

Coming Home

The narrative vision that follows includes contributions from the 12-member, all-Black, intergenerational Community Leadership Council (CLC) that was convened to help guide the development of Catherine Street; a mixed-use housing development and 1st floor space that is being developed by Avalon Housing & the Ann Arbor Housing Commission (AAHC). The six story property on Catherine St in Ann Arbor, Michigan is being built in a historically Black business and residential district.

The project flows out of two circumstances: the Ann Arbor Housing Commission (AAHC) identifying prospective city-owned sites for development, and the passing of the affordable housing millage. Both taken together are and will be the foundation of an unprecedented amount of affordable-housing creation in our city.

The property will have permanent supportive housing for single adults transitioning from homelessness. The partners also conceived of affordable housing for artists (this is intended to be an expansive definition of 'artist' which can include all types of creatives) in the building too.

Everyone involved, including the project's community engagement consultants, Yodit Mesfin Johnson and Jessica Letaw, is deeply committed to helping to support the vision and ultimate creation of a space and place that honors the unique history of this site and the people who worked, lived, and organized here, while welcoming 'home' new residents to the space and neighborhood.

As the project was taking shape, the CLC was asked to imagine the year 2027 (after the building is open). The following is a narrative of what they imagine the physical space and surrounding neighborhood will feel like for residents and community members, especially Black people who may be returning 'home' to this area after decades of marginalization and displacement. There remains an opportunity to expand and deepen connections and to engage others in our community more deeply in this futuring.....

A Place To Call Home

As we look around the first floor, the resident lobby and the sidewalks surrounding Catherine and 4th Avenues, we notice people of all ages talking, laughing and positively interacting. There's racial and economic diversity among visitors and residents. The space feels vibrant, inclusive and joyous. It's safe here and provisions are in place to ensure that everyone here can thrive and co-exist.

Visitors and neighbors are learning about the area's history, honoring the contributions of Black people to this area and touring the community space that includes a makerspace/FabLab.

Residents onsite and nearby are filled with pride, excitement, and joy to live in this historic neighborhood. The space is accessible for people with disabilities and welcoming of those finding stability and healing, all are welcome here.

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Residents, especially Black people, have a comfortable home in an accepting downtown environment. Other residents are talking with each other and their friends on the streets. Tenants are laughing, communicating openly following the monthly building-wide community building event that just wrapped up.

Outside, people are moving in; there are moving trucks and helpful people supporting new residents arriving 'home'.

Making CommUNITY

The first floor of the building is devoted to a makerspace/FabLab. Today, there's a faint smell of saw dust following the woodworking class that just ended. People come here and visit from all over the city to learn more about using the Fab Lab; a small-scale workshop offering (personal) digital fabrication.

Residents and community members are trained and working in the makerspace/FabLab creating things they need for themselves and others. There's a resident-curated playlist playing throughout the building. Makers sell items that were "born" in the community space and local venues and at the farmer's market.

Young people and students also attend activities in the Fab Lab, creating art and science projects for their school and service projects. Prospective funders visit often to learn about opportunities to invest and support this vital community hub.

In the nearby first-floor Community Room, there are self-help programs offered for residents and other community members. There's a sign up sheet for tutoring classes and a calendar with upcoming poetry slams (2x/month because of demand) on the welcome desk. A Community Ambassador who volunteers during the day greets guests and shares about the creation of this new site. "Look at what we do in this room! Experience the history of the neighborhood!". Restorative justice training in the community space has continued to strengthen relationships with tenants and nearby residents.

In a smaller space on the 1st floor, the team from the African American Downtown Festival are collaborating to plan their next event.

Visitors and residents easily access quality food through a partnership formed with the farmer's market. Some residents manage a booth at the market where they are talking about the community space.

Art Is Life

There's art throughout the space, on each floor on the walls. Local artists have contributed art and historical references that depict the vibrant histories of the area. Visitors are enjoying art

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exhibitions in the public spaces. The latest intergenerational artist collaboration is being taken down, replaced with the youth arts touring display that will be up for the next month. The African American Cultural and Historical Museum has a presence here. They'll be leading local tours of Washtenaw County's racial history soon. And there are historical markers that let folks know the history of the area throughout.

Healing Is Happening

The last few years have been challenging and cathartic as neighbors, residents and locals grapple with and work in principled struggle to attend to the histories of this area, particularly racism, displacement, gentrification, economic injustices and deeply held stigmas pertaining to people with behavioral and/or mental health syndromes.

Neighbors now work in right relationship towards collective repair and are challenging deeply held biases about who belongs in this neighborhood. Residents feel seen and valued because they are no longer stigmatized.

The community operates with care and safety, free from over-policing, instead using tools of restorative and transformative justice. When needed, conflict mediation is accessed and staff from Avalon support wellness and provide around the clock support for residents.

Welcome to your home, our home, neighbors.