

Convening New Partnerships, Breaking Out of Silos

In Los Angeles, the health and real estate sectors often work together in day-to-day real estate projects, but they rarely connect at the “big-picture” level to address the myriad of health and health equity issues that affect the greater Los Angeles area. However, thanks to a conversation jump-started by the local Urban Land Institute (ULI) district council, local real estate and health-related organizations—both public and private sector—are moving out of their silos, finding common language and discovering innovative ways to work together.

“

It’s the trust that by working and thinking creatively together, we can come up with ideas that will truly make a difference.”

- Ron Silverman, Cox, Castle & Nicholson

Seven years of conversations within a ULI committee led to three sequential convenings between 2018 and 2019 of roughly 30 individuals representing many diverse interests. Independently, organizations were working toward healthier outcomes in the built environment but had reached the limit of what they were able to do alone. “Their silos were all full of grain, but they didn’t know how to share that grain,” explains Ron Silverman, co-chair of the convening effort and senior partner at the real estate law firm Cox, Castle & Nicholson. After a three-hour facilitated dinner meeting, the participants in the first convening—including officials from Los Angeles County and the state, senior executives from Kaiser Permanente and representatives from the development community—all left energized, with the first glimpses of how they could collaborate and move forward.

The groups then identified several health-focused projects in various Los Angeles communities, including efforts already underway to enhance open space and parks in the chronically underserved East/Southeast Los Angeles area. Next, they initiated community-led conversations to understand local neighborhoods’ specific needs, focusing on parks and open spaces.

Four community groups have become particularly involved in leading the East/Southeast LA discussion: Los Angeles Metro, which is developing stations in the area; Promesa Boyle Heights, a local community justice group; First 5 LA, which advocates for children’s health from birth to age five; and TreePeople, an environmental advocacy group. These organizations are now working on a range of ideas from community residents, from planting more trees to potentially including health clinics in new Metro stations as rail service is expanded. Future convenings are also planned to explore other possible collaborations between the health and real estate sectors to promote healthier communities.

Silverman stresses that part of the process of creating new partnerships among built environment and health-focused organizations includes embracing uncertainty. “We don’t know the end result, but the process of convening and facilitating conversations with individual groups that deeply want to make a difference in their communities is leading to magical results,” says Silverman. “It’s the trust that by working and thinking creatively together, we can come up with ideas that will truly make a difference.”





Conversation guide

Projects and initiatives related to health and health equity in the built environment often start with a conversation between individuals or among small groups. It may be a formal convening led by a foundation or city agency, a workshop at a convention or even coffee between colleagues.

The Joint Call to Action to Promote Healthy Communities is engaged in a year-long effort to spur these conversations among our members and beyond. We've compiled stories about discussions that have led to healthy solutions at the community, regional and state levels.

Here are the questions they asked in Los Angeles →

WHO'S COME TO THE TABLE SO FAR

- Architects, Developers, Engineers, Lawyers, Planners
- Dignity Health
- First 5 LA
- Kaiser Permanente
- Los Angeles County Department of Public Health
- Los Angeles County's Chief Sustainability Officer
- Los Angeles Metro
- Los Angeles Neighborhood Land Trust
- Promesa Boyle Heights
- State of California (Governor's Health Advisor)
- The Trust for Public Land
- TreePeople
- Urban Land Institute
- U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- U.S. Green Building Council

1. STARTING THE CONVERSATION

In Los Angeles, initial connections between real estate and health-focused and community organizations—including public agencies and nonprofits—paved the way for a broader conversation on health and the built environment, working from questions such as:

- How do we find common language and terminology?
- What other professions, companies, public agencies and nonprofit organizations are working in this space? How do we identify and connect with them?
- What are the limits of our knowledge and expertise? How can we work with other professions and organizations to move beyond those limits?
- What is the most effective way to work with and excite professional and organizational leaders whose time is limited?

2. BUILDING OUT THE CONVERSATION

As the conversation moved to a formal convening, more questions—crafted with the help of a professional facilitator—helped guide the participants:

- How do we embrace uncertainty and the open-ended nature of our goals?
- How can we establish trust among a wide range of groups from many different sectors?
- What steps can we take to ensure we move toward outcomes that diverge from the status quo?

3. CLOSING THE LOOP

After the first formal convening, the group met again to select specific projects to explore together. Continuing to work with a facilitator, key questions at this point included:

- How do we ensure we're working effectively with organizations at the community level to listen and learn about their needs, rather than offering them our proposed, unsolicited solutions?
- How will we define healthy development, and how will those definitions influence the work we're trying to accomplish?
- How do we continue to encourage organizations to move out of their respective silos and find ways to synergize with each other to identify ongoing and future projects?