

Separated, but self-sufficient: Protecting ‘Da Island’

On a sunny but cool December morning last year at Other Suns Coffee Shop in

Winston-Salem, someone said: “Whoever owns the land is going to determine what’s going to happen.”

This statement left a necessary pause for the people involved in the conversation to think about past, present and future development of East Winston. Whoever owns the land will ultimately get to decide how that land is developed, and for whose benefit.

So, how does an entire community get that ability?

Our research team has been working on one possible answer to that question. A partnership among

the three authors of this column, supported by the Spatial Justice Studio Faculty/Community Fellows Program, has set out to learn what residents of East Winston think about models of collective land ownership. Island CultureZ was created in 2020 to focus on strengthening “Da Island” neighborhood in East Winston, which is bounded by MLK Jr. Drive to the west, Highway 311 and Skyland Park to the north, Business 40 to the south and Brushy Fork Creek to the east. The leaders of Island CultureZ looked into models of collective land ownership after noticing a concern within the community that, without proper preparation and safeguards, there is a risk that the future development of East Winston could lead to gentrification and displacement.

While searching for solutions to this problem, Island CultureZ became interested in community land trusts (CLT) as a potentially powerful tool to have property under the control of the community, curb real estate speculation, and keep land and housing affordable and desirable by setting

the terms of how property can be used. All of these qualities could help maintain the cultural identity of a location like Da Island by giving residents a method for realizing their visions of future development in the neighborhood. In the typical CLT, a nonprofit owns land, while people are able to own the houses and structures built on that land, usually at below-market rates. This division of ownership keeps homes more affordable and can provide stability of land ownership for generations. Additionally, people living within a defined community boundary are able to participate in decision-making about CLT activities and land uses, even if they don’t live on CLT-owned land.

To test the CLT’s viability in East Winston, we developed a research project that involves interviewing residents to learn their opinions on the character of the community, collective land ownership in general and the community land trust model in particular. The goal is to see if people will be interested in such a project prior to starting one.

When done well, a CLT will require a lot of participation from the community, so our goal with the project is to gauge interest. Additionally, we’re asking people about the different types of development they would like to see in the neighborhood, whether it’s housing, retail, gardening space and so on. Understanding which land uses are most important to the community would inform the structure of an eventual CLT.

Our work has been supported by the Spatial Justice Studio Faculty/Community Fellows Program since October 2023. The Spatial Justice Studio works to address inequities in the geographic distribution of resources and opportunity in Winston-Salem.

In line with that mission, our work studying collective land ownership in East Winston is trying to understand a potential solution to a local spatial injustice. Much of Winston-Salem’s wealth has been concentrated in areas west of Highway 52, a byproduct of the Urban Renewal program of the mid-20th century, which was mobilized in

Winston-Salem to clear predominantly Black neighborhoods and included the construction of the portion of Highway 52 through Winston-Salem, effectively separating the eastern part of the city from the west.

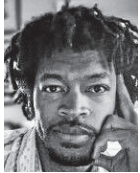
Today, newer places like the Innovation Quarter serve as hubs of development and economic activity, while adjacent communities to the east don’t often share in the benefits of the prosperity. With development pressures now moving eastward, community members are determined to ensure that any economic benefits that result from the growth of the city are also enjoyed by the community, and that history doesn’t repeat itself.

As we move forward with this research, we anticipate more conversations about the prospect of a CLT, and will use the information we gather to build a solution that will suit the community’s wants and needs.

Michael Banner and Marcus Hill work with the nonprofit Island CultureZ and Dylan Turner is a Ph.D. student at UNC Charlotte.



**MICHAEL
BANNER**



**MARCUS
HILL**



**DYLAN
TURNER**