available to Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities.

Without structural interventions, stark differences in access will continue to replicate themselves across generations, each time making it harder to get out of such a cycle. Specifically, the United States' foundational policies have perpetuated a cycle of exclusion and spatial injustice, preventing Black, Indigenous, and people of color from securing housing, land, and generational wealth, while reinforcing the concentration of these resources for white populations. Deconstructing such a deep-seated dynamic requires going face to face with past and present harms and injustices rooted in skin color, race, nationality, gender identity, and more.

There are growing movements—by and for these communities—to expand new futures for land and housing justice, whether by calling for universal access to stable housing, repairing relationships with the land, or demanding restitution for historical and ongoing injustices. The movement for reparative spatial justice is reimagining and reshaping spaces to enable historically marginalized communities to reclaim their connection to land and obtain restitution for the long-standing impacts of racist policies and practices.

Aligning such efforts across communities, scales of action, and movements signifies a critical step in the journey toward reparative spatial justice, which is a transformative approach to rectify injustices in the distribution and use of housing, space, and land in a way that shapes inclusive, equitable futures. Reparative spatial justice aims not just to redistribute tangible assets like land and housing but to foster intangible yet vital elements like healing, growth, and well-being. As a movement, reparative spatial justice extends itself to reenvision the world as a place in which all spaces enable historically marginalized communities to reestablish their connection to land and be restored from the long-standing impacts of discriminatory policies, practices, and programs. In this way, the movement recognizes the where, how, and when of justice, particularly that it can only be achieved by considering past, present, and future injustices.

These efforts, rooted in the very soil of the communities they represent, range from Indigenous land rematriation in Ohlone territory in Northern California to housing grants addressing discriminatory real estate practices in Evanston, Illinois. They include efforts to pass federal legislation for reparations and the establishment of housing preference policies in Portland, Oregon, for those displaced by urban renewal projects.

The Spatial Futures Initiative

The PolicyLink housing team launched the [Spatial Futures Initiative](#) to serve as a catalyst and policy hub that uproots and amends racial inequities in land and housing policies in the United States going back for centuries. Our mission is to gather and distribute resources that catalyze communities to create initiatives that repair the past while shaping a more just present and future in land and housing. Through this inaugural initiative, PolicyLink established the Spatial Futures Fellowship, a network of 10 creative researchers, advocates, consultants, and more who are cultivating strategies for reparative spatial justice in their communities.

Goals of the Spatial Futures Initiative:

- Illuminate systemic inequities in policy architecture.
- Architect transformative policy recommendations.
- Amplify reparative spatial justice recommendations.
- Build movement infrastructure.
- Forge narrative strategies.

Employing a wide range of methodologies to achieve these goals, the initiative will produce a comprehensive set of tools, including the Spatial Futures Fellowship, a policy scan, policy blueprints, frontline stories, and an array of multimedia tools to share initiative findings.

Broader Movements for Spatial Justice

PolicyLink positions its work on housing and land justice within the broader movement for Black reparations, recognizing it as a distinct and vital effort to repair, heal, and restore the Black community that has endured the loss of land and resources. Concurrently, it acknowledges the profound and enduring impact of land and resource dispossession on Indigenous peoples, recognizing the interconnected struggles and distinct movements for justice and reparation. The call for reparations began before enslaved people were freed, and today that call is still waiting to be answered in a way that includes systemic solutions that uproot inequities for generations to come. By presenting broader reparative movements alongside grassroots efforts for spatial justice, *Grounding Justice* highlights the overlapping themes of restoration and repair that are constantly present in order to make lasting change.

Based on our exploration, the following themes emerged as key components of the reparative process:

1. **Recognition or acknowledgment of harms (repairing relationships)** involves openly acknowledging the historical and ongoing harms caused by spatialized racism, which is crucial in mending the fractured relationships between communities and the institutions that have perpetuated these injustices.
2. **Reckoning (understanding why and how)** delves into a deep understanding of the causes and mechanisms of spatial injustice, unraveling the complex web of historical and systemic factors that have led to current disparities.
3. **Guarantees of non-repetition (accountability)** entails a commitment to prevent the recurrence of past injustices, which requires systemic changes and robust accountability mechanisms.
4. **Restitution, redress, and repatriation (amends)** involves tangible steps toward making amends, which can include financial compensation, land return, policy reforms, and other forms of redress aimed at rectifying past wrongs.

Insights from the Field

Recognizing the rich diversity and multifaceted nature of the reparative spatial justice movement, the first phase in the Spatial Futures Initiative was to map its current landscape. In spring 2023, a strategic partnership was formed with Social Insights, a women-of-color-led firm renowned for its innovative methodologies that decolonize evaluation and research. The collaboration involved comprehensive focus groups and one-on-one interviews with 22 subject-matter experts and practitioners from across the United States, and representing a wide array of professional fields, ranging from community land trusts and affordable housing to urban planning, climate research, housing policy advocacy, and human rights law.

This research was designed as an exploratory study to understand diverse contexts, formulate actionable recommendations, and identify strategic pathways to achieve reparative spatial justice for communities historically subjected to displacement, disenfranchisement, redlining, and exclusion from equitable housing opportunities. Social Insights employed a 5W+1H (What, Who, Why, Where, When, and How) analytical framework in analyzing the interviews, exploring the multifaceted dimensions of reparative spatial justice as perceived by subject-matter experts and practitioners.

This analytical approach delved into the essence and scope of reparative spatial justice (“the what”), exploring the varied interpretations and definitions that experts and practitioners assign to this concept. It also scrutinized methods and strategies for enacting reparative spatial justice (“the how”), probing into the practical aspects of implementation. The research further examined the key stakeholders involved, identifying both the providers and the beneficiaries of reparative spatial justice (“the who”), and pinpointing the geographical and community contexts where reparations efforts should be initiated (“the where”). The timing of these reparative processes (“the when”) was also a critical area of focus, reflecting on the pace and phases of implementation. Finally, the underlying motivations and justifications for reparative spatial justice (“the why”) were explored, highlighting the significance and impact of these efforts.

Mapping Our Future Directions

Grounding Justice serves as an invitation to take action, collaborate, and discuss reparative spatial justice and its practical implications, embracing the tensions and growth that this journey demands. We strive to highlight the importance of using a reparative spatial justice framework in land and housing by uplifting research, policy recommendations, and various perspectives that illuminate the multifaceted nature of this approach.

Grounding Justice concludes with several next steps that serve as a guide to support the initiative’s goals in advancing reparative spatial justice:

1. Integrating lived experience and community expertise.
2. Catalyzing collective action and building coalitions.
3. Elevating community-driven approaches.
4. Addressing systemic inequities.
5. Elevating conversations and supporting changemakers.
6. Redistributing investments.
7. Engaging stakeholders across the spectrum.

We hope that the journey toward spatial justice will inspire you to take part in this collective action, to uproot racial segregation and displacement and pave the way for a future in which justice is embodied in every community.

Read the full report at: <https://spatialfutures.org/resources/grounding-justice>.

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Author Biographies

Tram Hoang, Senior Associate, is a skilled policy analyst and researcher whose work has been essential to advancing housing advocacy and narrative change. She has extensive experience working on ballot initiative campaigns, tenant protections, and housing and equitable development issues, having held roles with nonprofit community developers and city planning departments.

Rasheedah Phillips, Director of Housing, leads the team’s national advocacy to support the growing tenants’ rights, housing, and land use movements, working with grassroots partners, as well as movement, industry, and government leaders. Rasheedah previously served as managing attorney of housing policy at Community Legal Services of Philadelphia.

Jasmine Rangel, Senior Associate, conducts research, develops resources, and supports community leaders and policymakers to advance a more just housing system. Jasmine became interested in housing justice after an early introduction to community engaged practices as a part of the Bonner Scholars program.

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