

DESIGNING FOR DEMOCRACY

# North Omaha

Development Framework  
July 2023



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# Introduction

## North Omaha: Development With Purpose

Bordered by several neighborhoods, including Bemis Park, East Omaha, Kountze Park, and Saratoga, the heart of North Omaha is home to a long-storied cultural landscape, including the historical epicenter of Omaha's African American community. Throughout the Twentieth Century, this neighborhood encountered struggles ranging from redlining to strategic disinvestment, yet the community persevered despite these challenges. North Omaha has been home to a dedicated and long-committed base of community organizations, activists, and local leaders who actively opposed these forces.

Currently, the community is faced with existential challenges that threaten the security and stability of businesses and residents, new and old. As financial capital flows in from other parts of Omaha and beyond, local real estate costs and values are at risk of fluctuation, a major contributor to displacement. The informed response to these historical circumstances and potential dangers in

North Omaha: Development With Purpose must be an assurance and commitment that development and growth in North Omaha is equitable and fair.

The framework outlined in this booklet is meant to provide a grounding and a contextual analysis for the subsequent design phases and implementation of an equitable development plan for North Omaha. The ensuing process will be collaborative and iterative, and this is meant to be a live document that is periodically revisited and replenished as more information is gathered. One of the most crucial members of the project team will be the community itself, who understand the land, the culture, and the stakeholders, and their input will be essential to form the foundation of all successful projects.

This process and the resulting approach to future development is rooted in a commitment to positively impacting the surrounding community, to integrating

community-focused components into future development, and to catalyzing wider investment in this area - investments that benefit those who live and work here already.

In addition to looking ahead, this project has the responsibility to acknowledge the trauma embedded in this environment and create opportunities for nature and healing (environmental, social and psychological) where practitioners can offer services and where there are opportunities for small businesses.

In recent decades, North Omaha was massively impacted by the expansion of the North Freeway: the largest state investment in the area, which also brought incalculable harm to the neighborhood's housing stock, population density, and income earnings. Multiple planning documents have been explored and submitted since then, with the Forever North plan being a very important

component, introducing the concepts of trail-oriented development, neighborhood revitalization, and quality of life improvements - all programming that seeks to address the demolition and displacement caused by the freeway's construction.

We look to a collaborative, community-informed process in the next design stages, so that this framework can be further developed with those who live there.

# Project Team

## SPARK CDI - THE CLIENT

Spark Community Development Intermediary (CDI) is a community development organization that strives to provide North and South Omaha with holistic real estate development, while advancing and advocating for policies that promote livable, thriving neighborhoods.

In 2019, Spark CDI was a part of a consortium of local stakeholders in the North Omaha committed to develop a strategic approach in community development. The product of their labor was the Forever North strategy, a comprehensive approach that furthered past development strategies, like the North Omaha Village Plan, and strengthened them into a more vibrant, opportunity-rich, and secure vision.

## DESIGNING FOR DEMOCRACY

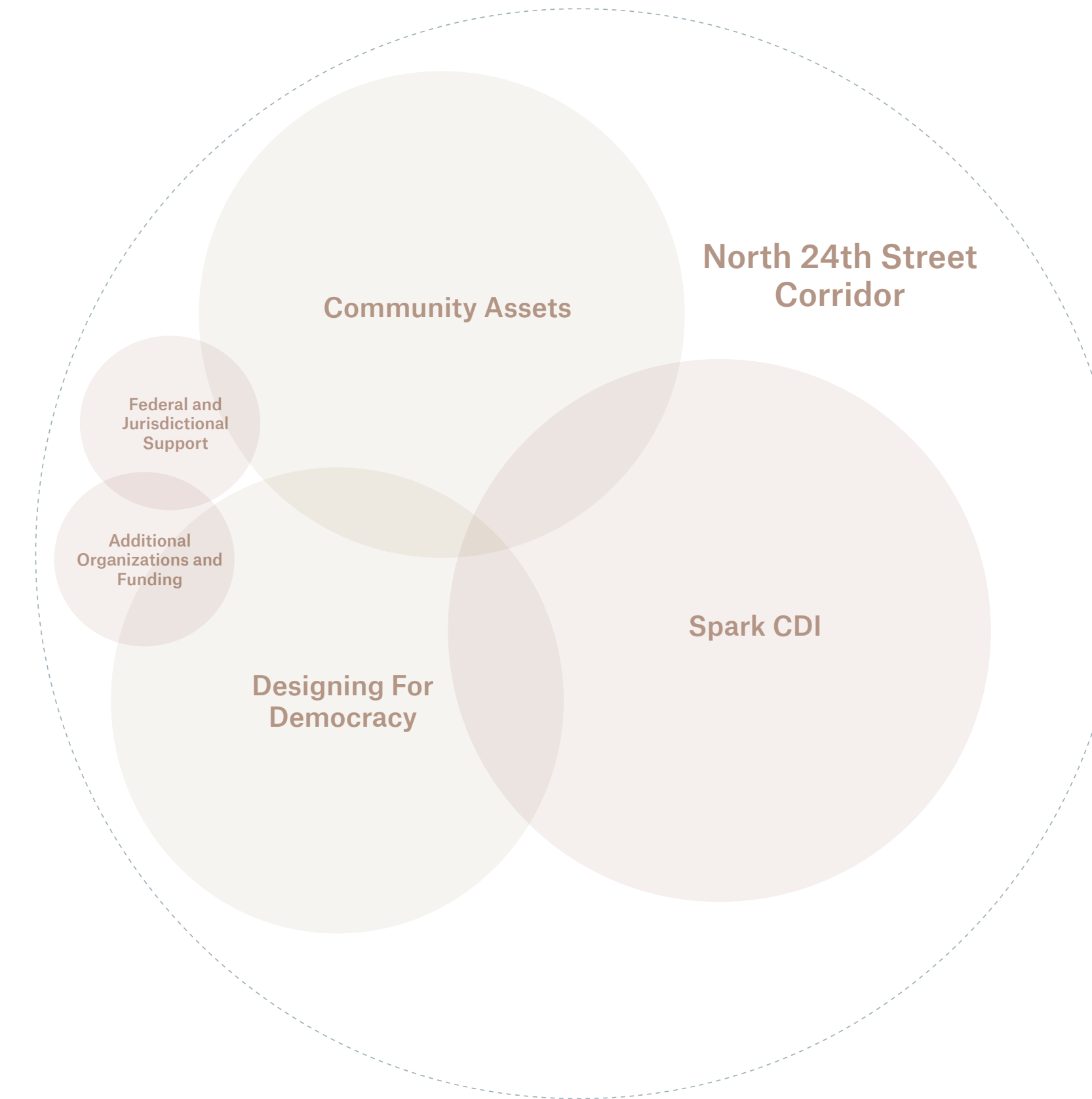
Designing For Democracy is an interdisciplinary consortium of practitioners investigating the implicit relationship between systems of the built environment and society's most pressing challenges. Our diverse upbringings, skill sets, and lived experiences empower our ability to connect how the nodes of inequity, cultural hierarchy, and dehumanization become spatialized and proliferated, all facets of a growing existential threat to the full potential of democracy.

Within this context, DFD activates opportunities for new pedagogical and methodological approaches to interrogate and deconstruct existing paradigms, while simultaneously advancing democratic spatial practice through the emergence of projects centered on more equitable, humane, and just stewardship of the built environment.

## COMMUNITY & CONSULTANTS

We understand that when we build, we are shaping our landscapes, economies, communities, and cultures. We create spaces with a sense of rootedness—that evoke an atmosphere enhancing how people move and feel. We use tools of artistry—concept, craft, and expression. Articulating ideas through materiality, Designing For Democracy sees this work as an ongoing process that will impact our collective future for generations to come: a collaboration.

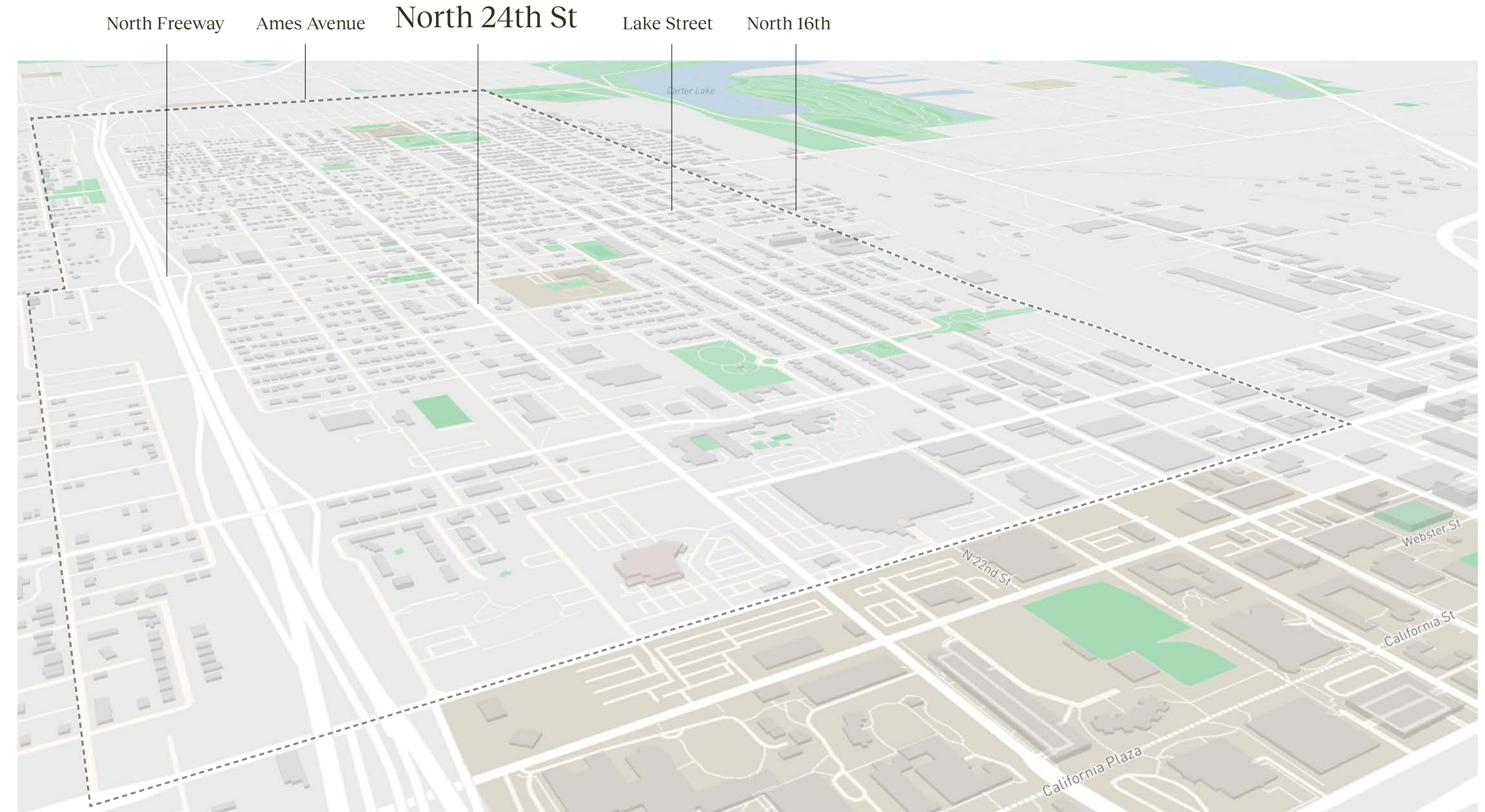
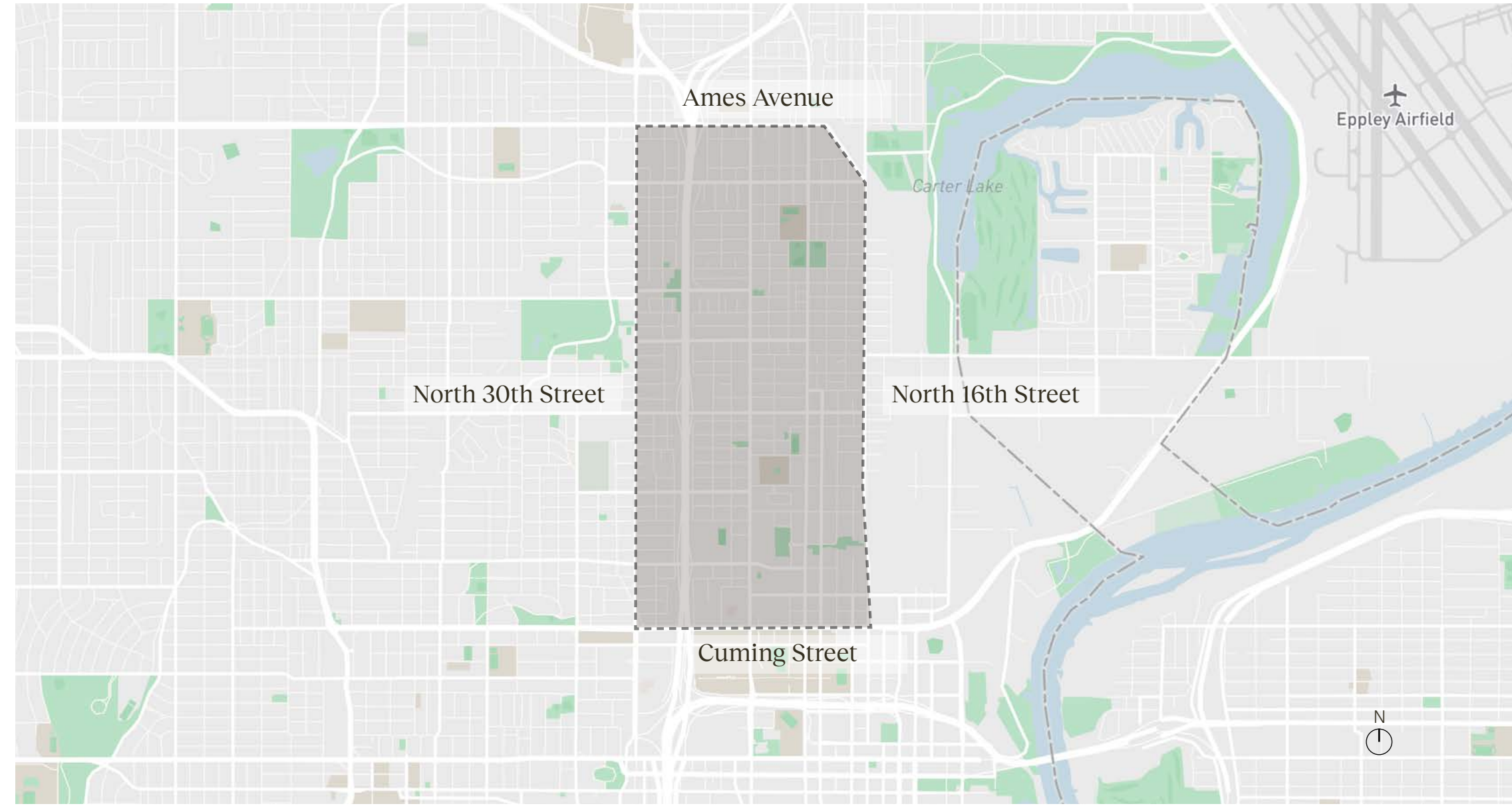
In the coming weeks and months, Spark CDI will engage a team of professionals, individuals, and organizations ranging from landscape architects and engineers to educators and farmers, who will guide and inform the design process to achieve an equitable and just result.



Spark CDI, with support from DFD, will orchestrate a team of professionals, individuals, and organizations to achieve the goals and vision outlined on the following pages of this document

# Project Location

The heart of North Omaha is bordered by Ames Avenue to the north, North 16th to the east, Cuming Street to the south, and North 30th to the west. Once a densely interwoven residential community, it has since been divided and fragmented with the construction of the North Freeway in the latter half of the Twentieth Century.



## A Regenerative Ecology

How do we reverse decades of restrictive policies and practices to reactivate the North 24th Street Corridor as not only the epicenter of the Black experience in Omaha, but as a thriving, sustainable, and equitable community for all Omahans?



1955 Aerial Survey of Omaha, City of Omaha Planning Department



1982 Aerial Survey of Omaha, Historic Aerials by NETR Online



1999 Aerial Survey of Omaha, Historic Aerials by NETR Online

# A Regenerative Ecology

"Migration is an expression of the human aspiration for dignity, safety and a better future. It is part of the social fabric, part of our very make-up as a human family."  
- Ban Ki-Moon, 2013 United Nations conference

Woven into the fabric of Omaha is a story of human movement and migration. From the indigenous tribes descended from the Ohio River Valley to the Great Migration in the early 20th Century, the flow of people has indelibly impacted the fortunes, environment, and landscape of Eastern Nebraska. Each section follows an era during Omaha's history, including its challenges, unheard stories, and the moments of inequity that have translated to today.

The first section, 'A New Frontier and the Cradle of Democracy,' chronicles the dispersal of the indigenous populations into the Great Plains, European exploration and exploitation, the Mormon migration, and contested

nature of homesteading in the founding of Omaha.

The second section, 'Go West, Young Man,' documents the forceful hand of the federal government in indigenous affairs, the early migration of African Americans as a part of the Exoduster movement, the planned subdivisions that came up during the Trans-Mississippi Exposition, and the legacy of the industrial economy on social relations and physical environment.

The third section, 'The Greatest Generation,' looks at how the Great Migration transformed North Omaha into a space of black culture and power, the community became host to a center of organizing and raising political consciousness, and how redlining and real estate practices restricted the movement of African Americans and pulled investment from the community.

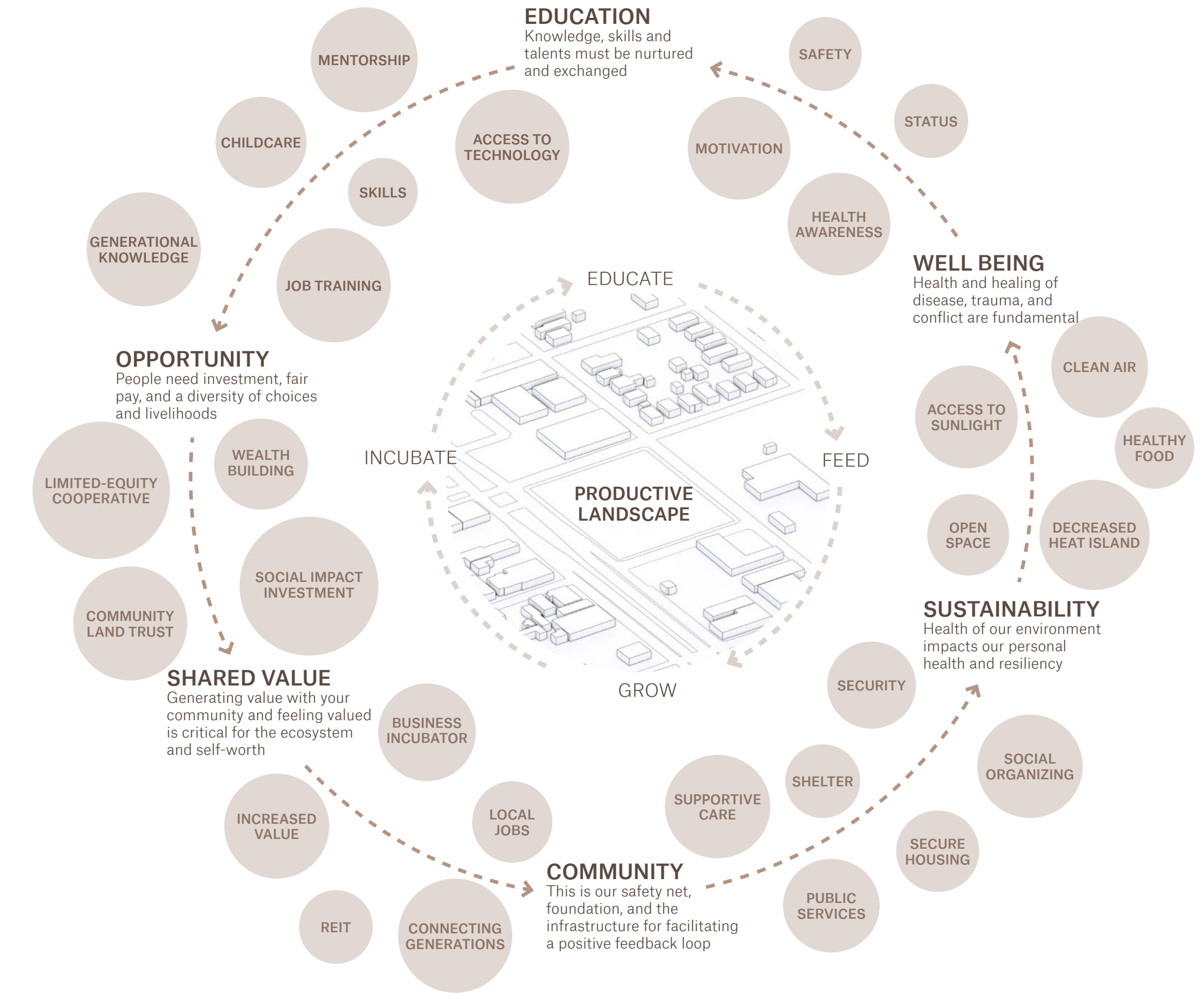
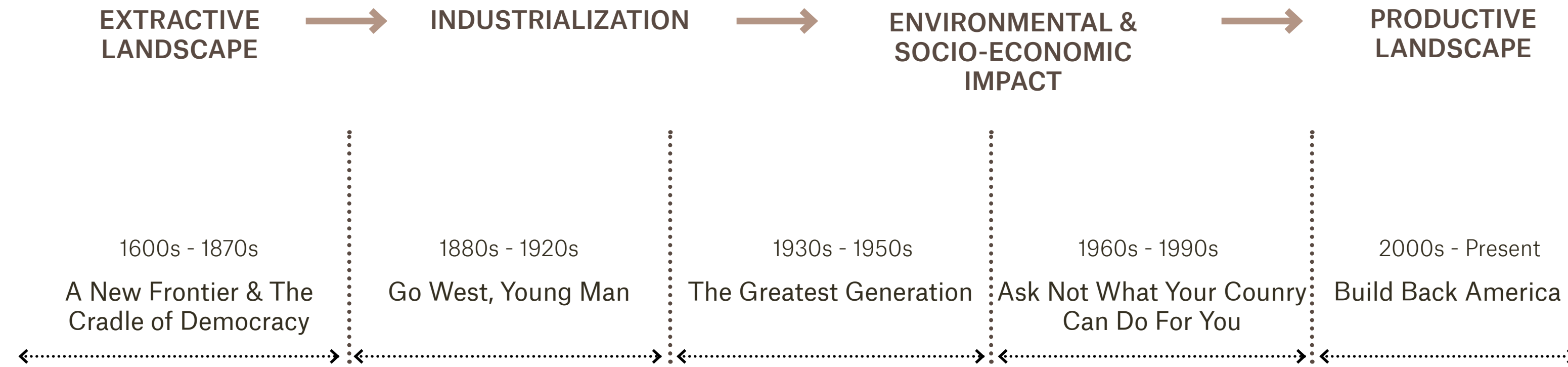
The fourth section, 'Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You,' explores the role of public housing, desegregation, white flight, and the construction of the North Freeway in setting up North Omaha for a period of decline and disinvestment.

The fifth and final section, 'Build Back America,' surveys the current and recent trends in North Omaha's development: from nonprofit affordable housing developers' commitment to North Omaha to the work of Spark CDI and others in the Forever North plan, and looking at the current platforms of opportunities available for establishing the regenerative ecology.

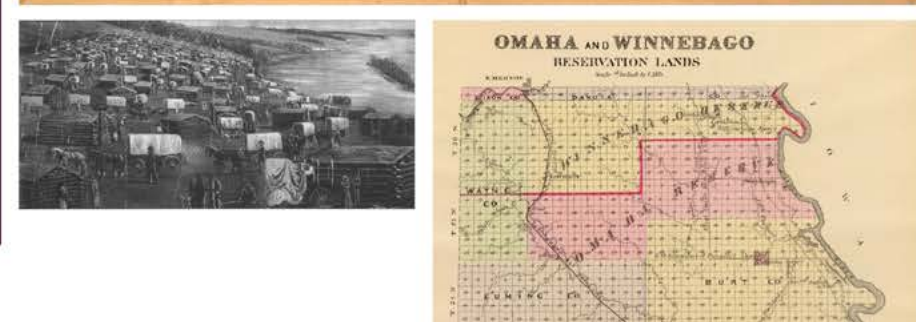
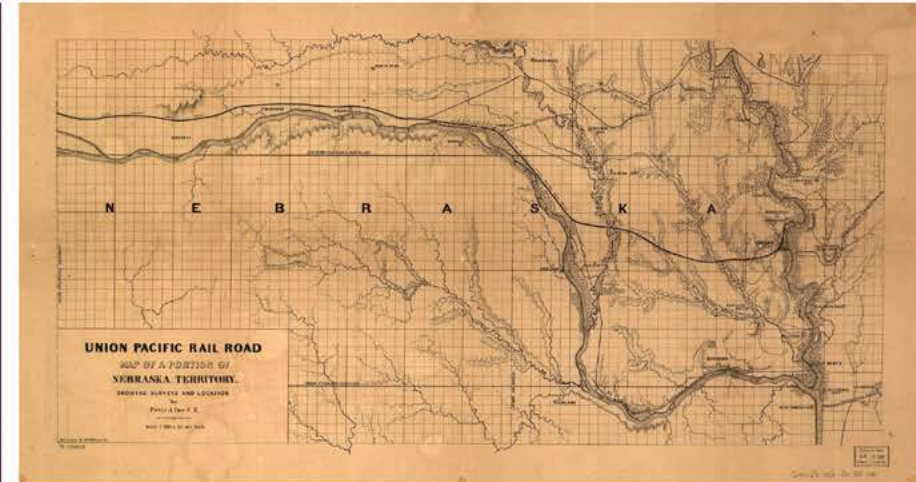
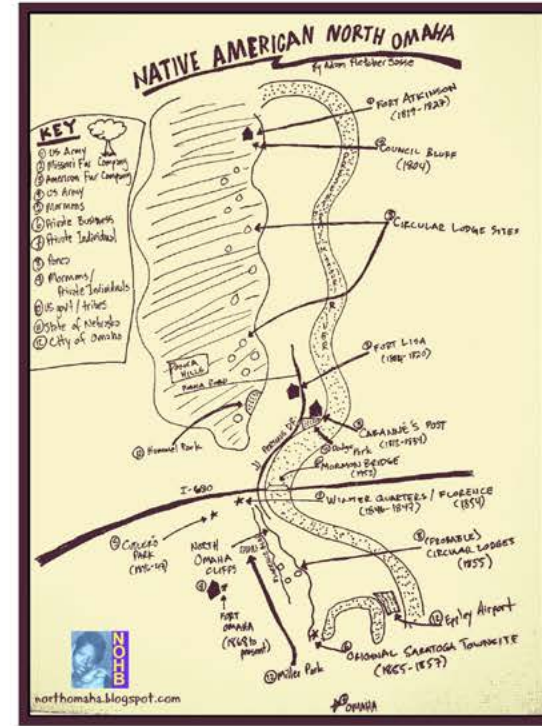
By acknowledging these historical threads, we can create a foundation that considers these antecedents and brings forth a re-envisioning of how space is mapped, organized, and used within a city. Humanity is not removed

from these local, regional, and global systems that have impacted our environmental conditions. Promoting the concept of a regenerative ecology speaks to two critical components: the conditions of our built environment and the conditions of our social ecosystem.

Since the colonial era, western urban design has long divided the environment into an industrial/working landscape and an aesthetic or ecological one, with little desire or impetus to bridge this ever-widening gap. The potential programming in North Omaha can be one avenue to reclaiming a connection with our natural surroundings and local ecology. Our usage of *productive landscape* is multifaceted - rather than a purely agricultural or horticultural concept, it speaks to a bigger aspiration to restore equitable systems in place to create an environment that is productive naturally, economically, and socially.

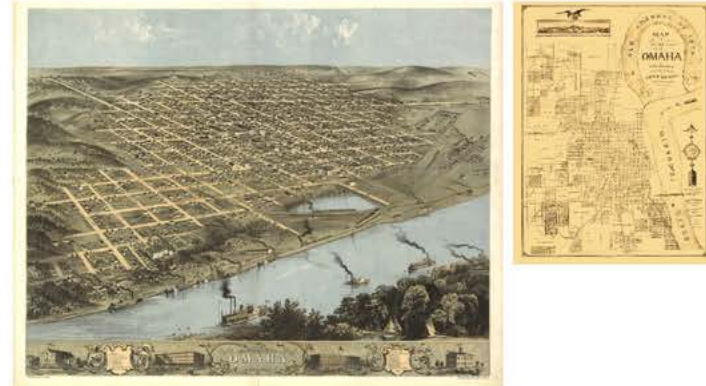


# A Brief History: From Settlement To Displacement



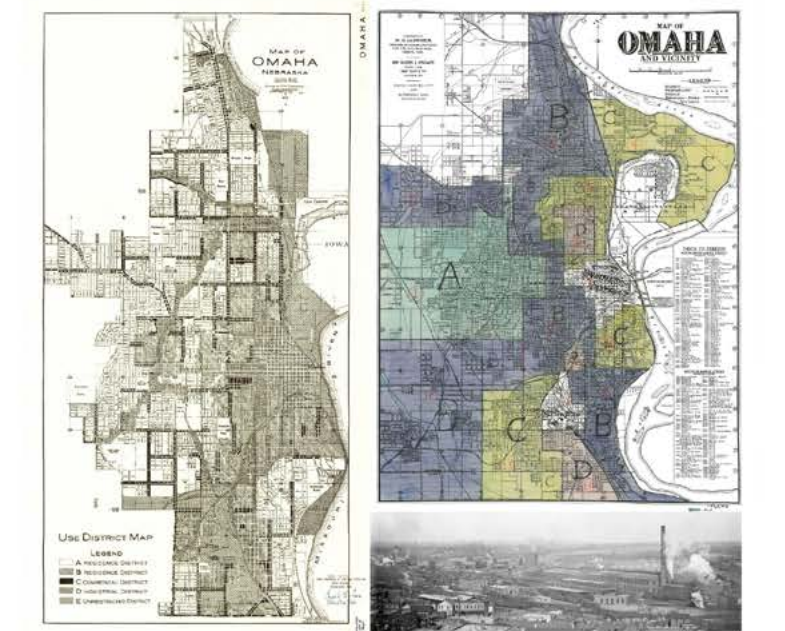
1600s- 1870s

A New Frontier & The Cradle of Democracy



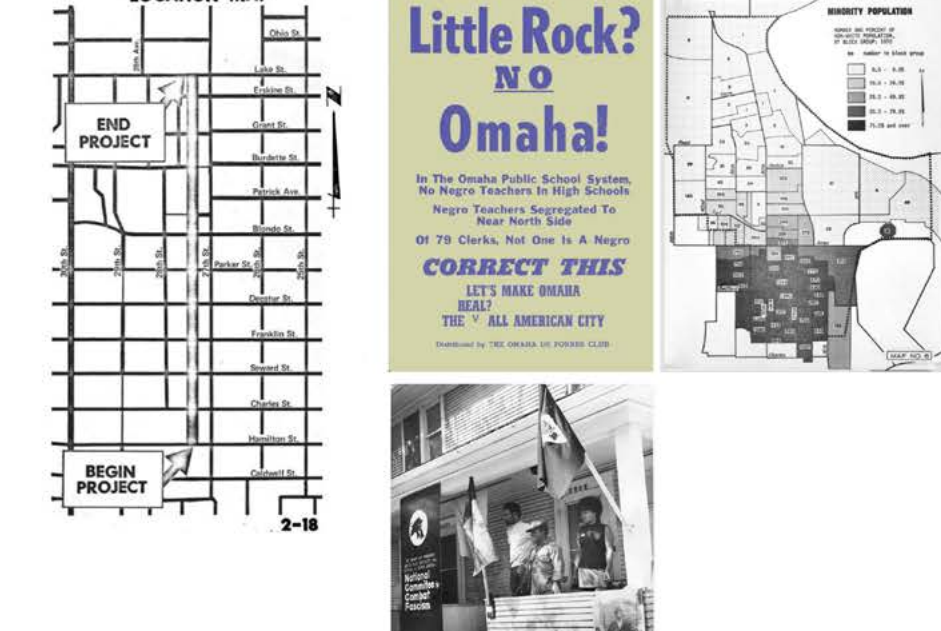
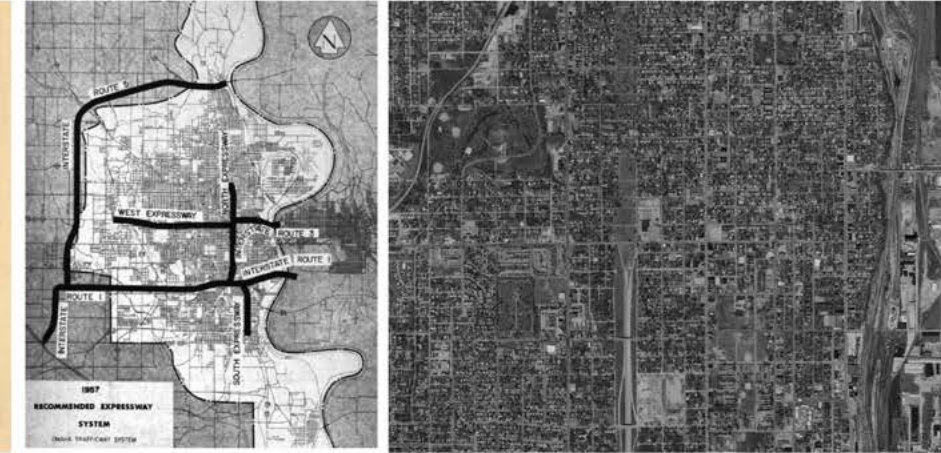
1880s - 1920s

Go West, Young Man



1930s - 1950s

The Greatest Generation



1960s - 1990s

Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You



2000s - Present

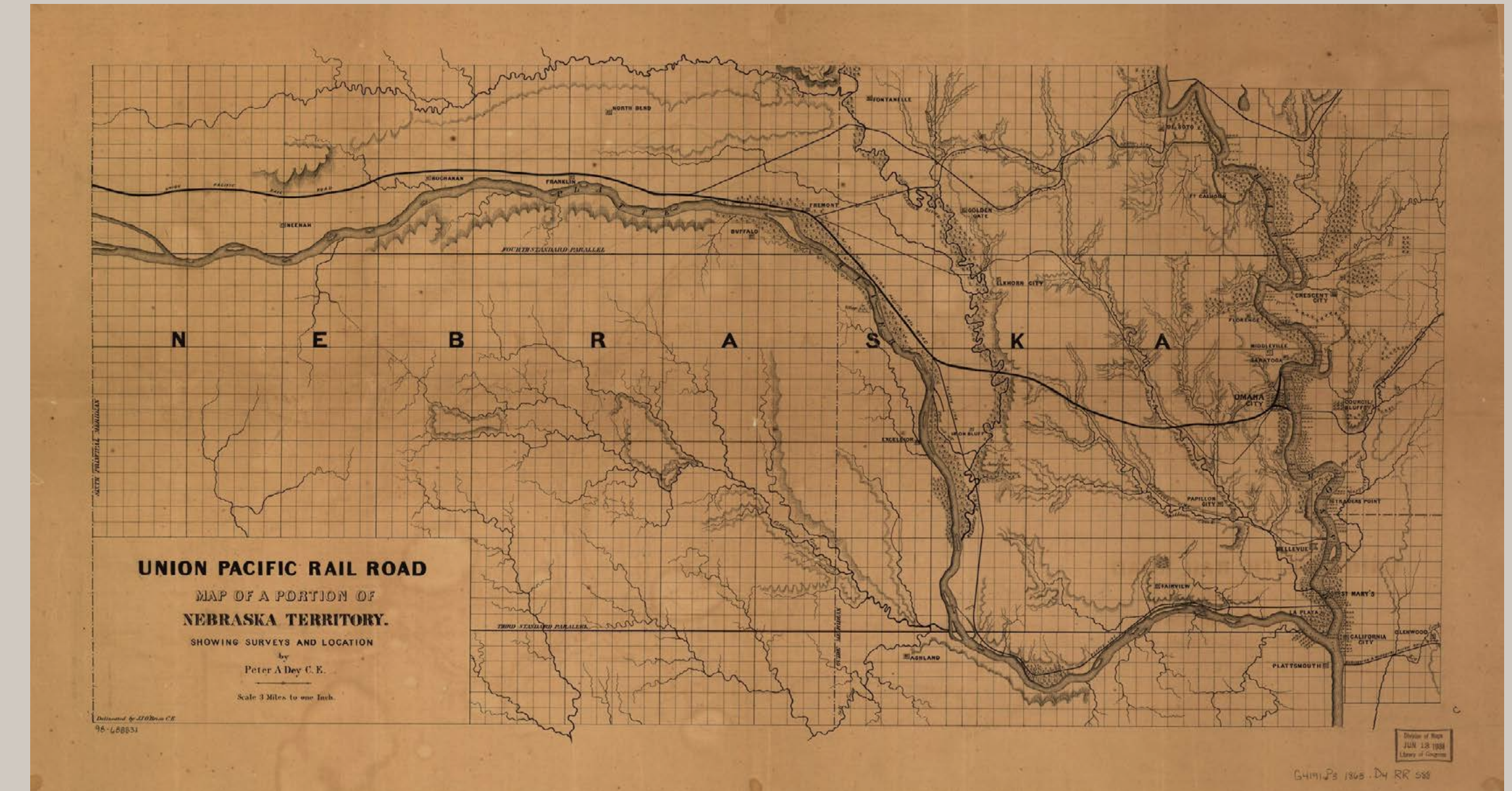
Build Back America



# A New Frontier & The Cradle of Democracy

1600s- 1870s

How do we begin to recognize the indigenous population and enslaved labor that went into securing the foundation on which Omaha was built?



"Union Pacific Rail Road, map of a portion of Nebraska Territory," 1865, map, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/item/98688831/>.

# A New Frontier & The Cradle of Democracy

1600s - 1870s

*“When I was a youth the country was beautiful. Along the rivers were belts of timberland, where grew cottonwoods, maples, elms, oaks, hickory and walnut trees, and many other kinds. Also there were various vines and shrubs. And under all these grew many good herbs and beautiful flowering plants. On the prairie was the waving green grass and many other beautiful plants.” - White Horse, a member of the Omaha tribe, to Melvin Gilmore*<sup>1</sup>

Long-settled by communities of Native Americans who numbered in the millions before the Age of Exploration, they tended to see themselves as stewards of the land, not owners. They upheld a lifestyle in tandem with the greater natural ecology and ecosystems, migrating with the climate and seasons. Conquest, manipulation, and violent acquisition of indigenous land, as well as the erasure of their culture have rooted an ongoing and contentious debate over the contradictions of just who exactly experiences the rights, liberties, and freedoms of democracy.

Philosophers and thinkers of the Enlightenment era believed that rational reasoning could be applied to all forms of human activity. They saw all humans as having the agency and right to meet their own ends without the guidance or influence of others. Society at its roots operated under a social contract between humans and the larger state. It was these ideals that laid the groundwork for the American and French Revolutions and the advent of democracy. At the convergence of these philosophical thoughts is the belief that human rationality can be propelled in government to serve ethical, humanistic, and progressive ends. Yet, as American history has shown, the values that compose democracy have not always lived up to those ideals and decisions of who has freedom.

## THE QUAPAW, PONCA, OMAHA, OSAGE, & THE KAW

Of the Native Americans who called this region home, there are several tribes who have inhabited the land that would later become Omaha, Nebraska. The Quapaw, the Ponca, the Omaha, the Osage and the Kaw - according to anthropological research - may have been at one time in the past: a single people, a single tribe. This is evident in the similar traditions, languages, and beliefs shared by these groups.

They were forcibly displaced by the Iroquois and Algonquin tribes from their ancestral home in the Ohio River Valley, which today comprises a stretch of land from Pennsylvania to Kentucky. The migration eastward split the tribe into different groups that each took different paths, leading to the formation of new tribes. Additionally, natural events like drought and inclement growing seasons accelerated this migratory movement as the Ponca grew maize and kept vegetable gardens, unlike the Dakota, the Lakota, and other Plains Indians who lived further west of Omaha.

*“The oral traditions of the five cognate tribes, and well as those of other Siouan-speaking people, tell of their origin in the east near a great body of water. The Ponca chief, Standing Buffalo, relates that his people emerged onto the earth from the water. According to Ponca legend, once these original beings moved to the land, they created the clan organization. The Dhegiha then migrated west until they came to another body of water. As they began to cross, rocks rose out of the water, so they could walk across with ease. When they lived along the shores of this water, they used spears to hunt, made log rafts, and camped in tents. Another segment of the story speaks of Wakanda, The Great Mystery, giving the Ponca three sacred gifts: the bow, the dog and a grain of corn.”<sup>2</sup>*

Called a ‘Wandering Nation’ by the French because of their migratory nature, the Omaha lived in their villages in the spring and first half of summer, then they parted ways across the landscape to hunt in the late summer and early fall, and spent the winters encamped in sheltered valleys. This cycle of settlement was season to season, and it repeated annually. As Europeans began to explore the interior, the Omaha used trade with Americans and Europeans to access security: recognizing the importance in assisting those who passed through as a critical mechanism for self-preservation.

## FRENCH & SPANISH EXPLORATION

European exploration of North America’s interior was spurred on by multiple factors: conflicts between the Great Powers on the old continent, the growing reliance on trade in global power, the fur trade, and the continuing quest to discover a route to Asia. French explorers first arrived in the Great Plains region in 1682, and Rene Robert Cavalier, Sieur de La Salle claimed all the land that drained from the Mississippi in the name of France. They built trading posts along the Missouri River to foster commerce with local Native American tribes, much to the chagrin of the Spanish colonial. In 1719, Spanish explorers arrived in northern Nebraska and established a series of forts that were used as staging points for their expeditions further west. These explorations discovered the routes that later became important trails and trade routes for settlers, as well as valuable natural resources like fur, timber, and minerals.

## AMERICAN EXPLORATION

As Thomas Jefferson read reports of European exploration taking place west of the Mississippi, his vision was to find the most direct route across the continent and to

assimilate and pacify the indigenous populations by encouraging a more sedentary lifestyle:

*“...to encourage them to abandon hunting, to apply to the raising stock, to agriculture and domestic manufacture, and thereby prove to themselves that less land and labor will maintain them in this, better than in their former mode of living. The extensive forests necessary in the hunting life, will then become useless, and they will see advantage in exchanging them for the means of improving their farms, and of increasing their domestic comforts.”<sup>3</sup>*

In concert with Congress, Jefferson requested and secured an appropriation of \$2,500 to bankroll an expedition to the West. Supported by a small contingent of soldiers, the Lewis & Clark expedition set course for the west with side objectives of researching biological and botanical specimens along the way, as Jefferson felt that the scientific endeavor would lend greater legitimacy to their claim over the West. In the early summer of 1804, the expedition traveled upriver on the Missouri from St. Charles, Missouri. On this stretch, they passed by Omaha, NE as they arrived in Fort Pierre, South Dakota at the confluence of the Missouri and Bad Rivers. This was the opening salvo that begun the American settlement of what would become Omaha.

Yet, it must be stated that the Native American assistance is what made the difference between success and failure in Lewis and Clark’s journey. The Mandans supplied the expedition with buffalo meat and corn to survive the winter, the Hidatsas gave them information about routes into the uncharted landscape, the Shoshone gave them much needed horses to traverse the Bitterroot Mountains, and the Nez Perces gave them salmon and vegetables that cured their near starvation. Sacagawea was amongst the most critical components that guided the expedition

to success. It must also be mentioned that other Native American figures like Shake Hand of the Yankton Sioux, and Black Buffalo of the Lakota, and Sheheke of the Mandans also aided the success of the expedition. The crossing of the river was the opening moment that begun the American settlement of what would become Omaha.

## OMAHA NATION FORCED TO SELL

Compelled by representatives of the US Federal Government, the Omaha Nation sold a total of four million acres at 22 cents an acre to the United States. Before this sale, the Omaha progressively lost territories over time, including northwestern Missouri where they had hunting rights in 1836. They experienced depopulation due to the spread of smallpox and other sicknesses by American settlers coming westward. Their way of life changed dramatically with the systematic hunting of the bison that nearly wiped out the species, an animal critical to the diets, tools, and textiles of Native Americans.

Domestically, the Dakota, Lakota, and Omaha were in a contentious conflict over land access, which further fueled the loss of lands. Logan Fontenelle played a major role as an interpreter in these land negotiations. Accounting for inflation, 22 cents in 1854 is worth \$7.76 today -- which makes that land sale over \$31 million. When the US made that land available to sale in the 1880s, the land was appraised at \$150-450 per acre accounting for inflation.

## MORMON MIGRATIONS

When the Mormons began their exodus out of Illinois in the 1840-1850s, the trail from Nauvoo, Illinois to the west followed through Council Bluffs and into Fort Bridger, Wyoming. Along these trails, Mormon emigrants would settle small towns/outposts, plant crops, and such along

this trail to aid future migrants.

*“Their plan called for a wholesale leaving of Nauvoo beginning in the spring of 1846 and continuing thereafter, until the entire population of those willing and able to go west was on the road. If all were unable to go all the way west to their desired destination that same year, they were prepared to leave behind most of the body of the Saints at either Grand Island or Council Bluffs while a vanguard company of the Twelve pushed onward to find “the place which God for us prepared”, likely the Salt Lake Valley or, if not, some other suitable location in the Bear River country.”<sup>4</sup>*

Winters Quarters in North Omaha near Cutlers Park was the first large-scale settlement in Nebraska when they took refuge in the winter on their emigration westward. Trading with local tribes and raising money through the church, they created a city albeit temporarily with local sheriffs, fire patrol in the Florence neighborhood.

## CLAIMS JUMPING & LAND THEFT

As Omaha was a central hub on the frontier and most land was not on the market, settlers used claims or squatting to call dibs on specific lands. This practice led to normalizing vigilante justice and mob violence as a means of settling disputes. Claims jumping was a serious issue in frontier Omaha. This illegal practice occurred when individuals or groups would attempt to seize legally registered land claims to gain property rights and resources. Claims jumping occurred regularly throughout the 19th century, with the most notable instance occurring during the frenzy of gold strikes in California that began in 1848. It was a major problem in the West, with Omaha being no exception. Because of this, laws were enacted to prosecute claims jumpers and protect those with legitimate land titles. Any person who took possession of

another’s property without legality could be arrested for trespass or punished for stealing. Unfortunately, these legal measures did little to deter claims jumping; many people were willing to risk the penalties to gain access to valuable resources. As a result, frontier Omaha was often plagued by conflict over land claims and economic turmoil because of illegal property grabs.

*“An orator of the day said the young city stood there on the Missouri River like a goddess lighting the way to the territory’s hospitable borders to the great west beyond. A disgruntled investor said the town wallowed in the mud like a harlot plucking at travelers’ sleeves and begging them to stay with her. Whatever the interpretation of it, Omaha sprawled over the Missouri flats and the river bluffs, muddy or dusty, sun-browned or snow-packed, but always lustily noisy with the vehemence of youth and growth.”<sup>5</sup>*

## HOMESTEAD ACT

The Homestead Act of 1862 opened Nebraska to migration from the Midwest and Eastern United States. The act provided individuals with 160 acres of public land if they worked it for five years, a process known as homesteading. This began an influx of settlers looking to make a living off the land, bringing their families and skills needed to build a successful life in Nebraska. Many of the homesteaders were immigrants from Europe, including Irish and German Catholics who settled around Omaha and other areas of Nebraska.

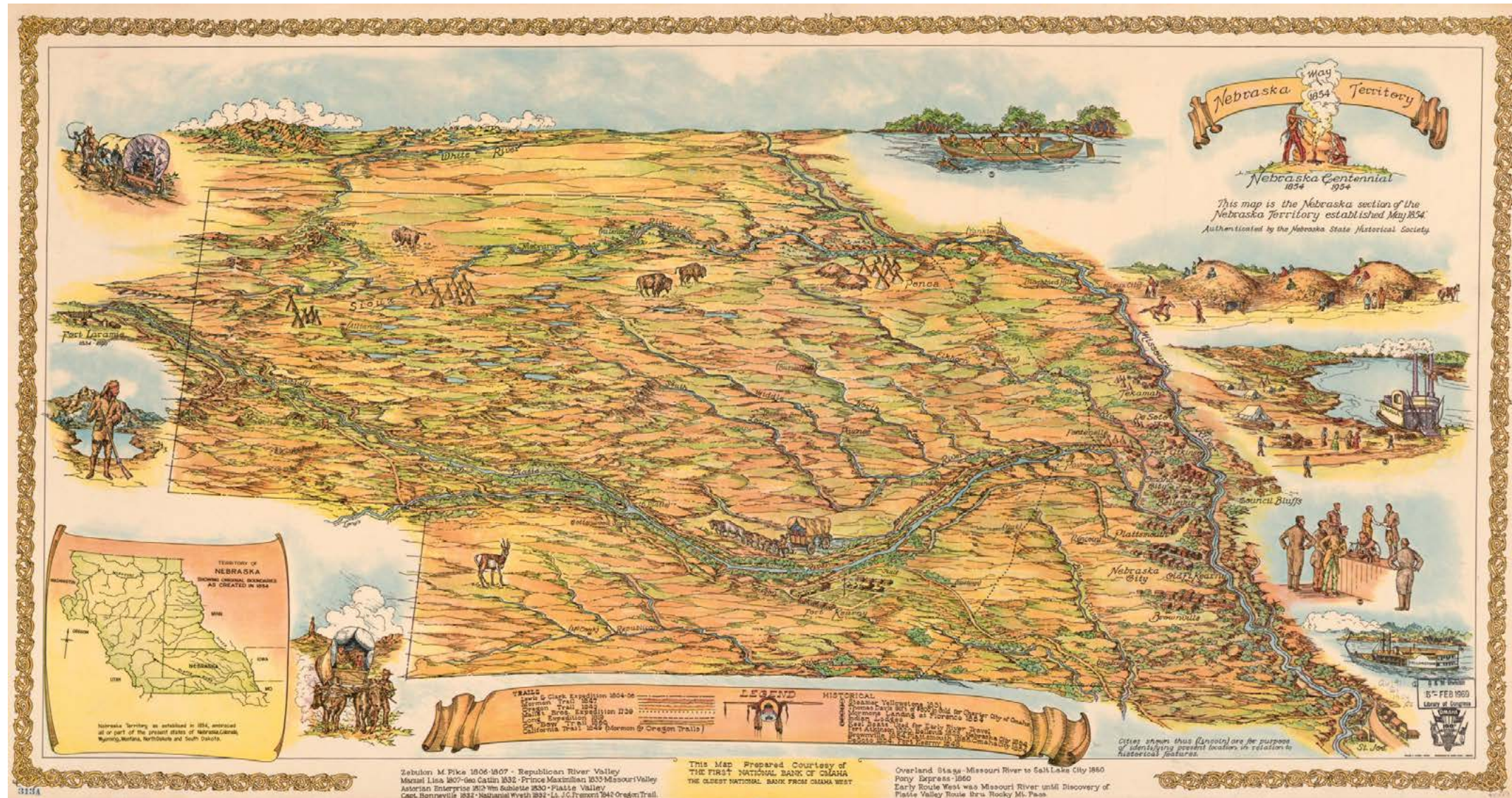
1. C. Thomas Shay, Under the Prairie Skies (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2022), pg. 71.

2. Eric Buffalohead, “Dheigan History: A Personal Journey,” Plains Anthropologist vol. 49, no. 192, 2004.

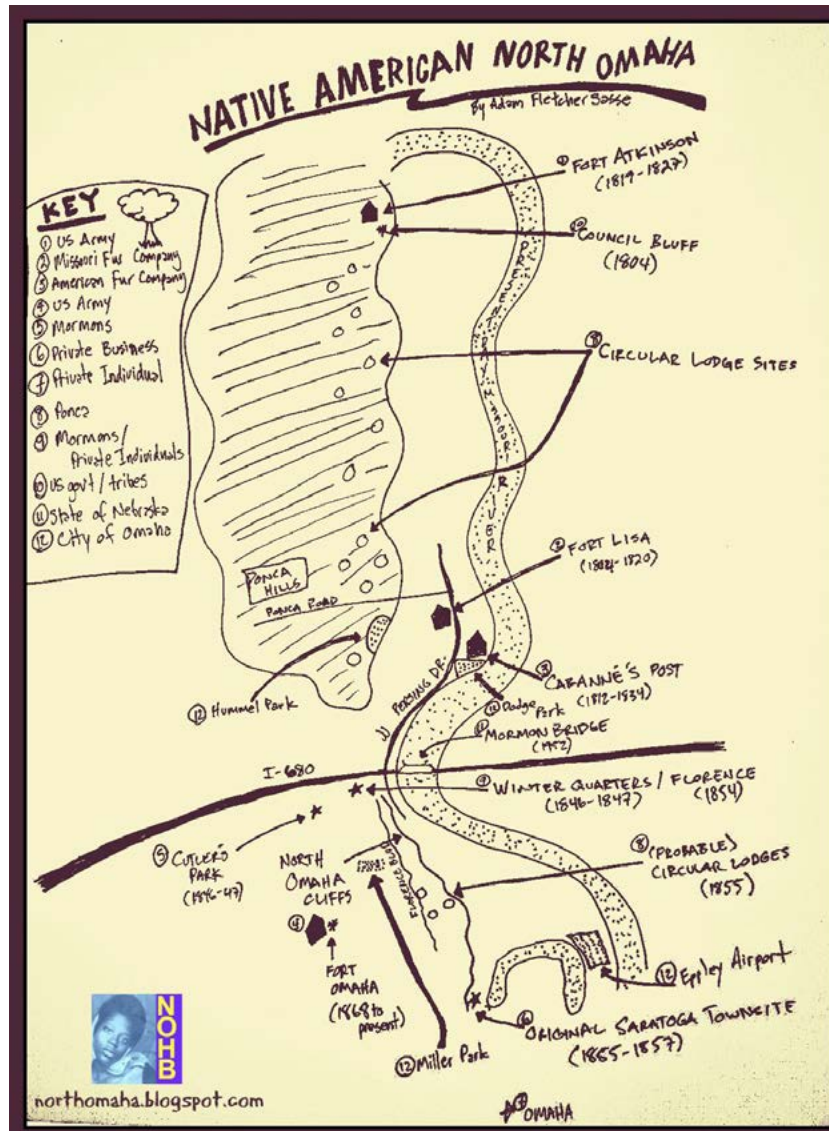
3. “A Confidential Letter,” Thomas Jefferson’s Monticello, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/louisiana-lewis-clark/origins-of-the-expedition/a-confidential-letter/>.

4. Chad Nielsen, “On Winter Quarters,” Times and Seasons, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.timesandseasons.org/index.php/2022/03/on-winter-quarters/>.

5. Bess Streeter Aldrich, The Lieutenant’s Lady (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1942) pg. 1.



"Nebraska Territory, May 1854 : Nebraska Centennial 1854-1954," 1954, color pictorial map, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4191s.ct007703/>.



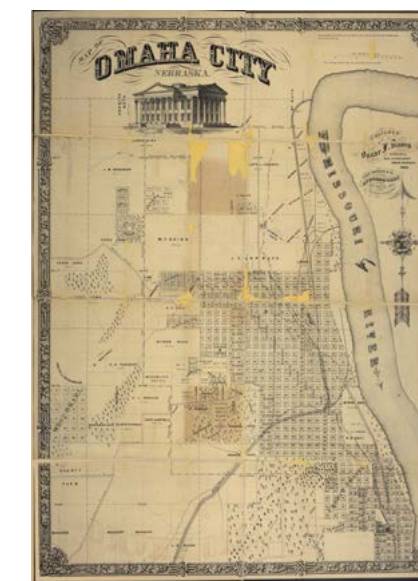
"Map of Native American Sites in North Omaha," 2015, hand drawn map, North Omaha History, <https://northomahahistory.com/2015/09/25/a-history-of-native-american-north-omaha/>.



"A Map of Lewis and Clark's Track, across the western portion of North America..." 1814, map, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4126s.ct000028/>.



"The Mormon Pioneer Trail," 1997, illustration in booklet, Stanley B. Kimball, <http://files.lib.byu.edu/mormonmigration/articles/MormonPioneerTrailMTA1997Official-Guide.PDF>.

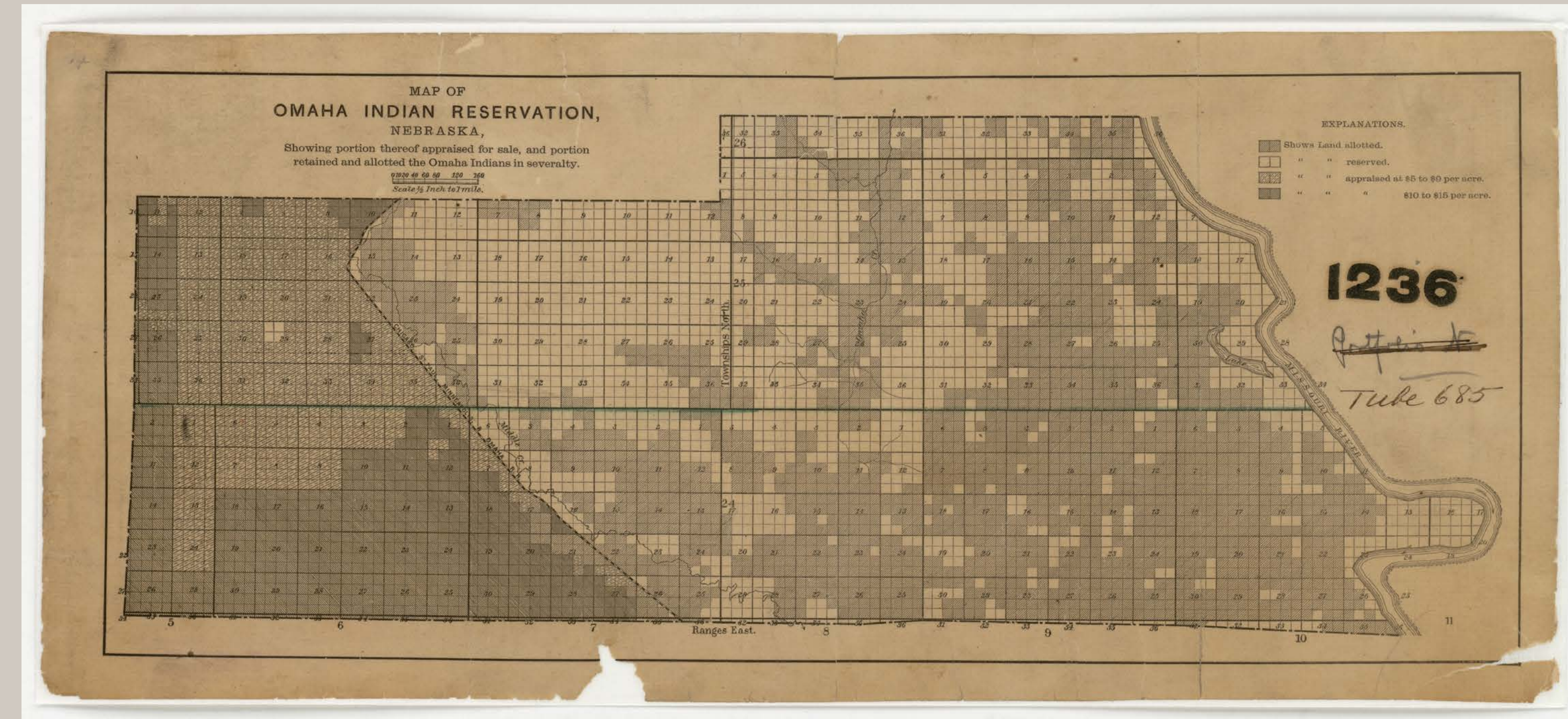


"1866 Omaha, Nebraska Land Survey Map," 1866, lithograph map, David Rumsey Map Collection, <https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY-8-1-298032-90069611:Map-of-Omaha-City,-Nebraska->.

# Go West, Young Man

1880s - 1920s

What are the sources of inequity from the city's growth period that still persist today?



"Omaha Indian Reservation," 1885, map, National Archives, Washington D.C., <http://recordsofrights.org/records/38/omaha-indian-reservation>.

# Go West, Young Man

1880s - 1920s

*“The promise of access to land, as old as the United States itself and seductive even in decades when farmers lost everything, was not about a love of farming. Rather, landholding represented security—having, literally, a place—a claim as important to dispossessed Native Americans and Mexican Americans as to aspirant immigrant, native white, and African American settlers. It represented at the most fundamental level a sense of belonging, whether to a local community or to a national myth. Landholders saw themselves as valiant contributors to the national good with commensurate claims on the state. In turn, congressmen, senators, and presidents remained as committed to an agrarian ideal of independent small farmers as Jefferson had been.”*<sup>6</sup>

As America expanded westward fulfilling its exceptional belief via Manifest Destiny, heavy industry paved the way for this growth with railroads, telegraphs, coal mining, and steel production. Local markets became regional and regional ones became national. Once distant or remote sections of America began to be opened up for new speculation in agricultural and urban development. Reconstruction commenced this moment in American history where the intrinsic values of democracy could have finally been in practice for all peoples; but, they were not fulfilled.

Not all were able to participate in the expansion of business and opportunity across America. The Great Migration moved freed Southern Blacks into the North only to encounter more hardship and deprivation of their God-given rights: not being able to settle in rural areas of America due to Black codes, usage of Black labor as strikebreakers to disrupt labor conflicts between owners and workers, and racial terror used by groups like the KKK to kill or force them from lands as a way to take land.

6. Sarah Deutsch, Making a Modern U.S. West: The Contested Terrain of a Region and Its Borders 1898-1940 (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2022) pg. 1.

7. Smithsonian Digital Volunteers, “Susanne LaFlesche Letters, 1879,” Smithsonian, accessed July 3, 2023, [https://transcription.si.edu/view/8131/NMAI-066\\_001\\_04\\_001-000001](https://transcription.si.edu/view/8131/NMAI-066_001_04_001-000001).

## RESERVATION SYSTEM

*“Uncle Frank says that they never signed any paper, petition, or treaty, to be taken down to Indian Territory, although it is said that a petition signed with their names was seen in Washington. The chiefs told us that when the White men were trying to make them sign the paper, they were asked to allow the Ponca Tribe to live with the Omahas. They, White men, told the Chiefs ‘No, the Omahas are to be taken down too.’ The chiefs then asked to be allowed to live with the Sioux and mingle with them as one people; that the two tribes were formerly enemies but they had now made peace with them and would rather live with them than be sent to Indian Territory. This also was denied them and they were told to get ready to go.”*  
- Susette La Flesche, 1879

While the Omaha were allowed to have a permanent residence in Nebraska in what would become Thurston County upriver, they became subject to onerous demands from the federal government such as selling their land for other Native American tribes seeking land, being compelled to sell to land speculators near railroad lines, or getting taxed by the local white-led county government despite being a tribal government (this taxation was not resolved until 1970 when the courts stated that the tribes cannot be taxed).

According to records, the earliest reservations in Nebraska were created in 1854 by several treaties between Native American tribes and the United States government. These agreements granted certain lands exclusively to Native Americans so that they could live on them without interference from settlers. As time went on, more land was set aside for Native Americans by the government, and their reservations grew larger. By 1875, the the Dakota and Lakota had a reservation of over 10 million acres in

Nebraska. This was eventually reduced to half its size with the Dawes Act of 1887, which sought to break up large tracts of land into smaller parcels given out to individual households. At the same time, the federal government implemented assimilation policies to try and force Native Americans to assimilate into white American society. The Omaha formally legitimized their own reservation; but, the other tribes were not so lucky in the negotiations, which forced them out of Nebraska and into the Indian Territory.

## EXODUSTERS

*“In the spring of 1879, thousands of colored people, unable longer to endure the intolerable hardships, injustice, and suffering inflicted upon them by a class of Democrats in the South, had, in utter despair, fled panic-stricken from their homes and sought protection among strangers in a strange land. Homeless, penniless, and in rags, these poor people were thronging the wharves of Saint Louis, crowding the steamers on the Mississippi River, and in pitiable destitution throwing themselves upon the charity of Kansas. Thousands more were congregating along the banks of the Mississippi River, hailing the passing steamers, and imploring them for a passage to the land of freedom, where the rights of citizens are respected and honest toil rewarded by honest compensation. The newspapers were filled with accounts of their destitution, and the very air was burdened with the cry of distress from a class of American citizens flying from persecutions which they could no longer endure.”* - 1880 Senate Committee Report <sup>7</sup>

The Exodusters were African Americans who migrated from the south to settle in Nebraska during the late 19th century. The movement was part of a larger national trend called the Great Migration by which millions of African Americans moved out of the agricultural South to pursue new opportunities in cities of the North and Midwest.

In Nebraska, they hoped to find economic and social freedom, but encountered racism and hostility in their new homes. The Exodusters were given land by the federal government and received assistance from the Freedmen’s Bureau to establish themselves in Nebraska. They established communities throughout the state, including those near Omaha, Lincoln, and Norfolk. While they faced discrimination and economic hardship, they persevered and created vibrant ecosystems of churches, businesses, and schools.

## OVERLAND ROUTE COMPLETION

As the city’s economic fortunes grew, so did its importance on the paths and trails that took settlers and travelers through Omaha. At the beginning of the century, expeditions took months of traveling to reach the Rockies and beyond; but, the Union Pacific railroad, which officially opened in 1869, featured trains traveling from Omaha to San Francisco in a week and a day. This further led to the expansion of railway access from Omaha to Chicago; and, led to Omaha’s role as a connective node between East and West. With the city connected into this transportation network, it became a recipient to a flow of new ideas, people, and spirit.

## 1898 TRANS-MISSISSIPPI EXPOSITION

Real estate boosters of Omaha used the exposition as a symbol of growth and expansion in not just their city but for the West itself. Over 120 buildings were built for the expo on the grounds that in and around Kountze Place. Originally intended to be a profile of Native American culture, daily lives, and their handiwork from thirty-five different tribes, Mooney and his officials realized that ticket holders were not interested in those revelations. Instead, they commoditized the Native Americans into

entertainment for the attendees by having them perform the Ghost Dance, mock battles, and other ceremonies. It had the original intention to be a showcase of culture and an educational experience; but it became a revisionist ‘Wild West’ sideshow as the government or promoters made no explanation between a scholarly representation and a sideshow performance.

## INITIAL “SUBURBAN” EXPANSION

As the city’s railroads increased the city’s vibrancy, the frontier downtown grew more congested leading to real estate development on the city’s northern end. More well-to-do citizens built larger estates, ranch houses in an area that was comparably less dense to the downtown area. Planned subdivisions were developed here alongside infrastructure like horse-drawn carriages or streetcars, such as the case with Kountze Park. Therefore, this area has one of the oldest housing stocks in the city.

## INDUSTRIAL FORTUNES OF OMAHA

*“With the development of the Union Pacific, Negroes first received their impetus to migrate to Omaha: first in the capacity of laborers in the construction work and later when the city became the system terminus of the Union Pacific, many who were employed as porters and cooks moved their families here.”*<sup>8</sup>

When the meatpacking industry initially boomed in South Omaha in the mid-1880s, it rapidly became home to a diverse set of immigrant communities. These industrial spaces attracted waves of Czechs, Greeks, Poles, and other European immigrant groups; and eventually they became a major employer of African Americans. Before 1910, African Americans primarily worked in the service sector, particularly as custodians, janitors, and porters.

9. James Harvey Kerns, “Industrial and Business Life of Negroes in Omaha,” Masters diss., Municipal University of Omaha, 1932.

The advent of WWI led to a labor shortage in the industrial sector that was met by African Americans of the Great Migration. Between 1914 and 1920, packing houses had an increase of 50% in African American employment and the smelting companies exhibited similar growth for semi-skilled and skilled mechanics. Although these advances in employment opportunities continued, African Americans experienced losses due to increased competition from white and immigrant workers and biased interpretations of their work ethic by employers, as documented in a 1932 thesis *Industrial & Business Life of Negroes in Omaha* by James Harvey Kerns at the University of Nebraska.

Omaha was home to the largest copper smelter for over one hundred years and the largest lead smelter for twenty years. These foundries contaminated the landscape by shooting debris and sediment into the air, where it landed on lawn and buildings.

## PROHIBITION

Ethnic and racial violence, along with the Trans Mississippi Expo, had a significant impact on the movement of people in Omaha. The proximity of industrial facilities in East Omaha offered economic vibrancy to working-class citizens. Breweries catered to the foreign born white European population. Early temperance supporters associated beer and spirits with immigrants and saw temperance as a means of moral control, and Nebraska became one of the early adopters for prohibition.

Immigrants were hit particularly hard by the ban on alcohol because it deprived them of one of their few spaces for social interaction. Many saloons owned by immigrants shut down as a result, taking away jobs and

leaving gaps in the social needs of the community. The laws were equally felt hard by immigrants as their lack of proficient English made them more susceptible to policing, which led to mistrust of the government.

## GREEK RIOTS & RED SUMMER

For the first two decades of the 1900s, Omaha was a hotbed for extraterritorial violence. From the Greek Town Riot in 1909 to the lynching of Will Brown in 1919, the role of race and ethnicity was used as a political cudgel by political figures like Mayor Tom Dennison to govern the city by exploiting the relationship between these different communities. Greeks were brought into Omaha as strikebreakers by local businesses and factories, which already foisted resentment for them among the other ethnic populations.

According to the February 22, 1909 New York Times, two state legislators and an attorney gathered 900 men, rousing the assembled crowd with anti-Greek speeches after which a mob of 3,000 was raised to lynch the jailed Greek. He just barely escaped with his life and was moved to another jail, but the mob rioted in the Greek quarter of South Omaha. A Greek boy was killed and several other people attacked, including Italian and Romanian immigrants who were mistaken for Greeks. Greek businesses were looted and homes destroyed. The Omaha World Herald called the Greeks, ‘the dregs of society.’ As a consequence, Greek-Americans moved to Council Bluffs and Sioux City, and as far as Salt Lake City, to put Omaha behind them.

This left a long scar in the social fabric of the city, and the growth of the Ku Klux Klan in Nebraska developed in the wake of this atmosphere. By 1921, there was over fifteen hundred registered members of the Klan, and by the end of 1923, there was over forty thousand. This culture of intimidation and violence set the stage for Malcolm X’s coming of age when the KKK forced his family from town in the middle of the night. Earl and Louise Little were involved with Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association, which often found itself at odds with the KKK over their messaging of black nationalism, improvement, and power.

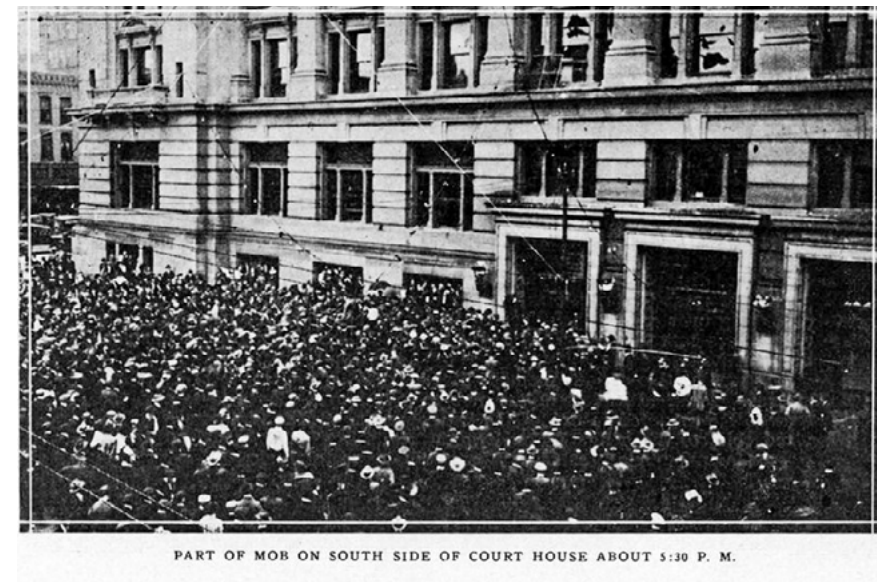
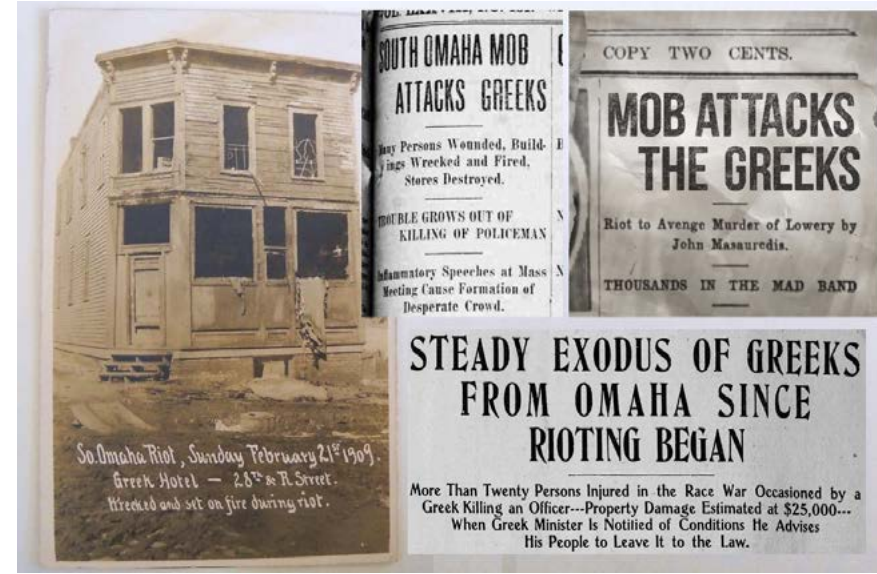
In September 1919, the decades-long simmering of ethnic and racial competition and conflict reared its head in one of the most violent episodes of Red Summer: the lynching of Will Brown. A local packinghouse employee, Brown was

accused by a white woman of an assault that triggered a social panic and frenzy that culminated in a vigilante mob. Savagely attacked and lynched, his body desecrated: Brown’s death even nearly came alongside the mayor’s own lynching for trying to intervene. This left a long scar in the social fabric of the city, and in part informed the movement of African Americans into the Near North. Greeks were brought into Omaha as strikebreakers by local businesses and factories, which already foisted resentment for them among the other ethnic populations. According to the February 22, 1909 New York Times, two state legislators and an attorney gathered 900 men, rousing the assembled crowd with anti-Greek speeches after which a mob of 3,000 was raised to lynch the jailed Greek. He just barely escaped with his life and was moved to another jail, but the mob rioted in the Greek quarter of South Omaha. A Greek boy was killed and several other people attacked, including Italian and Romanian immigrants who were mistaken for Greeks. Greek businesses were looted and homes destroyed. The Omaha World Herald called the Greeks, ‘the dregs of society.’ As a consequence, Greek-Americans moved to Council Bluffs and Sioux City, and as far as Salt Lake City, to put Omaha behind them.

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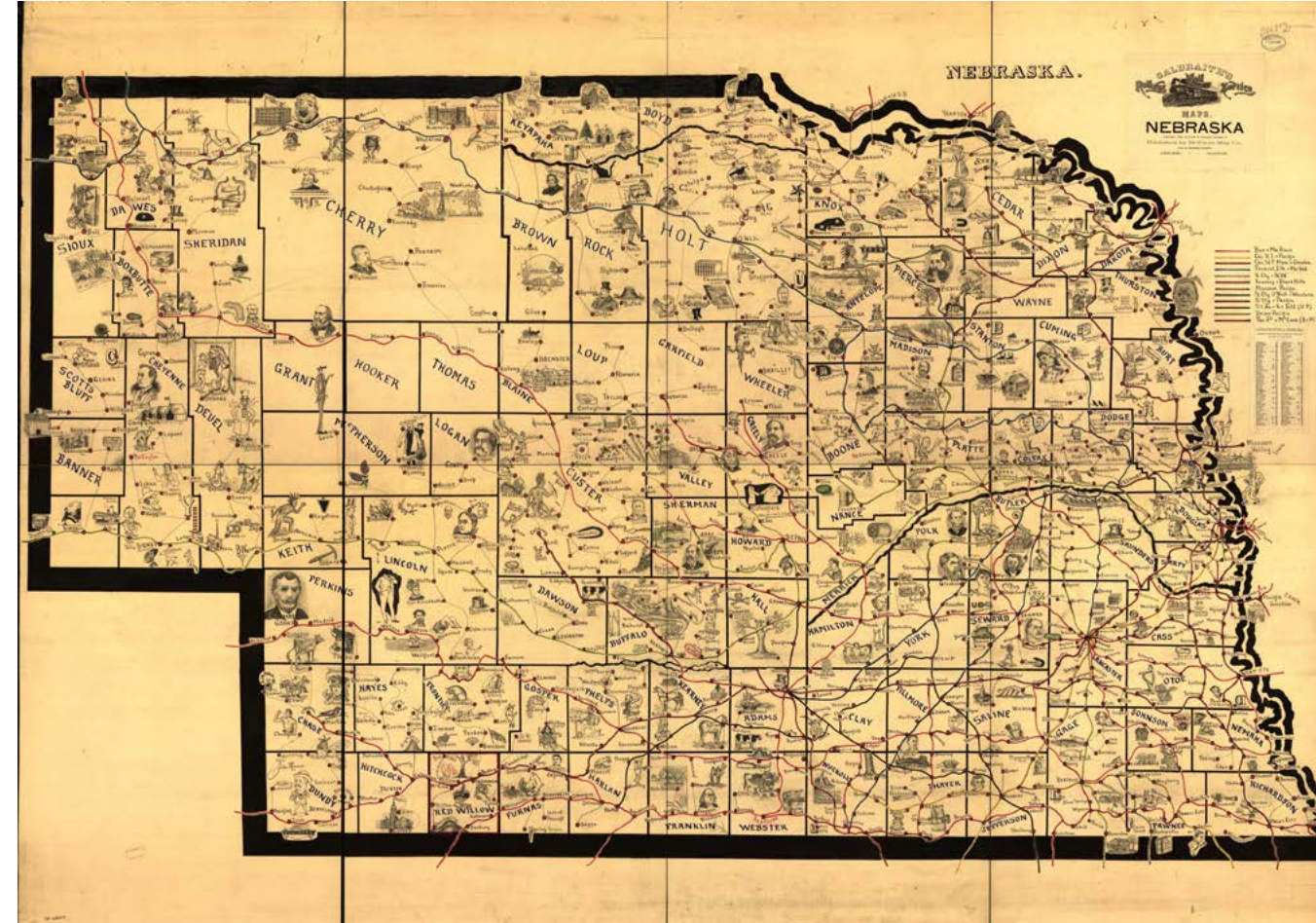
# Go West, Young Man

1880s - 1920s



"Collage of Newspaper Clippings on the Greek Riot," 1909, collage of images and newspapers, The Pappas Post, <https://pappaspost.com/on-this-day-february-21-1909-anti-greek-riot-in-south-omaha/>.

"Rioters on the south side of the Douglas County Courthouse," 1919, newspaper, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/t-town-red-summer-racist-mobs/>.



"Galbraith's Railway Mail Service Maps: Nebraska," 1897, map, Library of Congress, Washington D.C., <https://www.loc.gov/resource/g4191p.rr002520/>.

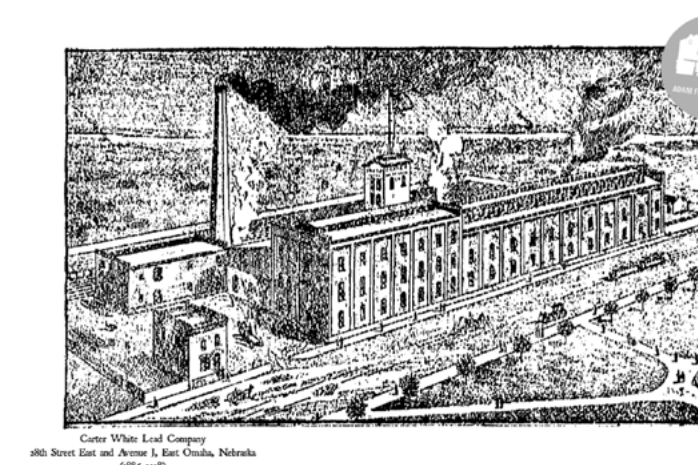
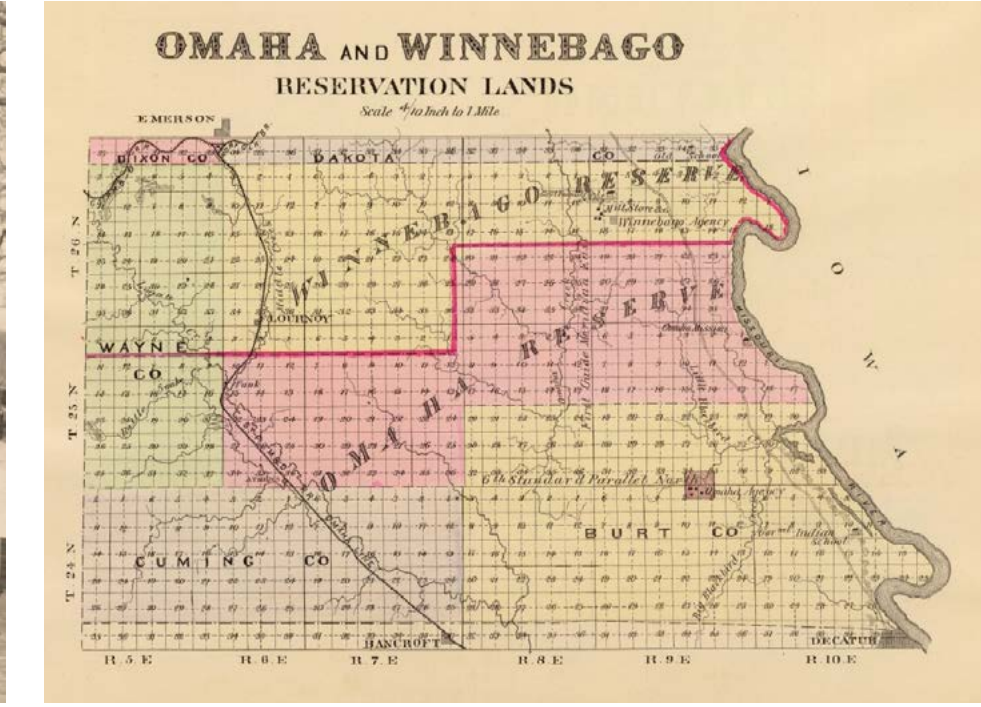


"Kountze Place - The Home of Omaha's Business Men," 1896, advertisement, Omaha Bee, <https://northomahahistory.com/2008/09/30/a-history-of-omahas-kountze-place-neighborhood/>.



"Raid on illegal booze; Douglas County, Nebraska," 1920s, photograph, History Nebraska, <https://nebraskastudies.org/en/1900-1924/prohibition-of-alcohol/the-noble-experiment/>.

"ASARCO Site," 1936, photograph, Durham Museum, Omaha, NE, <https://northomahahistory.com/2016/04/18/a-history-of-lead-poisoning-in-north-omaha/>.



"Omaha, Winnebago Reservation Lands," 1885, lithograph map, David Rumsey Map Collection, [https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY-8-1-28917-11305:Omaha,-Winnebago-reservation-lands-?sort=pub\\_list\\_no\\_initialsort](https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY-8-1-28917-11305:Omaha,-Winnebago-reservation-lands-?sort=pub_list_no_initialsort).

"Carter White Lead Company Plant," 1890, illustration, North Omaha History, <https://northomahahistory.com/2016/01/06/a-short-history-of-the-original-east-omaha/>.



"Modern Woodman Day at the Trans-Mississippi Exposition," 1898, print advertisement, Trans-Mississippi International Exposition, <https://trans-mississippi.unl.edu/memorabilia/view/TM105029.html>.

# Go West, Young Man

## Recommendations

### HOUSING STOCK REHABILITATION

North Omaha is home to a major concentration of the oldest housing stock in the city. Over 60% of housing built before 1950 resides in North Omaha, whereas the citywide estimate is 24%. Organizations like the Omaha Economic Development Corporation (OEDC) have made strides in renovating and restoring the housing stock, like the Margaret Apartments. By utilizing a rehabilitation strategy, the OEDC aimed to reduce waste and used green energy-based utility systems to lower the building's carbon footprint. These strategies combined with a focus on affordable housing development can tackle the growing 5 to 1 gap of housing cost-burdened households to affordable units, according to last year's recent housing assessment by the Omaha Community Foundation.

Impacted Social Determinant(s):  
Neighborhood & Physical Environment, Community & Social Context

- Potential Strategies:
- Workforce Development
  - Protocols for Property Upkeep

### LEAD & POLLUTANT REMEDIATION

With North Omaha being home to the city's lead smelting industry, the effects of contamination by air, soil, and water has been felt to this day. Facilities like the ASARCO refinery have produced contaminants that have landed on houses and lawns. Even after this was the Environmental Protection Agency's largest superfund site cleanup, the city continues to support clean-up efforts through a registry system and remediates over a hundred properties each year. Additionally, the older housing stock proves to be a second thread due to the usage of lead paint and lead pipes. Continuing the efforts to resolve this lead crisis will produce beneficial and more tangible impacts for this community that, at one time in the late 1990s, experienced juvenile lead poisoning at a rate of one in four.

Impacted Social Determinant(s):  
Healthcare Systems

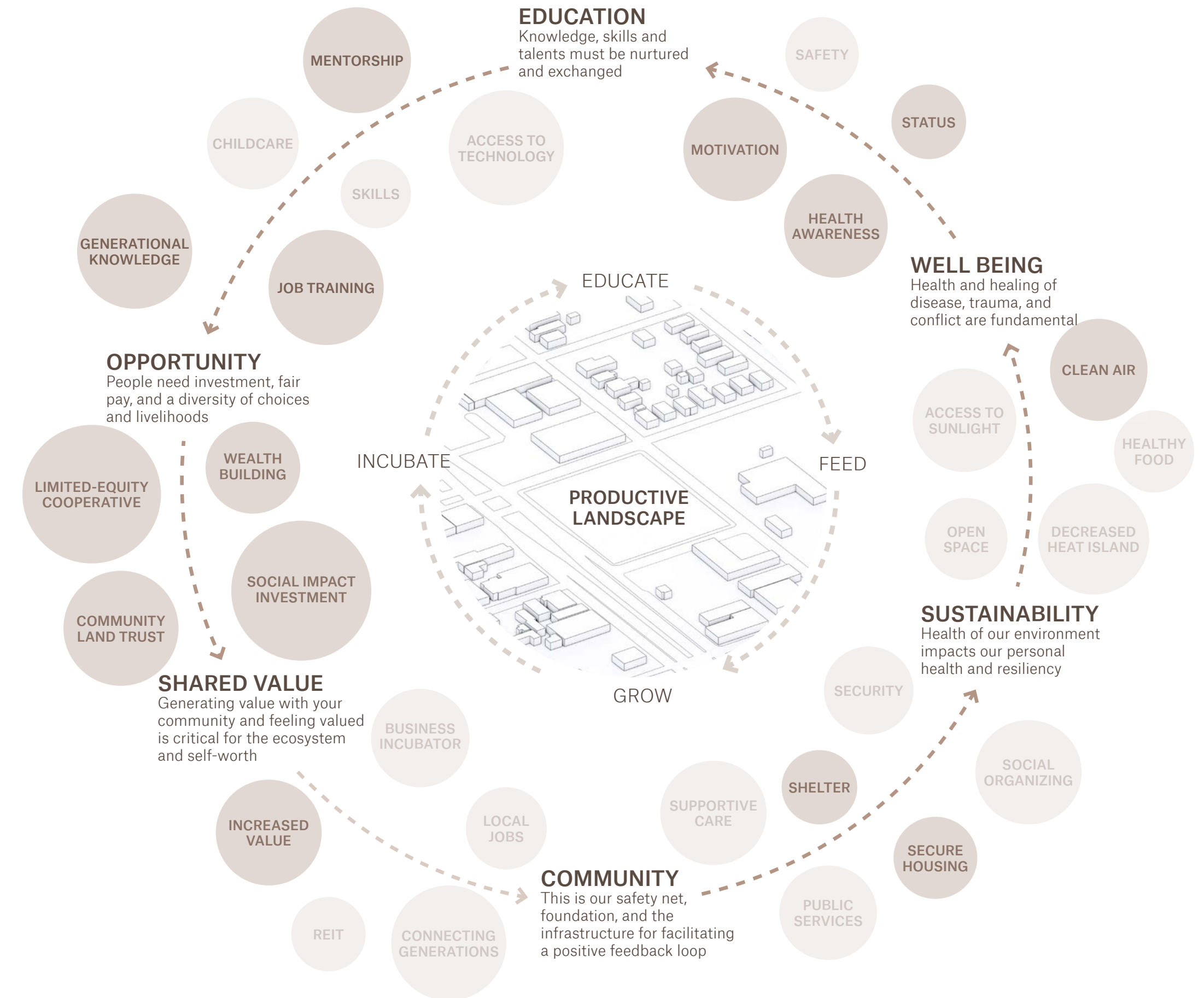
- Potential Strategies:
- Continue Lead Registry Efforts
  - Replace of Lead Water Pipes Still in Use
  - Expand and enact environmental rehabilitation programs: urban agriculture programs, protocols for soil remediation in parks and open spaces
  - Provide new legislation & local ordinances
  - Increase healthcare access for monitoring impacts
  - Address gaps in access to mental healthcare and therapy needs presently not available in North Omaha.

### ECONOMIC INCENTIVES FOR INDUSTRIAL REVITALIZATION

Community and economic vibrancy has occurred simultaneously with economic fortunes. North Omaha's industrial capacity has made it a traditional target for migration for domestic and international peoples. Due to the loss in industrial activity, diverse communities have encountered fractured relationships and difficult economic situations that have stymied physical and social mobility. These gaps in economic advancement must be met with new investment and opportunities in order to build a revitalized and self-sustaining economy, and not an extractive one.

Impacted Social Determinant(s):  
Economic Stability & Social & Community Context

- Potential Strategies:
- Create New lending opportunities and financial streams
  - Provide training opportunities and incubators to encourage entrepreneurship



# Greatest Generation

1930s - 1950s

How do we re-stitch the communities that have been systemically separated by infrastructure?



"Sanborn Map of Omaha, NE," 1901, color map, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., [https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn05229\\_006/](https://www.loc.gov/item/sanborn05229_006/).



# Greatest Generation

1930s - 1950s

As American veterans returned home victorious from war-torn Europe, they came back with a renewed sense of self-worth, identity, and value in society. The G.I. Bill was passed as a program to move veterans back into the labor market after WWII, though not all would be able to participate. While many Americans were able to attend school, secure assistance, and find an affordable mortgage for a home in the suburbs, Black veterans found that the GI Bill didn't provide all benefits to them: some encountered issues getting an honorable discharge from the military, some could only find programs at segregated spaces that did not allow them to take courses, and some could neither access mortgages or the very suburban subdivisions being promoted in advertising and pop culture. Black veterans, put their lives on the line to fight for American democracy overseas only to return home to find an environment that still valued them differently.

## GROWTH OF BLACK CULTURE

*"Every little Nebraska town had a dance hall and we played all of them. The black bands were treated differently than whites. We played black music and that's what they wanted to hear. They didn't expect any other band to play like we played. [My band was the last of the touring territory bands. The onset of television and fast cars killed off that era.]"*  
- Preston Love<sup>9</sup>

The Great Migration brought African-Americans into Omaha seeking better opportunities. Due to the legacies of Jim Crow, segregation, and redlining, North Omaha became the bustling nucleus for African-Americans, and this neighborhood hosted the vast majority of Black owned jazz clubs and nightclubs in the city. Omaha being a stop on the Union Pacific Railroad made it an important stop for touring national jazz musicians as they traveled between Chicago, Minneapolis, Kansas City, and Denver.

10. Tim McMahan, "Sharing the Love: An Interview with Omaha Jazz great Preston Love," Lazy-1, accessed January 15, 2023, <https://www.timcmahan.com/prestonlove.htm>.

11. Amy Helene Forss, Black Print with a White Carnation: Mildred Brown and the Omaha Star Newspaper 1938-1989 (Lincoln: NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2014), pg. 115.

The Dreamland Ballroom in the Jewell Building on North 24th Street was the hub of the music scene, hosting acts like Nat King Cole, Dinah Washington, Earl Hines, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and Louis Armstrong. This energy wasn't just contained in Omaha, it reverberated across the state and into neighboring ones.

## FROM STREETCAR TO STRIKE

Originally opening in the 1890s, the city's streetcar system was a private enterprise, with the majority operated by the Omaha Street Railways Company. The system ran for over 125 miles, and it had a cost of \$.50 to ride it anywhere in the system. In North Omaha, the streetcar system provided an integral sense of connectedness as the routes bisected the community and followed along the borders from the southern areas of the heart of North Omaha to northern ones up near Florence.

In 1935, efforts to unionize by the streetcar workers was met with extraterritorial violence from strikebreakers hired by the owners of the Omaha and Council Bluffs Street Railways Company, the later entity that nearly owned all the routes. Historically, Omaha's streetcar and tram system was a segregated space until 1954. No people of color were allowed to be streetcar operators, and nonwhite passengers were expected to sit away from white passengers aboard.

The effort was defeated, and the tram was shut down by 1955 in favor of age of the automobile. The labor effort was seen as the last nail in the transportation system's vitality. According to local historians, the removal of the streetcar routes in North Omaha was one reason that caused the economic decline of the neighborhood. The loss prompted the expansion of a bus system and led to

the creation of a highway through North Omaha. These outcomes produced solutions that created disparate environmental and health effects for North Omaha.

Among the last physical remnants of this system was the company barn at the intersection of Lake Street and N 26th Street. When the system was closed, the site fell into decline as it switched ownership between potential investors before becoming owned by the City of Omaha. It was transformed into the city's municipal vehicular fleet's maintenance yard; and, after decades of use, it was demolished in 2018. The barn's razing represented this theft of North Omaha's cultural and historical legacy, as it had been a testament to the neighborhood's former glory and success.

## OMAHA STAR AS AN ORGANIZING HUB

*"We are convinced that two great evils facing us are racial discrimination and racial segregation. This paper will expose and oppose these evils. We accept this not only as a right but as a duty. The price of the duty which we accept comes high. It would be financially more profitable for us to remain silent. In the past few months, we have opposed racial discrimination as practiced by several business places. Others have found it to their liking to remain silent or to completely sell out. We have and still are losing money for taking the stand of exposing and opposing these evils."*  
- Mildred Brown<sup>10</sup>

When Mildred Brown founded the Omaha Star in 1938, she sought to build an outlet that spoke directly to the local community. The newspaper intended to be an alternative voice to the traditional forms of media, like the Omaha Guide, that ignored issues or topics facing the African American North Side. It provided positive and inspirational stories from individuals, businesses, and organizations in the community. It raised the concerns

of North Omaha to the city hall when their calls often went unheard earlier. Brown spearheaded campaigns to support integrated businesses and ones that would hire African Americans: "It is your hard-earned dollar. Make it count by spending it with merchants and firms who show willingness, not by words but by action, to give employment to all Americans, regardless of race."

## REDLINING

At the end of the Great Depression, the Homeowners Loan Corporation employed out-of-work real estate agents to assist in the surveying of American cities and counties for mortgage risk. These efforts produced 'area descriptions,' a document that described a neighborhood's demographics, housing conditions, economic livelihoods, and a projected market outlook. These documents were highly subjective to the biases and mental models held by the surveyors. This is evident in the frequent correlation between higher risk and diverse, heterogenous communities made in these documents.

Risk was also assessed based on the presence of 'Foreign-Born' populations like Irish or Italians, 'Relief' populations such as migrants and refugees, and 'Negro' populations which is self-evident. In some instances, it took only a few households to deem an area 'hazardous,' which would result in a yellow or red classification. Through this process, the classifications became prescriptive as it would determine how much investment would be made in these communities.

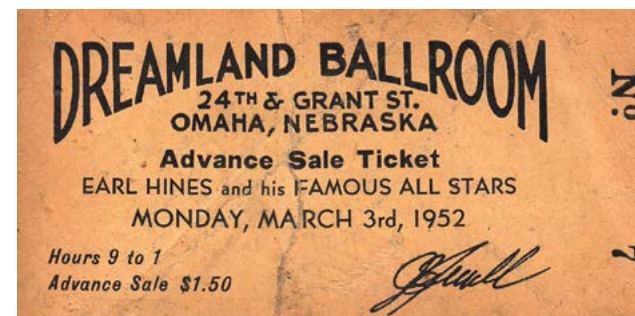
For North Omaha, the geographic contours of the redlining were a near perfect rectangle around the African American part of town. These areas became spaces of containment, whereby populations could not leave without severely economic loss or those who could not

access mortgages attained housing through other means, like contract buying. These practices also reduced the commercial and economic vibrancy of North Omaha by removing it from critical financial instruments. Omaha's public housing development followed these patterns due to the complexes being built with segregation as policy.

## LOSS OF CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

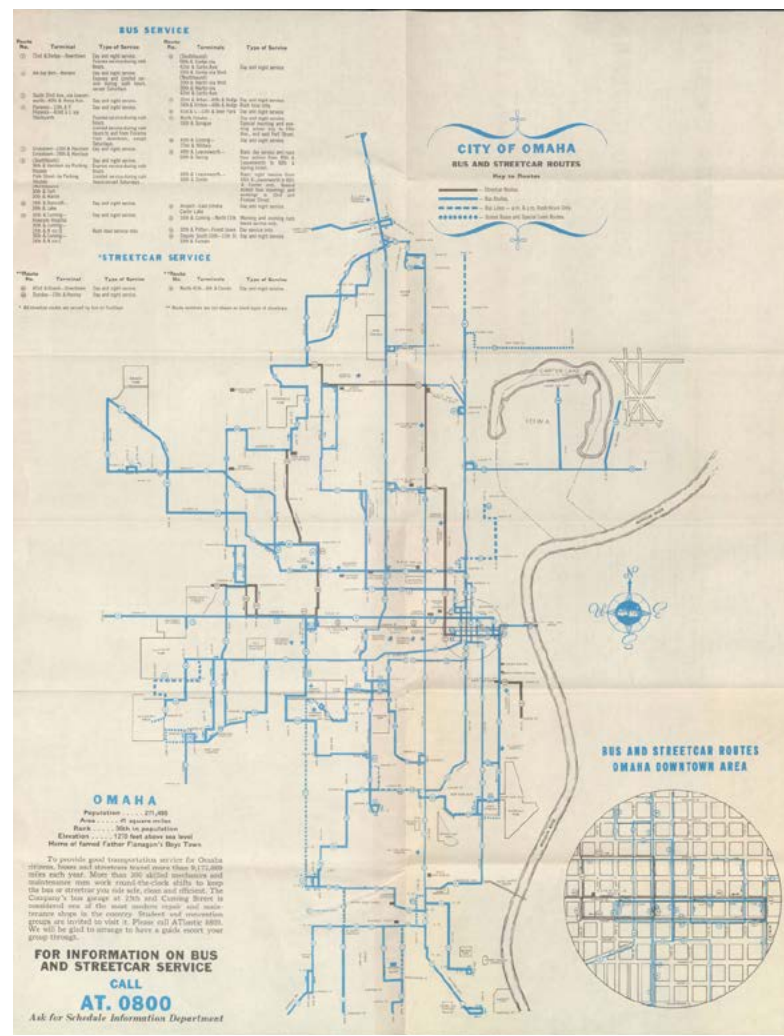
Whereas Black Omaha's cultural heritage has been threaded throughout these histories, the compounding factors of redlining, disinvestment, and closure created a climate that tore through the neighborhood's cultural landscape. North Omaha was filled with film and performing arts theaters: Diamond Moving Picture Theater (24th and Lake St), Beacon Theater (2910 Ames Ave), Corby Theater (2805 N 16th St), Lothrop Theater (3212 N 24th St), Circle Theater (524 N 33rd St), North Star Theater (2413 Ames Ave), Minne Lusa Theater (N 30th St), and Cass Theater (500 N 16th St).

Most of these theaters were founded during the early 1910s and 1920s when vaudeville was all the rage. These venues were no exception to the social restrictions of the time, as the Diamond Moving Picture Theater and others were segregated spaces. By the 1970s, these venues all were closed, a legacy forged by the designed decline of a community. Considering that there were twelve theaters alone along or just off the N. 24th Street drag is emblematic of the neighborhood's cultural and historical importance. Few parts of the city feature the same amount of density in these forms of recreational spaces.



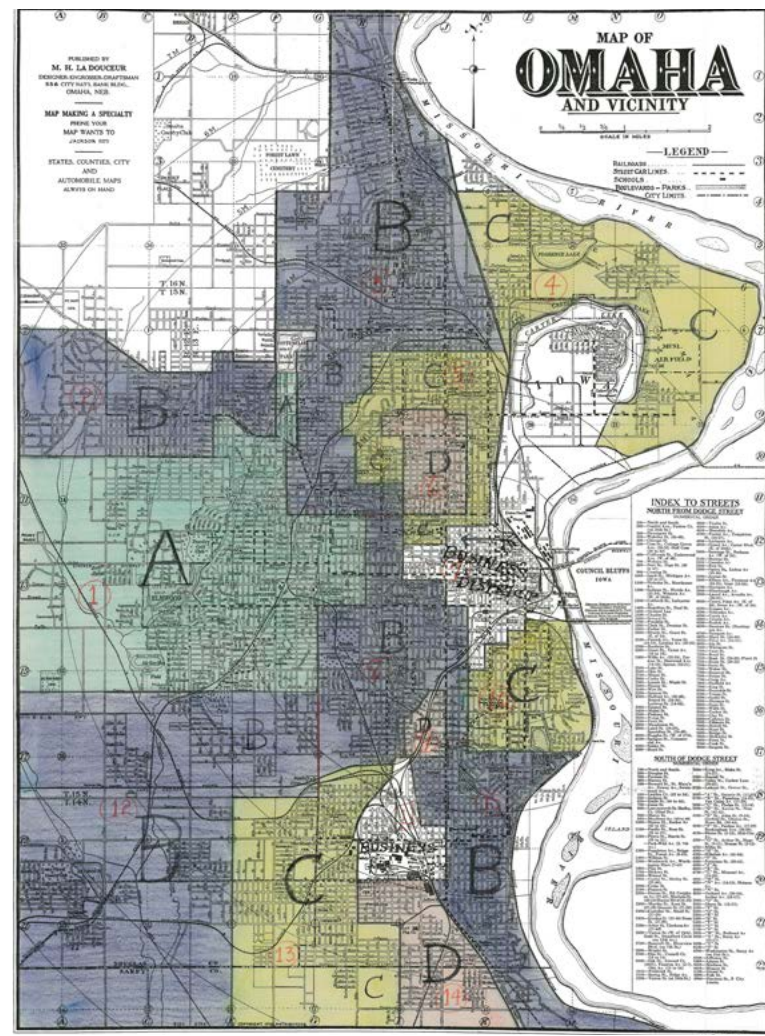
"Ticket to the Dreamland Ballroom," 1952, ticket stub, The Clio, <https://theclio.com/entry/22509>.

"North Star and Beacon Theaters," 1950s, advertisement, North Omaha History, <https://northomahahistory.com/2021/11/10/a-history-of-the-beacon-theater-in-north-omaha/>.



"Transportation Map of Omaha Showing Bus and Streetcar Routes," 1951, map, Omaha Public Library, <https://digital.omahalibrary.org/digital/collection/p16747coll4/id/1510/rec/7>.

"Redlining Map of Omaha," 1937, map, Home Owner's Loan Corporation.



# Greatest Generation

## Recommendations

### TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

Once home to a densely interconnected rail and streetcar system, North Omaha's public transit system has been reduced to a bus system, which the Omaha Community Foundation has concluded more focuses on reaching populations far out than being concentrated in high-density communities. Additionally, 33% with 45 minute or more commute times take public transit compare to only 16% who drove or carpooled. Encouraging and incentivizing alternative modes of transport, such as bicycling, can strengthen the access within local communities and improve the emotional and physical health outcomes, which is a disparate impact felt by North Omaha compared to surrounding communities.

**Impacted Social Determinant(s):**  
Neighborhood & Physical Environment, Healthcare Systems, & Food Access

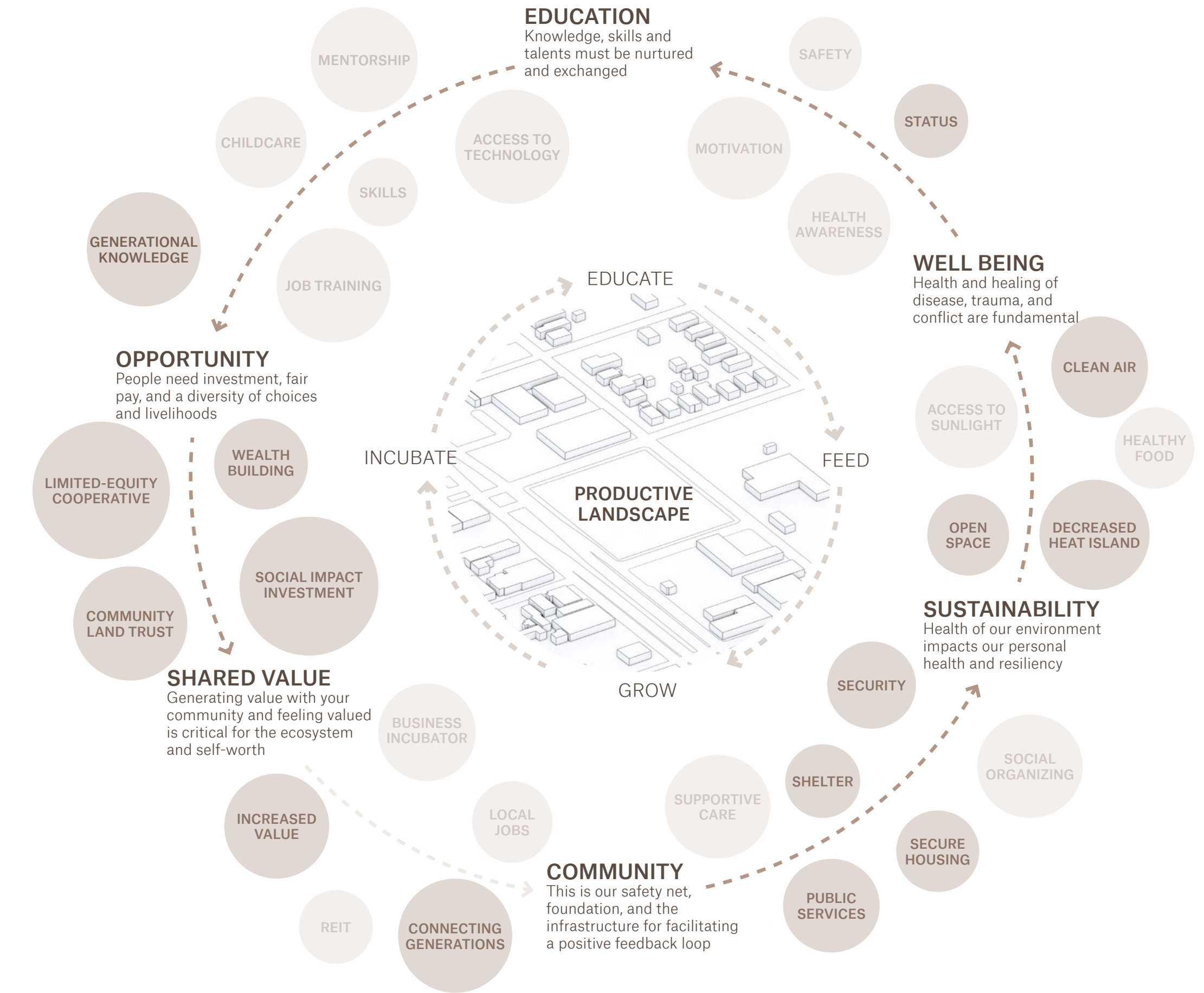
- Potential Strategies:**
- Expand already existing alternative transit modes like bike trails
  - Explore potential for new mass transit opportunities
  - Increase walkability
  - Identify service gaps in trails and transit

### AFFORDABILITY PRESERVATION, MIXED-USE DIVERSITY

Racial covenants and redlining have long concentrated populations of like ethnicity, race, or creed into specific neighborhoods. North Omaha is one such example, and this legacy has stoked housing insecurity and precarity in tandem with other factors. Due to extenuating circumstances involving education and employment access, communities are often left behind in their pay potential amidst rising income inequality and growing inflation. Expanding and reinforcing North Omaha's affordable units, encouraging alternative models of ownership, and funding rent relief are all strategies that can nourish and root the residents of North Omaha.

**Impacted Social Determinant(s):**  
Social & Community Context

- Potential Strategies:**
- Preserve Culturally Important Sites
  - Expand the Homestead Exemption Program
  - Create New Tax Relief Programs or Renter Protections
  - Explore alternative ownership models such as community land trusts and cooperative developments



# Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

1960s - 1990s

How do we create new resilient developments  
to encourage those who have been displaced  
to return?



"Aerial Imagery of Omaha, NE," 1982, satellite photo, Historic Aerials by NETROnline.

# Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

1960s - 1990s

From President John F. Kennedy's New Frontier policies to President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society programs, the Democratic platform prompted a two-prong priority for the betterment of America: the eradication of poverty and to send man to space. At the height of the Cold War, this was a moment for all Americans to be proud of their country and to assist their fellow man in public service. In particular, President Johnson called out that the Great Society, "serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce, but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community." While the executive branch expressed these optimistic platforms and often followed through with successful results, like making government programs more transparent, decades of redlining, segregation, disinvestment, profiling, and little opportunity stoked the flames of social upheaval. Black Americans saw an expectation that the government can do more to actually fulfill and realize their democratic values of freedom and liberty - and actually help the communities in the so-called "inner-city."

When the United States overcame high unemployment and inflation from the 1970s, President Ronald Reagan's re-election relied on a message of "prouder, stronger, better" to affirm the strength of America's recovery and success in the eyes of voters. After a half century of federal dollars going into America's cities, Reagan reversed course in an act of repudiation against the welfare state. Combined with the then-unrecognized effects of deregulation and economic policies accelerating capital and human flight from cities, urban populations across America began to experience reductions in quality of life once again. Older industrial cities were hard hit by the brunt of these policies as deregulation reduced the number of anti-poverty programs via public money, which meant that Americans living in these cities were experiencing additional harm after decades of

13. Adam Fletcher Sasse, "A History of Public Housing in North Omaha," North Omaha History, Accessed January 13, 2023, <https://northomahahistory.com/2019/07/26/a-history-of-public-housing-in-north-omaha/>.

14. Jeffrey H. Smith, "The Omaha De Porres Club," Negro History Bulletin vol. 33, no. 8 (December 1970), pg. 198.

past devaluing and disinvestment. Comparably, newer postindustrial cities expanded and grew with the new capital and investment being guided by supply-side economics.

## PUBLIC HOUSING

When the United States weathered the Great Depression, federally funded public housing was a component of the New Deal as it provided housing for those out of work and in need. While there was an original intention of making public housing integrated and available to those in need, these spaces became segregated due to explicit decisions made by policymakers and the availability of mortgage lending to ethnic whites in the postwar period. In Omaha, the first four public housing developments (Logan Fontanelle, Hilltop Homes, Pleasantview, and Spencer Homes) were located exclusively in the north. This strategic placement followed the redlining map, as situating public housing in green or blue line areas would mean significant devaluation. In later decades, private developers got into the public housing trade by accessing subsidies from the federal government. By 2020, the original four public housing developments were scheduled to be demolished with sites planned for new housing development.<sup>12</sup>

## DEINDUSTRIALIZATION & LABOR PARTICIPATION

Compounded by post-WW2 economic restructuring, the economic losses experienced due to the decline of the railroad, the reformatting of the meatpacking industry, and overall deindustrialization led to the shedding of tens of thousands of jobs. This was particularly hard felt in North Omaha and South Omaha, whose working-class communities depended on factory work. As visible in the adjacent maps, the community of North Omaha went

from being one of the densest populations of employed citizens to one of the city's sparsest. This pattern was accelerated due to waves of deindustrialization and a weakening economic sphere. These trends continued to become exacerbated by advances in technology, higher employment requirements, and the growing influence of automation and artificial intelligence in logistics and production.

## DESEGREGATION

"As members of the Omaha De Porres Club we firmly believe that: all As of the one human race, without any exception, whatsoever, have been equally endowed by the creator, through his promulgation of the natural law, with the following fundamental Human Rights: the right to live a full and complete life to the utmost of their capacity, both in private and in public. Consequently, we recognize the following inalienable rights in each and every member of the human race..." - De Porres Club Credo<sup>13</sup>

Long battles took place to break down the legacies of Jim Crow that flourished in the decades before. Even with the Civil Rights Act, it took direct action and activism from the DePorres Club and other organizations to tackle the racialized discrimination that was embedded in spaces like public housing, firehouses, and the public school system, where African American teachers were only allowed to teach in North Omaha. The DePorres Club targeted these businesses with direct action for not hiring Black workers: Reid's Ice Cream, the Coca-Cola bottling plant at 3200 North 30th Street, Dignotti's Doughnut Shop, Harry's Tea Club, the Greyhound Bus station, the Hotel Fontenelle, the Paxton Hotel, and Eppley Airfield.

The state was initially resistant to integration and the court battle for equal access to education went all the

way to the Supreme Court. In 1976, a consent decree was issued by a federal district court requiring desegregation of Omaha Public Schools. This led to changes such as transporting students from predominantly African American to predominantly white schools. After the order was put into effect, Nebraska's public school system made strides toward desegregation and in 1978 the state legislature passed a resolution that declared that "all citizens are equally entitled to an equal educational opportunity regardless of race, color, sex or national origin." The resolution also stated that "educational opportunities shall not be denied or abridged on the basis of race, color, sex or national origin."

Despite this progress, Nebraska still has a long way to go when it comes to achieving true desegregation in its public schools. There continue to be disparities between certain neighborhoods and school districts that are based on race. These structural conditions led to poor educational outcomes for students, resulting in figures that have ricocheted through the decades. For example, the number of people with Bachelor's degrees has not increased or decreased in the period of time between 1970 and 2020.

## RIOTS & WHITE FLIGHT

In the decade before the North Omaha riots between 1966 and 1969, the commercial corridor of N 24th Street experienced an economic decline due to the systemic factors outlined earlier. There were closed and boarded-up storefronts, burned out buildings due to arson, and public services cut due to decisions from the white-majority City Council at the time. Comparatively, neighborhoods south of Dodge or north of Ames experienced the complete opposite: public investment, availability of public services, and construction.

The unrest of the late 1960s began as a response to police brutality and discrimination in the predominately African American neighborhood. On June 28, 1969, more than 400 people gathered at 24th and Lake Streets to protest the police brutality the community faced. Protesters clashed with the police, resulting in injuries to both sides and property damage. These events soon spread across the city, leading to a three-day period of riots that left more than 200 people injured and nearly 50 buildings destroyed. These events scarred the urban fabric of the North Omaha, as it further accelerated the white flight out of Bemis Park and Gold Coast, and up further north into Miller Park and adjacent communities. The Safeway on 24th and Lake permanently closed due to the riots, and North Omaha suffered from an intense food desert problem since then.

## CONSTRUCTION OF NORTH FREEWAY

With the federal government willing to invest and front upwards of 90% of the total construction costs in the 1950s, Omaha's city government bristled up to the occasion and planned on constructing freeways. In this era of freeway resistances from local communities, a plan for a western expressway that would have cut across Dodge Street was cancelled because of local resistance from white residents in Dundee. Yet, when it came to the North Freeway that would cut through North Omaha between N 27th Street and N 28th Street, the resistance from residents, many of whom were African Americans, went unheeded.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, the city of Omaha demolished a pathway forward between North 27th and North 28th Ave - razing large swathes of historic homes, churches, schools, and community assets to place a highway that would tear the community in two

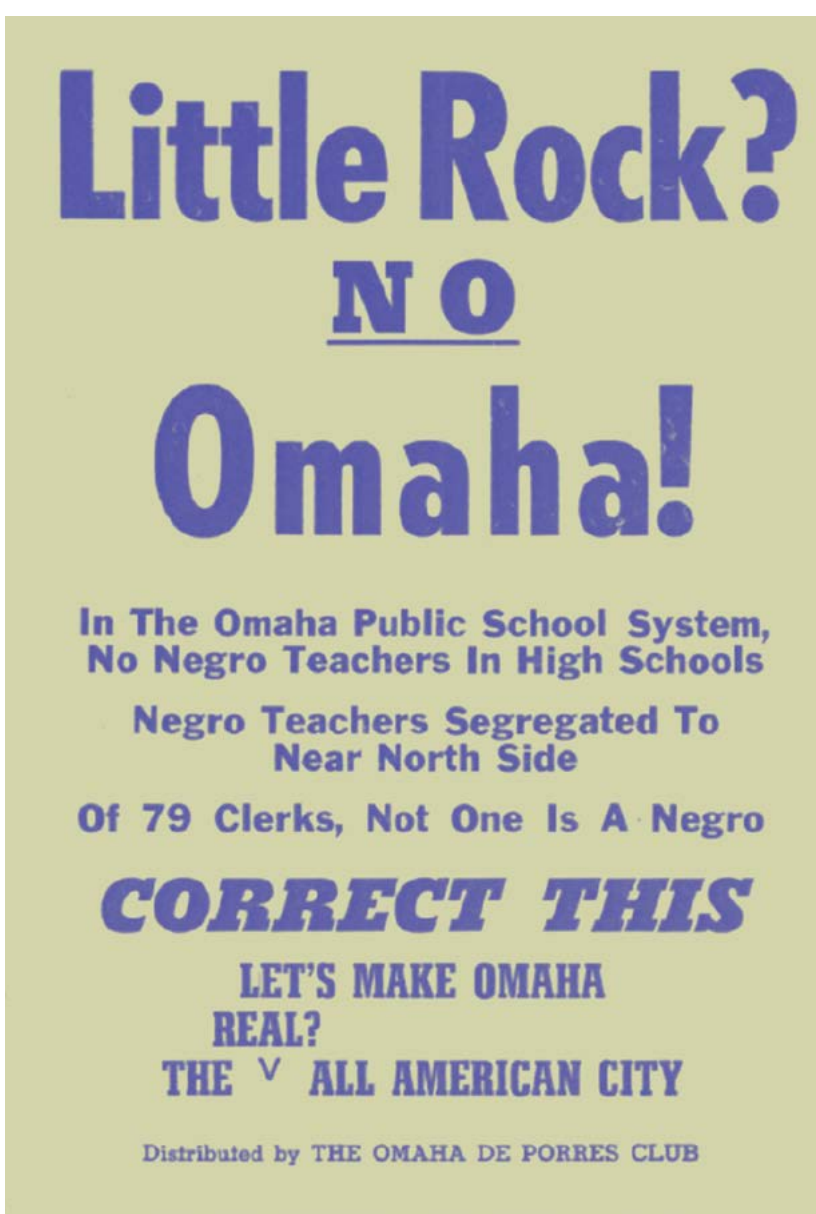
15. Garrett Hoie, "Reimagining the North Freeway," NOISE, July 30, 2021, <https://www.noiseomaha.com/community-response/2021/7/29/reimagining-the-north-freeway>.

to this day. The North Freeway was completed in multiple stretches: the first segment from California Street to Cuming Street in 1960 - 1965, the second segment from Cuming Street to Lake Street in 1965 to 1969, and third segment from Lake Street to Ames Street in the late 1970s - 1989. In the 1990s, the Sorenson Parkway and the Storz Expressway were constructed from the northern point of the North Freeway to allow for a more optimal flow east to west.

## LOSS OF HOUSING AND INCREASED SEPARATION

The construction of the North Freeway split North Omaha in two. This rift broke the streetscape: leaving dead ends in the street grid and reduced the neighborhood's walkability. Compounded by other trends in economic activity, lending practices, and intergenerational wealth, the population density of North Omaha was one of the highest in 1950, and now stands among the lowest in 2020: indicating a loss in housing supply and an economic ecosystem that can support a large population. In a sad irony for the toll it took on the local community, the North Freeway itself is not even used as much compared to other highways in Omaha for its size. In an opinion piece from Garrett Hoie in North Omaha Information Support Everyone (NOISE):

"According to traffic data from the City of Omaha, the ramps on the North Freeway each see between 12,000 and 14,000 cars in a day. In comparison, the West Dodge ramps handle between 38,000 and 58,000 cars in a day. For a nearby comparison, 10th and Cuming/Abbott Drive handles 27,000 cars in a day successfully without being an expressway. In fact, all of the ramps handle the same number of daily cars as 40th and Farnam, which is the heart of the lively Blackstone District that would have been destroyed by the never-built Western Freeway."<sup>14</sup>



"Little Rock? No! Omaha," 1963, protest sign, North Omaha History, <https://northomahahistory.com/2018/02/06/a-history-of-segregated-schools-in-omaha-nebraska/>.

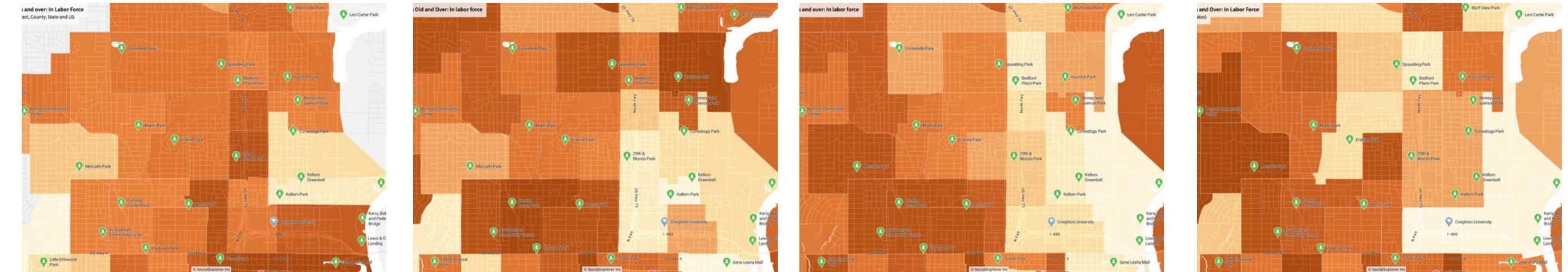


"Ed Poindexter (left), Clarence Williams (middle) and Linda Clark (right) standing at the headquarters of the National Committee to Combat Fascism," 1970, Douglas County Historical Society Collections.

"A photo of a civil rights march taken at 24th and Ohio Streets in Omaha," 1968, Rudy Smith, the World Herald.

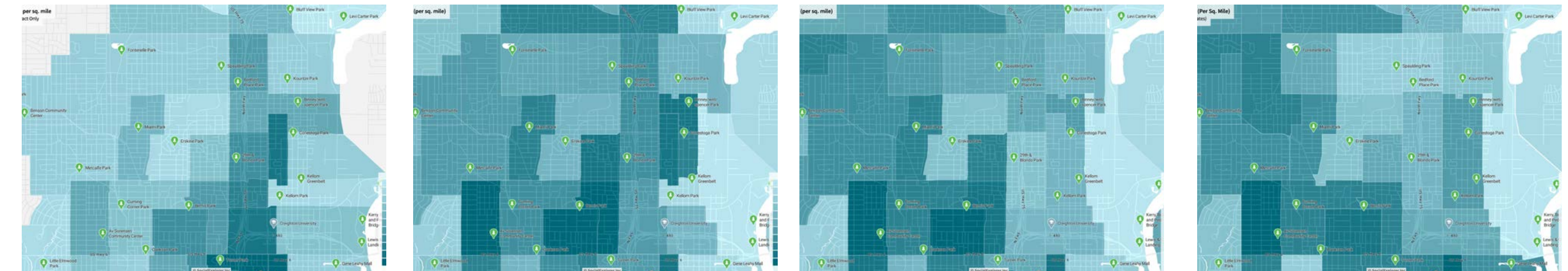
# Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

1960s - 1990s



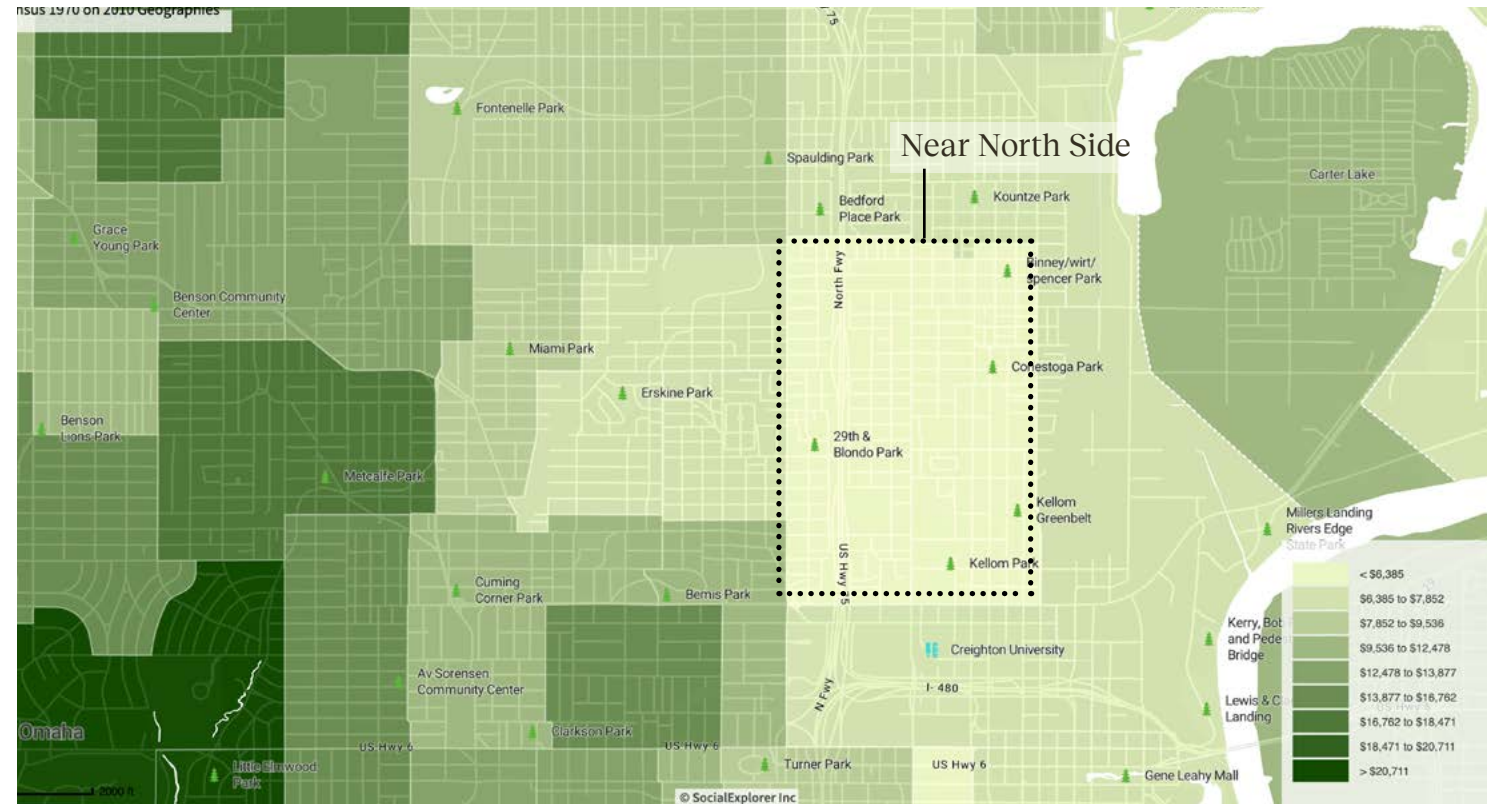
1950 1960 1970 2020

CENSUS TRACTS BY EMPLOYMENT



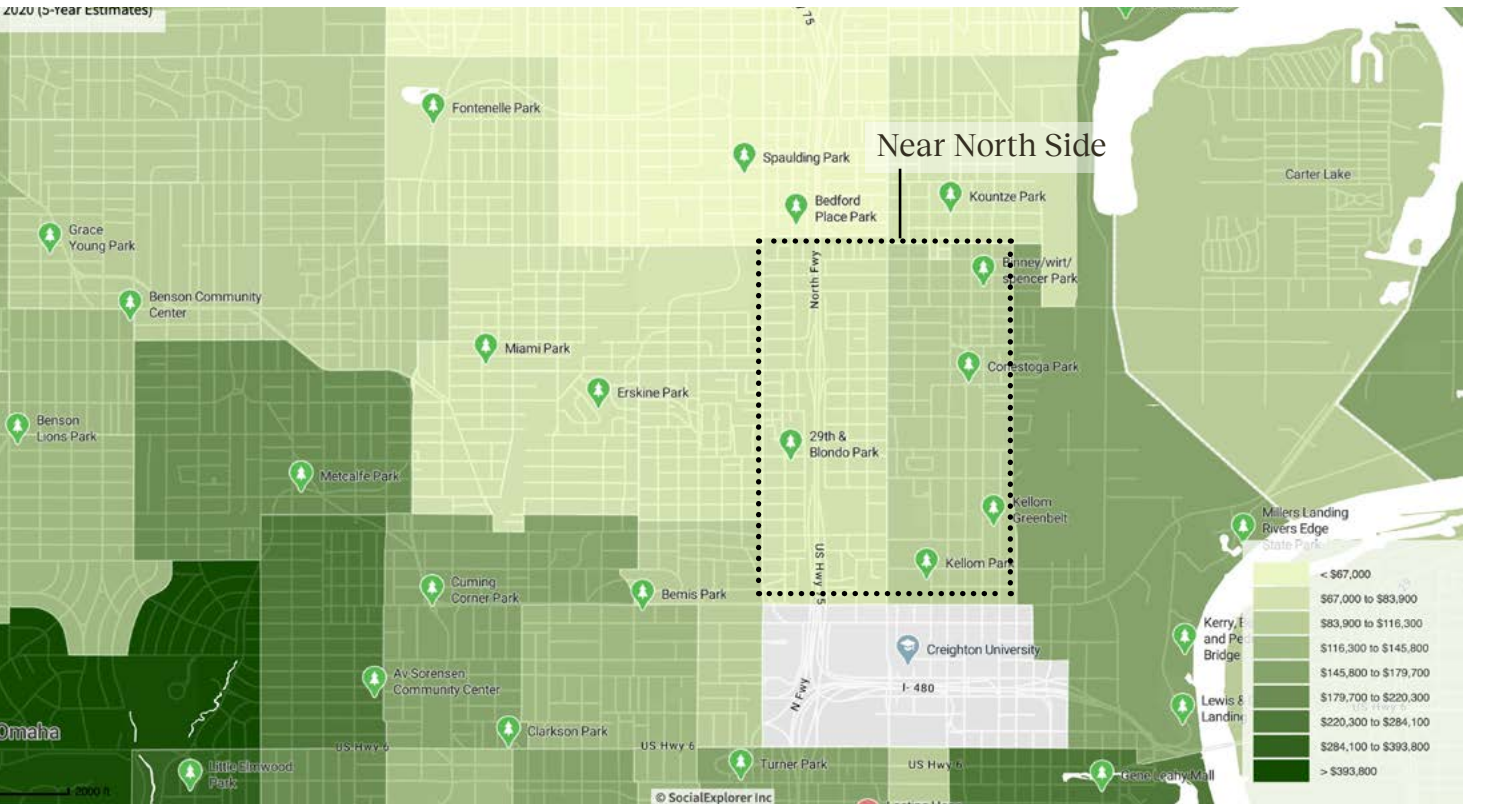
1950 1970 1970 2020

CENSUS TRACTS BY POPULATION DENSITY



1970

CENSUS TRACTS BY MEDIAN HOME VALUE



2020

# Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

1960s - 1990s

The construction of the North Freeway had an immense and immediate effect on North Omaha's local population, economic ecosystem, and housing stock. The freeway's path goes through two present-day Census Tracts, 7 and 11. Census Tract 7 captures the area between Ames Avenue and Bristol Street, and between N 30th and N 24th Street; while, Census Tract 11 captures the area between Bristol Street and Cuming Street, and between

N 30th and N 24th Street. As it was construction from south to north, the following graphs illustrate the physical and socio-economic effects the eminent domain and demolition caused over time.

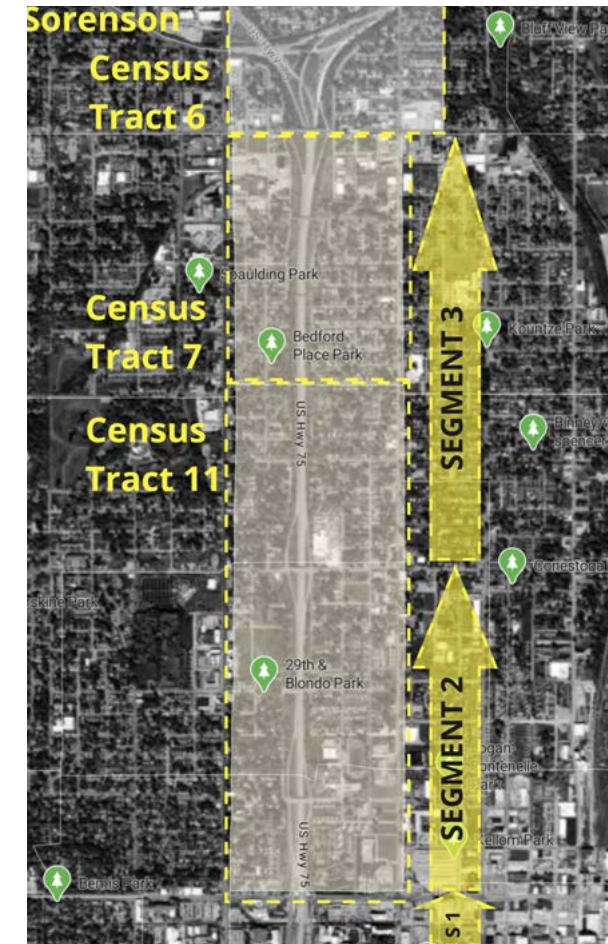
In the first graph, these two census tracts had a peak number of housing units of well over 4,000 units in 1960. As each segment is completed, these tracts experience

a precipitous drop in housing stock, reaching just under 2,000 units in 1990. Within thirty years, these tracts lost 50% of its housing stock.

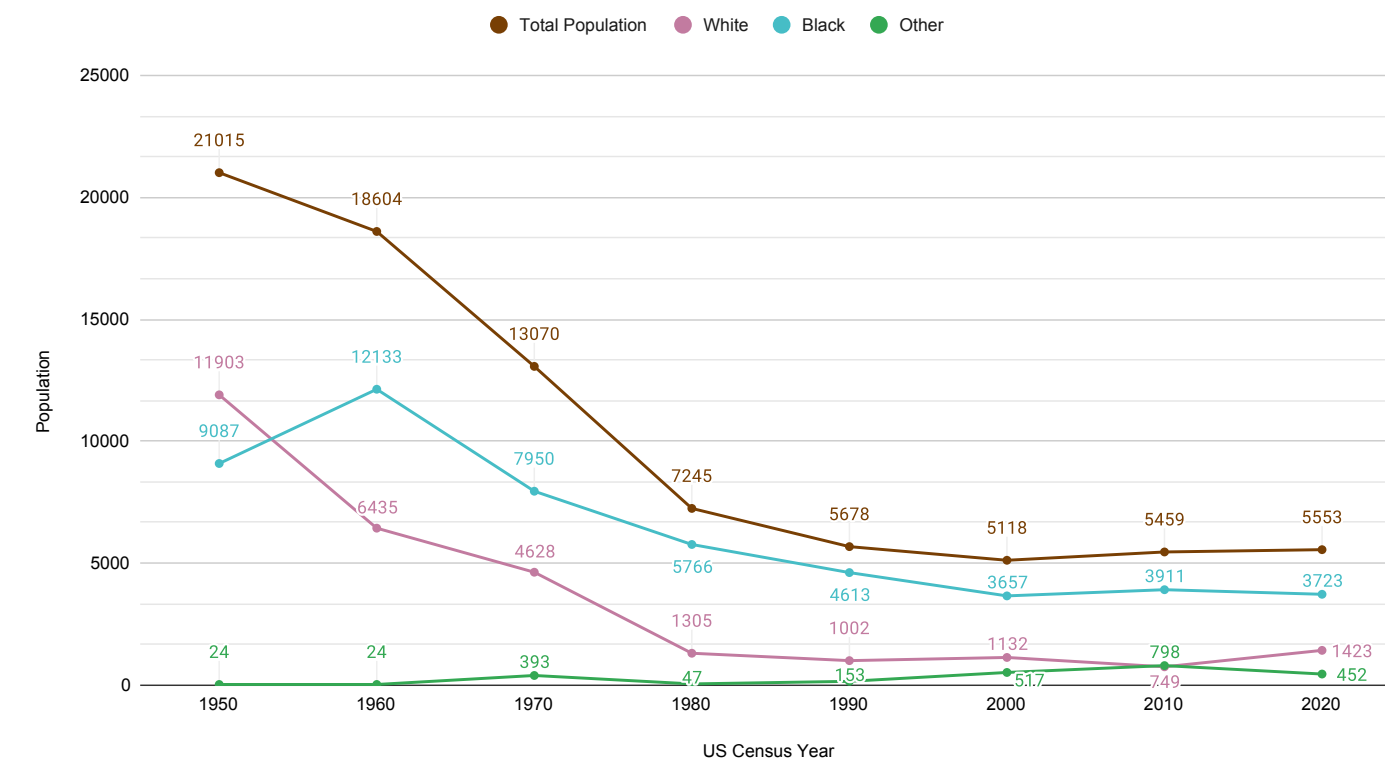
In the second graph, the income per household over time exhibits a similar relationship to the loss of housing stock in the previous graph. Accounting for inflation, there is a 45% drop in income between the start of the freeway's

second leg and the completion of its third leg.

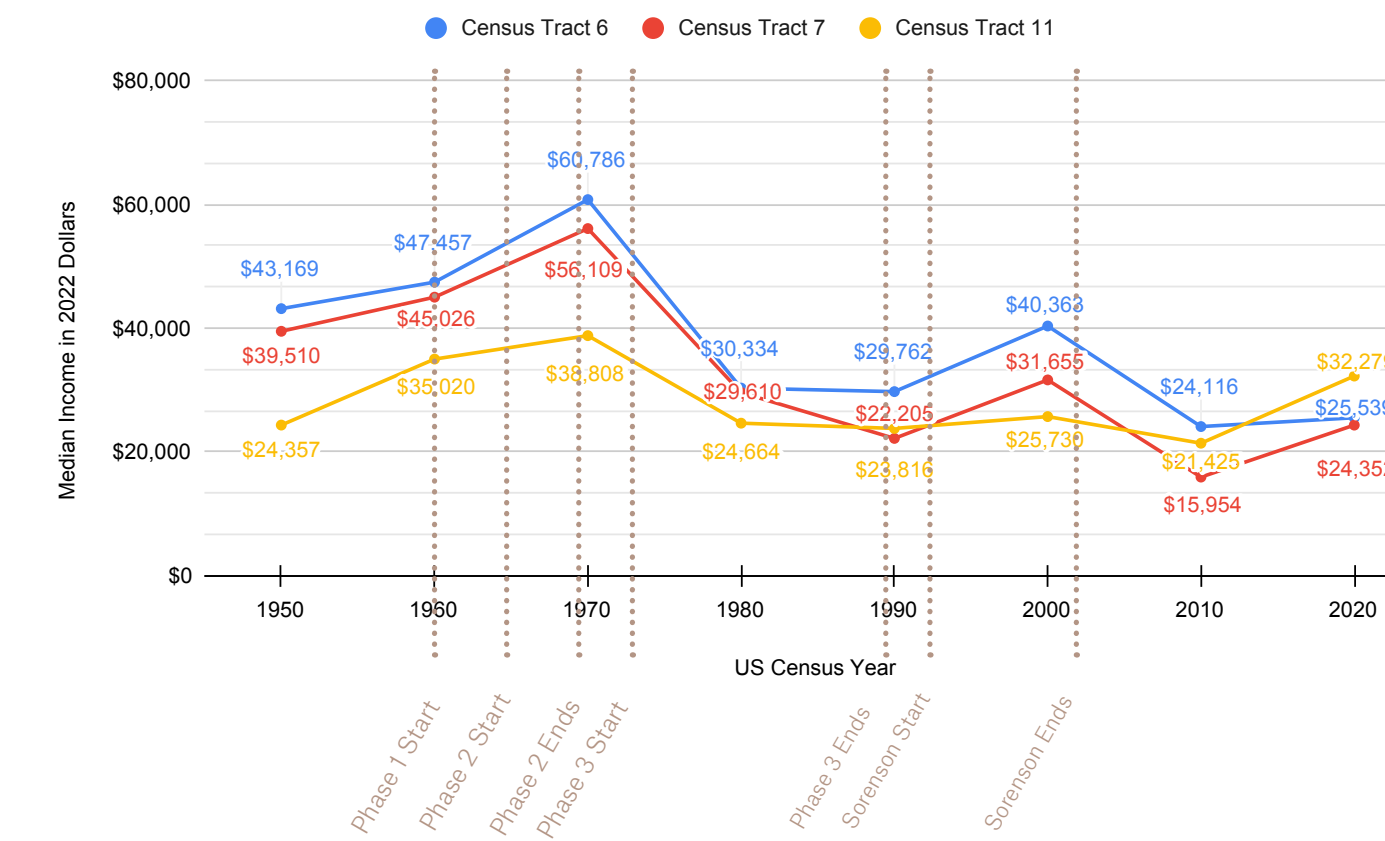
In the third and fourth graphs, the racial demographics of the community show the impact of the highway's demolition and reverberations on its diversity. Illustrated in these graphs is the white flight from this part of North Omaha and the following settlement of African-Americans due to those vacancies.



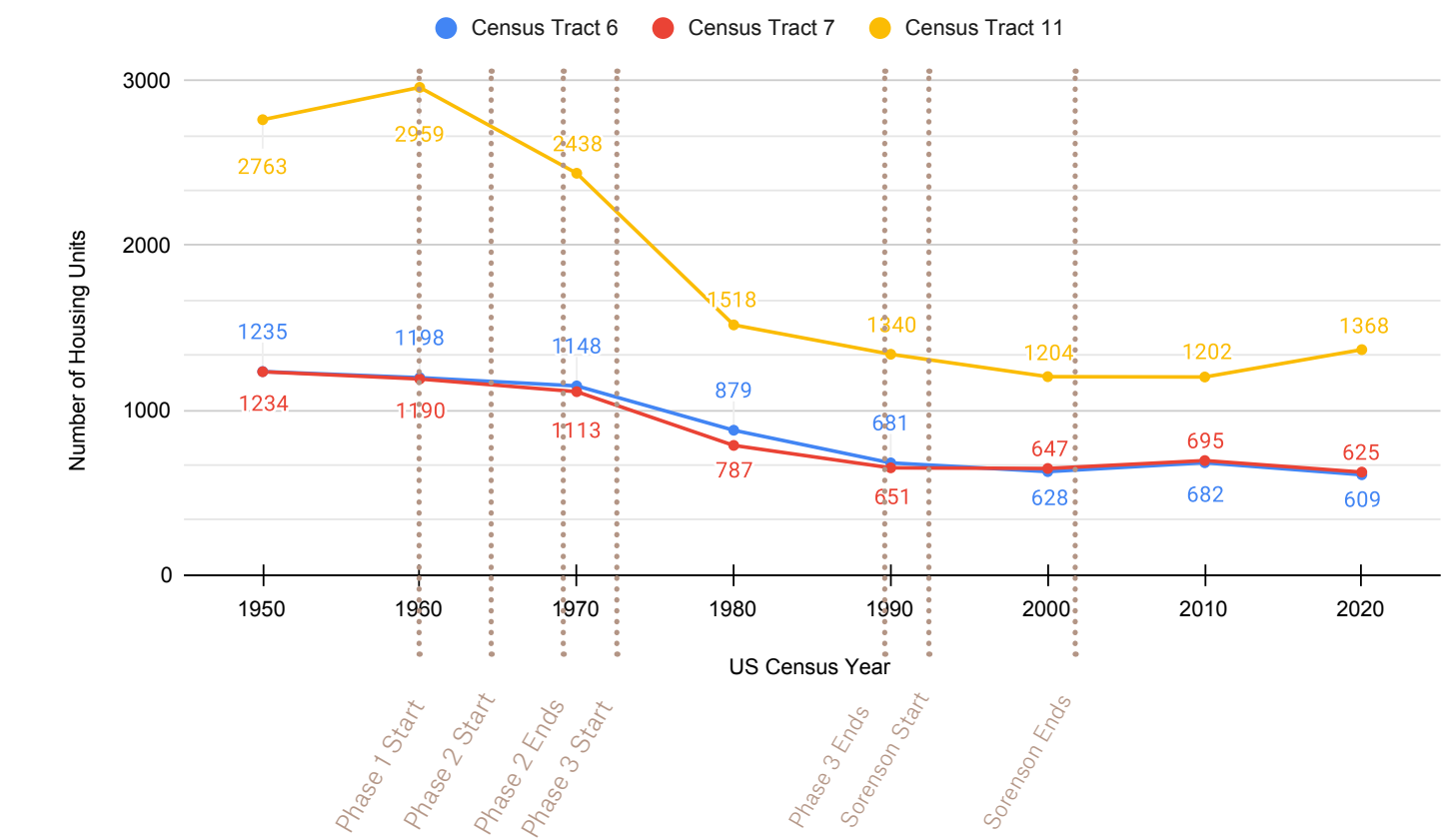
Population & Race in Census Tracts 6, 7, and 11



Annual Median Income in Census Tracts Along North Freeway



Housing Units in Census Tracts Along North Freeway



# Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

## Recommendations

### REVIVING LOCAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP, SUSTAINABLE ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Deindustrialization impacted North Omaha consequently and immensely as it hollowed out employment opportunities and caused the decline of the commercial ecosystem that surrounded it. According to the North Omaha Recovery Plan 2022-2025, North Omaha residents will enter the post-pandemic period much the same as they did for the past six decades: powerless and neglected. As the state must determine the dispensation of American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funds, North Omaha must be a priority in accessing these funds to encourage private investment, explore mixed-use development, and responding to the gaps in retail service.

Impacted Social Determinant(s):  
Economic Stability

#### Potential Strategies:

- Incentivize private Investment
- Commercial corridor Revitalization
- Explore opportunities for updating zoning codes to allow for Mixed-Use Infill development
- Identify Retail Gaps in the Neighborhood

### EXPANSION OF EDUCATIONAL OPTIONS

Due to the histories of structural segregation within the school system, North Omaha is home to one of the most diverse school districts but also among the most underfunded. A well-rounded education is the pathway for economic and social mobility, which is seemingly harder to attained according to recent Census data and education reports. In discussion with members of Spark, capacity and waitlists are barriers and spaces of intense competition for early education access, which prompts the need for further expansion and investment.

Impacted Social Determinant(s):  
Educational Access

#### Potential Strategies:

- Create more community spaces for gathering and sharing knowledge, providing after school care
- More investment to increase school capacity

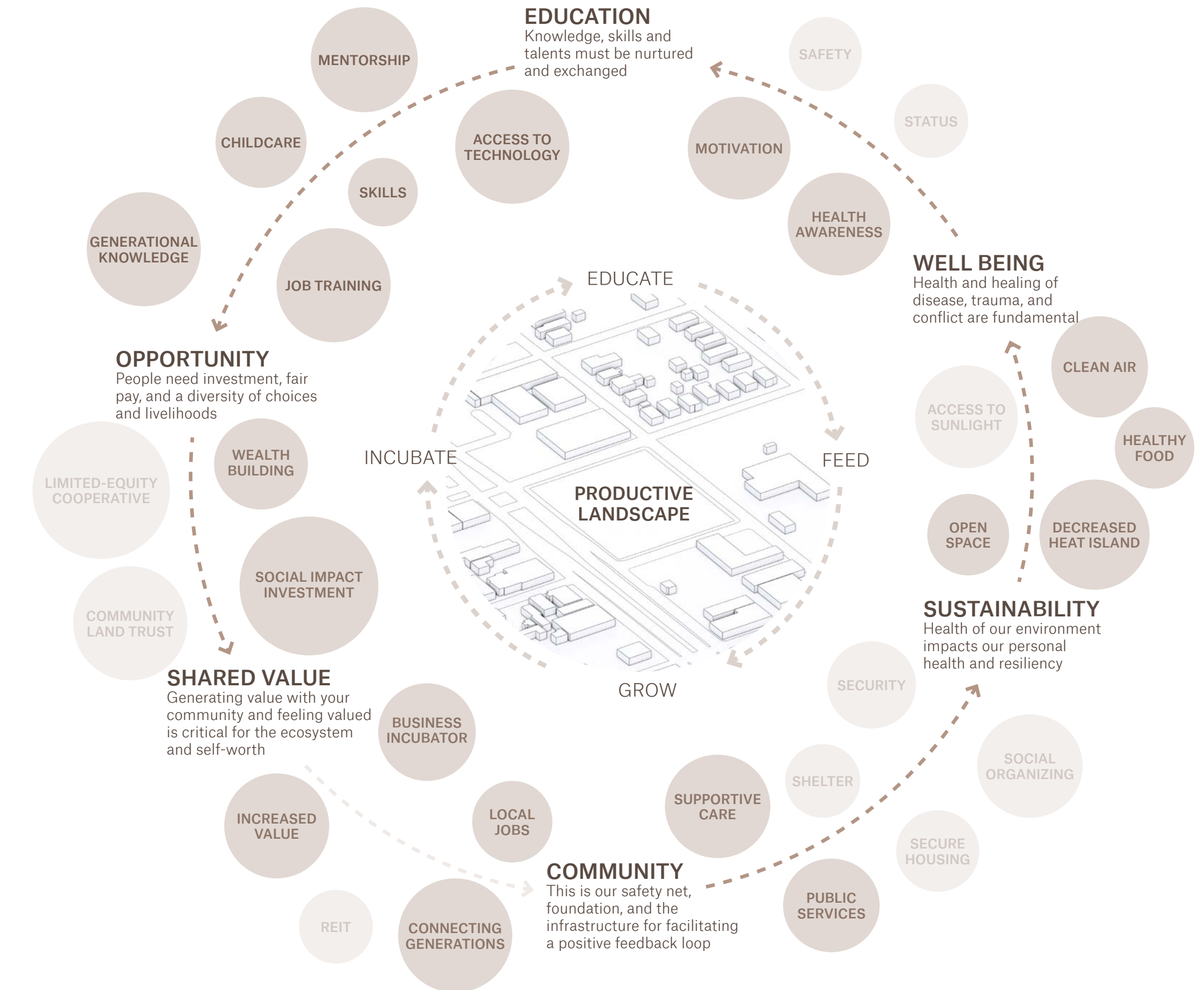
### HIGHWAY RESTITCHING, INCREASED DENSITY & INFILL DEVELOPMENT

When the North Freeway created a physical rift in North Omaha, the disparate impacts were felt and evident in multiple socio-demographic metrics, including race, income, education, and housing stock, and the highway itself has become a strip of comparably negative outcomes when Census data is mapped. As there was little concern for the neighborhood on the part of historical transportation planning, there are few areas where one can cross between the eastern and western half of North Omaha, which has led to major issues of accessibility and development. Capping the highway and weaving the streetscapes together can increase connectivity and allow for new housing construction opportunities, which can return much needed density to the community. For example, while North Omaha is a food desert due to multiple factors, one major one is the lack of a dense population base that provides an opening for grocers or markets to build fresh food businesses.

Impacted Social Determinant(s):  
Neighborhood & Physical Environment, Healthcare Systems

#### Potential Strategies:

- Identify segments of the highway best suited for potential capping
- Explore innovative ways to activate underpasses and increase connectivity
- Enable Participatory Design for Visioning New Open Space and Construction Opportunities
- Open New Food Options via Increased Population & Density



# Build Back America

2000s - Present



"West side of 24th Street, looking southwest from about Ohio Street" 2016, photograph, Wikimedia, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Omaha, Nebraska, W side 24th St. from Ohio St. 1.jpg>.



# Build Back America

## 2000s - Present

Since the Great Recession of 2008, America has been at a dividing line over class, ethnicity, race, and religion, all of which have amplified due to rising political partisanship and rifts in our lived environments. We have heard our political leaders speak about American exceptionalism, hope, optimism, and equality for all; yet, these calls seem to fall silent when they reach the ground where people live, work, and play. Inequality in income rises, wages continue to stagnate, inflation continues to rise, and access to fundamental rights and spaces dwindle, all holding immense influence over how our democracy is practiced and realized. Power rests in the hands of all of us as we interact with each other and the spaces we call home.

### NONPROFIT AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Nonprofit developers such as Habitat for Humanity Omaha, GESU, Holy Name, Project Houseworks, and others have served thousands of families in the Omaha area, with a large portion focused on North Omaha. For decades, these nonprofits have continued to serve North Omaha as an anchor in the construction of affordable housing via new construction, blight infill, and renovation and rehab.

### FOREVER NORTH

*"In addition, through Forever North, the City worked with community members to conduct integrated place assessments of targeted locations along N. 24th Street. Their assessments focused on level of service for transit riders, pedestrians, bicyclists, and drivers of private vehicles. They also assessed sociability, uses and activities, access and linkages, and comfort and image. During the assessments, participants explored interim methods for utilizing vacant spaces and reducing traffic noise. Their ideas will help set the stage for a collaborative*

16. Community Development Division, "Forever North," City of Omaha Planning Department, accessed July 3, 2023, <https://planninghcd.cityofomaha.org/forevernorth>.

*demonstration project that evolves into a permanent solution and meets corridor needs."* - Forever North, 2020

Built from past attempts in planning (e.g., North Omaha Village Revitalization Plan, Village Square Development Plan), the Forever North plan seeks to improve the 24th Street corridor's quality of life by supporting development with a respect to the community's culture and history. It also understands the multiple roles in how accessibility and transportation inform the security and success of a neighborhood and environment. Produced by a consortium of stakeholders from the local to the state, this community-driven process and research study has become an amendment to the city's Master Plan. This can set the course for a development and planning commitment in the neighborhood cognizant of the challenges and needs facing North Omaha.<sup>15</sup>

### CONNECTION

From the rehabilitation of properties by area nonprofits and for-profit developers to Spark CDI's trail-oriented development and Developer's Academy, there is an understanding that community-sourced endeavors will produce outcomes that are better for the residents who continue to live there. These endeavors are also critical to securing space in the community from becoming purchased and speculated upon, as an area so close to downtown with property values that are comparably lower makes it compelling target for these forces. The restoration and recreation of the 27th Ave edge into a path of access and walkability is an effort in reweaving the urban fabric – and using movement to change disparate outcomes and incubate the community vision to transform more, e.g. capping the nearby highway and weaving the streets back as they were.

### REAL ESTATE OPPORTUNITIES & SPECULATION

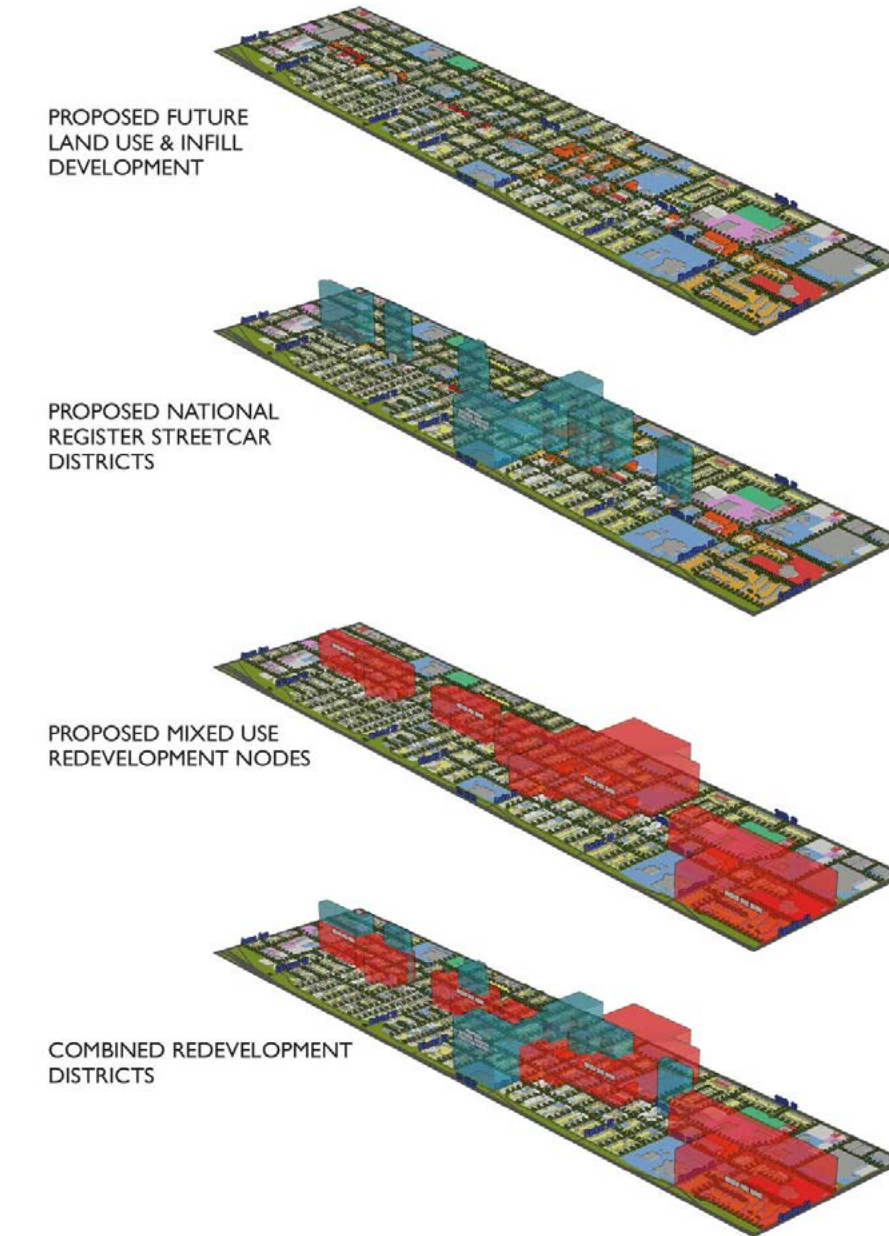
As reported by numerous media outlets, Vinebrook Homes, an Ohio-based company holds title to 154 Douglas County homes, of which nearly two-thirds are in just two North Omaha zip codes. These purchases make them the third-largest owner of individual rental properties in the city of Omaha.

Additionally, the comparably lower housing values of North Omaha to other parts of the city makes it a target for speculation, from within or from outside the state. Reports from KETV and Flatwater Free Press exposes the precarity and vulnerability this community faces. When outside buyers are transforming single-family or two-family homes into rental properties, this will only serve to further endanger the residents who have historically called North Omaha home.

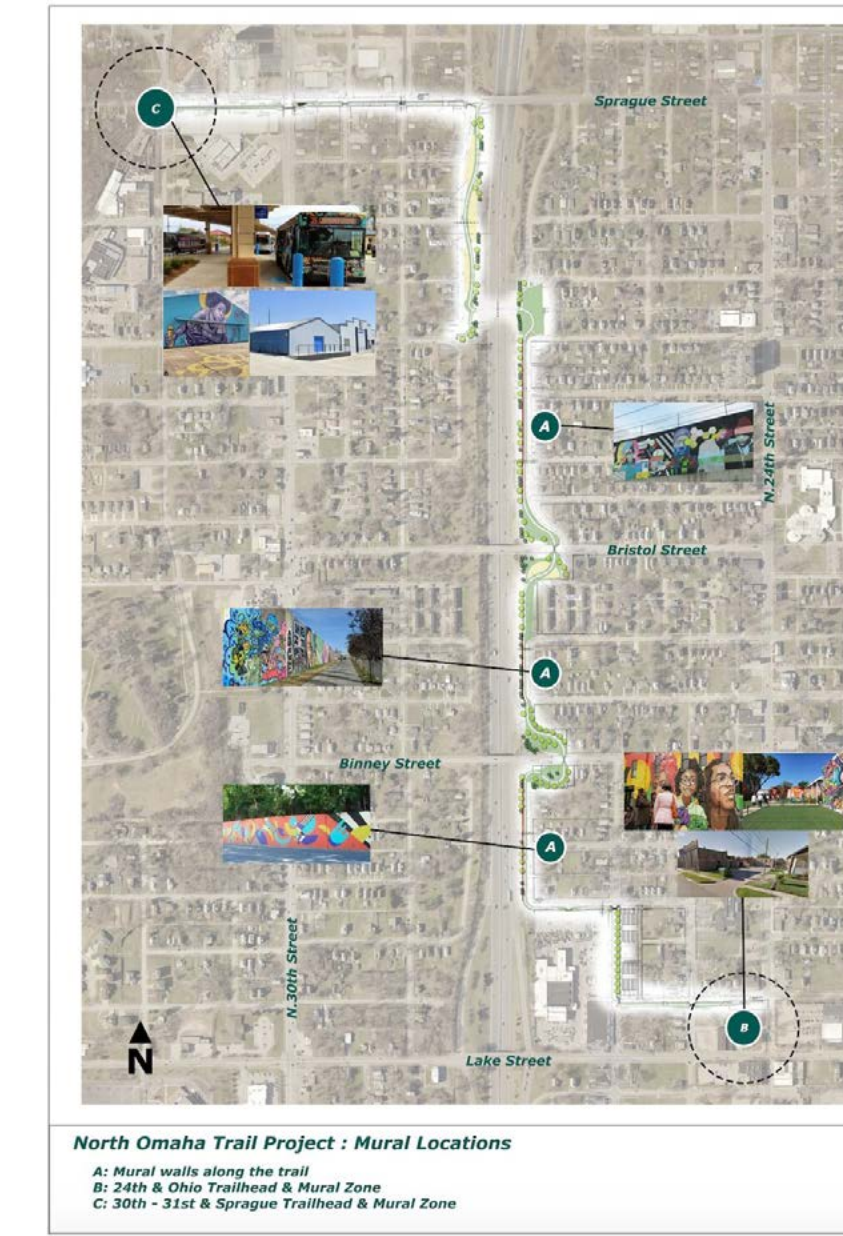
### NORTH OMAHA RECOVERY ACT

Also known as LB-1024, the Legislature set aside and appropriated \$450 million dollars from the federal American Rescue Plan of 2021 for FY 2022-2023 to address the COVID-19 public health emergency and its negative impact upon qualified census tracts within Omaha, which includes the census tracts this document has been focusing on. Concurrent with national trends in the accessibility and availability of affordable housing for those below the median income, Blueprint Nebraska's 2019 report 'Growing the Good Life' proposed that the state needs to construct 30,000 to 50,000 more affordable and livable units. This trend is further exacerbated when observed in Omaha's real estate market, which will continue to grow to over 100,000 by 2040 if nothing is done.

As outlined by the North Omaha Recovery Plan released in January 2022, an investment in North Omaha's affordable and sustainable housing with those public dollars is a commitment and assurance for the community's ability to survive, thrive, and succeed in the coming decades.



"Concepts of Density," 2019, illustration, Forever North Plan, <https://planninghcd.cityofomaha.org/forevernorth>



"North Omaha Trail Project: Mural Locations," 2021, map, Spark CDI.

# Build Back America

## Recommendations

### GOAL 1: REHABILITATE EXISTING HOUSING STOCK

Since the Great Recession, communities across the country have encountered the waves of outside capital seeking to speculate on “undervalued” properties in formerly redlined neighborhoods. As local real estate developers and landlords seek to accumulate more property and speculators spread fliers about buying houses for cash, a stronger line of defense on North Omaha’s housing stock is essential. From restoring the aging housing stock to offering incentives and relief to local homeowners needing renovations, this act of empowerment will help shield a precarious community from the tides of finance capital that will wash in sometime in the future.

### GOAL 5: ENACT ANTI DISPLACEMENT POLICIES

Two prongs of an anti-displacement approach include the preservation of existing affordable housing and the stabilization of neighborhoods (residents and businesses already rooted in the community). Preservation and rehabilitation are strong strategies in countering displacement forces, especially when households are living within affordable units that are not presently subsidized. For the city or nonprofit means to provide financial and technical assistance in this regard, they must be cognizant of the potential role renovation and repair can have in potential urban change like gentrification. Potential strategies to avoid such precarity could include restrictions on monies available, unit conversions, or tax incentives.

Stabilization of the neighborhood should allow those who presently call the neighborhood home the ability to do so without fear of being forced out, monetarily or physically. Implementing just cause evictions and providing tenants with a right to counsel will improve the security and stability of residents.

### GOAL 2: EXPAND TRAIL ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

From 24th Street and Ohio to 30th Street and Ames, Spark CDI completed the first leg of the North Omaha Trail this year. Using existing pathways along the North Freeway and pedestrian footbridges over it, the trail is the first phase in the gradual reconnection and restitching of North Omaha’s urban fabric that was torn asunder by the highway. One of the goals undergirding this plan is a desire to further reconnect the North with the downtown core, which has lacked in a diversity of transportation options.

### GOAL 6: CREATE AN INNOVATION DISTRICT

As economic development over the last thirty years in the United States has become increasingly uneven, the innovation district is a strategic tool that has been able to couple inclusive economic growth with communities lower on socio-economic metrics. Locating a dense ecosystem of new business development in and around these communities provide an immediate boon of accessibility, transportation, and opportunities in education and employment. For example, Cleveland’s Health-Tech Corridor is one such example of an innovation district that is built with providing assets and investments back into the city’s economically distressed areas surrounding the site.

### GOAL 3: RESTORE 27TH AVENUE

The North Omaha Trail unlocks the potential and vision of local residents to reuse and revalue their space that was taken by the highway. Galvanizing solutions such as the Thriving Communities Program from the US Department of Transportation, offers impactful community-supported and informed decision making towards revitalization that responds directly to one of the most significant urban disruptions of North Omaha.

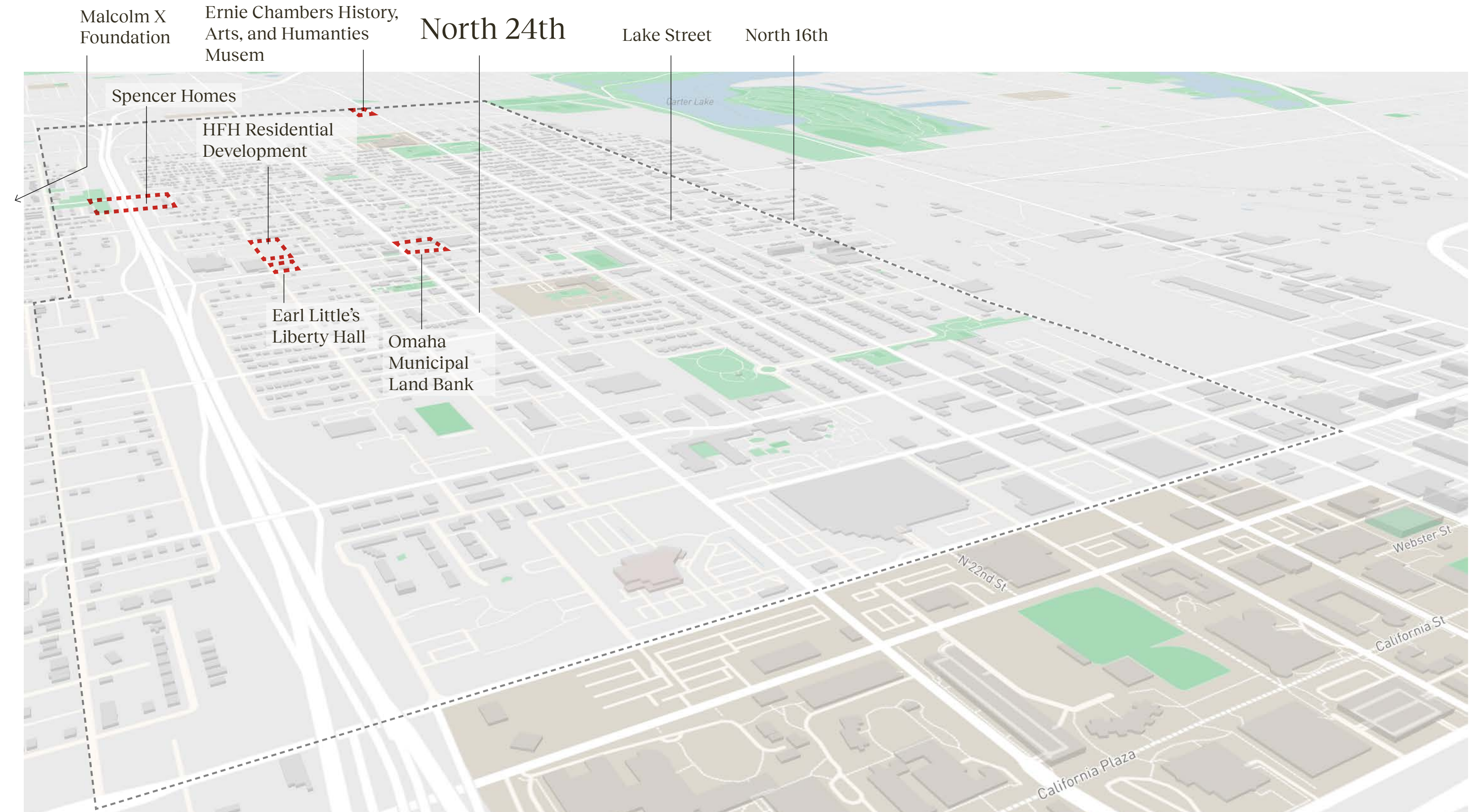
### GOAL 7: CREATE A LIVE-WORK / MIXED-USE CORRIDOR

An intentional investment in creating a live-work and mixed-use corridor supports the needed and necessary increase in density and multifamily housing units to provide stable housing for North Omaha residents. The creation of locally accessible businesses promotes a vibrant economy and a self-sustaining commercial character for North Omaha.

### GOAL 4: CREATE PUBLIC ART AND PUBLIC SPACES FOR INTERACTION

Local legend Preston Love Jr.’s concept of ‘the Seed of Our Community’ speaks to the power of physical space to foster human interactions and relationships while promoting the visual stimulus of growth and love for residents through murals, nature, and public art. By recognizing the economic devastation that took place in North Omaha and challenging it, this act of public reinvestment pays honor to the community that has endured such a legacy and fosters faith that tomorrow will be a better day for all.

# Potential Opportunity Sites



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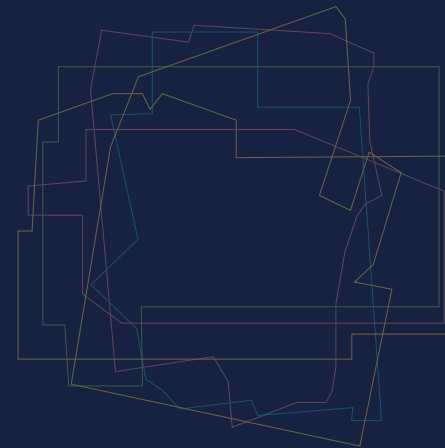
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