

Placemaking in the Context of Affordable Housing: A Case Study

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Christina Lanzl

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The DSNI Group. Courtesy of Greg Watson

On Monday, June 24, Greg Watson, Director for Policy and Systems Design at the Schumacher Center for a New Economics and former executive director of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative (DSNI) joined the Placemaking Network to share his insights on equitable community development. As the cost of living and real estate in metropolitan Boston continues to skyrocket, DSNI's groundbreaking work in Roxbury's Dudley Square neighborhood continues to be a valuable and relevant precedent. Formed in 1984 as a community-based planning and organizing group, the non-profit not only transformed the neighborhood, but also created 250 affordable homes for first-time home buyers in Dudley Square. DSNI presents an important case study and precedent for today's housing market, which is becoming more and more unaffordable for a wide majority of people.

In our challenging times, new solutions need to be found, not just for *placemaking*, but also for *placekeeping* as displacement looms on the horizon for many. There is an urgent need for policy at the federal level that begins to contain the ownership of real estate by fewer and fewer people. How did DSNI start? Unfortunately, it appears that the condition for change begins with immense loss and turmoil. In the mid-20th century, urban flight by Dudley Square's white middle-class home owners had led to desolate conditions, where former homes were burnt for insurance premiums. The growing number of empty lots became a dumping ground for construction debris and large household items from the entire city.

The remaining residents, primarily African-American, with little hope for help from the city, realized that they needed to organize in order to change the existing conditions. With brilliant minds among their ranks, the group began to flourish. Greg Watson, who had worked for the Nature Conservancy and with a background in community organizing, was recruited in the mid-1990s as executive director. Working closely with DSNI's 30-member elected board of directors, a non-confrontational approach, combined with an attitude that "you can do it, if you have the leverage" led to a solution to the dilemma of continuous decline and disinvestment.

The answer was to develop a community land trust (CLT), considered an effective tool to facilitate the development of affordable housing in low-income communities. An urban village visioning process established placemaking and community gathering opportunities as integral part of the project. To improve living conditions and to bolster placemaking in the neighborhood, DSNI created Dudley PRIDE, also known as *People and Resources Investing in Dudley's Environment*, along with several effective community campaigns, such as *Don't Dump on Us*. As a permanent fixture, the green heart and public gathering space of the newly built neighborhood became the Dudley Town Common.

Greg Watson concludes, "For communities of color with little economic clout and a history of political and social marginalization, control over land is a significant source of power and empowerment for residents." A spatial analysis of variables like homeownership rates (measured by owner-occupancy data), vacant lots, building values, land values, and foreclosures, shows that CLTs can stabilize neighborhoods by maintaining housing affordability. The tradeoffs with this model of "gentrification without displacement" are lower housing values and wealth accumulation. Mining the quantitative and qualitative data of the Dudley Square transformation are a useful tool for economically stressed neighborhoods to determine if such a strategy is a viable option.

Resources:

Holding Ground: The Rebirth of Dudley Street. Documentary.

www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUerVOi623E

Greg Watson's presentation, *Tools for Systemic Change: Assessing the Impact of the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative* is available online at the BSA's [Placemaking Network](#).