

JUST DON'T

COMMON PITFALLS OF EQUITY PRACTICE AND HOW TO AVOID THEM

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**CoDesign seeks to embed the design disciplines in antiracist, abolitionist, and reparative practices through action research, studio pedagogy, and design activism accomplicng working-class, BIPOC [Black, indigenous, people of color] movements.*

⚠️ TOKEN EQUITY ⚠️

You notice **increasing attention and resources** devoted to issues of equity by decision makers and funders. The **language is ambiguous**, gaining varying usage by groups with different values, objectives, and capacities. You use equity framing to **enhance your project's reach and relevance**.

INSTEAD TRY...

...reconsidering your project in **equity** terms advanced **by communities most historically marginalized and overburdened by the issue**. Retool your project to address root causes of the issue at hand by recompensing for structural injustices and leveling structures of governance and ownership. Whites (and others proximate to whiteness) might begin with their own communities in challenging power and resource hierarchies.

⚠️ MELODRAMATIC EQUITY ⚠️

You **want to show that there is a problem** that merits public attention and investments. You **enlist data** to convey that a particularly **dire problem** exists in this given issue area/locale/community. You use **bold language and visuals** to grab attention of resource holders and decision makers. It comes **at offense to local communities**.

INSTEAD TRY...

...inviting those situated at the frontlines of the problem to conduct joint fact finding and sit at the table with resource holders and decision makers. **Supplement** demographic, socioeconomic, and spatial data with research on underlying political and institutional factors. **Map** community and civic assets, including traditions of organizing and activism. **Gather and share** data in ways that engage local stakeholders and inform collective action strategies.

⚠️ SAVIOR COMPLEX ⚠️

You recount the structural violence and inequality wreaked upon local communities over decades and centuries. “They have disproportionately lost and suffered at every historical turn.” “They are victims and martyrs that need help.” You **prime the situation to elicit your specific intervention.**

INSTEAD TRY...

...examining the full history, identities, and cultures of the community and complexities of the situation. **No community is homogeneous.** They are more often diverse and stratified, and misinformed outsiders can unwittingly play into the hands of local elite interests. **Use your specific skills and connections** to support ongoing efforts by place-based activists and community-led organizations attending to the needs of most vulnerable groups.

⚠️ QUICK WIN ⚠️

You are tired of equity rhetoric, preferring to achieve concrete actions and changes. **You efficiently plan and build a project** using quickly assembled funds and manpower that delivers visible physical upgrades to an otherwise distressed urban area.

INSTEAD TRY...

...carrying out a neighborhood improvement that **strengthens community ownership** and control over neighborhood spaces. Trigger cross-issue linkages (e.g. housing, jobs) to reverberate impacts of spatial investments. Use the project to build strategic partnerships, coalitions, and alliances that not only deliver long-term investments to the area but also enable its most vulnerable long-tenure residents to remain and enjoy improvements.

⚠️ MY WAY OR THE HIGHWAY ⚠️

You **undertake a project** in a historically disinvested neighborhood. Community residents, business owners, and activists **express concern** with its approach, terms, and anticipated impacts. **You are put off** by the heated, passionate, and sometimes angry tone of the conversations, interpret it as a preference to keep things as-is, and **decide to cut your losses.**

INSTEAD TRY...

..trusting that community members want the best for their neighborhood. **Understand** how repeat, widespread experiences of institutional discrimination result in trauma and mistrust of authorities. **Compare and contrast** how your agency/organization is engaging this community in project planning, resource decisions, implementation, and management relative to white-majority, affluent neighborhoods. **Recognize** relevant efforts led by the community and tailor the project to build on such momentum.

⚠️ FAIRYTALE EQUITY ⚠️

You are **impressed with an instance** of equity policy, planning, design and want to share the story. To inspire and inform others, you depict the **visionary and heroic actions of leaders** and focus more on the **project’s strengths than tensions or tradeoffs.** You compose and **disseminate the story to wide acclaim.**

INSTEAD TRY...

...to **reflect on your desire to tell the story** in light of the long history of biased storytelling about people of color and low income communities by whites and class-privileged researchers. **Recognize gaps in your perspective** and reinforcement of cultural norms heralding individualism, binary thinking, and unilateral progress. **Support communities most impacted** by the initiative to tell their own story and reflect on their lived experiences.

