

Race, Place and Power

Learnings from the Ford Foundation's
Just Cities and Regions Program

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Hester Street on behalf of the Ford Foundation

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Introduction

At the end of 2021, the Ford Foundation sunsetted its Just Cities and Regions program, the primary grantmaking hub related to housing within the Foundation, and the culmination of decades of work in the arena.¹

This report captures the lessons of this final phase of Ford's housing work, from 2017-2021, and overarching strategic lessons drawn from its decades of work.

JCR sought, explicitly and primarily, to build the power of impacted communities... [facing] housing insecurity and inequitable development.

The lessons shared here reveal the core challenges of winning structural, systemic change at scale: the most effective near-term and long-term strategies for scaled change and the balance between the immediate and long-term; the interplay between power, narrative, systems, and place; the centrality of race; and the complexity of working towards change in a shifting context. These reflections are offered to colleagues within philanthropy in particular, as well as to the range of actors across the complex housing justice field. Notably, most if not all of what is captured here holds implications not just for those focused on housing *per se*, but for the range of actors working towards a just, equitable, and abundant world.

To capture these lessons, the report team interviewed a range of stakeholders with various vantage points, including JCR staff, other current and former program staff within Ford itself, and a cross-cutting set of grantees and field stakeholders. The team complemented these interviews with a thorough review of Ford archival materials as well as academic and field-produced research and analysis.

As we explore in more detail below, JCR's most important contribution to the field is its articulation of *race, place, and power* – both as a framework to guide diagnosis of our shared problems, and as the pathways for transformational change. JCR used this tripartite framework as a lens through which to view the causes of entrenched, endemic housing insecurity and inequity in the US (a diagnostic function), as well as hallmarks for what types of interventions are necessary to drive scaled, durable, and equitable structural change (a strategic function). Centering race, place, and power shaped not simply what JCR chose to fund, but *who* it funded and towards *what end*.

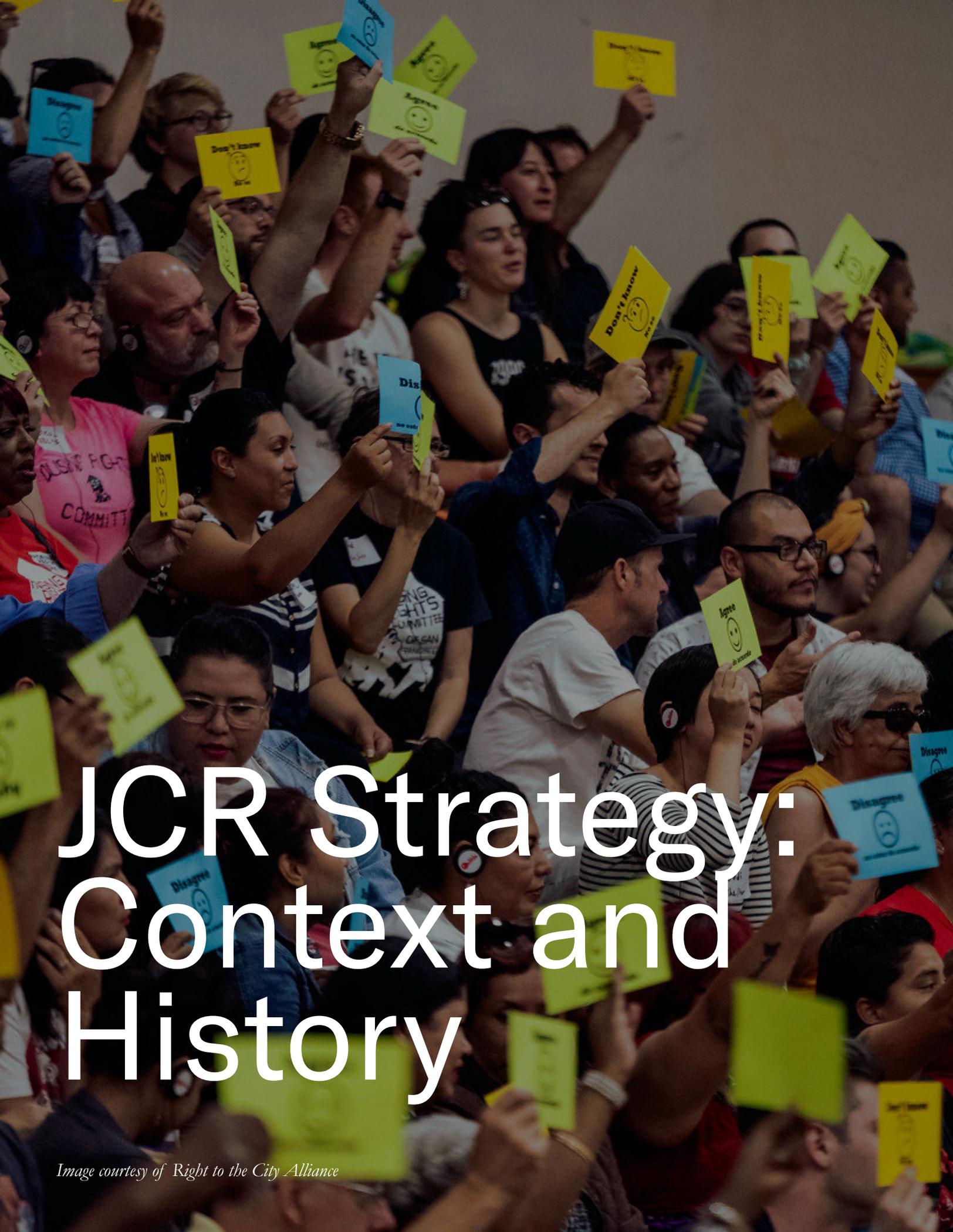
JCR sought, explicitly and primarily, to build the *power* of impacted communities to shift the policies that

drive housing insecurity and inequitable development, alongside other strategies (market interventions, public policy advocacy) deployed *in service of* power-building.

This orientation offers powerful insights for the range of social justice actors and funders – for those focused on civic engagement, democracy, racial justice, climate, culture, technology, and beyond.



Image courtesy of Hester Street



JCR Strategy: Context and History

Image courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

To understand JCR's elevation of race, place, and power as central drivers of its strategy, it is helpful to contextualize it in the work from which it evolved.

Ford first formalized its Just Cities and Regions line of work in 2015, and then in 2017 organized it under the newly-convened Cities and States Program. Thus, JCR formally launched in a moment of growing racial and income inequality,² increasing housing insecurity, the acceleration and disparate impacts of the climate crisis,³ and the stalemate for impactful federal change.⁴

JCR's immediate predecessor, the Metropolitan Opportunity Unit ("MOU"), pursued housing justice work that integrated multiple aspects of the built environment while maintaining a focus on particular places. MOU focused on funding at the metro-regional level in ten jurisdictions across the US where an influx of federal or other significant development resources presented an opportunity for major projects and leveraged impact at the intersection of infrastructure, housing, and jobs. MOU used issue-focused campaign opportunities to galvanize action and sought to integrate across typical silos within the field. While MOU's work proved impactful in regions with an existing level of regional organizing infrastructure and political constituency (such as the Twin Cities and Bay Area), in other regions where *regional*-level organizing infrastructure was less developed at the time (such as New York State), it proved hard to secure wins — especially in a short time frame.

The challenges of a regional-level strategy without adequately networked community-rooted organizing and infrastructure, as well as overall shifts within Ford (towards a strategy *conscious* of place, but not "place-based"), helped crystallize lessons that drove questions of *power* to the foreground in JCR's strategy.

At the same time, JCR sought to mark a different approach against the backdrop of historic swings (in the field and within Ford's own strategy) between viewing housing as an individual "*asset*" and strategy for family wealth building (and a focus on market interventions, leveraging private resource investments, and home ownership) to housing as a human *right* (and concomitant focus on social housing, broad social programs, and the role of government).



Image courtesy of Oakland Causa Justa Just Cause

JCR's strategy built off of key lessons from prior Ford housing strategies, such as:

→ A critical examination of the field's historical reliance on financial markets and private development dollars as primary strategies to drive systemic change, as compared to expansion of social provision of rights and access;

→ An analysis that to date, the operation of the American economy is deeply connected to race and enduring racial inequality;

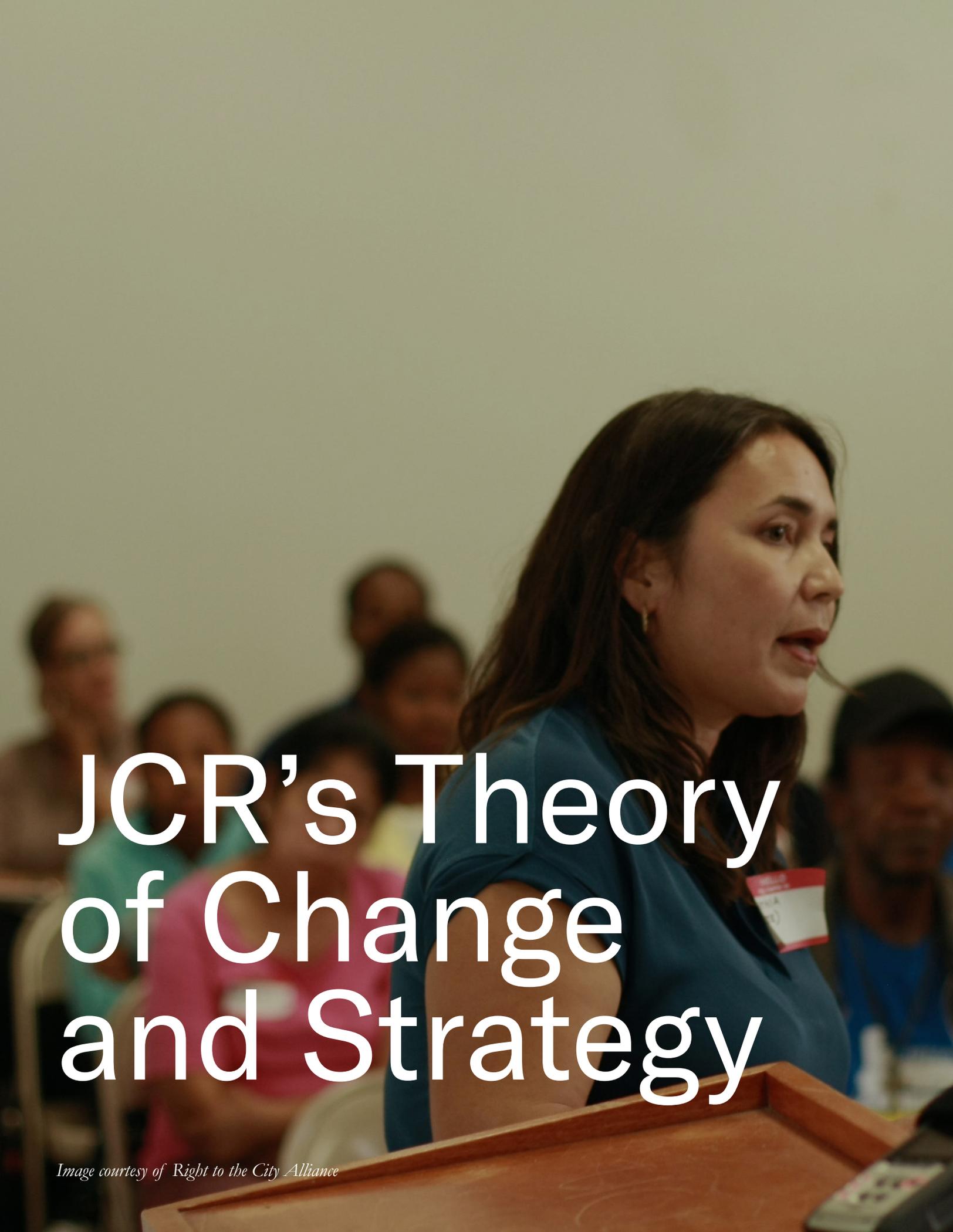
→ An analysis of the impacts of financialization, the ongoing fallout from the 2008 foreclosure crisis, the role of private equity/speculation within the housing and real estate market, and the impacts of these trends on communities of color;

→ A richer understanding of the centrality of place to people's lived experience, identity, and political constituents—and the dimensionality of people as community constituents, not just “homeowners” or “renters,” but as parents, neighbors, workers, students, activists, etc.;

→ A recognition that local change is constrained by state policy, and thus a broader regional and statewide constituency is needed to impact housing policy at scale (including at the federal level);

→ The importance of narrative power and strategy to inspire systemic change, not simply smart policy ideas or new financing mechanisms.

It was within this complex internal and external landscape that JCR crystalized its theory of change.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a blue top and a name tag, is speaking at a wooden podium. She is looking to her right. In the background, several other people are seated at tables, some looking towards the speaker. The setting appears to be a conference or meeting room.

JCR's Theory of Change and Strategy

Image courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

JCR sought to retain some elements of the MOU era, integrate lessons from decades of work, and sharpen an approach aimed at building durable civic power for those most impacted to imagine and win systemic change for the production and preservation of equitable and affordable housing.

While Ford's strategy⁵ had historically swung from a focus on fair housing and civil rights to a focus on housing as (individual) assets and market interventions, JCR centered race, place, and power in order to tackle spatial inequality within the built environment, as reflected in land, housing, and development.

Grounded in this analysis, JCR worked to integrate distinct dimensions necessary to winning change at scale, including:

→ Building community- and people-centered grassroots power through integrated civic engagement strategies,

→ Grounded in the leadership and vision of the communities of color who are disproportionately impacted,

→ Anchored by an ecosystem of networked, durable, social movement infrastructure,

→ Focused on winning systems-level interventions and change, not simply public policy reform or near-term “fixes,” and

→ Supported by relationship based and long term co-governance by communities and those in public leadership roles.

JCR understood that “housing” stands at the intersection of the complex flows of development, capital, infrastructure, land, and civic power. To make progress on housing, JCR recognized that interventions had to tackle those intersecting systems at the appropriate jurisdictional level. Simply put, “housing” can not be “done” in isolation.

JCR's Integrative, Strategic View of Place

Writ large, Ford's understanding of questions of "place" is complex and has shifted over time. Beginning with MOU and fully realized by the launch of JCR, Ford moved away from "place-based" strategies (often associated with "comprehensive" interventions of earlier eras or the ten metro-region focus of MOU), concerned over the ability of national philanthropy to effectively engage in place and of the unintended consequences of a block-by-block, more piece-meal approach to comprehensive community development that failed to address the larger market and public sector drivers of racial and spatial segregation. "Place-conscious" grant-making replaced "place-based" in the Foundation's lexicon, signaling a recognition of an attunement to the particulars of place, and encompassing a desire to scale solutions across geographies.

JCR sought to refine and operationalize this evolving understanding of "place." JCR did not view "place"

simply as a unit of "intervention" or "analysis," or solely from a tactical perspective of where particular policy wins were feasible. Instead, *JCR explored the role of place in people's lives, as constitutive of identity, and as the "site" where macro-economic forces shape experience and entrench inequality.* Thus, JCR understood place as a more dynamic, geographically permeable site for contestation, creation, constituency, and power building, shaping community organizing strategies and tactics to advance long term structural change."

This holistic and strategic understanding of place, in turn, is in some ways issue-agnostic: the importance of place holds regardless of the "public policy issue" you fund or work on. That said, housing — as an anchor of people in place, as a gateway to work, transit, and education, and as a platform for civic engagement — takes on greater strategic and narrative importance for making systemic change at scale.

The Centrality & Dimensions of Power

JCR also held central the question of what is required to build *power* — the kind and degree of power needed to drive systems-level change, and the relationship between power and place. JCR's theory elevated the often implicit/embedded notions of power: highlighting the range from civic power, to narrative power to define the problem and frame the solutions (explored more below), to the durability of power (in infrastructure, community ownership/control, co-governance, etc.). Whereas prior Ford work had focused on technocratic, "expert"-driven solutions to the housing crisis, JCR recognized and placed a stronger emphasis on building durable *community* power as central to progress. Put another way, JCR pursued a "both/and" strategy – recognizing the importance of policy expertise and innovative solutions, even as JCR supported grantees and work on the ground

that deployed that expertise in service of community power-building and community-driven change, not siloed from it.

Finally, JCR held a new vision for power expressed through "*co-governance*," seeing a path to power through enduring, values-anchored relationships between communities most impacted and those in public leadership roles (rather than a largely adversarial or tactical relationship with those in public office). Towards that end, JCR believed that integrated civic engagement strategies — which linked issue-based organizing with year-round civic engagement work — were core to durable power building and to the ability to raise the political prominence of the housing crisis.

JCR's strategy renewed racial justice as a central focus, recognizing that progress on housing is intimately related to the economics of real estate — not just construction and finance, but also, crucially, the ownership and control of land.

A Renewed Focus on Racial Justice & Equity

Throughout its history, Ford elevated ending racial inequality as core to addressing inequality for all. JCR's strategy renewed racial justice as a central focus, recognizing that progress on housing is intimately related to the economics of real estate — not just construction and finance, but also, crucially, the ownership and control of land.

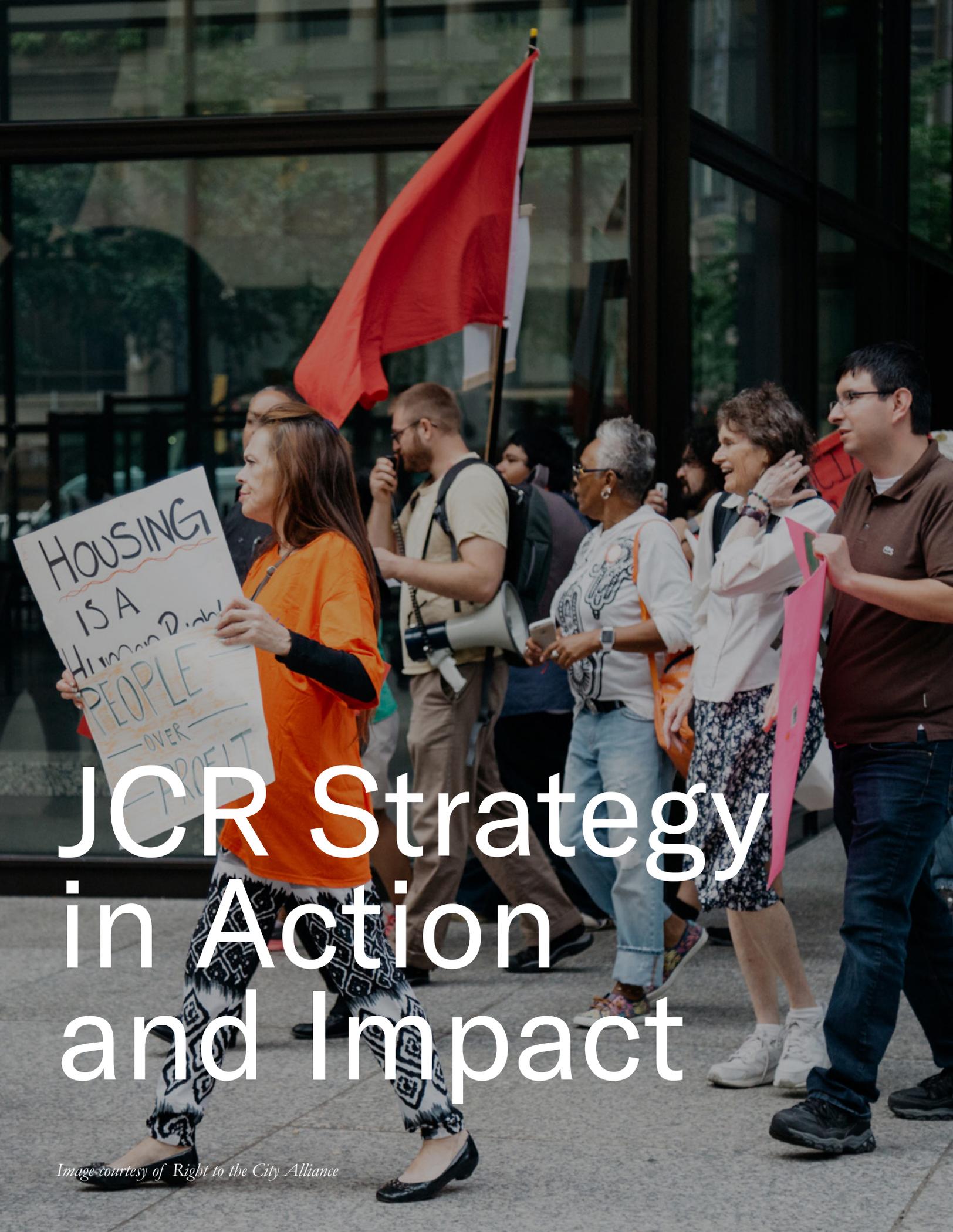
Furthermore, progress on housing relies on the presence or absence of infrastructure, the legacy of anti-Black racism, and the impacts of climate change on communities of color, public health, and more. At the same time, JCR recognized that the ability to move the needle on the housing crisis was not solely an issue of

good policy ideas or adequate funding, but of the civic power of those most impacted to define the priorities and change the underlying systems.

Thus, JCR took seriously the urgency of supporting BIPOC leadership and organizations within work to advance equity. . While previous eras of Ford investments in housing and community development sought to create new housing-focused institutions, JCR sought to empower grassroots, power-building organizations and, crucially, to encourage new kinds of coalitions — or tables — among them and new kinds of leadership within them.



Image courtesy of Hester Street



JCR Strategy in Action and Impact

Image courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

While race, place, and power were the anchors of JCR's strategy, it pursued its work within the particular context of Ford, including a leadership-initiated shift towards a renewed focus on housing, the announcement of JCR's four-year sunset and stepped-down annual budget starting in 2017,⁶ and a shifting national landscape.

JCR elevated BIPOC-led work and organizations, power-building from the community level up, the building out and strengthening of the ecosystem of networked, multi-issue (yet housing-focused) community and advocacy infrastructure, and work that tackled multiple dimensions of power, from political to narrative. Tracking an interest to contest and shift away from a strategy focused on market mechanisms/market interventions, JCR also pursued work to pilot and scale alternative models of development that codified real community control.

Hallmarks of JCR's grantmaking, reflective of this strategy, include:⁷

1. National networks of grassroots, power-building organizations. JCR increased funding to national networks that support state and local-focused housing justice, advocacy, and organizing, and knit that locally-grounded work into the roots of a national movement. Further, in light of the sunset, resourcing national networks enabled support for local work without the risk of destabilizing disruption come 2021. Emblematic grantees of this line include **Right to the City** (with a central focus on more radical, housing-focused work), **Partnership for Working Families** (with a theory of the role of cities in advancing economic democracy), and the **Homes Guarantee** Campaign.
2. Community-ownership pilots and “bluer sky” experiments. Community land trusts and other models of community or public ownership had begun in prior eras of Ford housing work. With a central commitment to hardwiring community control, JCR continued to fund experiments with community land trusts and other models of community ownership during the sunset years.⁸

3. Strengthening the ecosystem. JCR took a broader view of strengthening the overall ecosystem towards durable power building. For example, JCR was an anchor funder of **Local Progress**, a national network of local elected officials, which supports trans-jurisdictional multi-issue housing-focused organizing and policy innovation by its members, as well as developing a vision and practice of co-governance between impacted communities and public officials across issues.

4. Supporting strategic organizing within philanthropy. In addition to its direct grantmaking to the field, JCR directed resources and attention to cross-philanthropy efforts to leverage resources to housing justice, organizing, and power-building by BIPOC communities. For example, JCR invested seed funding for the **Amplify Fund**, **HouseUS**, **Greater New Orleans Funders Network**, and **Neighborhoods First Fund**. These funder collaboratives are critical both to leveraging investments on housing issues beyond JCR's sunset, and as models of philanthropic practice that centers race, power building, and systems change within their work.

5. Supporting movement-aligned technical assistance, policy, and legal expertise with grantees such as **Grounded Solutions**, **Center for Community Progress**, and **Public Advocates**.

As noted at the outset, JCR's full-fledged theory of change and strategy were never fully implemented to start, nor afforded a time-horizon long enough to evaluate its full potential impact or missed opportunities. And yet, there are three core contributions to the field that warrant exploration and elevation:

1. Stronger, networked ecosystems to win and anchor durable change
2. A vision and roadmap for equitable recovery; and
3. A strengthened approach to narrative strategy.

Ecosystem-Generated “Wins”: Durable Infrastructure & Power in (and across) Place

JCR grantees helped generate some marquee housing advancements of recent years, from New York State rent laws⁹ by the Upstate/Downstate coalition, to the right to counsel for tenants facing eviction in New York City,¹⁰ to the end of single family zoning in Minneapolis,¹¹ and more. These “wins” are often held up because of the impact of the victory itself — reshaping the balance of power between tenants and landlords, and ensuring more inclusive development.

Recent federal-level policy changes are reflective of the shifts that JCR, and MOU before, helped galvanize in the field. Ford’s focus on bridging issue silos (integrating public health and housing justice work, for example) and supporting grassroots constituency building and organizing by impacted tenants on the ground helped set the stage for the historic COVID-era moratorium on evictions decreed by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Ford grantees were instrumental in elevating an eviction moratorium as a viable policy intervention — an idea that just a few years ago was far from the mainstream. For example, the work of the Miami Workers Center¹² and Community Justice Project on eviction moratoria after disasters positioned them, and others in New York, Missouri, California, and Illinois (grantees of Ford and HouseUS), to galvanize action for federal action during COVID. Similarly, the national housing playbook that JCR supported lifted up eviction moratoria as critical in the face of disasters.¹³ These diverse streams of work, seeded over many years, were crucial to providing momentum, a political constituency, and the foundation to win the ground-breaking federal action.

Similarly, the COVID-era upsurge of private equity/corporate landlords in the rental housing market,¹⁴ and subsequent public attention and organizing, also has seeds in Ford’s decades-long work, begun in the post-2008 foreclosure crisis when Ford supported community

organizing, advocacy, and creative strategies¹⁵ to protect tenants and affordable housing from predation.

Less visible, however, are the ways in which these advancements are “proofs of concept” of core elements of JCR’s strategy. Founded in 2017, Housing Justice for All is a New York State-wide movement of tenants and homeless New Yorkers fighting for housing as a human right. The movement has been anchored by the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance, a diverse coalition of organizations across New York City and, crucially, the state as a *whole*,¹⁶ disrupting the traditional critique that housing is a “city-only” problem. The seeds of Upstate-Downstate were, in many ways, sown in the MOU-era when Ford convened metro-region-wide organizations. While what the alliances hoped for then (in particular, a bridge between fair housing advocates and grassroots organizations focused on anti-displacement and community revitalization fights) did not take root, the work did help participating organizations see more clearly the need and opportunities possible with state-wide networked infrastructure. City-based Ford grantees such as Make the Road New York and Community Voices Heard built bases and organizing outside the city. And cross-state relationships took root in ways that bore fruit as the Upstate-Downstate Housing Alliance.

Crucially, the communities most affected by housing injustice and instability led the campaigns that Upstate-Downstate drives and fosters. This approach and framework explicitly supports community power building that is bolstered by durable infrastructure and deep, authentic relationships and networks.

Grantees’ decades of organizing, base building, public education, organizational expansion, networking, and relationship building led to the passage of the Housing Stability and Tenant Protection Act of 2019. The statewide legislation provides for rent stabilization across the state, makes it hard for landlords to deregulate apartments, curtails previously-allowed rent hikes and loopholes, and provides legal protections for residents of mobile home communities. These are game-changing — period. But they also signal a real shift of power within New York State, where upstate/downstate

divisions have historically undermined statewide reforms, and powerful real estate and finance interests have an outsized influence in shaping state housing and development policies.

These types of scaled, durable change included three key elements: a vision and practice of building towards *co-governance* (not just policy wins); the ability to imagine and drive towards *new possible futures*; and stronger, more networked place-anchored *infrastructure*.

Co-Governance

JCR’s strategy sought to shift and reshape the typical inside/outside dynamic, and the often “only adversarial” stance of grassroots groups to those within government. JCR recognized that systemic, scaled change that endures requires a deeper, long-term, and dynamic relationship between those within public office and impacted, largely BIPOC communities on the “outside.” Often called “*co-governance*,” JCR supported grantees at the forefront of building and testing new models for co-governance in practice, including Make the Road New York, the Texas Organizing Project, Local Progress, and others. Indeed, JCR’s seed BUILD funding for Local Progress laid the foundation for Ford’s broader engagement with

Local Progress as central to our civic engagement and government strategy and US states programming. The newly-launched public housing network will be another locus of work to explore and expand co-governance, supporting public housing residents to engage directly with governments and housing authorities to reimagine and create a new model of social housing for this country. Notably, the attention to co-governance by JCR has taken broader root within Ford, in collaboration with the states line of work, and Ford’s Civic Engagement and Government Program (which centers co-governance within its strategy).

Imagining New Futures

JCR’s support for the multi-author national housing playbook published by Community Change¹⁷ represents another key contribution to the field. The playbook captured and elevated more than 400 concrete policy ideas for game-changing advances in the housing justice field. The playbook focused squarely on reimagining federal government leadership, coming after decades of inaction in the face of worsening conditions. As the authors noted, “It is time for a transformative federal

housing agenda that not only reasserts the federal role in housing, but also fundamentally reframes and reimagines that role to be centered on racial equity, increasing opportunity, and guaranteeing homes for all.” The vision and ideas gained traction within the new federal administration, where leading advocates and thinkers from civil society (including some interviewed for this report) are now on the inside, exploring how to move these ideas to action.

Strengthening and Scaling Ecosystem Infrastructure

Finally, JCR generated significant and durable impacts in the ecosystem infrastructure that will long outlast the program itself. Notably, JCR succeeded at leveraging investments from other sources within the Foundation, including from the \$1B social bond initiative, which significantly enabled JCR staff to invest in shared philanthropic and field infrastructure that would extend beyond JCR's programmatic sunset.

In addition to the funder collaboratives noted above, Ford's work also helped seed longer-term organizing and collaborative infrastructure in the housing field directly, such as the the *Alliance for Housing Justice*, a table organized by Public Advocates, Right to the City, and PolicyLink that includes both traditional civil rights organizations and the organizing networks to coordinate and build cross-cutting housing justice strategy.

During its final years, JCR has been instrumental in seeding the soon-to-launch *National Public + Social Housing Network*, an independent network to transform public housing anchored by public housing residents and non-profit and community-based organizations. The Network will aim to frame a collective vision,

narrative, and agenda for housing as a fundamental public good decoupled from market pressures; share and disseminate tools, advocacy tactics, and strategies while supporting local leadership through capacity building and training that centers racial justice, resident control, power, and co-governance; and build a broader, stronger constituency for systemic change. JCR was critical to the launch of the Network and to securing a commitment of three years of seed funding from Ford's social bond initiative.

Thus, the kinds of “wins” JCR's grantees helped secure in the JCR era are reflective both of organizing, infrastructure building work prior to JCR (in particular, under MOU), as well a focus on the less overt, explicit building blocks for durable change: a vision of co-governance, of bold imagination of what is possible, and the networked infrastructure at the local, state, and federal level that can win and implement such change. While these lessons are central to JCR's work on housing justice, they are of course relevant and necessary for progress on the range of social justice issues well beyond housing itself.

Donor Organizing

When JCR's exit from the field was announced in 2018, program staff intensified efforts to shift funder behavior and to align diverse philanthropic efforts around a shared vision of racial and social justice. Three significant efforts to influence national philanthropic practice by encouraging the intentional centering of race, place, and power as a path to equity for all as articulated by JCR.

As the following section on Equitable Recovery makes clear, many of the lessons that JCR program staff learned in New Orleans inspired new coalitions, specifically

lessons about how to build out a philanthropic infrastructure to support the mobilization of powerful constituencies led by the people most affected by housing insecurity.

In New Orleans in 2015, Ford, along with other national and local funders who had been engaged in recovery work in the city and region since Katrina, formed the Greater New Orleans Funders Network (“GNOFN”), launched at the 10th anniversary of Katrina. They launched the network to at once express their continued commitment

to the region and develop an impactful funding structure that would continue to attract new resources to the region. Ford staff were founding members of the network, held advisory board seats, and co-chaired the Equitable Development Action Table in the years since, providing thought partnership and collaboration with a wide range of funders working on issues related to housing, criminal justice reform, opportunity youth, climate justice, and mass incarceration/criminal justice reform. The founders put an initial three-year time horizon on GNOFN, vowing to evaluate if the Network was indeed attracting resources and fostering collaboration (and vowing to gracefully disband if not). They commissioned an assessment which affirmed these goals, and have remained in operation since, having grown from about ten initial members to over 35.

Later, in the context of JCR's sunset, the team once again leaned into collaborative work organizing the national funder landscape; two significant examples include the Amplify Fund and, more recently, HouseUS. Founded in 2016 and housed at Neighborhood Funders Group, the Amplify Fund is funder collaborative that "supports Black, Indigenous, people of color and low-income communities to build power and to influence decisions about the places they live and work. Amplify centers racial justice and believes in following the wisdom and guidance of local leaders."¹⁸ Launched in 2020 and based at Amalgamated Foundation, HouseUS fosters basebuilding, movement infrastructure, and working towards systemic change at the federal level. It too centers the experience and leadership of people of color and impacted communities in its efforts to build and support the national movement for housing justice. Both projects have targeted specific states in which to fund projects,¹⁹ which may point to sector-wide recognition of the importance of state politics to the housing justice movement.

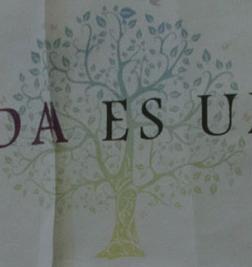
Another more nascent example is the Organizing Resilience initiative,²⁰ supported with a significant infusion of resources from JCR's final budget, with the aspiration that Ford's vision of supporting long-term

equitable recovery over short-term crisis intervention will continue to leverage philanthropic resources into durable power building in some of the most at-risk communities in the country. The project has three goals: to shift funder behavior, to foster networks among movement leaders in disaster areas, and to document best practices around coalitions between movement leaders and elected officials. JCR program staff understood that shifting funder behavior requires promoting the alignment of funders and movement leaders in post-disaster areas to fund more equitably, to support more movement work, and to center racial justice and long-term recovery. To foster useful networks among movement leaders will allow for the sharing of best practices, strategies, and policy reform ideas. And the identification of where such leaders have made successful partnerships with government leaders will surface what they will need when they go to City Hall after a disaster with demands. They need to be better prepared than the disaster capitalists, and that preparation requires support and knowledge sharing.



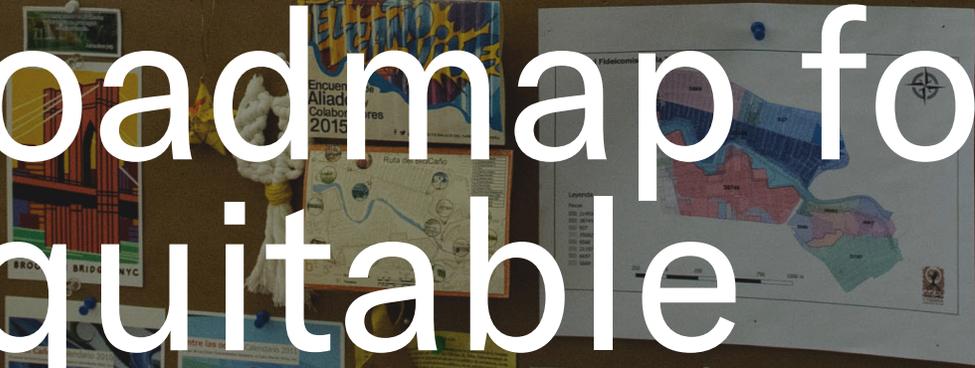
Image courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

“LA VIVIENDA ES UN DERECHO HUMANO”



A Vision and Roadmap for Equitable Recovery

¡PERO QUE FLUYE EL DERECHO COMUNITARIO, Y LA JUSTICIA COMO IMAGINABLE!



ÁREA DE VIVIENDA
Rochelymar, Damián, Mozart, Jennifer
PLAN DE TRABAJO SEMESTRAL
AF 2020-21
ENE-JUN



Equitable Recovery Work

Equitable recovery work is the work of building a more just and resilient community.

It is the work of ensuring that all people have the opportunity to thrive.

It is the work of ensuring that all people have the opportunity to participate in the recovery process.

It is the work of ensuring that all people have the opportunity to build a better future.

It is the work of ensuring that all people have the opportunity to live in a safe and healthy community.

It is the work of ensuring that all people have the opportunity to have a voice in the recovery process.

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The experience in New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in particular provided a crucible for a new approach to philanthropic intervention and generated lessons that directly informed JCR's overall strategy. Years before JCR articulated its theory of change and strategies, the Foundation's investments in equitable recovery work centered race, place, and power. As such, this work became key to building a case for investing in durable, community-anchored infrastructure, BIPOC leadership, and a networked movement ecosystem that transcended issue siloes. In this way, Ford's equitable recovery work is best understood as both a strand of JCR's DNA and as an evolving and central component of the JCR line of work itself.

Hurricane Katrina laid bare what disinvested communities of color across the nation already knew: the racial inequalities in the American economic system are manifest in the built environment and exacerbate inequality. The development of public housing and informal settlements in flood-prone or other vulnerable geographies, disproportionate homeownership rates by race, gentrification, and displacement, disinvestment in and over-policing of neighborhoods of color, and segregated, underfunded, and underperforming schools – all are the result of deeply entrenched systems that seed, maneuver, and maintain inequality. The storm's impacts were felt most acutely among low-income Black New Orleanians, who disproportionately lost lives, homes, and jobs, were less likely to receive FEMA aid, and were therefore least likely to recover from the storm. To address these conditions, Ford program staff reasoned, philanthropic efforts should not be about mitigating the effects of storm damage to return the Gulf Coast to a pre-storm status quo. Rather, they should be about changing those structurally racist systems by harnessing federal resources while also building robust political infrastructure on the ground.

Therefore, in the aftermath of Katrina, Ford flipped the traditional script (funding emergency needs – water, food, blankets, temporary housing) and instead invested in long-term recovery, resilience, and movement

infrastructure. By addressing the key systems driving inequality – housing, education, job security, and criminal justice – and strengthening the ecosystem of community actors positioned to cultivate long-term social resilience, Ford committed to a longer investment time horizon and focused on supporting leaders and fostering coalitions, and on building power and confronting racial inequities. These initial investments were seeded from Ford's Gulf Coast Transformation Initiative, a cross-program effort anchored by Linetta Gilbert with the support of then program manager, Jerry Maldonado..

With deep experience in post-Katrina New Orleans before coming to the Ford Foundation, program staff member Jacqueline Burton, in particular, was able to articulate the urgency of collaborating across issue silos and foregrounding how housing insecurity is a key driver of gender, racial, and ethnic inequality. Hopefully, the experience of this equitable recovery work will remind future program officers that housing insecurity is also a galvanizing on-ramp to civic engagement and a critical factor in envisioning a more equitable future of work.

Notably, this work was taking root during an era of successive strategy refreshes within Ford between 2008 and 2014. And while the reorganizations and realignments complicated efforts Foundation-wide to match coherent theories of change with actionable strategies, the work in New Orleans stood out for proving the case: centering race, place, and power works. The Gulf Coast work set precedents within the Foundation in how program officers were working together across program areas and issue silos. Since then, JCR has maintained this interdisciplinary, cross-issue ethos, reflected in more recent work in New Orleans and Puerto Rico and has influenced how the US States Working Group operates.

For example, although HousingNOLA was initially set up as a short-term initiative of Foundation For Louisiana, the convened network of affordable housing advocates, residents, and nonprofit organizations decided to develop into a robust, 10-year initiative, poised to listen to community and partner with local electeds to assess and address the city's housing needs.

“Housing has to do with the centrality of human dignity. It also has to do with a claim about belonging, the right to stay and the right to return.”

Human Rights Lawyer Ariadna Godreau

JCR’s support enabled HousingNOLA to grow into the robust organization it is today (in fact, it has evolved into HousingLouisiana, addressing housing statewide). Instead of viewing this crisis through a traditional housing development lens, HousingNOLA brings a deeply community-informed, racial and social justice lens to bear. This approach means seeing the city’s challenges holistically; the housing crisis is inextricable from the infrastructure crisis, the education crisis, the criminal justice crisis, etc. And this, in turn, means shifting towards movement infrastructure, community organizing, and collaborative policy work with local elected officials. At the same time, other New Orleans nonprofits that had previously received Ford funding were not oriented towards community engagement and did not pivot towards positive contributions to a movement-building ecosystem. Refocusing grantmaking on groups that understood the need for BIPOC leadership and a commitment to movement-building within New Orleans — and seeing the fruits of that effort — helped to prove JCR’s theory of change.

In Puerto Rico, a revealing example of the kind of organization that typifies the shift Ford has made in recent years towards advocacy, activism, and systems work is *Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico* (“ALPR”). Ayuda Legal is a dynamic and ambitious pro-bono legal services organization committed to empowering Puerto Ricans, launched by human rights lawyer Ariadna Godreau within 24 hours of Hurricane Maria’s landfall. According to Godreau, housing is a central focus because “housing has to do with the centrality of human dignity. It also has to do with a claim about belonging, the right to stay and the right to return.” In addition to supporting tenants in eviction court and other traditional legal aid services, the organization also prioritizes impact litigation to highlight structural inequality embedded in

the territory’s colonial status and the predatory lending that has bankrupted the government. ALPR also led a successful legal advocacy campaign to get FEMA to stop requiring formal home titles to receive disaster aid — instead, a sworn statement can now be used. Ayuda Legal is also an important example of the kind of multi-issue group that has a good chance of continuing to attract support from national philanthropy even in the absence of a national philanthropic leader in the housing space. JCR’s impact in the realm of disaster recovery goes beyond any one grantee and lifts up the importance of strengthening networks between grantee organizations and among philanthropy and elected officials.

Ford’s equitable recovery work has generated both significant impacts in the geographies in which Ford worked as well as broader shifts in how philanthropy understands and approaches intervention in moments of crisis. These impacts are visible in changes to:

1. How public money is spent in post-disaster spaces
2. How donors come together in these spaces, and
3. How local groups on the ground are able to share lessons and strategies.

Redirecting Public Resources

In terms of redirecting public resources to vulnerable communities in need, an important example can be found in Harris County, Texas. Chrishelle Palay leads the *Houston Organizing Movement for Equity* (“HOME”) and previously worked at Texas Housers, a JCR and MOU grantee. Through long-term community organizing and advocacy with elected officials, HOME was able to convince Harris County officials to reverse the traditional formula for allocating expenditure on flood protection. According to the *New York Times*, “Governments have long used a simple concept, cost-benefit analysis, to decide where to focus money on flood protection: Spend it where property values are higher, for the best return on investment.

However, that puts poorer minority areas at a disadvantage. And it feeds a cycle of decline as flooding returns again and again.”²¹ The year after Hurricane Harvey resulted in unprecedented levels of flooding in 2017, Harris County voters approved a \$2.5 billion bond measure to fund hundreds of flood-control projects. When county commission’s leadership changed in 2018, HOME’s advocacy convinced them to change course: “Instead of prioritizing spending to protect the most valuable property, which benefited wealthier and whiter areas, they decided to instead prioritize disadvantaged neighborhoods that would have the hardest time recovering, including communities of color.”²²

New Jersey provides another example. The *Fair Share Housing Center* (“FSHC”) is a fair housing legal nonprofit founded in 1975 to support the enforcement of the Mount Laurel Doctrine, a landmark judicial ruling that requires that municipalities use their zoning powers affirmatively towards the production of affordable housing. The organization has since evolved into the leading public interest voice of low- and moderate-income households in New Jersey with regard to local housing policies and civil rights. After the devastation wrought by Superstorm Sandy in 2012, FSHC and its

partners used litigation to force the state of New Jersey to “channel federal resources for rebuilding in ways that advanced the cause of integration and expanded opportunities for communities of color and low-income communities.” The landmark \$240 million settlement that FSHC negotiated with the Christie administration (on behalf of the NAACP and Latino Action Network) inspired the Obama administration to issue guidelines that “apply federal civil rights laws to state and local governments that receive federal funding to recover from disasters.”²³ While FSHC remains focussed on maintaining New Jersey as the national standard-bearer in fair housing rules, in 2017, the organization also dedicated efforts to work with “peer organizations in Florida, Texas, and Puerto Rico to ensure implementation of the reforms to the disaster recovery process... pioneered in New Jersey and reinforced by federal civil rights guidance issues in 2016.”²⁴

“Instead of prioritizing spending to protect the most valuable property, which benefited wealthier and whiter areas, they decided [to] prioritize disadvantaged neighborhoods that would have the hardest time recovering, including communities of color.”

Houston Organizing Movement for Equity

Network Building

Organizing Resilience, described above as an example of JCR’s efforts in donor organizing, recognizes the importance of establishing a robust network among local groups in different locations. And, again, the recognition of the need for this type of soft support draws from lessons learned first in New Orleans and repeated in subsequent disasters over the past fifteen years. The deep relationships that Ford program staff were able to build in New Orleans over years revealed the extent to which long-term trust-building is essential to success in particular locations with highly specific political cultures. Similar lessons about the importance of non-grantmaking activities — investing time in building trust, understanding institutional and political cultures, and fostering networked collaboration across issues and locales — came up again and again: in New Jersey after Superstorm Sandy; Texas after Hurricanes Dolly, Ike, and Harvey; and Puerto Rico after Hurricane Maria. And just as important as the nuances of each of these highly specific contexts are what they can learn from each other’s experiences. So JCR program officers looked for opportunities for grantees to spend time together and share stories and strategies. Sometimes this meant paying for plane tickets and hotels. And sometimes it meant encouraging national policy-focused groups to solicit the input of movement groups and community organizers and then encouraging informal discussion outside of official events and meetings. Small grants to organizations that are willing and able to help convene cohorts of place-based grantees working in post-disaster areas can help to formalize these types of network building activities.

In this way, national foundations can meaningfully engage with local circumstances while simultaneously scaling up the potential for national impact. Indeed, JCR’s strategic use of Ford’s convening power was repeatedly flagged in interviews across sectors and geographies. For example, in Puerto Rico, JCR helped stand up *Filantropía Puerto Rico* (“FPR”), a philanthropy-serving organization (PSO) which connects, convenes, and advises foundations and donors who have an interest in Puerto Rico. Prior to JCR’s involvement, FPR was not explicitly focused on social justice, and JCR program staff helped them reframe their mission and helped them launch and run several fundraising campaigns. This example typifies how JCR created the conditions for this diverse set of actors to work together to steer grantmaking towards longer-term advocacy and structural change instead of focusing too narrowly on emergency relief. JCR also funded most of the housing advocacy, strategic litigation, and technical assistance work on the island. And it helped to create an ecosystem of organizations working on policy advocacy for housing justice issues on the island. One example is FPR’s Housing and Land Action Dialogue, which convenes funders and networks of elected officials (like *La Liga de Alcaldes*, a non-partisan mayors’ network) to examine land tenure and titling issues.

Janice Petrovich, a former Ford program officer who helped start *Filantropía Puerto Rico*, reported that, for years, US foundations have ignored Puerto Rico, and that philanthropy on the island is nascent and traditional. JCR’s work with this organization in many ways typifies

how JCR has — in several different places — leveraged Ford’s heft and profile to encourage disparate players to collaborate with each other.

It also meant opening doors for local practitioners and advocates on the ground to learn from each other. For example, Ford sent some of their grantees from Puerto Rico to learn from grantees in New Orleans about Katrina recovery work, and to Detroit to learn about municipal bankruptcy work. Again, this kind of network support is crucial to building out a thriving ecosystem of local actors, learning from each other, connecting the dots between systems and their on-the-ground manifestations, and developing cross-sectoral and multi-jurisdictional partnerships. Concretely, such networks are actively collaborating to think about national level changes to disaster recovery systems informed by their on-the-ground experiences and how to influence the national narrative around disasters as racial and climate justice issues.

This has had ripple effects on ongoing coalition and disaster recovery work, most notably in this post-COVID pandemic period. While most Foundation teams have engaged in more traditional recovery work related to the coronavirus pandemic, JCR is building on their historic work related to environmental disasters. One particularly compelling manifestation of the hurricane recovery cum pandemic recovery is the Louisiana Power Coalition for Equity and Justice, the state’s flagship statewide multi-issue civic engagement table around which about a dozen advocacy groups sit and their 2021 Roadmap to Recovery that “outlines opportunities for policy changes, investments, and community shifts that could lead to more equitable communities.”

Ashley Shelton, the Executive Director of the Power Coalition and Ford grantee, states, “As someone that has spent a good part of my career doing disaster recovery, the impact of COVID-19 is no different: housing and food insecurity, job loss, education, or child care issues.” She goes on to say about the Roadmap to Recovery, “this is a generation in the making... We have an opportunity

right now to be creative in our approach... (to) activate an equitable recovery, and create systems and policies that help Louisiana move towards a just future.”

In many ways, this remarkable arc — from Ford-funded local groups focused on post-Katrina relief to a powerful, state-wide coalition taking the lessons learned from 2005 to confront the post-COVID moment and challenge all of the systems that drive inequality — points to the success of the equitable recovery work, and to JCR’s strategy overall. JCR has successfully seeded the infrastructure for communities of color and other vulnerable communities to withstand the next crisis, to network across jurisdiction, and to work together on policy reform to mitigate the effects of future disasters.

After JCR’s sunset, equitable recovery will continue to be an area of philanthropic interest that cuts across issue siloes, weaving together climate change, housing, public health, migration, infrastructure, and civil rights. As such, the ways that Ford has invested in equitable recovery work offers powerful lessons for creating national impact in redressing inequality through a dedicated focus on centering race, place, and power.



Narrative Strategy: Expanding the View of What's Possible

Image courtesy of Brandon BMike Odums for Studio B

A recurring theme in the Ford Foundation's long history in the housing and community development space is that efforts to ameliorate the effects of racial and socioeconomic inequality in the built environment have often prioritized compensatory moves to correct for the harms that the real estate industry — including private actors and public policies — has inflicted on poor communities.

Until JCR, these efforts have not tried to build a counterweight within those communities to make *transformational* moves to rewrite the rules of the market. And part of the reason why this last step was never made until recently has to do with our internalized beliefs about housing as a commodity, our inherited notions about the predominance of market logic more broadly, and longstanding public policies that have enabled and reified both. Another way to define the common ground undergirding these beliefs and policies is as a narrative.

To evolve from compensatory to transformational interventions, then, requires *changing the narrative*. Narrative change has been a buzzword in social justice movements since at least 2016, and in different contexts it has variously referred to a renewed focus on strategic communication, refocusing journalistic coverage, political campaign messaging, the integration of art and storytelling into community organizing and social change work, and the embedding of social justice advocates in the production of popular culture (especially TV and film). Narrative change practice encompasses all of these things. But at its heart is the belief that “the practice of analyzing harmful narratives and framing visionary alternatives provides a fundamental tool for changing what people think and understand, what they feel, and what they do about social concerns,” according to Leila Feister. Feister worked with the JCR program to document its ambitious Rise-Home Stories Project, which is one of several distinct ways that JCR sought to promote narrative change work within the housing and community development space.

One of JCR’s major contributions to the housing and community development field has been its support for community organizing as a means to build advocacy power among individuals and groups experiencing housing insecurity. This shift towards fostering the development of movement infrastructure has been a long time in coming to the Ford Foundation’s work in community development. It draws on earlier eras of community consultation and stakeholder engagement but departs from them by sharpening the focus to center

and empower the people most affected by public policy and the downstream effects of the inequitable housing market. JCR’s theory of change asserted the importance of building a constituency to demand that change. And while the major components of community organizing praxis have remained constant since Saul Alinsky codified them in the 1940s, the swift uptake of narrative change tactics reveals how the toolset of movement building is growing and changing. Philanthropy should be at the forefront of supporting the emergence and expansion of tools for empowerment.

Across the spectrum of power-building within social movements, new awareness of the importance of investing in narrative change has led social justice organizations to rethink their strategies of messaging, communications, and outreach, as well as the role of art and culture in their work. No longer is strategic communication an outsourced end-stage part of a campaign, but rather, increasingly, a fundamental and internal part of organizing for structural change. And no longer can activists ignore the way that media portrays the issues they work on — whether through the language journalists use or the way media portrays poor communities of color. JCR grantees are no exception to this trend, and in many ways have been leading the way on how to shift public perception about housing insecurity through a strategic approach to narrative.



Image courtesy of Rise-Home Stories for Dot's Home

For example, the Right to the City Alliance describes itself as “a movement building formation that is engaged centrally around power building, organizing, direct organizing of impacted communities” with a national focus on “land and housing justice.” In our interview, Dawn Phillips told us that in order to do its work — and to support the work of more than 80 member groups in their network — “Strategic communication cannot be a standalone effort. Strategic communications is a component of powerbuilding strategy.”

Narrative change work includes and also goes beyond strategic communications, of course. It touches on every aspect of championing over-the-horizon policy ideas and making them feasible. In internal reflections on strategy, JCR distinguishes between strategic communication and narrative change work in important ways:

Strategic communications

A traditional form of media and/or advocacy ‘messaging’ work designed to achieve a particular end (e.g., policy change, behavior shift). Usually short-term, on a tangible timeline, and linked to a discrete campaign and narrowly defined constituency. Operates on a broad, conscious level. Strategic and tactical, often with quantifiably measurable outcomes (e.g., wins/losses, number of supporters). Can operate within a narrative framework, but does not always do so.

Narrative change

A long-term effort (even multi-generational), cyclical, and ongoing effort to get diverse audiences to understand and embrace the narrative being expressed, with the goal of shifting paradigms and discourse over time. Disseminated through culture, media, community, law, and policy. Operates at a more subconscious level than strategic communications. Uses complex storytelling and public engagement as an end in and of itself. Can be messy and hard to measure quantifiably.

Strategic communications and narrative change are distinct but can overlap and work in concert.²⁵

One example of how this emergent area of practice is professionalizing itself is an organization called the Narrative Initiative (founded with seed funding from Ford leadership) which shares best practices and fosters new collaborations to “make equity and social justice common sense.” The very existence of such an organization demonstrates both the speed at which social justice organizations are incorporating this type of work into their core competencies and the need for shared definitions and identifiable strategies in order to do so effectively. The organization’s website describes its origin story as “sparked by the recognition that pervasive and systemic narratives define our personal and collective identities, inform our values, animate our popular culture and influence our politics.” With this framing, policy change can only be possible when the narrative; indeed, the paradigm, shifts. And that requires hard work and resources. Rashad Robinson, Executive Director of the powerful civil rights organization Color of Change, goes further: distinguishing between the transformational possibilities that narrative change can deliver and the tools and process to make those possibilities into reality. He writes, “Narrative power is the ability to change the norms and rules our society lives by. Narrative infrastructure is the set of systems we maintain in order to do that reliably over time.”²⁶

Structural change in the housing and community development sector seems especially limited by its adherence to such ‘norms and rules’ because of the ways in which American culture and its economic and political orthodoxy treats housing as a commodity subject to the laws of supply and demand. Since so much of professionalized housing and community development work has sought to expand the opportunities for capital to flow to poor communities or to increase homeownership rates among poor households, there has not been a lot of effort into questioning hardwired ideas like the role of private property and homeownership in the American Dream, for example. Other fields advocating for systemic change and social justice have proven more adept at integrating narrative change techniques than the housing space has.

“Narrative power is the ability to change the norms and rules our society lives by. Narrative infrastructure is the set of systems we maintain in order to do that reliably over time.”

Rashad Robinson, Executive Director of Color of Change

Tara Raghuvver, Campaign Director for the Homes Guarantee, cited the work of the National Domestic Workers’ Alliance as a powerful example of a social justice organization using narrative strategies to shift the culture — in that case, to make the precarity of domestic workers *visible* through strategic partnerships with the entertainment industry, dedicating staff time and resources to help TV producers and screenwriters to “ensure the storylines of misrepresented and underrepresented communities are accurate, timely, and authentically reflect the world they live in.”²⁷

Raghuvver spoke of the need to shift the entire paradigm of how we think about housing justice specifically in terms of constituency building: building a political identity among tenants. Narrative change, for her, is key to articulating “political unity among those who are tenants, plus the unhoused, plus working class homeowners...this is the political class of tenants for whom we are seeking justice.” In her analysis, the ways in which profiteers of racial capitalism have sold a narrative that pits renters and working class property owners against one another — and decoupled their struggles from those of public housing residents and the unhoused — has impeded the building of a national housing movement. So that narrative needs to change.

Her vision is compelling. And yet, with notable exceptions like Philips and Raghuvver, among others,

leaders in the housing field have been slow adopters of narrative change strategies.

Within JCR, the idea of supporting narrative change work within the housing and community development space dates back to 2014, when Amy Kenyon joined all program staff working in the US in a collective brainstorming exercise that sought to name the drivers of inequality. She described the moment of recognition that pernicious narratives maintain the dominance of market logic, white supremacy, and scarcity as a revelation that led her to a “complete mindset shift.” Two years later, she co-led a two-day retreat that helped to galvanize support within the foundation for supporting narrative change work, and to develop the idea of a capacity-building cohort of grantees that brought culture producers into collaborative efforts with advocates. Reflecting on the rationale for this approach, she writes, as part of JCR’s “goal of building political will to end housing insecurity, we have supported work that makes visible the norms and paradigms that underpin society’s dominant narratives about land and homes. Overall I have come to understand my role in philanthropy as working to make visible how our collective relationship to land and development (our “built environment”) impacts both community and individual well-being.”²⁸

This support has taken a few different forms.

Commissioned Research

JCR commissioned original research by the cognitive linguist Anat Shenker-Osorio, who adapted her methodology from the influential Race-Class Narrative Project²⁹ to analyze the language used in the press and by housing advocates and policymakers. Her

findings centered on the over-reliance on passive voice constructions when characterizing housing insecurity. For example, she cites the following sentence as indicative of a tendency “to name problems without naming how they came to be.” Instead of “[State] is *experiencing an*

affordable housing crisis, and entire communities of color that have been in the city for decades are being displaced to make way for fancy new high-rise apartments” an active construction would be “[State] lawmakers are helping to force out entire communities of color from their long-standing neighborhoods in order to hand over unrestricted profits to corporate developers building high rise apartments and contributing handsomely to their campaigns.”

Journalism

The press obviously plays an enormous role in perpetuating the dominant narratives that define and constrict what popular perception deems possible. Supporting in-depth journalism on complex issues is an important step on the path to realizing a changed narrative. JCR supported Renaissance Journalism,³⁰ a nonprofit dedicated to inspiring “journalists to expand — and to even rethink — their reporting and storytelling practices and how they frame complex issues.” The grant enabled Renaissance Journalism to conduct three roundtable discussions with community-based organizations and local journalists in Pittsburgh, San

Antonio, and Fresno. The white paper they produced to reflect on those efforts identified the three primary pitfalls that hamper journalists’ ability to accurately represent the crisis of housing insecurity:

1. Tunnel vision and oversimplification of complex issues
2. Reducing sources to stereotypical or scripted characters; and
3. Reliance on the market narrative.³¹

Narrative Shift Project: Rise-Home Stories

JCR’s boldest investment in narrative change moves beyond the traditions of commissioned reports or seed grants to nonprofits already steeped in storytelling. After a training period of more than a year, in which JCR staff learned more about narrative work, JCR identified a capacity-building cohort of grantees, drawn from issue-based organizations, who would convene periodically over a two year period and make work together in collaboration with a group of multimedia storytellers. The cohort eventually decided to produce a video game, an animated web series, a childrens’ book, podcast, and interactive website, all of which challenged our inherited narratives about race, place, and power as they relate to housing insecurity. Together, these five products are called the *Rise-Home Stories Project*.

The cohort model was a departure from the traditional practice of working with individual grantee organizations on a 1:1 basis, as was the decision for the project to be led by a filmmaker who works on social justice issues, Luisa Dantas, as opposed to a strategic communications firm. Participating organizations received a stipend and committed more than one staff person to the cohort to ensure the work would build capacity within the organizations. A significant pool of money (about \$3 million over four years) was controlled by the project director rather than program officers, making access to resources more agile and responsive to dynamic needs over the four year period. Notably, Ford staff did not exert editorial oversight or impose traditional reporting requirements, which freed the cohort to make

experimental work that many participants reported to be both creatively energizing as well as impactful. The resulting projects have been recognized with prestigious prizes and screenings. And the ways in which they will influence the development of the institutional cultures and core competencies of the participating organizations will continue to unfold for years to come.

The Rise-Home Stories Project presented an affirmative vision of what it could look like to produce new narratives about land, race, and housing. Thematically as well as methodologically, this approach presents opportunities for philanthropy to consider new ways to invest in narrative change. But philanthropic support should also maintain a parallel focus on diagnosing the existing paradigms that govern behavior and constrain public imagination about solutions to housing insecurity. What Renaissance Journalism pointed to as the third pitfall — reliance on the market narrative — gets to the heart of the challenge in envisioning the realization of housing justice. If we continue to portray housing — in our journalism, popular culture, and political messaging — as a commodity whose prices reflect supply and demand, then achieving something like a homes guarantee becomes impossible and a cause for despair. That narrative, that understanding, has influenced Ford's work in the housing and community development sector through most of its history. And it has led to what some have characterized as palliative fixes to the inequitable private market instead of bolder moves for structural changes to the system.

As JCR has shifted away from the framing of housing as an asset and towards one of housing as a human right, the kinds of movement building organizations that align with JCR's theory of change have increasingly adopted a language of abolition (adapted from the decarceration movement) and complete system reform. In order for that kind of language to power real change, we first need a paradigm shift in how we think about housing. The ways that Ford has supported narrative change indicate a future where community organizing to build power among the housing insecure is paired with coordinated

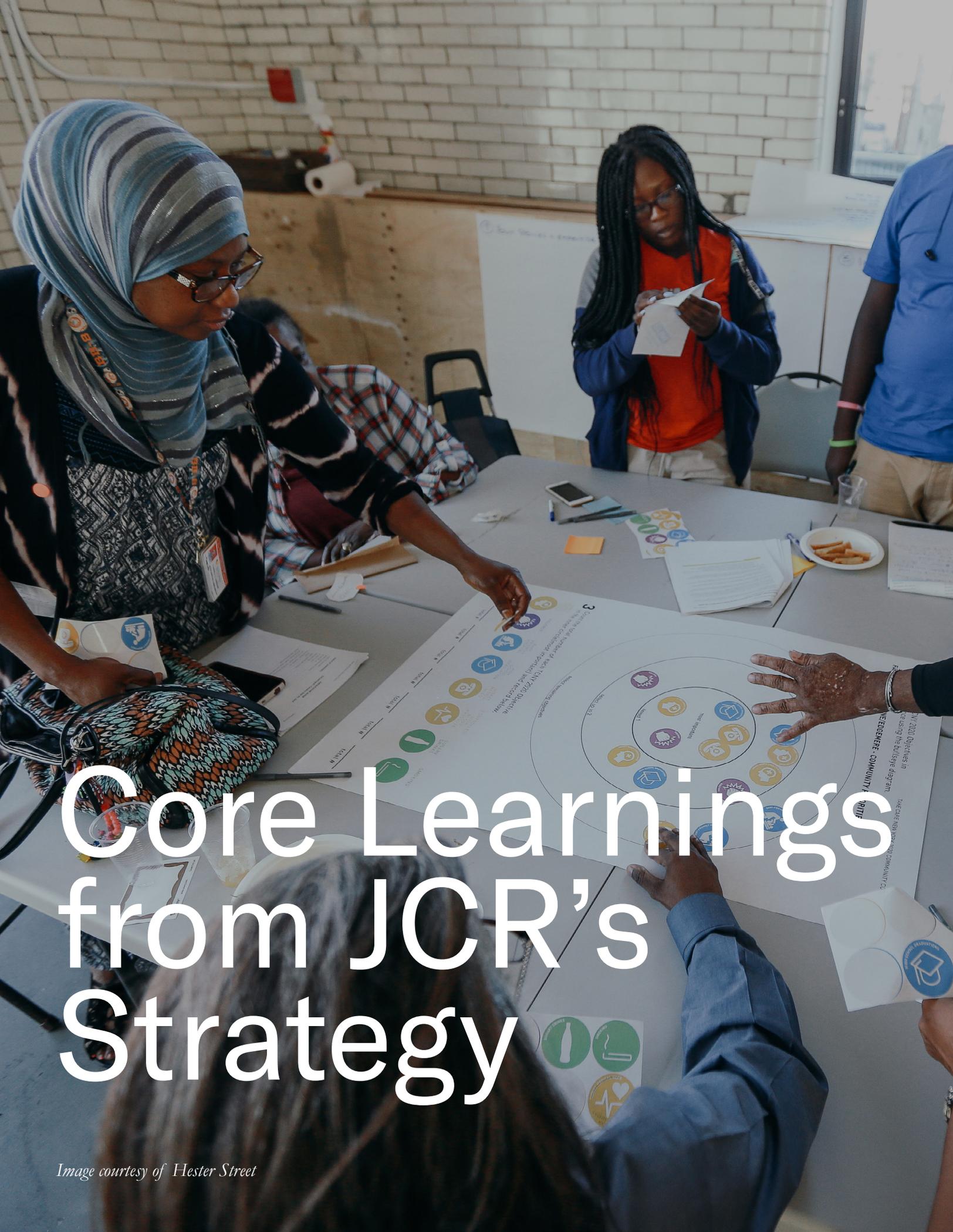
narrative efforts to talk about and understand housing in a new way.

What JCR is leaving behind is a seed. And even if this seed were given time to flower, there are no guarantees that the results would be concrete or quantifiable like policy changes or housing unit production. But what the participants in the Rise-Home Stories Project reported — in terms of how their participation revitalized their work and demystified a formerly abstract idea into something actionable and important — offers one indicator of what projects like this can achieve.

Going forward, as philanthropy grapples with how to support movement building work towards realizing housing justice, it will need to help foster a reintegration of housing and community development work into our analysis and interventions of other realms beset with inequality, like health, climate, economy, and democracy. It will also need to contend — and to wholly reimagine — core societal assumptions about the relationship between housing and the racialized markets of land and real estate. Narrative change will be an essential component of this work.



Image courtesy of Rise-Home Stories for Dot's Home



Core Learnings from JCR's Strategy

Based on our field interviews, conversations within philanthropy, conversations with JCR program staff, and independent experience as strategists for social change, we capture here how the key lessons from our investigation reflect and affirm core tenets of JCR's strategy:

1. “Upstream” (often implicit) assumptions or decisions about the problem to tackle or its causes have enormous down-stream effects. JCR's focus on race, place, and power invited a broader vision of the underlying structural causes and a greater imagination of solutions (e.g., broadly available social housing). But advancing this vision requires “unwiring” the market-focused strains within the housing justice and community development field. At the same time, it requires shifting the emphasis back to strengthening the role of government and of the public sector at all levels to protect, preserve, and produce more deeply affordable housing that is not controlled or distorted by the market.
2. Systemic, structural change at scale requires not simply better public policy or more private dollars, but a fundamental realignment of the balance of political, cultural, economic, and narrative power in this country towards BIPOC communities most impacted by housing insecurity. This, in turn, requires philanthropy to focus on civic engagement, power building, and infrastructure-building from the ground up — not simply supporting policy innovation, advocacy, and service delivery through market-based systems.
3. Building durable and adequate power (narrative, economic, and political) requires a networked ecosystem, a vision of co-governance (not simply outside agitation or ‘grasstops’ technocratic approaches), and time. Issue campaigns and victories flow from power building; “issue-first” efforts may secure wins without lasting power.

4. Centering racial justice and BIPOC communities as a path towards equity for all requires a deeper shift in practice -- from “consultation” or “engagement” to true community ownership over vision, strategy, action, and resources.
5. Philanthropy holds deep power to convene stakeholders, direct the conversation, and — intentionally or not — shape the broader field (including local and community philanthropy). Attention to the relational work and requirements, not simply the grant-making role, is crucial to advance change and avoid reinforcing problematic field dynamics. Furthermore, philanthropy as a whole should pay attention to how institutional investments, including in real estate, can reinforce problematic market and field dynamics.
6. Traditional “metrics” of wins (policy changes, units built or preserved, people housed, racial wealth gap changes, or dollars invested) are important, and indeed power-building tactics deliver such wins, at times over a longer time frame. But those traditional measures are insufficient on their own, as they are often poor proxies to measure the depth of community power or the durability of change.



Lessons from Ford's Full History in Housing Justice

Image courtesy of Mike Dennis for Right to the City Alliance

Over the course of this entire project, including a longer historical analysis and broader field investigation, the team drew a series of conclusions applicable beyond the JCR strategy itself, grounded in the longer history of housing justice work overall and Ford's own evolving theory of change.

These conclusions are summarized below, and they offer lessons for philanthropy and the housing justice field more broadly. JCR's own work was, on many of these fronts, an attempt to intervene to correct for challenges in the field which Ford had, unintentionally, reinforced.

1. Balkanization of the field

The housing justice movement and field in the US remains balkanized in ways that hinder progress. Housing continues to be siloed from more “mainline” work on the economy, workers rights, and economic justice. For example, for most funders and many organizations on the ground, work on “economic justice” focuses on the workplace, policies such as minimum wage or sick leave, and supporting increased worker self-organization and power. No interviewees, nor this team, mean to suggest that that work is not central. Rather, there is a missed opportunity to understand and craft strategy around the role of land/real estate in driving the evolution of the economy itself (and as a central investment vehicle for the 1%) and in driving the local power dynamics (i.e., the role of real estate developers within local politics). Integrating an understanding of real estate and the markets of land and housing will be key to grappling with the evolving US and global economy itself.

Within the housing field directly, there remain other enduring schisms that undermine scaled impact — divisions between those focused on home ownership versus renters, rent vouchers versus public housing, housing integration versus anti-displacement/community revitalization, etc. Philanthropy’s tendency to focus on narrow “winnable” strategies or issue slices within housing, rather than efforts to build collective power across vulnerable populations, reinforces the cleavages within the housing field. In addition, there is a tendency within the broader social justice world to avoid work on housing, reinforcing that housing is left to technical experts often working siloed off from the broader ecosystem.

Indeed, the housing justice field is often viewed either through a “rights-based” lens, driving towards social provision of housing, or an “assets-based” frame, focused on interventions to “correct” market failures and near-term housing creation. The rights frame elevates the centrality of stable, equitable housing to democratic participation and racial justice – and contests assumptions that market-driven solutions could be adequate to solve the crisis. At the same time, impactful interventions on the housing crisis also require near-term benefits for families: affordable housing production and preservation which, in this political and economic moment, require some level of private investments to succeed. A comprehensive strategy must pursue a “both/and” approach – while recognizing the limits of each in isolation, and the particular impediments to structural, systemic shifts of a strategy that overly relies on market-based solutions.

JCR's strategy embodied the strategic and relational approach, seeking to invest in base building organizations over time.

2. Imagining the “who” of a new political constituency

While there has been an upsurge in a national movement for housing justice and the “housing as a human rights” framework has gained traction, there is a shared sense that the tendency to “pendulum” from a focus on renters to homeowners and back (and the particular and different solutions relevant to each) has unhelpfully undermined the ability to build and link a broad movement of *all* housing insecure families and communities, across their “status” with respect to housing.

Indeed, commentators noted that what is truly needed in the country is a broad-based movement and political identity that unites renters, low-income homeowners, the houseless, low-income landlords, public housing

residents, and more. *That* level of organization and power, and the imagination of what is needed it could unlock, is what is required to drive systems-level change.

Tara Raghuvver, the Homes Guarantee Campaign Director at People's Action, drove this point home: “Housing justice is not how I would frame this actually. I would say ‘tenant justice’ — the need for political unity among those who are tenants, the unhoused, the working class, homeowners. This is the political class of tenants for whom we are seeking justice. Not just everyone should have a home. But instead, [there should be] fundamental security for people who are excluded from this racist economy.”

3. A strategic, holistic approach to “place”

National philanthropy has a crucial role in scaling impact, knitting together cross-jurisdictional lessons and work, and ensuring real bottom-up organizing momentum nationally. This requires a shift from the “tactical/instrumental” approach to place (considering it only as relates to policy changes or issue priorities) to a strategic and relational approach to place (as the

site of building power, an ecosystem to align, etc.) and building power in place (and across geography). JCR's strategy embodied the strategic and relational approach, seeking to invest in base building organizations over time, rather than episodic and short-term funding only when groups' campaigns happened to align with the Foundation strategy.

“‘Tenant justice’ [is] the need for political unity among those who are tenants, the unhoused, the working class, homeowners. This is the political class of tenants for whom we are seeking justice. Not just everyone should have a home. But instead, [there should be] fundamental security for people who are excluded from this racist economy.”

Tara Raghuveer, Homes Guarantee Campaign Director at People's Action

4. The “limits” of issues to build power

Institutional philanthropy often tends toward an issue-first approach, which can undermine the collective ability to truly understand the forces at play or to organize constituencies for long-term change.

Ford's history offers many examples of the tendency, and limits, of a narrow issue-first strategy. By contrast, organizers appreciate the inadequacy of an issue-first, infrastructure- and constituency-second approach. As one interviewee put it, if you fund the Texas Housers and Texas Appleseed on affordable and fair housing fights, but not the Texas Organizing Project to drive organizing and basebuilding of impacted tenants, your strategy will fail over time.

A number of people interviewed also pointed to the tendency of the common “affordable housing” frame to obscure the central role of racial capitalism³² itself, to naturalize the commodification of land and what could otherwise be the “commons,” and the fundamental inadequacy of a “tinker in the markets” approach to solutions. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor's work on race and

the housing market and Joseph Stieglitz's recent work on the role of real estate in the future US economy were examples offered of scholars whose work sheds light on how housing, land, and inequality are central symptoms and drivers of systemic inequality.

One commentator noted the unfortunate irony that while our analysis about the racial wealth gap is focused on communities, the solutions skew individual — focusing on the individual, prompting investment in programs to increase it, and investments in counseling intermediaries or voucher payments to landlords. This frame does not elevate the systemic challenges around “land, power or control,” and instead feeds privatized and marketized solutions — as well as reinforcing the harmful dominant narrative of individualism and bootstrapping.

Each of these reflections points back to the limits of a narrow “issue-first” focus on the challenges faced — both in truly understanding what is needed, and in building the power needed to make structural change.

5. Expanding the possible

The boundaries of the common understanding of “the problem” impacts the boldness of solutions we can imagine. A number of people noted that the housing justice field has been too constrained in its imagination of truly big, bold solutions — ones that galvanize a broad constituency to action and that move the needle on what then seems within the realm of the possible.

Manuel Pastor emphasized this, calling for philanthropy to “invest in moonshot ideas” to advance the conversation. He offered a range of bold interventions (highly progressive property tax, lower limits on inheritance tax, wealth tax, and other value capture measures) that will not pass in the near term but that could be “anchor ideas” that “stretch the imagination.” Pastor lamented

that Ford and others have not been doing enough to invest in the visionary game changers that can shift the Overton window of political feasibility. As Afua Attah-Mensa, former Executive Director of Community Voices Heard, noted: the fight is for “housing for folks to live in dignity, but you can’t just ‘build’ our way out of this.”

Philanthropy can play an important role on this front, supporting not simply the idea generation, but also the experimentation on the ground. As Chris Kabel of the Kresge Foundation put it, philanthropy is at its best when it provides “risk capital for social change,” when it can take those kinds of risks to “do a proof of concept that the public sector can’t.”

6. What is a win?

Many of those interviewed touched on how we define a “win,” and how that shapes — or distorts — the strategy and work. Traditional metrics of “wins” look to units built, dollars leveraged and invested, or policy changes— all important areas of focus. But many interviewed, and JCR’s strategy itself, looked to generate outcomes that may be harder to “measure,” and that unfold in non-linear, longer-term ways. Indeed, when a strategy seeks to build durable, cross-issue community power and infrastructure, and to go to battle with some of the most powerful actors (e.g., the real estate lobby), the work does not hew to near-term calendars, nor fit neatly into traditional metrics focused on dollars, units, or public policies.

In discussing perspectives in the field, Attah-Mensa highlighted an organizer’s view of “winning,” cautioning

that if “we win the vote but don’t build the base, that’s not a win.” On the flip side, she noted that a campaign can “lose the vote,” but that if you build your base, build your power, and integrate lessons from the fight into how you campaign in the future, “that’s a win.”

Christina Rosales, formerly of Texas Housers, linked narrative change to power-building wins. She noted that previously, “it was about concrete policy wins: did counties adopt model subdivision rules or did the state legislature adopt a particular policy? Over time we have shifted towards seeing wins not as concrete policy wins, but more ‘who is talking about the things we care about?’ Community leaders are being quoted in the New York Times because of the work they are doing with us. Local officials are adopting the language about housing justice - that everyone should have a place to live and that is the

moral and right thing to do. To me those are signs of long term narrative change. When impacted people have ownership over these issues they are not technocratic conversations anymore. Our community leaders are the experts. That is a win and that is progress.”

The increasing integration of housing with other issues was flagged several times. For example, Solomon Greene at the Urban Institute, when interviewed, pointed to the impact of the interconnection of health and housing when noting the historic nature of President Biden’s eviction moratorium, an unprecedented flex of executive authority grounded in a public health rationale. Others pointed to the deeper understanding of the connection between progress on housing and civic engagement overall. While not “wins” in the traditional sense, advances in cross-issue integration within strategy mark real progress for the progressive justice sector. Finally, several interviewees, including Christina Rosales, noted that the prevalence of a “human rights” framework among progressives and housing advocates is itself a “win” — signaling a shift away from technocratic, market-focused interventions and the broadening of vision and agenda.

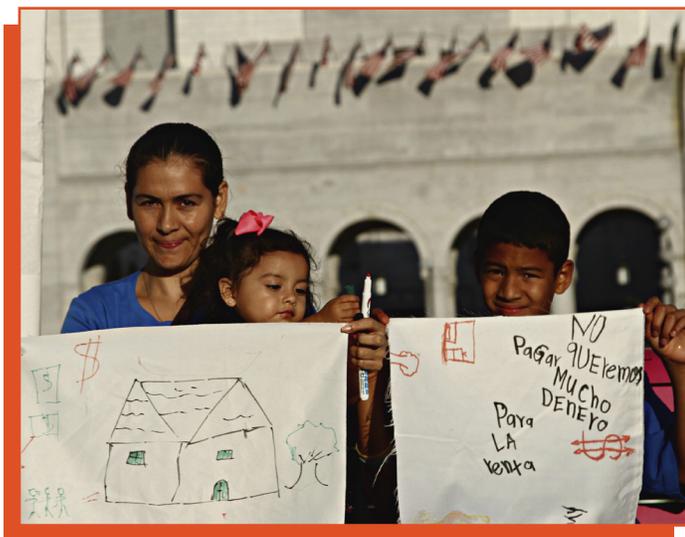


Image courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

New models of “impact” could look to questions of:

Durability

Are the leaders, funders, organizations, and coalitions built still active and effective today? Have they grown?

Equity

Are the most vulnerable, disenfranchised communities truly better off — drivers, not just subjects, of wins?

Narrative

What voices and communities are defining the problem, imagining the solution, and setting the strategy? How are their perspectives informing and reshaping the dominant narratives about what is wrong or what needs to change?

Systems Change

What kinds of policies and practices have changed as a result of the work?

Democracy

In what ways has participation, transparency, accountability, and government and community collaboration grown?

Belonging

In what ways are people in communities more or less connected? Do people have a sense that they are part of a community, that together they are responsible for each other and for their place?

Stewardship

Are the resources needed to thrive equitably shared, and is ownership of public goods held by the public?

Notably, such metrics are both challenging to capture and measure, hard to “isolate” to just one funding stream or area of work (e.g., JCR-funded housing work), and require a relatively longer time horizon to track meaningful evolutions within an ecosystem.

7. Building durable power and community ownership

Another common theme from interviews was the importance of work to build durable civic power, and to shift the traditional balance of power within place. JCR's move to elevate the centrality of power, and to move away from a singular focus on technocratic policy "fixes," was highlighted as critical.

The importance of durable infrastructure, not simply policy changes, was named by Linetta Gilbert, who flagged that success at seeding local infrastructure post-Katrina that has taken root and evolved in ways that are reshaping the balance of power within the state. Maldonado, too, pointed to Louisiana as a promising

"nascent seed" of JCR's legacy -- where relationship-based, long-term investment in communities of color and infrastructure was enabling scaling up from very local housing work to state-level, multi-issue coalition infrastructure.

Ford's work, beginning before JCR, on alternative models of community ownership and shifting land out of the market were also highlighted in field interviews. Building scalable models of community control and alternate financing were seen as key elements to continue to explore as part of building durable community power.

8. Moving at the speed of trust

Another theme from interviews was the importance of "moving at the speed of trust," to use a phrase often repeated by Acting Program Officer Jacqueline Burton. Organizing, networking, and coalition building is fundamentally relational work. The long-term real relationship-anchored ecosystems in Minnesota, New Orleans, and, more recently, New York are examples where this kind of long-term cultivation generates significant victories. So too, trust and relationship building were core components of JCR's Equitable Recovery strategy, and to the success of that work.

Philanthropy, with a focus on near-term measurable outcomes, often funds in ways at odds with the pace of relational work. Ford's approach has had varied success on this front. At times, such as under MOU in metro regions without adequately networked existing infrastructure, Ford's strategy outpaced what was possible in the near term. JCR's commitment to deep, long-standing relationships with grantees and attunement to the work required for coalition and networked relationships were noted with appreciation in several interviews.

9. The centrality of affordable, secure housing to community and democratic thriving

Finally, field interviews elevated the shared sense that housing is central in and of itself — a human right — *and* as an essential ingredient to a healthy, functioning democracy and economy.

Tony Pickett, of Grounded Solutions, put it succinctly, noting we can't have meaningful civic participation if "people are forced to live nomadic lives because of housing insecurity." In this way, housing justice is a leading indicator of the overall health of our democracy.

Housing is also an indicator of our national progress on truly grappling with the depth of the structural, governmental, and hard-wired economic racism in this country. As Attah-Mensa put it, housing has been the "central throughline of anti-Black racism in the US." If we take seriously the work of truth and reparations demanded by BIPOC communities and this political moment, we must take seriously the centrality of housing justice.

10. The gap Ford leaves in the field

The final — and unanimous — theme from field conversations is the enduring uncertainty around Ford's rationale for ending its grantmaking focused on housing justice, coupled with a shared certainty that other funders are unlikely to fill the particular gap Ford will leave. Funders focused on health or climate resilience are increasingly recognizing the importance of housing justice and equitable and resilient development. And funders who focus on homelessness are probing how that issue intersects with housing or climate justice.

But these funders are not in a position to fully step into the breach or fund housing at the scale Ford has. Furthermore, there are open questions on whether foundations that fund housing production or civic engagement will fund tenant organizing or ambitious policy campaigns to reimagine housing in this country.

As former U.S. Programs Vice President Maria Torres-Springer notes, that question is "TBD; that's the mountain to climb."

For multi-issue, power-building grassroots organizations, there may be paths to replace Ford's housing-focused support. But for some of the directly housing-focused policy, campaigning, and research organizations, there is unlikely an easy way to fill the void.

As Ford's history has shown, strategy and funding decisions by major philanthropies have field shaping and distorting effects. It remains to be seen how the end of Ford's JCR program will impact the field, the choices of other funders, or how both will evolve in response.



Conclusion

Even as Ford sunsets its JCR program, the work of JCR, and the longer arc of Ford's work, hold lessons for the field and the work of Ford itself going forward. As explored in this report, JCR put race, place, and power explicitly at the center of its strategy — as a lens through which to understand the nature of endemic, entrenched spatial inequality in the built environment, and as anchors of work for structural, scaled, systemic change.

This strategic stance elevated the critical importance of building durable, cross-geography *constituencies* of impacted communities of color to drive the work, thus seeding, and networking of long-term political and *organizing infrastructure* within and across place, sharpening and cohereing a national *narrative* on housing justice that can move the needle on the possible, integrating housing justice work *across issues* and linked to civic engagement, public health, climate resiliency and racial justice work, and pushing for broader *social/public goods and a renewed role of government* and beyond market-driven solutions.

Core to JCR’s strategy was a strategic, holistic approach to “place.” As noted above, JCR did not view “place” simply as a unit of “intervention” or “analysis,” or solely from a tactical perspective (i.e., where policy wins could move). Instead, JCR understood the role of place in people’s *lives*, as constitutive of identity, and as the “site” where inequitable, macro-economic forces shape experience and entrench inequality. Related,

JCR saw “place” — as in, actual neighborhoods and *communities* — as the site of building constituencies for systemic change and of anchoring infrastructure. In this way, JCR did not use “place” as short-hand for level or scale of intervention (e.g., city versus state versus national), but for something much deeper and constitutive. JCR sought to experiment with building power within *place* for scaled change.

While dimensions of JCR’s strategy were directly related to its focus on the built environment, land, and housing, much of its approach is directly relevant for the *range* of social justice fights aimed at the drivers of structural inequality in this country. The hallmarks of JCR — the focus on building power, of understanding the nature of power, racial inequality, and identity within place, and on the systemic and historic nature of entrenched racism — must be the hallmarks of the fights for democracy, civic engagement, racial justice, and a just, equitable, resilient economy.



Image courtesy of Right to the City Alliance

Methodology

The methods for this summative report of Ford's housing justice work include:

1. Qualitative interviews with current and former staff, select grantees, and partners from the field (n=33)
 - a. Former staff interviews (n=5) focussed on the formulation and evolution of theories of change
 - b. Interviews with current non-JCR staff (n=4) focussed on how JCR's work on housing justice interfaces with other aspects of Ford grantmaking and non-grantmaking activities
 - c. Interviews with grantees (n=19) and other partners in the field (n=5) focused on articulating how JCR's theory of change and strategy evolution was understood in the field (A sample questionnaire script is included as appendix B).

The grantees represented organizations that ranged from national organizations focussed on federal policy change to multi-issue community-based organizations focussed on organizing and movement building. We spoke to people in Washington, New Orleans, San Juan, Oakland, San Francisco, Houston, New York City, and Detroit. We discussed and researched grantee projects in these locations as well as projects in Minneapolis, Atlanta, Denver, the Rio Grande Valley, and the NYC/ NJ metropolitan region.
2. Iterative and ongoing interviews and conversations with current JCR program staff helped to test our assumptions and preliminary findings, clarify the chronology of program design evolutions, and
3. A review of grantmaking summary reports from 2008 through 2021, with a particular focus on new grantees from 2015 onwards that were indicative of JCR's specific strategy
4. A review of internal Ford memoranda, reports, and presentations served as primary sources for the historical overview
5. A review of relevant academic and journalistic literature helped to characterize the macro-trends in US housing and community development policy that reflected and responded to Ford's strategy shifts over time

All interviews were conducted between May and September of 2021. We asked interview subjects to describe the organization, their relationship to Ford, their understanding of Ford's priorities and strategy shifts and how those were communicated, and we asked them to characterize their observations of changes in the field (including the changing definition of what constitutes a "win" in housing justice work.).

The report team also relied on its knowledge of the field. We are all practitioners with expertise in economic justice, community-based planning, movement building, non-profit management, and the history of urban development and housing policy in the United States. While sectoral knowledge is a less traditional qualification for this kind of exercise than expertise in program analysis, our collective knowledge of the field allowed us to see past some of the tensions that result from the field's balkanization and can obfuscate alignments as well as divergences among the data and the interview cohort.

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1. Bob Allen, Urban Habitat
2. Afua Atta-Mensah, Community Voices Heard (at time of interview)
3. Judith Bell, San Francisco Foundation
4. Staci Berger, Housing and Community Development Network of New Jersey
5. Devin Culbertson, Enterprise
6. Sasha Forbes, Enterprise
7. Ariadna Godreau Aubert, Ayuda Legal Puerto Rico
8. Solomon Greene, Urban Institute (at time of interview)
9. Sarah Johnson, Local Progress
10. Chris Kabel, Kresge Foundation
11. Ellen Lee, retired from the City of New Orleans
12. Amy Morris, Amplify Fund
13. Andreanecia Morris, HousingNOLA
14. Glenisse Pagán, Filantropía Puerto Rico
15. Manuel Pastor, Equity Research Institute, USC
16. Janice Petrovich, Filantropía Puerto Rico
17. Dawn Phillips, Right to the City
18. Tony Pickett, Grounded Solutions
19. Tara Raghuvver, Homes Guarantee Campaign, People's Action
20. Christina Rosales, Texas Housers (at time of interview)
21. Elisabeth Voigt, Mobile Homes Action (at time of interview)
22. Akilah Watkins, Center for Community Progress
23. Cindy Wu, LISC
24. Ellen Wu, Urban Habitat
25. Garland Yates, Community Democracy Workshop

Endnotes

- 1 *The end of the JCR program represents Ford's exit from grantmaking within the housing justice field. Ford continues to play a role within the space through its mission-related investments in housing development as well as through funding enduring field infrastructure, such as through the HouseUs Fund.*
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- 5 *The summary of JCR's strategy was drawn primarily from interviews with JCR staff directly, as well as reference to Ford internal strategy documents.*
- 6 *JCR had a four-year sunset, with annual budgets of \$11.8M in 2018, \$13.9M in 2019, \$9M in 2020, and \$5M in 2021.*
- 7 *These are drawn primarily from interviews with JCR program staff, as well as Ford annual reports.*
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