



Equity means distributing resources to people in a just and impartial way. It's not giving everyone the same thing, but rather giving everyone what they need today while considering how existing power structures have governed resource distribution in the past. As transportation professionals, we face constant opportunities to either dismantle or perpetuate inequities. We must recognize them and act accordingly.

EQUITY

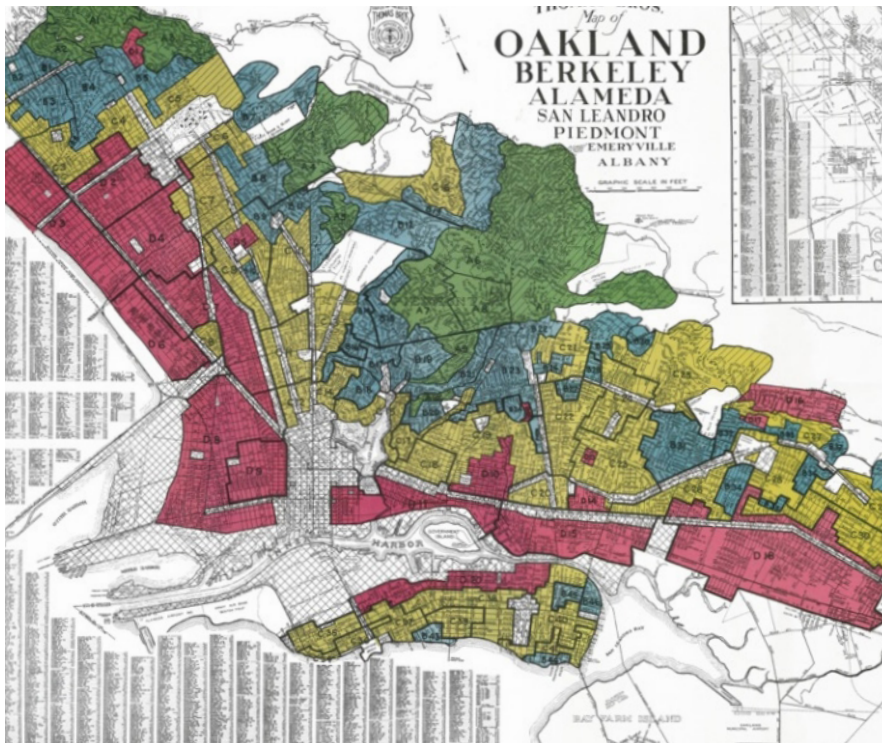
Most people wouldn't point to the transportation world as the right industry for someone who wanted to fight for social justice and the protection of civil rights—human rights law, prison or education reform, or public health might seem like better fits. But the built environment has always been ground zero for systems of oppression: from redlining to Jim Crow to urban renewal, many communities across North America— frequently people of color, low-income people, and immigrants—have long borne unfair environmental and transportation burdens because they were different from those in power.

If you want to end that oppression, why not start with the places we exist in and the ways in which we move between those places? Just as those of us in the transportation industry can practice empathy toward the people we serve and do what is ethical by creating a system that serves and keeps people safe, we can center equity in our organizational culture and in our project work.

What is equity?

Equity in our work means giving everyone what they need today while considering how resources have been distributed in the past. At its heart, equity is providing what is truly needed for anyone in any situation to have access to mobility options that allow them to move freely and flourish.

The fact that not everyone has access to safe, comfortable, affordable, and healthy transportation choices¹ is a clear reminder that inequities that are rooted in the built environment are alive and well today. As transportation professionals, we face constant opportunities to either dismantle or perpetuate inequities. We must recognize them and use our work to make the world more equitable.



Urban planning practices like redlining created inequities based on race and their legacies are deeply entrenched in our neighborhoods today.

Equity work is becoming more common in both our industry and others, but this growing awareness does not make it a passing fad. Countless people have been doing it for a long time, and its importance is rooted in real, daily struggles that will persist until they are fully addressed.

Equity in our work means giving everyone what they need today while considering how resources have been distributed in the past.

¹ <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resource-files/sanchez-moving-to-equity-transportation-policies.pdf>



Inclusion is when those who have historically been excluded from decision-making processes take leadership roles. See page 6 for more on the concept of co-powering.

We must start with race

The professional world is full of unwritten rules, and in most work environments, one of them is that race is a topic to avoid. Sometimes the fear of saying the wrong thing and appearing to be racist keeps us silent. Sometimes people believe that being “color blind” means conversations about race are unnecessary. Sometimes people are overwhelmed by the weight of racism and avoid the topic because it seems too large to overcome. But race has a great impact on all of our lives even if we don’t realize it, and ignoring that fact won’t change it.

At Toole Design, while we recognize that many different people and communities are subject to systemic oppression, we have placed racial equity at the center of our efforts. This is because structural racism is pervasive in virtually every sector of U.S. society²—from who can live in safe and walkable communities

to who has access to the best education and who our CEOs are is closely tied to race. We believe that our work toward equity must start with the most glaring and prevalent injustice: racism.

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Where do diversity and inclusion fit?

It’s common to see the word “equity” grouped with the words “diversity” and “inclusion,” and it’s important to understand how each concept’s meaning overlaps and differs. At the heart of the matter, both diversity and inclusion are crucial—but different—parts of building equity. Efforts to diversify—to ensure representation from a collection of people that represents our world’s array of races, classes, religions, abilities, gender identifications and

representations, and perspectives based on a number of other factors—are extremely important. You can’t have a company full of people who look, act, and think similarly and expect the environment to be welcoming for those who do not fit that mold.

But at the same time, faces that look different from one another aren’t enough. It’s one thing to have a seat at the table, but another to have true decision-making power. Inclusion is when the people who make an organization more diverse are also allowed to fully participate in and lead the decision-making process. The fact that in corporations across the United States, the percentage of women and people in color in leadership positions is far lower than the percentage of the overall workforce that they constitute³ is a reminder that diversity without inclusion is far too common.

² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/578fa7e3d482e9af82f8f507/t/5c1b08a50eb-be8eec9f38d21/1545275564106/REI+Ground-water+Approach.pdf>

³ https://wiw-assets-production.s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/pdfs/women_in_the_workplace_2018_print.pdf

Do the internal work!

As equity has become more of a buzz word, many people and organizations have voiced a strong desire to “do equity work.” But before looking at the external work, we must focus internally and build a foundation and culture of equity being a part of all that we do.

Promoting equity begins on the inside, as our cultural norms are a much more immediate indicator of our progress in this area than what we do in our technical work. To achieve equity, we must examine, question, and change our fundamental habits and the power structures they serve.

This work might be daunting for any organization or company, but it is both necessary and possible. Below are a handful of internal steps any company can take to become more equitable:

Leadership/Initiatives/Task Forces

Companies can create equity-focused task forces and initiatives to take a deeper look at who enjoys the most access to opportunity—and who gets the least. These task forces cannot be token groups. They must be fully resourced and supported and have decision making access and authority. Individuals serving or working in this capacity cannot be viewed as volunteers or doing “extra” work. Rather, they should have their time valued and compensated.

Trainings

It’s totally reasonable to have questions on this subject—after all, we don’t know what we don’t know. We can, however, be proactive about building knowledge by commissioning and paying competitive rates for trainings on equity. Just like a new technology or accounting systems, equity work can take a company to new heights, but it requires financial investment. Targeted learning sessions on these matters, especially when run by trained professionals, can shed light and bring a level of understanding that is otherwise difficult to find/achieve.

Hiring and retention

Companies can interview and hire from a more diverse pool of candidates. As mentioned above, equity efforts can’t stop at striving for a diverse workforce, but diversity is a key component of creating equity, and a company cannot become more diverse unless it interviews, hires, and retains a diverse group of candidates.

Doing this effectively requires a simple but powerful shift in mindset: we need to go from thinking that finding and hiring diverse candidates simply takes too much time or is too hard, to simply seeing it as part of the standard process. Rather than thinking that it’s harder or takes longer than what’s “normal,” we should view not doing it as not working hard enough. For a transportation-

related analogy, think about a city that decides to really go all in on a multimodal network: at some point for this city, building great sidewalks and bike lanes stops being a burden and is just par for the course.

Diversifying our offices is only the first step. Beyond being hired, people need to work in a supportive and inclusive environment where they can show up as their full, authentic selves. If a black woman doesn’t feel comfortable wearing her hair the way she wants to⁴, or a Muslim person doesn’t have a place to pray throughout the day, or employees are subject to a culture of heteronormativity when it comes to inviting partners to office outings, we might have diversified, but we haven’t created an environment that welcomes a diverse range of employees.

The power of the dollar

When making a purchase for the office—lunch for a group or office supplies, for example—companies can make it a point to buy from local business owned by members of marginalized groups. This can feel like a small gesture, but it brings equity work into the routine and day to day, which can have a big impact.

4 <https://www1.nyc.gov/assets/cchr/downloads/pdf/Hair-Guidance.pdf>



TAMIKA BUTLER, ESQ
*Director of Equity & Inclusion;
 Director of Planning, California*

“The beauty of our profession is that we have the tools to help people connect and move freely. Yet we often fail to acknowledge that this profession—and those same tools—have been used to keep people apart and stifle mobility. To make transportation equitable, we must commit to addressing historical and present-day inequities as we move together towards mobility justice.”

Equity in our external work

The task of getting things right on the inside will always be ongoing, but this should not keep us from also working with clients and business partners to achieve equity in the world at large. Below are a few steps that transportation professionals—particularly consultants—can take to use their work to promote equity:

Know your history and understand the existing conditions –

Practitioners must understand how we have kept marginalized people from helping to shape the built environment and how, in turn,

the built environment has blocked marginalized people’s access to opportunity. This means knowing and accounting for history⁵ and reviewing existing plans and policies with an eye on who they have and have not helped and harmed. Doing this right requires looking beyond the European models that have traditionally been the most celebrated in our field.

When analyzing existing conditions, we can use data on a number of equity-related factors—communities that are majority people of color, low-income

⁵ <https://www.npr.org/2017/05/03/526655831/a-forgotten-history-of-how-the-u-s-government-segregated-america>

populations, and concentrations of people with disabilities, for example—to analyze how existing systems serve or fail to serve marginalized groups.

Engage with the public on their terms –

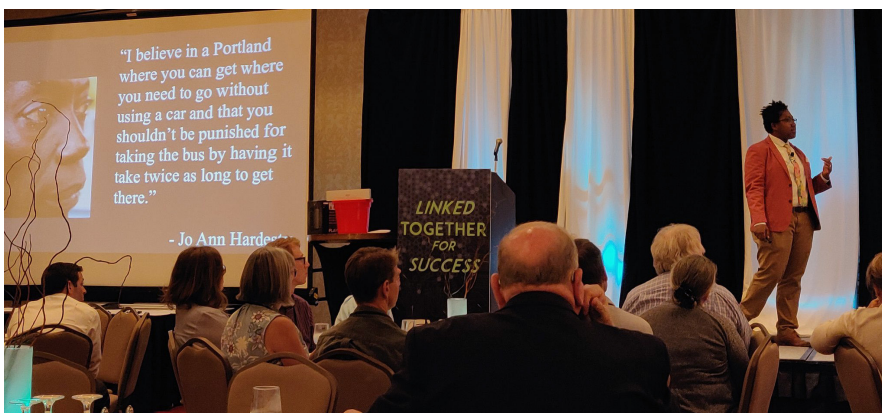
We can work to hear and respond to the voices of the people the transportation profession has not adequately served and who continue to be excluded. We must shift from a model of empowerment to one of co-powerment⁶, where the emphasis is on collaboration and recognizing the power and knowledge that’s present in the community before we ever show up.

One way to do this is through partnering with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs)⁷ to ensure that input on a project is truly representative of the communities it will affect.⁸ Whenever we work with community members or CBOs, we must value their expertise and knowledge by adequately

⁶ <https://twitter.com/AlfredHFX/status/1172119210144743424>

⁷ http://media.metro.net/projects_studies/toc/images/report_toc_MBLFLM_execsummary.pdf

⁸ <http://www.untokening.org/updates/2017/11/11/untokening-10-principles-of-mobility-justice>



An equity workshop at the Washington State Transit Association conference.

Equality



Equity



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compensating them for their time⁹ (see “Local Innovation” on pg. 3)—as we would with any other expert.

When developing master plans or active transportation plans, recommend changes that promote equity – There are three main ways to do this.

- **Demand Analysis** – Equity indicators such as no-car households and low-income households can shed light on where there’s likely demand for active transportation

⁹ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59e46956bff2000caf3dcfa9/t/5d57f709b14a65000188b623/1566045962459/8.13.19+DRAFT+-+The+Equitcity+Racial+Equity+Statement+of+Principle+PDF.pdf>

infrastructure. Recommendations should reflect this demand.

- **Performance Metrics** – Practitioners can help clients evaluate their efforts to meet a plan’s equity-related goals. For example, a city might strive to ensure that X% of communities of color are within Y distance of active transportation facilities or to reduce crashes by Z% in low-income communities.
- **Project Prioritization** – Practitioners can factor equity-related metrics (like the ones mentioned above) into decisions about what projects to build, and where.

Make equitable teaming

arrangements – When we team with firms that are owned and operated by historically marginalized groups, we share the opportunities that privilege has granted us. We can take this a step further by ensuring that in these teaming arrangements, the firms we partner with actually perform technical work. If an engineering subconsultant on an engineering project only does graphic design or communications work, they miss out on a chance to build meaningful qualifications. Additionally, if we only give these firms the minimum percentage required, we risk tokenizing them rather than truly valuing them for their talents and skills.



You got this

As we work toward integrating equity into all that we do, we're bound to make mistakes. It is important to know that, acknowledge mistakes when they happen, repair any damage that has been done, and keep fighting to be better. After all, equity requires empathy, including toward ourselves. It's totally normal to be afraid of making the wrong move or saying the wrong thing, but we can't be so afraid that we don't act. Requiring perfection before changing the system is a key tenet of white supremacy culture¹⁰, and it often stops us from taking risks in efforts to do what's right.

Centering equity is about honestly confronting how racism has guided our profession and how we have built oppression into communities, and then working to make things right. This may not be easy, and change won't happen overnight, but it's the ethical approach, and it's necessary if we're going to build a world that truly serves everyone.

¹⁰ <https://www.showingupforracialjustice.org/white-supremacy-culture-characteristics.html>