

# Hotboxing: The Predictable and Systematic Lifecycle of Gentrification

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**Abstract:** Gentrification is a term used to describe the changing of a neighborhoods character due to increased affluence. The gentrification lifecycle, or hotboxing, is both predictable and systematic. Predictable meaning there are recognizable signposts that clearly indicate an active state of hotboxing, also indicating that gentrification is preventable. Systematic, meaning that systems in a democratic society, presumed to be owned and controlled by their constituencies, produce outcomes, establish patterns, and reinforce their lifecycles unless disrupted. This paper explains how hotboxing is predictable and systematic and asserts that democratic systems should eliminate hotboxing by recognizing its signposts and reacting appropriately.

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## **Introduction**

The movement of people is typically perceived as phenomenal and fact of matter. Current discourse about urban renewal and affordable housing deal with where people might live, work, shop and play. A magnet for politicians, special interests and social workers, this discourse constructs a limited basis of research and analysis that only answers one basic question: How can societies best warehouse their people? A curious question that positions people as a problem to be solved by society through its available methods of physical placement and displacement. Elevating a deductive inquiry that incrementally transfers individual agency to the society, it suffocates the individual’s freedom of movement and ventilates society’s systematic displacement and placement of people. The financial and social societal investment that decides where to put people is a collective divestment from an individual’s agency and free will to put themselves where they want to be.

What do we know about the forces that overwhelm a person's free pursuit of self-interests through systematic displacement? When the focus is on solving problems that benefit society, the individual's well-being becomes increasingly determined by the systems that they belong to. Affordable housing and urban renewal discussions are superficial, a symptomatic treatment inadequate for answering questions that deal with human's fundamental need for shelter and their overall well-being. These discussions fail to properly address why people are moving and what they gain or lose in the process. They fail to properly address the system's beneficiaries and how they are positioned to benefit. They stage gentrification in a light of innocence, as a universally unavoidable outcome that must be dealt with reactively and fail to address the systems that cause it to happen so assuredly. These superficial conversations are unable to address the systematic, predictable nature of gentrification.

Gentrification is a term used to describe the changing of a neighborhoods character due to increased affluence. The gentrification lifecycle, or hotboxing, is both predictable and systematic. Predictable meaning there are recognizable signposts that clearly indicate an onset of hotboxing, or people who are being hotboxed, also indicating that gentrification is preventable. Systematic, meaning that systems in a democratic society, presumed to be owned and controlled by their constituencies, produce outcomes, establish patterns, and reinforce their lifecycles unless disrupted. This paper explains how hotboxing is predictable and systematic and asserts that democratic systems should disrupting hotboxing by recognizing its signposts and reacting appropriately. By eliminating hotboxing, gentrification can be eliminated as well.

## **Method**

I conducted interviews with experts in urban planning and community organizing to gain a better understanding of the forces that impact how areas are planned and developed and how community residents participated or are impacted. I used the University of Minnesota libraries, EBSCO host, and internet search engines to find

academic and non-academic resources examining gentrification and explaining the characteristics of hotboxing, locating them by search engine and library searches of terms such as “gentrification”, “displacement”, “urban renewal”, “community institutions”, and “community building”. I also discussed research on an ongoing basis with the thesis sponsor who recommended additional texts relating to my project. Similarly, interviewees recommended readings that would address pertinent issues.

## **Explaining Displacement**

Often spoken of as urban renewal, development, or affordable housing, displacement is often disguised by its physical manifestations of condos, coffee shops and mixed-use multi-story buildings. Cloaked by this disguise are the people who once occupied those spaces. They not only disappear from the discourse, but they also disappear from sight as displacement proliferates through communities. A simple consideration of displacement’s physical forms supports a discourse that deals with simply warehousing people and does well to downplay and nullify discourse about the immensity of human attachment and dependence on the place. However, humans are undoubtedly attached both socially and psychologically to the place. Displacement can occur even without its physical manifestation, as noted by Rayle (2015) who asserts that even if physical displacement rates are small, “social and psychological displacement may have greater effects on residents” (p. 532).

Systematic forces facilitate various forms of displacement which are well-studied and documented, but often absent from the mainstream discourse. Adding clarity to haphazard and “fact of life” gentrification discourses, Wyly (2010) explains displacement as exists in forms direct and indirect displacement. Direct, such as being forced evictions and indirect, such as the erosion of the resident’s ability to stay where they are from and their sense of belonging where they are. Again, considering the impacts of displacements at merely physical

level, downplays the impact psychological impacts of forced separation (direct displacement) and the overwhelming complication (indirect displacement) to one's connection to that place called home.

Applied in many contexts, displacement efficiently separates people from their power and erodes the power structures they depend on. As Greenhill (2010) explains, the tactic is often deployed during international conflicts. In conflict, displacement is a tool for destabilizing populations, eroding democratic legitimacy, and creating political quagmires. It divides otherwise unified groups into mutually antagonist camps who are either for or against displacement, vilifying the displaced as burdensome responsibilities who overwhelm governmental capacity and dilute existing communities (Greenhill, K.M., 2010). Interesting, the way that those displaced during international conflicts are vilified, is strikingly similar to the media narrative commonly placed upon those who are displaced domestically. One can hardly doubt that displacement, whether in the domestic or international context, is immensely destabilizing the to the impacted populations.

Displacement disconnects people who were once connected, disassociates them from their own agency and enacts society's paradoxical warehousing operation, investing in shelters for the displaced while denying that sheltering the displaced is a societal responsibility in the first place. Additionally, through the use societal constructs and norms, displacement is systematically enacted against those already having the least agency in the system. As Gary (2017) explained, "it's not often we systematically displace the rich and privileged, this seems to be an activity reserved for the poor and disenfranchised" (Gary, Hannah, Personal Communication, 2017).

### Systems of Displacement

Displacement is not an uncontrollable phenomenon, contrary to common discourse. After serious consideration of available information, we see that displacement is the result of patterned, causal, reactions informed by cultural, political and economic forces. The research showed the ways which displace may be manifested. Next,

we will describe the key ways in which displacement is caused systematically; by subcultural imposition, government intervention, subsidizing and disinvestment, community institutions, and the Justice System.

### Subcultural Imposition

Infiltrating communities, exerting transformative energy against the existing cultural norms, subcultural imposition displaces people systematically. Like a colonizing force, those enacting subcultural imposition are connected to and supported by people outside of the community with whom they share interests and privilege. Beginning with indirect displacement, subcultural imposition psychologically disconnects longtime residents from their sense of home and community. It disrupts social networks. Then it incites physical displacement of longtime residents who no longer feel like they belong. Logically concluding with direct displacement, it only makes sense for people to be displaced once their place and everything they know it to be has been replaced through cultural imposition.

Explaining a real-world example of subcultural imposition, Lewis (2017) cited her ethnographic work in the Selby neighborhood in of St. Paul, Minnesota. Longtime Selby residents had been accustomed to the neighborhood norms, including petty crimes. While not culturally acceptable, the crimes where culturally normal in the sense that residents maintained their sense community purpose and belonging even with the crimes happening (Kinniburgh, 2017). However, as residents would say, the neighborhood gradually took on a different stride, drifting from “pit bulls to poodles”. With an influx of new residents who were younger, whiter, more single, and more white collar, the formation of a subculture welcoming a larger police presence to impose new norms was established.

With the new residents also came new cultural expectations and norms, specifically a low tolerance for petty theft and embracing of increased police surveillance. They marketed term “youth crime” crime, repackaging normal petty crimes as something new. Setting the stage for targeting specific criminal acts

occurring the neighborhood, they also welcomed the institutionalized racism of the police department that would disproportionately victimize longtime neighborhood residents, who are primarily Black. The increased police presence was culturally acceptable to the imposing subculture, however longtime residents tolerated the ongoing concurrences of petty theft in exchange for minimizing police presence (Lewis, B. 2017).

The Selby example shows how indirect displacement might occur over a short period of time and serious disrupt a population. Anxiety and instability flourish as the fabrication of neighborhood criminal elements decreases property values within the neighborhood, leaving residents with less equity in their homes and prospective profit from selling their home, while feeling simultaneously unwelcome in their own neighborhood. For longtime residents, the urgency to “get out” becomes thematic throughout their daily motions as police harassment becomes habitual, inevitable, and increasingly menacing. Consequently, they feel obligated to forfeit the real estate wealth they’ve built to move to new place that is more like home, advantaging the subculture and esteemed incoming residents.

Examine the social and psychological disconnection from one’s community. As longtime residents increasingly experience non-criminal police encounters due to the institutionally racist practices and culture of police departments, they become more detached from their ownership of the street, store, park and corner. The blanketing of police surveillance rests heaviest on these residents, leaving them with a constant feeling of being inhospitably discomforted and detached from the neighborhood they once had, from the neighborhood they live in (Kinniburgh, 2017). This psychological displacement precedes the impending social displacement as neighbors and businesses are indirectly displaced and seek asylum in more welcoming areas (Rayle, 2015).

A similar example comes from the Freret parish in New Orleans. After hurricane Katrina, incoming Freret residents imposed new cultural norms with them, and also brought a problematic attitude toward the neighborhood’s longtime residents. Going so far as to lobby and receive a designation of the parish as cultural

district that only offered tax benefits to new businesses only, they listlessly disadvantaged the longstanding neighborhood businesses. To drive the point home, they unsuccessfully lobbied for a private security force proposedly funded by property tax hikes (Kinniburgh, 2017). Like a colonizing force, incoming Freret parish residents hoped to convene with outside power structures for aid to impose their own subculture. And they achieved a level of success in disenfranchising disrupting longtime businesses.

In each of these cases, we see the forces of systematic, indirect displacement being brought to communities by a small group of people who form subcultures. These subcultures impose their norms and expectations on the community. Before any form of physical displacement takes shape, longtime residents are socially and psychologically displaced by the imposition, leaving physical displacement, and direct displacement as logical next steps.

### Government Intervention, Subsidization and Disinvestment

Subsidization creates winners and losers. After all, essentially subsidization functions as a means of extracting wealth from the population through taxes into a common pool funds that can be programmed according to the choice of those holding power.

As is the case in the Baltimore, a system of “trickledown” development exists, where the subsidies for developers are expected to improve the lives of residents. As *The Baltimore Housing Roundtable* (2015) showed, “expanding public subsidies to attract private capital” has led to the city raising to the ranks of 15/50 large cities “in terms of census tracts that have gentrified” (p. 2). As a result, we see how government intervention in the form subsidizing developers leads to a disinvestment in residents and their communities. As residents give their wealth to city, they are displaced in return. According to Kubisch et al (2013), communities are weakened by “years of underinvestment due to structural economic factors, racialized policies and practices, and disempowerment” (p.67).

Additionally, the ineffectiveness of trickle-down development in improving the lives residents seems like a relatively bland topic, when compared with the discussion of more menacing ways that government intervention functions as an actuator of gentrification based along racial lines. This point is demonstrated by recently popularized forms of transit oriented development, as Rayle (2015), citing (Belzer et al., 2006), explains, “Neighborhoods near existing or planned transit may be susceptible to gentrification because they generally have above-average populations of renters, blacks, Hispanics, and low-income households” (p. 536). We can consider how intentionally, or intentionally, government intervention plays the role to further enhance and engrain power strata already in place from a legacy of systematic institutionalized racism, consequently further disenfranchising groups who have endured a legacy of systematic victimization. Demographically homogenous communities are prone to displacement, enacted by government intervention.

Additionally, the amassed wealth of displaced communities becomes non-transferrable and extracted by a secondary impact of this subsidization, which comes from development itself. Real estate has long been considered the most powerful investment tool available to average citizens. However, government intervention through forced by-outs, rezoning and right-of-way ordinances, is a form of direct displacement that strips residents of their equity and ability to retain or maximize their real estate wealth during the impending gentrification and real estate price hikes.

### Community Institutions

As highlighted by Kinniburgh (2017), residents are displaced when incoming “residents take their place in the neighborhood’s institutions and begin reshaping power dynamics” (p. 3). That assessment is supported by research from Ferman, B., & Kaylor, P. (2001) who assert that community institution functions as community builders, continually cultivating the cultural heritage of a geographic space. Consequently, the reshaping of power dynamics also means reshaping of culture, which leads to the social and psychological displacement of longstanding community residents, preceding what is commonly recognized as gentrification.

Often, community institutions become disconnected from the residents they intend to serve, committing to an organizational focus and losing sight of the residents. According to Kubisch et al (2013), three types of relationships must exist for *resident-centered community building*: “Relationships among residents, relationships between residents and neighborhood institutions, and relationships between residents and community” (p. 62).

However, community institutions have gained a bad reputation for fostering poor relations with communities they serve. Racial differences and bureaucratic procedures sour the relationships, further disconnecting the institution from the resident. As exemplified by scenarios typical in urban settings, Kubisch et al (2013) that the distrust arising from cultural differences “may be exacerbated when there is a perception that a predominantly white organization is imposing its agenda on a community of color” (64). See prior discussion of subcultural imposition. A simple examination of the typical non-profit organization’s leadership demographics reveals what is commonly known - organizations meant to benefit non-white communities are often white-led. Additionally, these cultural rifts can be further extended to public institutions, such as schools and law enforcement organization operating in non-white communities.

When community institutions begin to look and act abnormally in the perspective of residents they represent or serve, social and psychological displacement is occurring. Residents have difficulty navigating the relationships between the organization’s people, organizational processes and the people in a position to influence behavior or policy (Kubisch et al, 2013). Impacting change becomes an impossible endeavor, estranging the relationship between residents and community organization.

A good example of how community institutions estrange residents is the Minneapolis business organization called the Bassett Creek Valley (BCV) Redevelopment Oversight Committee (ROC). As described by Lewis (2017), ROC represents the Harrison and Bryn Mawr neighborhoods of Minneapolis. However, many

community ROC stakeholders have been inconsistently involved however during the long running redevelopment proposal process, leaving many of the project decisions to ROC members who do not live in the neighborhood. ROC faces a common problem amongst long running community projects, because community members often work more than one job, they move or maybe they get arrested or get sick, it is difficult for these projects to display the required agility to sustain their community connections over long periods of time (Kubisch et al, 2013). ROC has been at it over 11 years, so we are left to ask: when the plan is enacted who will be displaced?

### Justice System

As noted earlier, the Justice System displaces people. The police force quite literally serves as displacement apparatus, first by keeping the community vulnerable and second, once gentrification begins, removing people who no longer fit community norms and placing them in prisons, jails and mental health facilities, far away from the communities which they were once a part of. These people are physically displaced as a comprehensive attempt to *remove criminal activity* from a space, which simply succeeds at *removing people* as the community's social fabric is torn. In turn, the remaining residents are experience further social and psychological displacement, supplying the police force with a greater impetus to continue physically displacing the remaining neighborhood residents (Davis, A., 2003).

As the Department of Justice (2015) report about police practices in Ferguson, MO, revealed, many residents are displaced from their communities due to non-criminal activity such as traffic violations, and failing to pay court fees. The burdens of the legal system may not impact affluent residents with access to lawyers and paid time off, but they destroy the legal standing and economic vitality of less-affluent residents. As the *The Baltimore Housing Roundtable* (2015) asserts, the residents, often black males, are “saddled [...] with criminal histories that push them to marginal and temporary employment” (p. 2). Not only are residents physically

displaced by the Justice System, it further displaces them from the social strata of white collar jobs and psychologically from the vision of themselves as a fully capable member of the community.

## **Explaining Hotboxing**

Displacement and gentrification become much more tangible when we force ourselves to turn back time and analyze how all this could have started any way. What made a community vulnerable to gentrification? Who benefits from that gentrification? I propose that communities are systematically hotboxed, a process where a geographic area is identified, destabilized, devalued, depopulated, only to be redeveloped and repopulated.

There are three major signposts in process of hotboxing:

- 1) Redistributing power amongst homogenous demographics through social, psychological and physical displacement,
- 2) Deploying tools of the State to facilitate the transfer of power and wealth, and
- 3) Gentrification.

## **Homogenous Demographics**

Interestingly, arguments for desegregation can provide for cover for what, ultimately, is a transfer of space from one group to another. Geographic areas that are demographically homogenous, Black, Latino, working-class, etc., carry with them values and norms that are be unique and unrepresented in wider society. Therefore, homogenous demographics are easily targeted by Tools of The State. Specific laws can be created to criminalize specific cultural norms, and enforcement of laws that criminalize common activities across wider society can be enforced disproportionately. Thus, when communities consisting of homogenous demographics exist or are formed, the residents can be socially, psychologically and physically displaced and replaced through Tools of the State.

The working class is also demographic that, when isolated, is easily hotboxed. This happens especially through government intervention, subsidization and disinvestment. Consider the impact of government subsidized factory relocations and the social and psychological displacement experienced residents who no longer work in the neighborhood they live in, combined with the loss of the community's economic vitality. Petty crimes and vacancies are undesirable to everyone, but the working class is susceptible to being displaced by proposed solutions to these undesirable community elements. Once their economic vitality is disinvested, the residents are seen as a problem to be solved by society and tend to be the victims of problems and solutions as their agency is transferred to those with power in society.

### Tools of the State

Transference of power and wealth from homogenous groups makes them unable to withstand the economic forces of gentrification. In this signpost of the hotboxing process, people become increasingly disempowered as the Tools of The State systematize disenfranchisement through legislation. These tools are typically executed through the Justice System and trickle-down development.

The Justice System can displace people socially, physically and psychologically in one fail swoop. A prime example is the war on drugs. Originally imagined by the Nixon administration as a way to criminalize "Blacks and hippies" through stigmatization, it was expanded in the Reagan era, with the CIA notoriously distributing crack-cocaine to Black communities, then disproportionately criminalizing them for using the drug. The criminalization of these communities displaced many of their members, fueling the prison industrial complex and tearing apart social fabrics.

The Justice System is efficient in its work of disempowering populations. As we've already considered with the war on drugs, laws have historically targeted demographics. Other laws, such as loitering, lurking and spitting have been determined to criminalize non-white communities. Police incarcerate people, focusing on

specific communities, breaking up the social fabric, raising the crime rates, and making it more difficult for community residents to offer their full contributions to society. As more community members attain criminal backgrounds relegating them to menial work, the overall economic production of the community is defined by society as unsatisfactory. These communities are being hotboxed, losing their economic independence, and simply awaiting gentrification.

Trickle-down development transfers from wealth from individuals, to the society, and then to society's elected official. It is a tool of state that chooses winner or losers. The choice is a simple, and a choice made by the society. Tax funds could just as easily finance community land trusts (CLTs), but instead they usually fuel transit projects or build multi-story mixed use developments. Society's typical choice is to fund developers seeking to profit from a combination of retail and dense housing, as opposed to funding the development of the people who currently live there. Rarely do these developer's plans include keeping current residents in place, as exemplified in Baltimore where home prices rose some 67% since the 1970's (The Baltimore Housing Roundtable, 2015). Often undetected due low variation of a neighborhoods total population number, neighborhood composition typically changes during urban redevelopment, indicating displacement of longtime residents (Lin, J., 2016). We can conclude that the societal employment of trickle-down development positions residents as an afterthought, stripping them of their self-determination in choosing a place to be, simply awaiting displacement and the onset of gentrification.

## Gentrification

Once a homogenous demographic has been targeted and the Tools of State have been brought against them, gentrification, the final signpost of hotboxing, easily takes hold and forms a new neighborhood with a higher level of affluence that permanently displaces the longtime residents. The longtime residents, being physically, socially, and psychological displaced, must find a new place for themselves. They can longer afford to live in their neighborhood, nor do they want to, as the neighborhood they once knew no longer exists.

In gentrification, the displacement of people is disguised by the increased affluence of neighborhood. However, this disguise quickly fades after considering how hotboxing works. The systematic nature of hotboxing and the societal investment in seeing it through, is an act of warehousing people, removing one group and replacing them with another, culminating in gentrification. As this cycle repeats, the wealth of the displaced gradually deteriorates. Society ends up, reluctantly, taking on responsibility for warehousing them in affordable housing as gentrification spreads leaving a physical, social, psychological connections to a place further out of their reach.

## Recommendations

We have taken time to seriously consider displacement in its various forms and the signposts of the hotboxing process. With this knowledge in hand, we can begin to visualize systematic nature of hotboxing and where interventions might be effective. Following on the discussion, I propose the following strategies for disrupting or totally averting the hotboxing process:

1. Community Land-Trusts,
2. Solidarity Economies, and
3. Resident-Centered Community Building.

## Community Land-Trusts

Commonly advocated for by workers unions, housing advocates and grassroots movements, Community Land Trusts (CLTs) build or convert housing and real estate into community owned assets. CLT's can avert hotboxing by placing swaths of real estate out of reach for right of way appropriation by municipalities and outside developers. In 2016, Baltimore residents passed a referendum to create and as affordable housing trust fund, targeting \$40 million in annual city funds (Hatcher, R., & Lee, J., 2016).

These funds would typically be allocated for developers, without stay-in-place assurances for long-time residents. The alternative offered by CLTs is an opportunity for revitalization of a community, distributed wealth building, and sustaining the community's sense of physical, psychological and social belonging that is lost to gentrification once it has set in.

Allocating funds directly to the community breaks the pattern of trickle down development, frequently used by municipalities, but unproven in its benefits for community members. As was done in Baltimore, CLTs can be legislated, often as a result of sustained and organized grass roots pressure. CLT's may also be pursued through establishment of non-profit or cooperative business structures intent on holding land forever in benefit of the community, as is the case of the City of Lakes Community Land Trust, located in Minneapolis, MN. They own the land, and provide affordable 99 year leases to low and moderate-income residents (City of Lakes Community Land Trust, 2017). CLT leases have been found keep homes affordable, because homes can be bought and sold without being concerned with profit to avoid inflating the market (Van Den Berk-Clark, C., & Pyles, L. 2012).

### Solidarity Economy

Averting hotboxing is, in itself, a social cause that can only be successful if people work together. These people may see the same ethical issues with hotboxing, or how it economically detrimental, making a solidarity economy (SE) a perfect tool for intervening in the hotboxing process. Solidarity economy (SE), according to Loh and Shear (2015), "is a set of theories and practices that engenders ethical economic relationships and new possibilities for democratic and transformative community development" (p. 244).

These theories and practices create an economy where people use their capital in line with their ethics, likewise circulating capital to individuals and business with like ethics, creating wealth and building a loop capable of maintaining all facets of society. Through SE's democratic organizational structures, Van Den Berk-

Clark, and Pyles, L. (2012) explain that community members, “engage in critical analyses of the basic assumptions of current community development approaches”. Consider that subcultural imposition would fail to overcome a well-organized SE who would recognize an ethics misalignment and shutout that subcultures participation in buying land or acquiring resources from the SE. Consider how a well-organized SE might pool resources to weather government disinvestment. The ways that an SE can disrupt hotboxing are numerous.

As we have examined SE so far, it not hard to think of the many forms that and SE might take on, even some forms that we are already familiar with, such as CLT’s and consumer cooperatives. However, forming an SE is political act of reframing the economy, leaving neo-liberal economics behind and forming a new economic system. Therefore, joining with others in these politics is essential to forming an SE (Loh, P., & Shear, B., 2015). Consequently, SEs often form from social struggles, appropriately for the case of this discussion, the struggle to disrupt hotboxing.

### Resident-Centered Community Building

Several times through this discussion, we’ve seen how displacement is often depicted in its physical form, and is addressed by the societal act of warehousing people. Resident-centered community building, however, makes the community members the visionaries of improving their own communities (Kubisch, A. C., Auspos, P., Taylor, S., & Dewar, T., 2013, p. 60). With this strategy, residents maintain their agency against the forces of hotboxing.

The key to this strategy, and why it works, is because it forms deep relationships amongst residents. With these relationships in place, community members can work outward, gaining expertise, connecting with powerful institutions and encouraging them to collaborate on the behalf of the residents. With the residents at the helm of this community building, they are empowered to control their neighbor and future (Kubisch, A. C., Auspos, P., Taylor, S., & Dewar, T., 2013, p. 69).

Resident-centered community building happens when organizations move beyond societal constructs and allow residents to take the lead. Residents can organize activities to help strengthen relationships, such as community gardens, neighborhood cleanups, and art events, using these small wins as a path to community building using their own agency to make community development decisions, and creating a resilience to hotboxing.

## **Conclusion**

Hotboxing, is both predictable and systematic. Throughout this discussion, we've described the systematic forces of displacement and the signposts of hotboxing, as well as strategies for disrupting hotboxing once it is detected. By understanding hotboxing, we can see that gentrification is not fact of life, but a predictable outcome of the hotboxing process, which is repeated over and over again. Further exploration of the hotboxing process should be conducted, however it should be recognized that the hotboxing disruptive strategies are useful whether or not hotboxing has been detected, and serve as powerful ways for building strong communities.

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