

# Organizational Principle: Strengthen Community Bonds

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*A Right to the City*, a two-year, temporary exhibition at the Anacostia Community Museum (ACM) in Washington, DC – one of the lesser-known federal Smithsonian museums – depicts the museum’s commitment over five decades (1967–2017) to “promote the coming together of diverse people and perspectives to learn from, empower and uplift one another to create a more tolerant, unified metropolitan community.”<sup>1</sup>

Impressed from prior visits to ACM, co-authors Maleke Glee and Carmen Robles-Inman arranged a tour of *A Right to the City* and experienced it through the eyes of ACM’s Chief Curator, Dr. Samir Meghelli. Astonished by the exhibition’s breadth, richness, and audacity, they selected it for a training experience on

behaviors of high-performance teams and exhibition accessibility for staff of the Prince George’s African American Museum and Cultural Center (PGAAMCC), a Maryland sister-museum. At that time, Glee was PGAAMCC’s executive director and a graduate student of Cultural Sustainability at Maryland’s Goucher College. Robles-Inman is an organization development consultant to PGAAMCC with 25 years serving DC residents and DC-based, nonprofit organizations. When we saw NAME’s call for proposals for this issue, we agreed that this was an ideal opportunity to share our analysis with a larger audience. We felt that the museum field would benefit from learning about the considerations, challenges, and triumphs of exhibiting a contemporary, often volatile issue.

In this article, we contend that the *A Right to the City* exemplifies ACM’s successful application of its charge and its capacity to bridge divides in the District of Columbia. To this end, we emphasize the following three points: 1) the exhibition serves

<sup>1</sup> The exhibition opened in April 2018 and is slated to close in April 2020. The museum is closed through mid-October 2019 for renovations. Through an initiative called “Offsite and In the City,” *A Right to the City* has been reproduced into satellite exhibits on view in DC Public Library branches. Before planning a visit, be sure to contact the museum for open hours. You can find information on the museum’s website, <https://anacostia.si.edu>.

# Who has a right to the city? What might a more equitable future for the city look like?

as an effective vehicle to educate local stakeholders about the background of some of the racial and socio-economic tensions prevalent in the District today; 2) by presenting multiple examples of cross-racial/cultural collaboration among DC residents, it offers visitors the opportunity to learn from collaborative change-making fostered by diverse communities, providing ideas and solutions for contemporary, often comparable issues; and 3) it brings to light the presence and historical significance of other minority groups whose public visibility is not commonplace in accounts of DC history.

The following discussion introduces Anacostia Community Museum and its importance to DC, provides a brief description of the exhibition, and presents information that supports our observations as community stakeholders, intentions from the curator on the process, and the findings of a survey on the exhibition's effect on visitors.

## **ACM: A Historic and Cultural Icon for Washington, DC's African American Community**

Originally named the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum, the ACM is a historic and cultural icon that sits in a predominantly African American neighborhood. The museum is separated from its 18 DC-based sister museums by

**Fig. 2.** At the entrance to the exhibition, visitors are confronted with a large photo of President Eisenhower conferring with DC-based real estate financiers regarding the District's urban renewal plans.

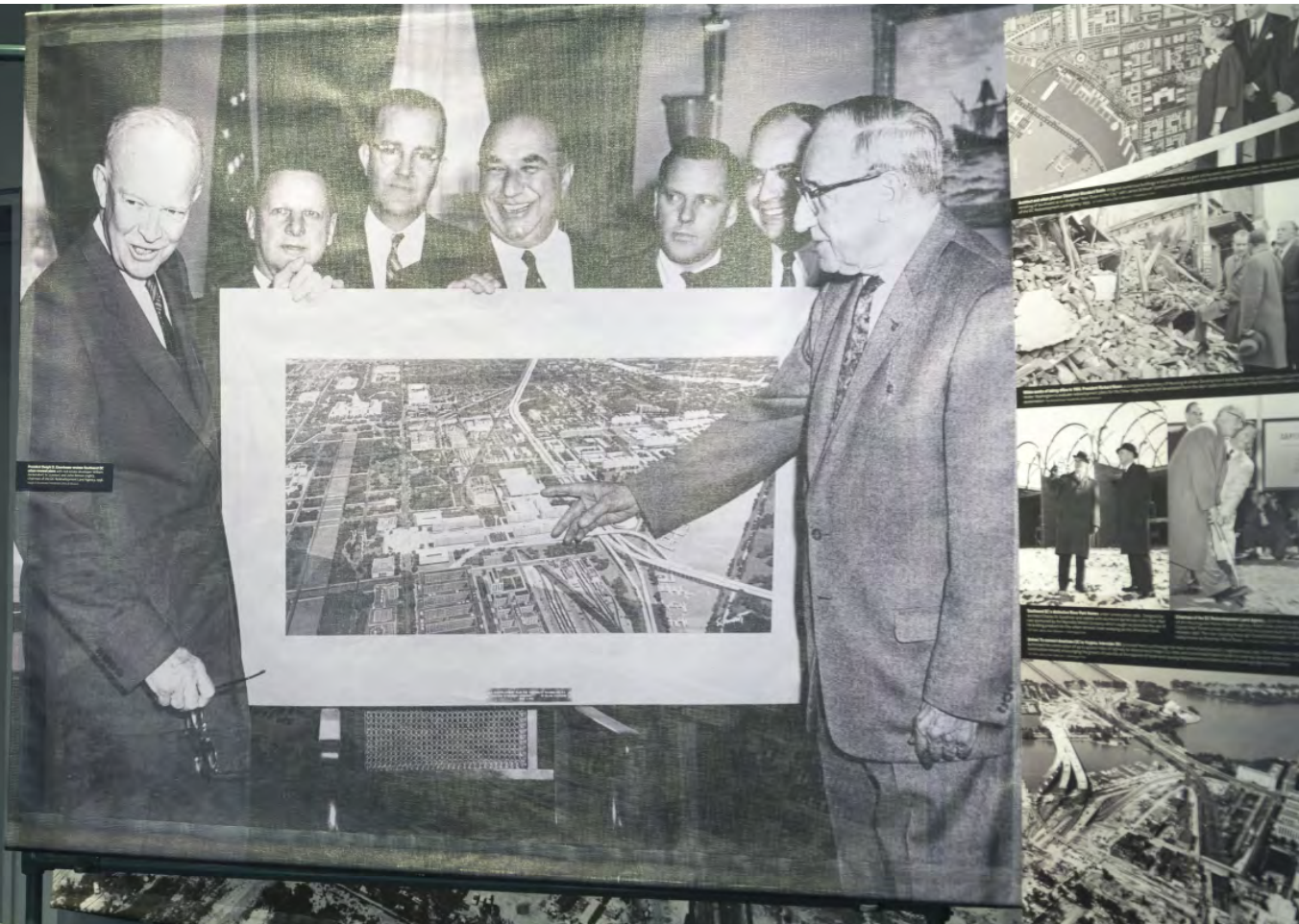
the Anacostia River and by multiple human-made socio-economic, racial/cultural, and political barriers. Accordingly, its original charter was to explore how "a community-based museum could be a bridge between the Smithsonian Institution and the District's African American community." A name change in 2006 to Anacostia Community Museum signaled an expanded mission "to explore social issues impacting diverse populations of the DC metropolitan area to promote mutual understanding and strengthen community bonds."<sup>2</sup>

## ***A Right to the City, a Historical Analysis Relevant to DC Today***

*A Right to the City* offers visitors an analysis of the intersection of federal policy, urban development and displacement, and the role of citizens in change-making and organized resistance in the District's communities of Adams Morgan, Anacostia, Brookland, Chinatown, Shaw, and Southwest between 1950 and 2017. The focus on these six neighborhoods with distinct characters, histories, and diverse racial/ethnic demographics offers a snapshot of the diversity in our nation's capital. Currently, DC is experiencing yet another wave of exponential changes which are contributing to increased displacement and associated socio-economic hardships, primarily among its African American and Latino/Hispanic residents. Last year marked 13 years of consecutive population growth by an average of 12,222 people annually. In 2017, the District's economy grew at a rate of 4.1 percent in the private sector and 2.9 percent in the public sector.<sup>3</sup> While these changes

<sup>2</sup> To learn about the museum's history, visit the "About" section of its website at <https://anacostia.si.edu/About/History>.

<sup>3</sup> "WDCEP Releases DC Development Report: 2018/2019 Edition," *The Washington DC Economic Partnership*, accessed April 15, 2019, <https://wdcep.com/news/wdcep-releases-dc-development-report-2018-2019-edition/>.



have benefited the District’s more affluent residents, they have imperiled long-term, low- and moderate-income residents.

It is in this socio-political and economic landscape that *A Right to the City* opens: It recounts the experiences and accomplishments of District residents/communities and provides important historical context for the current situations. Similar causative agents are at play: large-scale development and changing demographic and political landscapes. This brilliantly executed anthropological study of more than 200 interviews and multi-source documents was guided by two questions: “Who has a right to the city?” and “What might a more equitable future for the city look like?” ACM’s Chief Curator, Dr. Samir Meghelli, wishes *A Right to the City* audiences to consider that “changes in the city are not

organic in nature, but rather, the outcome of human-made decisions.” His hope is to share bold forms of resistance that impacted the history of the city, and as such may have relevance for the situations at hand today.

### *Exhibition Design*

*A Right to the City’s* exhibition design portrays a city under construction: display materials include scaffolding, retired street signage, and a large-scaled DC map made into a rug. The exhibition’s overall structure resembles a metaphoric “avenue” that branches off into “streets” leading to triangular enclaves for each of the six featured neighborhoods (fig. 1, intro image).



The exhibition’s entrance, a relatively small triangular space, is dominated by a large image of President Dwight D. Eisenhower alongside real estate financiers discussing the District’s urban renewal plans (fig. 2, p. 103). The image of this cabal of developers and government officials determining the fate of the city’s landscape and resulting social displacement sets the tone for the active resident-driven resistance and counter-organizing found later in the exhibition. This scene is also reminiscent of the District’s current resistance to federal interference in its local affairs and the protracted fight for statehood.

While there is no directive to tell how to navigate the space, the neighborhoods are arranged in chronological order reflective of their period of massive development, which creates an easy-to-follow narrative path. The first featured neighborhood, Southwest, is

depicted in “Southwest DC: Urban Renewal, Urban Removal.” Southwest was home to one of the first large-scale demolitions of public and private property under the federal policy of “urban removal” that became widely criticized as “Negro removal” (as writer and activist James Baldwin famously said) because of the residual displacement of urban communities, mostly low income and African American. The redevelopment of Southwest removed more than 1,500 businesses and 23,000 residents.

From Southwest, the visitor travels to the other five neighborhoods, then finally to the closing experiences: a combination of tactile experiences with interactive installations, including a phone booth where visitors can listen and contribute to a collection of visitor experiences, most of them responses from local residents, connecting their personal experiences to the exhibition content in

Fig. 3. Interactive installation in *A Right to the City*.

a heightened inclusion of perspectives. Another interactive, a wall of magnetic words with the prompt “TOWARD A MORE JUST NEIGHBORHOOD” asks visitors to imagine how a fair city might look and feel (fig. 3).

### *Visitor and Community Relevance*

As aforementioned, we feel that *A Right to the City* bridges divides in significant ways; its presentation is timely given the shifts in local demographics, and larger aims of the museum field, namely accessibility and widened spaces of public discourse. In its content, organization, and scholarship, we can track new ways to bring important, fully contextual, multi-voiced narratives to the fore – especially those that are not widely known to the public.

*1. The exhibition serves as an effective vehicle to educate local stakeholders about the background of some of the racial and socio-economic tensions prevalent in the District today.*

For example, the exhibition conveys how the African American families displaced from the Southwest urban renewal process were relocated to Anacostia, which led to the mass departure of a predominantly white community originally established about 1850. The translocation of African Americans to this isolated “across-the-river” neighborhood precipitated the subsequent social, economic, and cultural isolation of the District’s African American community, and was one of the primary reasons for establishment of ACM in 1967. The exhibition also highlights how “blockbusting,” a real estate strategy to clear the neighborhood of its current residents (white Washingtonians) for a different incoming group (Black Washingtonians) is an economic strategy that can and has been used against and for any group. This example points to the complexity of the

issues addressed by the exhibition and Curator Meghelli’s poignant request: that the public consider that “changes in the city were the outcome of human-made decisions” – thereby helping DC’s residents broaden their knowledge and perspectives and assume responsibility for their decisions.

A visitor survey showed that respondents found the exhibition extremely useful in providing insight about the racial justice issues faced by DC residents, and agreed that multiple audiences, educators, government workers, health practitioners, law enforcement workers, teens/youth, political leaders, and general DC residents would benefit from seeing it. Furthermore, they all strongly agreed that the exhibition could be used to connect people of diverse backgrounds (e.g., political, race, class, and culture).

*2. A Right to the City presents multiple examples of cross-racial/cultural collaboration among DC residents, thereby enabling diverse visitors to see themselves in the exhibition and offer ideas about how they can effect change now.*

Each neighborhood exhibit highlights at least one community-based organization, most of which were racially and culturally integrated. The Southwest Neighborhood Assembly (SWNA), a nonprofit civic organization, was founded in 1963 to unify the community against rapid development. This racially integrated group was the first of its kind, with several to follow as the development and resistance movements spread throughout the city’s featured neighborhoods. Other such groups include the Emergency Committee on the Transportation Crisis, organized by Black and white residents of Brookland and neighborhoods across the city. Another example, the Adams Morgan Organization, with Latino/Hispanic, African American,

The Shaw neighborhood enclave exhibit.

and white residents throughout northwest DC, created a neighborhood governance structure that eventually influenced the political infrastructure of DC's Advisory Neighborhood Commissions, still in effect today. The exhibition depicts many more examples that show the strategic cooperation that occurred between civic groups and associations across race, ethnicity, and class. It is evident throughout the exhibit that these relationships were essential to stopping the overall intent of the federal Urban Renewal plan in DC. Moreover, these examples may embolden current DC residents to band together to deal with the perplexing political, social, and economic issues prevalent today.

3. *The exhibition brings to light the presence of and historical significance of other racial/ethnic minority groups – Chinese Americans, Jews and Latinos – whose public visibility is not commonplace in accounts of DC's history.*

While most residents displaced throughout all six neighborhoods were African American, *A Right to the City* also highlights the impact on other groups. A case in point is the Talmud Torah Synagogue, established in 1820 at 4th and E Streets SW, whose destruction depicts the displacement of one of the oldest Jewish communities in the nation's capital. Additionally, the Chinatown section depicts a community originally located on Pennsylvania Avenue near the Capitol Building and then displaced further uptown to 7th and H Streets NW; due to the federal government's use of eminent domain, a large, thriving community was ultimately reduced to roughly 300 Chinese Americans living in two buildings. The exhibition widens access to the experiences and role of not only African Americans, but also Chinese, Jewish, Latino, and white Americans in modern DC history.



# SHAW URBAN RENEWAL

WITH THE PEOPLE

BY THE PEOPLE

FOR THE PEOPLE



Shaw Yesterday



Plaque presented to the firm of African American architects Paul Devouras (pictured) and Marshall Parnell

Devouras had patrolled 44th and U Streets NW during the April 1968 civil disturbances, and eighteen years later was hired to design the city government building at that same intersection.

A large, low-profile display case containing several historical documents and photographs. The most prominent item is a sign that reads "PEOPLE OF SHAW JOIN MICCO 'PREPARE TO PARTICIPATE'" with "Martin Luther King, Jr." written below it. To the left is a newspaper clipping with the headline "Old Evening Star" and sub-headline "Shaw Renewal Starts To Leave a Dream". Other items include a photograph of a man's face and various smaller documents and photos. The case is set against a background of a city street scene with buildings and a street sign that says "A BLUMENTH".

**As supported by  
respondent feedback,  
*A Right to the City*  
demystifies cultural  
projections about groups  
in the region by  
centering their voices.**

As we organized our research for this article, one of our most helpful audience data-gathering methods happened synergistically. While touring *A Right to the City*, we met members of the Racial Justice Working Group (RJWG), who were attracted to the exhibition by their own motivation to have a positive impact on stopping systemic racism in the District. The RJWG joined us on a guided tour, and later five members responded to our email-based survey about the exhibition.

Overall, their responses aligned with our theory that this exhibition presents an experience that sheds light on the District's diverse history and creates a welcome space to bridge divides and unify neighbors for collective wellness. The group, which was primarily white, expressed the need for "white people" to become more informed and involved to address critical issues "such as gentrification and racist policing practices." One member expressed the "need to come together for a peaceful and just existence."

We believe that it's essential for a more diverse audience – a white audience – to visit *A Right to the City*. Because of its location, the ACM's traditional audience is primarily African American. But the complexity of the issues faced by the District require broad-based engagement as well as increased knowledge and comprehension of these issues to develop viable solutions. All survey respondents choose to see the exhibit to understand more about DC history, and about issues that contribute to racial injustice and to expand the group's capacity to address such problems.

### **Conclusion**

As supported by respondent feedback, *A Right to the City* demystifies cultural projections about groups in the region by centering their voices. In this way, divides are bridged as communities that have been – and still are – intentionally segregated due to race and class now have the space to hear from each other.

Each neighborhood's common threads allow visitors to find similarities and inspirations for charting a new course in unified resistance. Organizations may find a clearer use for the tools and organizing as they are situated as a collective, and now are facing similar issues. A few government agencies organized visits with their key staff members to make the exhibition a useful learning experience. Local government officials who visited include DC's former Deputy Mayor for Health and Human Services and her senior staff; senior staff of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development; DC City Councilmembers Elissa Silverman and Travon White; Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton; the Prince George's County Planning Department's Long-Range Planning Section; Maryland Black Mayors Inc.; and



Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) recruits and the “Police For Tomorrow” Fellows. A leader of the Georgetown Law’s Program on Innovative Policing shared that the exhibition “helped MPD officers and the Georgetown University law students, who knew nothing about the DC’s neighborhoods nor understand DC’s history of displacement and how it continues to influence attitudes today.”

This exhibition highlights the role of museums to expand access to important historical information using quality oral-history methods and multidimensional exhibition features. *A Right to the City* confirms the value of the Anacostia Community Museum to not only the people of the District and its surrounding metropolitan area, but also to the country. The exhibition is reflective of its organizational values, and has strengthened and expanded the scholarship and historical information on the District of Columbia.

For new residents, learning about neighborhoods of ethnic and cultural affinity may be beneficial, as much of these demographics have shifted. The city has an influx of new residents vying for a city similar to any major city, wherein the homegrown culture is not a priority, simply the access afforded by the city landscape. This exhibition can help create a space of understanding and empathy for Washingtonians, particularly Black Washingtonians who have a history of displacement, and currently experience cultural expungement. The exhibit shows the diverse groupings within the District, and particularly groups like the Chinese American and Latino American communities whose public visibility is not commonplace in accounts of DC history. Together, all these elements add a new breadth of contemporary knowledge espoused by often-overlooked

history bearers, and in this vein, the exhibition’s process and content provides new ways of creating in the museum.

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