

Planning, Power, and Possibilities:

How UNIDAD is Shaping Equitable Development in South Central L.A.

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Executive Summary

Private redevelopment is in full tilt in downtown Los Angeles – and cities across the nation. But with what is often welcome progress also comes unequal gains and potential problems of displacement. In two community organizing victories, United Neighbors in Defense Against Displacement (UNIDAD) has proven that community organizations and private developers can forge a shared future using tools like Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs; legal agreements on new development projects).

Planning, Power, and Possibilities tells the story behind two such CBAs – one with developer G.H. Palmer Associates in 2011 and a second (which was technically a “Development Agreement”) with the University of Southern California (USC) in 2012 – and notes how they include concrete benefits such as a new health clinic, living wage jobs, and \$20 million for affordable housing, among other things. We put those agreements in a broader context, showing how histories matter, movements matter, and models matter for achieving mutually beneficial wins and building inclusive, healthy, and vibrant cities.

For more than two decades, UNIDAD has brought together community organizations that represent low-income, immigrant, and Black communities in South Central Los Angeles to work towards health, economic, and racial justice. Collaboration among member organizations dates back to the 1990s, when the Coalition for a Responsible USC formed to improve the labor conditions for USC service workers, the majority of whom lived locally.



Photo credit: Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)

Renamed the Figueroa Corridor Coalition for Economic Justice (FCCEJ), it later worked with others to secure the first comprehensive CBA in the country at what is now the Staples Center and L.A. Live in downtown L.A.

So in 2006, when USC launched its Master Plan process and G.H. Palmer Associates bought land just east of USC to build the luxury Lorenzo Housing Development, relationships were in place and moving to action did not take long. What this shows is that histories matter: It is critical to understand the history of a particular place and critical for the groups that seek to enhance community voice to have developed long-term relationships – and trust – with one another and local residents.

UNIDAD’s success in affecting equitable development stems from its movement-building approach. Social movements are sustained groupings that develop a frame or narrative based on shared values, that maintain a link with a real and broad base in the community, and that build for a long-term transformation in systems of power.

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To build an authentic base, UNIDAD organizations' membership is made up of local residents, many of whom were trained in The People's Planning School for these very campaigns.

In coalition, these community planners from relatively-small, membership-based organizations were able to scale up from the neighborhood to the city level and become recognized participants in the conversation on urban redevelopment and community health. This was particularly significant because CBAs have traditionally been secured with an important labor partner; here the main drivers were smaller community-based organizations, making this an important and unique case and worthy of study by groups in other areas where labor is either not strong or not always closely aligned with community groups.

UNIDAD also refined and echoed a unified message throughout the campaigns, one that centered on how development without displacement was both possible and critical to community health. Tone was key as well: Even when negotiations were tense, UNIDAD stuck with a narrative that could serve as the foundation of a long-term partnership – that its goal was a “win-win-win” for the developer, university, residents, and the City. And to make sure the message was taken seriously (and revealing adeptness with government), UNIDAD also built trust with the City Council, nurturing ties with then-Councilmember Jan Perry and meeting regularly with then-Councilmember Ed Reyes. These capacities, broader than community development strategies, are part and parcel to movement building.

Research was also an important part of the model. Knowing the issues was critical in creating leverage – from understanding zoning conditions in the case of the Lorenzo, to benchmarking USC's proposals against affordable housing allotments in other

university redevelopment plans, to developing studies – including a Health Impact Assessment – that placed community concerns in the broader context of community well-being. As a result of all this organizing, messaging, and research, the USC Master Plan now includes significant affordable housing allotments and the Lorenzo provides space for a health center – and both developments are already leading to new, living-wage employment opportunities for local residents.

UNIDAD's victories have created an innovative model for urban redevelopment. With the long and often underfunded work of implementation ahead, many questions remain for the USC Master Plan agreement, including guaranteeing community input in housing fund decisions as well as tracking local hiring and the like. Still, UNIDAD has already shown how organizing for community benefits can tilt the balance of power to make way for equitable development and community health. The coalition looks forward to using more pro-active strategies in the future, like shaping Community Plans.

UNIDAD has proven that a broader set of stakeholders can determine the future of a city, highlighted how investment can happen without displacement, and demonstrated what equitable growth looks like and will require. Already, UNIDAD's lessons are informing UC Berkeley's expansion into Richmond, and in March 2015, the coalition secured a new CBA at the Grand Metropolitan in L.A. What is at stake now is not any particular agreement or even any particular neighborhood but whether tools like CBAs can be combined with movement-building strategies to help us establish the types of communities most of us actually want – ones that are diverse, healthy, and responsive. The UNIDAD story helps to point the way forward for urban America.