



Randall Lewis Center for  
Sustainability in Real Estate

# Partnering for Just, Green, and Ready Communities

## Community at the Center

As ULI District Councils consider how to deepen their impact in cities across the United States, many are exploring partnerships with community-based organizations (CBOs). These partnerships can bring ULI members and staff closer to the neighborhoods and people impacted by real estate development and decision-making and deliver ULI's tools and resources in ways that may not have been previously considered.

Work of this nature is often facilitated through new partnerships, sparks new relationships, and may require a new approach for District Councils. The information and recommendations in this short report can help guide District Councils as they contemplate working more closely and deeply with CBOs.

## Introduction

Facilitated by ULI's Randall Lewis Center for Sustainability in Real Estate with support from the Kresge Foundation, the Just, Green, and Ready Communities (JGRC) grant supported District Councils in hosting convenings and technical assistance dedicated to building socially equitable, low-carbon, climate-resilient places.

From increased flooding to extended droughts and extreme heat, the changing climate poses severe threats to cities and communities, especially those that have been historically marginalized. These neighborhoods and households also frequently bear a greater burden from a high-carbon built environment, from higher energy prices and dangerous air quality to inefficient, unhealthy housing environments.

The climate crisis is lighting a fire across the real estate industry and within communities to address these inequities and enhance livability, well-being, equity, and value in the built environment.

It was through this lens that District Councils selected for participation in the JGRC program identified potential points of impact in their respective cities, partnering with CBOs to advance climate resilience and equity, while also engaging in a series of expert-facilitated equity training by Tiffany Young with Think Equity and Rachel Porter and Camila Marquez of Kneading Change.

After completing their technical assistance work with their partners over 18 months, in June 2024, ULI members and staff from Dallas-Fort Worth, Louisiana, and St. Louis gathered in St. Louis, Missouri, for a capstone Summit, participating in the final facilitated equity training, sharing findings and progress points from their initiatives, and reflecting on their experiences of working with their respective CBO partners. The collective learnings from this process are summarized here to provide constructive insights for other District Councils considering or already conducting similar community-focused, equity-centered work.

***Pillars of the Valley.*** (Left) Pillars of the Valley is a 2024 winner of the ULI Americas Awards for Excellence. The permanent public art installation by Damon Davis commemorates the once-thriving Mill Creek Valley neighborhood in St. Louis, Missouri, which was destroyed—and 20,000 Black residents displaced—in the name of “urban renewal” in 1959.



Nothing  
for us  
without  
us.

## Building a Foundation

### recommendation #1

Before launching an initiative centered on work in historically marginalized communities, it was critical that the ULI members and staff involved first explored their own preconceptions, assumptions, and potential prejudices and implicit biases and also any internal organizational structures that may hinder the work or cause harm, however unintentionally, to the community. For this JGRC Cohort, that took the form of early and ongoing racial equity, cultural humility, and cultural intelligence training.

### Key Learnings

- **Mission alignment.** This community-centered work should be founded on an explicit alignment with ULI's mission.
- **Equity mindset.** ULI has a responsibility to engage and train staff deeply on how to engage with issues of social equity. Staff can then support members who will be working with community, helping them to embrace a cultural humility mindset before they begin the work. The personal values and humility of ULI members and staff will manifest in their professional actions and decisions.
- **Member recruitment.** Staff should seek out members who are informed and curious and who can become committed champions of the work. ULI can further support the members' pursuit of the knowledge, skills, and opportunity to build and strengthen their diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) muscles.
- **Partner and project identification.** By building on previous ULI or community work or building on members' existing community relationships, ULI can find bridges across networks and find volunteers whose values and mission priorities align with DEI initiatives.
- **ROI for community.** Communicate the anticipated return on investment to community members, sharing ideas as to how they can gain further from the partnership. Beyond altruism, there is real value to be gained by all parties.

The Brickline Greenway in St. Louis is envisioned as a vibrant, open, and welcoming network of paths and places that invite discovery and exploration while creating equitable opportunities for growth and investment across the city with a particular focus on areas that have been marginalized in the past.

# Lead with Cultural Humility

## recommendation #2

Equity advisors Tiffany Young, Rachel Porter, and Camila Marquez engaged with the JGRC Cohort, providing important training for members and staff throughout the process.

The advisors framed ten key principles for District Councils to embrace while working with the community.

- 1 Pursue bi-directional community partnerships.**  
Trust and mutual respect must go both ways for partnerships to be equitable and functional.
- 2 Understand the historical context as a basis for building trust.**  
Historical context includes the community and its members. It also includes you and ULI—both the ULI of today and the ULI of the past.
- 3 Include the perspectives of Indigenous people.**  
“Land use” includes meaningful collaborations with Indigenous peoples particularly (but not only) in places where they have been displaced.
- 4 Showing up is not enough. How you show up matters.**  
Performativity in community-focused work benefits the doer more than the intended recipient. Value your community partners’ knowledge as equal to your own.
- 5 Take the time to build reciprocal relationships.**  
Trust the knowledge of community partners and understand that their timelines will look different.
- 6 Use stakeholder analysis to reflect on community dynamics.**  
Work to identify who will be impacted, who holds influence, and which stakeholders need additional care or attention.
- 7 Center the most marginalized. Always.**  
Prioritize the leadership of those most affected by inequity, recognize the potential bias of data used to identify impacted communities, and explore how climate resilience and racial justice are connected.
- 8 Use your leadership to strengthen ULI’s relationships with community partners.**  
District Council staff can be a consistent thread between community members and the work, helping support ULI’s accountability when outside pressures limit members’ time.
- 9 Embrace compassionate accountability.**  
Be accountable to your community partners and ask that they be accountable to themselves and their fellow community members.
- 10 Pursue continual learning.**  
There is always more to learn on this journey towards climate resilience and racial justice.



This Kiener Plaza splash pad brings kids and families from across the St. Louis region to downtown to play and cool off in the summer.



Equity advisor Tiffany Young pauses in the Arcs sculpture in Citygarden, an interactive sculpture park for all ages and abilities.

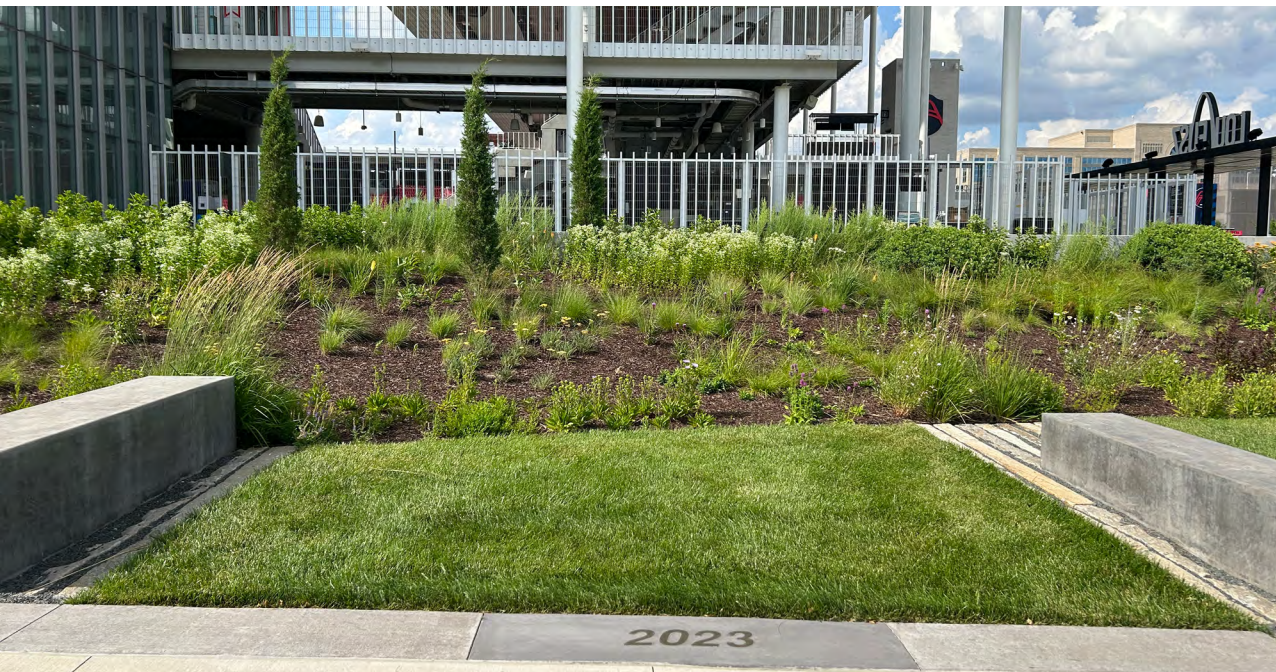
# Roles + Expectations + Communications

## recommendation #3

Any new partnership will take time to find its rhythm. Understanding and valuing partners' communication styles and preferences will help avoid potential misunderstandings around intentions. Working with community partners to jointly identify the various roles each participant will play can also help ensure that everyone is aligned around who will be doing what. And finally, expectations can be high among ULI members, staff, and community members; it will be important to determine together what expectations will be realistic and achievable.

## Key Learnings

- **Partnership is more art than science.** The formation of a partnership may not have a straight path for what will happen and when in early days. Flexibility may be especially helpful.
- **Set funding expectations.** Funding is often a spark, supporting early ideas that can foster partners' larger funding pursuits. It can facilitate ULI's work alongside community partners as they pursue lasting change.
- **Manage expectations of results.** Partners and related organizations need to know what ULI can and cannot provide. There can be confusion and broken trust at the end of a project if expectations are not clear early.
- **Recognize partner capacity.** No matter how good the intentions, the partners' capacity to engage in the work is key. Work to fully understand this capacity at the outset.
- **Position partners for success.** Be mindful of organizations or leaders who struggle to say "no" to an offer of funding or assistance. Recognize potential constraints, share ideas for possible mitigation, and be open to tabling the partnership for another time if necessary.
- **Communicate clearly and consistently.** Roles and responsibilities will need to be outlined early and clearly. Updating these when changes occur and at milestones will be helpful to keep everyone aligned and moving in the right direction.



The Pillars of the Valley installation is within the footprint of the former Mill Creek Valley neighborhood and sits at the front door to the new St. Louis CITY SC stadium.

- **Prepare an action plan and timeline.** An action plan and timeline can serve as a framework for success, guiding teams and partners with an agreed-upon structure and allowing all partners to know how to move through the process to find success. Timelines can also help other community members plan, prepare, and fully understand how and where they can participate and partner in the work.
- **Use follow-up and feedback.** Feedback during and after the project and regular check-ins with key players throughout will ensure that efforts are progressing and help manage everyone's expectations.
- **Be iterative, not prescriptive.** An iterative approach will adjust based on feedback, ensuring that everyone is heard and involved. Using an iterative process will also encourage continual improvement and support everyone's ability to flex and adapt as needed. The project may change and the outcome may be quite different than originally envisioned—and that's legitimate.
- **Communicate the mission (often).** It is easy to get wrapped up in the tasks of the day. It is important to remind everyone of the ultimate goal.

A key piece of the "Pillars" installation are these house numbers and seating walls, which represent the address and property lines of the Mill Creek Valley home that once stood here and was razed to make way for the interstate highway.

# Relationships Are Key

## recommendation #4

Community building is based on trust, which takes a long time to build. The relationships that make a partnership successful for ULI may rely on other existing community relationships that have been nurtured over time. It is unrealistic to believe that, at the outset, ULI members or staff can show up in community spaces and expect to find open, willing, and welcoming partners. It can be helpful to explore the breadth of member and staff networks to identify existing relationships that could serve as a warm introduction to community members of CBOs who may be unfamiliar with ULI and with whom the District Council may wish to partner.



## Key Learnings

- **Leverage existing relationships.** Building a new relationship within an artificial timeline, such as a grant window or ULI committee tenure, and expecting to meet community goals will be difficult and can strain expectations and impact delivery. Turn to existing relationships to better support project work during a shorter project window and move beyond the transaction, looking for other ways to broaden and deepen ULI's relationships in the community. Outside of project work, seek opportunities to strengthen ULI's ties within the community, build new partnerships, and be ready with those potential partners when the next opportunity comes along.
- **Continue to support community partners.** It is expected that ULI will work alongside a partner during the project window, but continuing that relationship after, even volunteering at their events, will strengthen those partnerships and reinforce ULI's community commitment.
- **Care about the community's work.** The work at hand is not just about the tasks associated with the project; it is about making the community a better place to live, work, and play for everyone.
- **Set and support a power dynamic of helping.** The power dynamic between a professional organization like ULI and the community is important to recognize. Leadership can be just as effective when it works alongside or supports from behind; ULI does not have to be out front. Offer thought leadership at strategic points with an eye on being helpful.
- **Reduce the Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.** Work to minimize your degrees of separation from the community in which you want to work. Instead of being separated by five layers of knowing someone who knows someone, keep seeking direct connections.
- **Listen deeply and actively.** Deep and active listening is key to relationship building. Some community-based organizations may have hesitations around a collaboration with ULI. Listening deeply to understand the context, history, and dynamics at play can help identify where ULI can and cannot help. Similarly, active listening can help ensure that the community is truly heard, and listening with humility and vulnerability can allow everyone to hear potential hard truths and help address any concerns.
- **Be specific with language.** Real estate circles often operate using language short-hand and with an assumption of shared knowledge. Community members will not share this understanding and will not know what the acronyms represent. Be clear, specific, and kind with language.
- **Build on a program of community work.** District Councils are hard at work in cities, identifying opportunities for impact and building community relationships. Look for opportunities to leverage funding and engagement to further existing community initiatives.
- **Encourage staff and member engagement.** When both staff and members are encouraged to build and strengthen relationships, the work has greater potential for continuity and longevity.

Participants in the JGRC Summit follow ULI St. Louis chair Aaron Williams as he takes them on a tour of downtown points of historic and cultural significance to Black St. Louisans.

# Pivoting Is Pivotal

## recommendation #5

Action plans, timelines, goals, and expectations are all critical pieces of partnership work—as is recognizing when things are not going as planned and change is required. Working together and communicating clearly, ULI and its community partners can find new paths forward that can still support the community in impactful ways.

### Key Learnings

- **Get creative.** Remaining mission-aligned during a pivot may require some creativity. Be patient, thoughtful, and unafraid of the new direction.
- **Be agile and adaptable.** Pivoting requires a nimble approach. We don't know what we don't know, and sometimes, the path we envision on Day 1 does not lead to the final result but instead builds toward something that meets the partner's needs better. Remain agile.
- **Put partner needs first.** Regardless of the organizational or funding timelines and objectives, the needs of your community partner should come first. Processes can be adjusted internally within ULI to better meet the constraints, needs, or pivots of your partner. We are here to support their work, not the other way around.



All Power to All People, by Hank Willis Thomas, serves to highlight ideas related to community, strength, perseverance, comradeship, and resistance to oppression.



Part of the Pillars installation is this topographic relief of the Mill Creek Valley neighborhood.

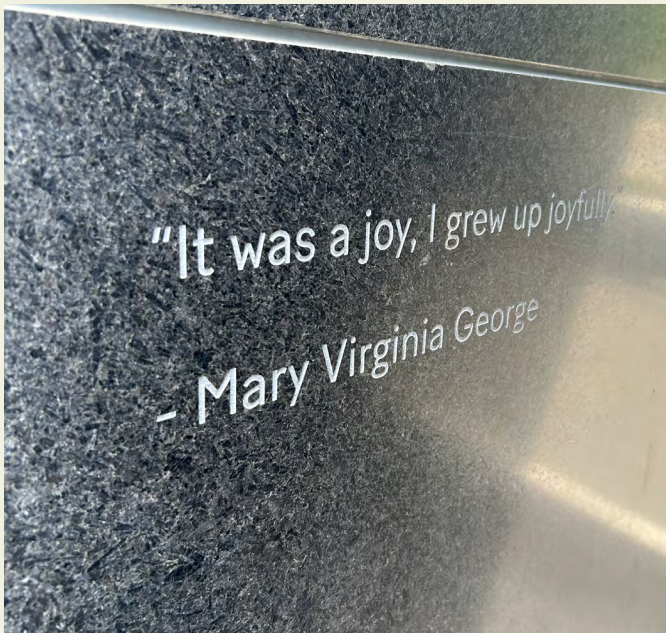
# Let Go of Timelines

## recommendation #6

As individuals who excel at project management, this recommendation may be particularly hard for ULI staff to embrace. There are times, however, when the best-laid plans and the best intentions are met with circumstances beyond anyone's control. District Councils need to be able to recognize these moments, discuss the scenario with community partners, and, if needed, let go of timelines. This may feel drastic, but it is sometimes what is needed to maintain the relationship, continue the work in the community, or maintain peace of mind.

## Key Learnings

- **Move at the speed of trust.** A project can only move as fast as the partners feel comfortable moving. Trust that is established early and nurtured throughout a partnership will allow the work to progress, but not beyond a speed that is comfortable for all partners. As much as any ULI member or staff member would like to set and maintain a deadline, it is the CBO who is leading the timing.
- **Be prepared to start, stop, pause.** Following the earlier-mentioned iterative process, stopping to pause and reflect will allow all partners to consider how the work is progressing, identify areas in need of adjustment, and improve the project.
- **The work may fall outside the funding timeline.** Sometimes, projects can be extended to adjust to a partner's needs or timelines. Other times, a shift may be required to get the best result for where a partner is at that point in time.

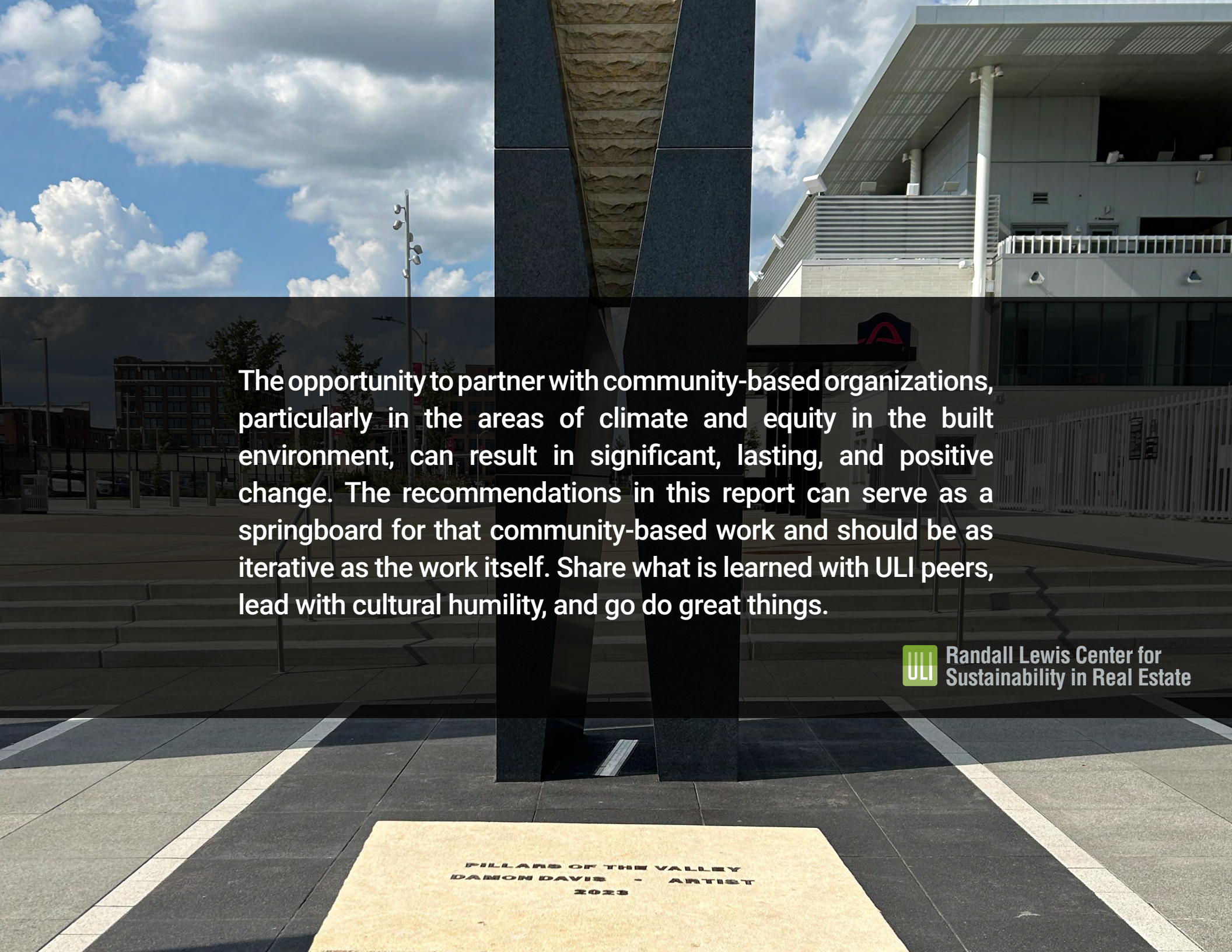


Within the eight 15-foot-tall monoliths that make up a portion of the Pillars of the Valley installation, walls are inscribed with quotes from residents who once lived in the neighborhood, giving voice to the people whose neighborhood and stories were paved over.

The Just, Green, and Ready Communities grant work continues even as this formal grant window closes. The District Councils involved in this cohort are committed to working with their partners and continue to strengthen those relationships for further impact.



Summit participants pictured from left: Diane Burnette, Juan Quintero, Beth Letscher, Kacey Cordes, Jack Thomas, Tiffany Young, Lindsay Brugger, Christy Mead, Chris Janson, Jennifer Schecter, Sonia Huntley, Nicole DePietro. Not pictured: Christie Brinkman.



The opportunity to partner with community-based organizations, particularly in the areas of climate and equity in the built environment, can result in significant, lasting, and positive change. The recommendations in this report can serve as a springboard for that community-based work and should be as iterative as the work itself. Share what is learned with ULI peers, lead with cultural humility, and go do great things.



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FILLARS OF THE VALLEY  
DAMON DAVIS - ARTIST  
2023