

Equitable Brownfields Redevelopment: Vision & Strategies

Low-income and Black and Brown communities have been disproportionately impacted by contamination and the placement of harmful industrial uses, the sites of which are now known as brownfields. Equitable brownfield revitalization is critical for supporting the communities that have been disadvantaged by past policies to improve environmental health and create much-needed housing and economic development on brownfield sites. However, without meaningful community participation and intentional policies enacted at an early stage, brownfield redevelopment projects run the risk of leading to market shifts that may negatively impact housing affordability and create displacement which harms those who have already suffered the most.



“We want to make sure that brownfield redevelopment is the *solution* for housing displacement, not the cause of housing displacement.”

- Dr. Carlton Waterhouse,
Deputy Assistant Administrator,
U.S. EPA's Office of Land and
Emergency Management (OLEM)

Key discussion points

1

Anti-Displacement. Brownfield redevelopment projects need to be considered not only on a site basis, but also in terms of future neighborhood impact. Brownfield redevelopment runs the risk of contributing to displacement if new projects lead to increased area real estate values without corresponding policies in place. To maintain affordability for both housing and small businesses, local policymakers need to be proactive about using brownfield redevelopment to support the existing communities who—often for decades—have suffered the negative impacts of pollution and brownfields. Policies and tools to consider include inclusionary zoning, land banks, and affordable housing development. As Elizabeth Yeampierre explained in her references to the Sunset Park neighborhood in Brooklyn, displacement often occurs from the exclusionary rezoning of industrial waterfront space. One solution to foster social cohesion of reclaimed space can be zoning for green industry, which can empower the local community and provide workforce development opportunities.

2

Environmental Justice. Brownfield redevelopment projects need to recognize the legacy of racism and environmental discrimination within the history of the U.S. Before COVID, over 250,000 people died prematurely every year from the effects of pollution, including the impacts of toxic infrastructure put in place by fossil fuels companies. As Elizabeth Yeampierre said, “This is a race issue, not just a class issue.” Brownfield redevelopment projects should

What to do next



Foster meaningful collaboration among different sectors and levels of government while ensuring that the process centers front-line communities. Local governments should explore non-conventional partnerships among private and public entities, centering the community in the process and compensating community members for contributing their time and expertise. Groups participating in a redevelopment visioning process may include local chambers of commerce, economic development corporations, academic institutions, small businesses, local nonprofits, and more.



What to do next

Prioritize policies and programs that focus on area-wide brownfield redevelopment.

As a result of institutional racism in land use policy and corporate practices, brownfields are often clustered in historically underserved communities. An area-wide revitalization plan can strengthen the economic opportunities that brownfield remediation can provide to the community. In 2003, UPROSE was able to integrate a climate lens into the planning of Sunset Park’s industrial waterfront by leveraging [NYS Brownfield Opportunity Area \(BOA\) program](#). Under the BOA program, local organizations across the state have received large grants to prepare area-wide redevelopment strategies.

Facilitate investments and resources to redevelop local brownfields in a way that advances climate goals.

In 2019, UPROSE led a project to assess the impacts of ‘Industry City’, a proposed luxury commercial development on Sunset Park, Brooklyn’s industrial waterfront. UPROSE provided technical assistance for the community to develop an alternative [Green Resilient Industrial District \(GRID\)](#) proposal. The GRID proposes a strategic implementation framework based on an analysis of existing conditions –including housing, real estate, demographics, and workforce– and subsequent models of green industries and policies to advance environmental justice in Sunset Park while preserving the historic industrial character of the community.

empower and center community needs, recognizing resident expertise, and the high price residents have already paid due to past contamination and structural racism in policy.

3

Role of Parks. For many underserved communities, parks and open spaces are not just an amenity, but essential to quality public health. Brownfield redevelopment projects should seek to meet this need and should engage community members in the planning process to determine park design and features. However, the introduction of new parks also runs the risk of “green gentrification”, further emphasizing the need to plan for preventing displacement before housing affordability issues arise.

Questions to ask

1

Who has the decision-making authority in the community, and how does power play into what happens during and after a brownfield redevelopment project?

2

How can redeveloping a brownfield respond to community needs beyond addressing site contamination?

3

How is brownfield redevelopment likely to impact market dynamics and housing access? What policies can protect affordability for housing and for small businesses?

According to the EPA, upcoming federal brownfield redevelopment programs and funding opportunities as a result of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law are likely to include:

- \$1.5 billion in additional investment in brownfields
- Training for 3,650 people into brownfield redevelopment-related jobs
- 18,000 more anticipated assessments through EPA funding

Learn more about the U.S. EPA’s Brownfield Grant programs [here](#). Communities and stakeholders can also learn about and address brownfield sites by requesting free [Brownfields Technical Assistance](#) or contacting EPA’s Regional Offices about [Targeted Brownfields Assessments](#).