

EQUITY ACTION PLAN



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In June of 2020, Code Studio made a commitment to reshape our firm to directly acknowledge and address systemic racism in America. Since the murder of George Floyd on the streets of Minneapolis we have reflected on our own role in perpetuating an unjust and unequal society. There have been too many occasions that we have silently witnessed black and brown lives being taken, and instead of demanding justice, we move on with business as usual. We have let issues of racism and equity be just one more item on a long list to consider as we conduct our projects. We have avoided conversations about the role of race and discrimination in the history of zoning. We have not pressed on issues of diversity and inclusion within our firm or with our clients.

The outcry across the country and the world has reignited our conscience and is calling us to honestly reflect upon and engage with the injustices and oppressive systems that we have built as a society. We take responsibility for the fact that Code Studio is an active participant in this unjust system. Our leadership is white and our staff are mostly white. The majority of our clients, collaborators and stakeholder groups that we work with are white, even though the communities we work in often are not. We are a part of an industry with a long history of oppressing and excluding black and brown people, and it continues to do so to this day. We are also part of a political and bureaucratic system that continues to fortify white privilege while disregarding the basic human needs of people of color and other under-represented groups.

While Code Studio has worked to promote housing equity and inclusive community engagement in our work, this alone is insufficient. We must unlearn and re-examine the things we think we know about our cities. We must continually evaluate our privileged perspective, raise the voices of BIPOC people (black, Indigenous and people of color), and challenge the structural inequities that surround our work.

As we implement this Equity Action Plan, we are moving with a new sense of clarity to refocus Code Studio. By stating our values and goals in this Plan, we hope to clarify our commitment to equity and the Black Lives Matter movement and to formalize our values for our current and future staff, team members and clients so that we may be held accountable if we do not live up to them. This is a living document that will need to be revised to address the inequality facing other marginalized groups, but it is our intention with this draft to properly address the challenges and discrimination facing the BIPOC community.

VALUES

We value, and our work will be guided by, the following:

Learning

People Who Know Better, Do Better

We value learning, whether from formal systems of education, personal research, or life experiences. Continuously learning from those with expertise in their own perspective and experience in the communities we work in is critically important. We must continue to learn about the impacts of planning and zoning, the policies and techniques we have in our toolkit, and the continuing injustices built into our systems that impose racist outcomes across the nation. We must do better but, first we must educate ourselves. Our actions are based on our understanding. When we know better, we do better.

Diversity

We are Stronger Together

We value diversity, recognizing the differences between people and communities, and appreciating those differences. Without diversity in race, age, ethnicity, gender, religion and sexual orientation, we are prone to 'groupthink' due to the similarity of viewpoints in our upbringing and education. Without diversity, it becomes easy to shy away from the candid conversations necessary to deepen our experience. Without diversity, we limit our capacity to innovate. Increasing our exposure to a variety of viewpoints and life experiences will enrich us all.

Support

With Our Privilege Comes Responsibility to Uplift the Unprivileged

We recognize our privilege. There are too many voices that have been unheard, too many people uninvested in, and too many people kept from reaching their potential in our profession and our communities. From our advantaged position it is our duty to uplift and amplify BIPOC persons and communities in order to begin to ensure their voices are heard and that they receive equal opportunities.

Innovation

Change is Imperative, Innovation is Crucial

Our current systems are unjust and inexcusable. The time for change was yesterday. However, the problems embedded in our planning systems and the way we build cities are socially and politically complex. Code Studio must engage directly with these wicked problems and use our technical expertise to move or field forward and make American cities places of justice and opportunity for everyone.

GOALS + ACTION ITEMS

We put forth the following goals as aspirations to guide our future actions. Each goal promotes one or more of our values. The action items are intended to implement our goals, either beginning immediately or over time.

Increase diversity within our firm.

Code Studio must become more diverse. A broader set of experiences and perspectives will make our team stronger as we learn from each other. This is essential to our ability to innovate and move the industry forward. As a successful planning firm, we are responsible for investing in BIPOC planners and doing our part to consciously improve societal equity as we grow.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Actively recruit BIPOC talent for full-time employment. Promote all employment opportunities through Historically Black Colleges and Universities and minority organizations in planning, urban design and architecture.

Status: Conducted BIPOC recruitment for intern in June; HBCU and minority organization contacts will be used again for future intern and full-time hiring.

2. Create a program to hire interns from groups historically under-represented in the planning profession, developing and equipping students by providing hands-on experience in planning and zoning.

Status: Advertised in June, intern started August 4. Anticipate 2nd internship opening in January 2021.

3. Focus on the diversity of the firm when considering employment applications.

Status: First new full-time hire anticipated before year-end.

4. Create opportunities for hiring future employees from a broader pool of candidates by increasing flexibility within the firm in support of a variety of lifestyles and household demands by allowing work-from-home and out-of-state employees. Paying a full-time employee in another state requires the firm to become a registered foreign corporation in that state, which requires additional paperwork and often payment of local payroll taxes. We are committed to this option for current or future full-time employees.

Status: Work-from-home began March 13 and will continue to be allowed in the future. Our intern lives outside Texas and is paid as a contractor. Several employees have worked outside Texas for weeks or months since March; however, they remain Texas residents.

Partner with BIPOC-led firms and experts.

As a firm, we often team with other local and national experts to conduct our projects. One immediate way to increase the diversity we offer our clients is to team with more BIPOC partners on our projects. A diverse team also offers the opportunity to uplift and amplify BIPOC voices and increases the opportunity for innovation that creates positive change.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Partner and actively network with BIPOC-led firms on new proposals.

Status: BIPOC firms have been included in proposals prepared since June. We are currently creating a system to better track our partnerships and progress on this item.

2. Hire local BIPOC-led firms with direct experience in our client communities.

Status: Local BIPOC firms have been included in proposals prepared since June.

3. Team with local and national BIPOC experts in community engagement.

Status: BIPOC experts in community engagement have been included in proposals prepared since June.

4. Increase share of budget and scope allocated to BIPOC-led firms and experts.

Status: Reallocated funds in existing Cleveland contract to support 12 Literary Arts and Lattimore Productions, local arts organizations with experience in community engagement.

Engage in critical dialogue.

We will engage our staff, the planning industry and our local community in critical dialogue regarding equity and race as it relates to our work and to our lives. By facilitating these types of discussions, listening to and learning from thought leaders, and sharing resources, during work hours and beyond them, we aim to continually reflect on our own implicit biases, deepen our understanding of the issues, and develop innovative and applicable solutions.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Set aside one hour bi-weekly for a firm-wide discussion about race as it relates to zoning and planning.

Status: Sessions began on a weekly basis at the end of June. Shifted to a bi-weekly basis in September. We will continue this practice indefinitely.

2. Share articles, books and other resources related to racial inequality and the impacts of land use tools on equity with the members of the firm.

Status: Slack channel created on June 11. To date, over 70 resources have been posted, and many have been part of our weekly or bi-weekly company-wide discussions.

3. Attend conferences, virtual events and listen to podcasts covering equity in land use and planning.

Status: Firm currently offers a company-wide stipend of up to \$1,000 annually to encourage continuing education. Due to COVID-19, this activity has been virtual since March.

4. Begin an industry conversation with a blog series discussing the role of zoning and planning in racially discriminatory outcomes.

Status: Anticipated 2021.

Ensure equity is an essential component of our workflow.

To create innovative solutions that move our field forward in support of societal change, we must ensure that equity is at the core of each project we contribute to, supported by each step in our work processes.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. As part of any planning work or zoning diagnostic, uncover, understand and share the racial history of our client communities and the disparate racial impacts of their land use policies, discussing them openly with local staff and the community.

Status: In planning.

2. We will identify and actively work to reduce power imbalances when engaging communities—especially those with histories of exclusion and marginalization.

Status: Ongoing.

3. In order to expand engagement and ensure representation in our work, provide compensation that values the time and expense of citizens that serve as local experts and community liaisons to under-represented perspectives and communities.

Status: Ongoing.

Support BIPOC-led organizations by building capacity around planning issues.

In fulfilling our responsibility to uplift BIPOC voices, we must provide support to organizations working in support of racial equity in our own region and in our client communities.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Assist Austin area groups working in support of racial equity through offering technical assistance and professional planning, urban design and zoning support.

Status: In planning.

2. Assist groups in our client communities in support of racial equity through offering technical assistance, professional planning, urban design and zoning support, volunteering and providing financial support.

Status: The firm is currently partnered with the Midtown and Famicos CDCs in Cleveland for our form-based code work in the Hough neighborhood.

Empower and support Code Studio staff in their contributions toward a more equitable society.

From our advantaged position, it is our responsibility to aid and encourage our employees in their efforts to support the BIPOC community, whether financially, through technical assistance, or with their personal volunteer hours.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Match employee contributions to organizations that amplify the voices of BIPOC communities and support racial equity in public policy, up to \$5,000 annually.

Status: Begin January 1, 2021.

2. Credit employees up to one working day each month for work with BIPOC-led groups and support racial equity in public policy.

Status: Beginning January 1, 2021.

Invest in the Careers of BIPOC Planners.

We must use our privilege to support BIPOC planners and designers by providing incentives for our clients to elevate their BIPOC team members and support BIPOC staff and students both locally and in our client communities.

ACTION ITEMS:

1. Create or contribute to a Diversity Scholarship at the University of Texas School of Architecture.

Status: Anticipated 2021.

2. Offer a fee discount to our clients for projects led by BIPOC project managers.

Status: Under consideration.

3. Support BIPOC planning staff in the Austin area and in client communities.

Status: Code Studio is actively supporting BIPOC staff members in Los Angeles, Honolulu, Detroit, Cleveland, Charlottesville and San Antonio.

4. Offer to mentor BIPOC planning and urban design students.

Status: In planning. Currently mentoring Chumba Koech, our Summer/Fall intern.