

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## By Focusing on Health, a Community goes from 'Little Vietnam' to Vibrant and Thriving

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EFFECTIVE, AFFORDABLE HEALTH CARE is essential for improving health, but what happens beyond the doctor's office also has a major impact on how healthy we are. There is increasing understanding of how important it is to combine good medical care with support in daily life.

Where we live, learn, work and play all make a difference—for better or worse. Nutritious school lunches, affordable healthy foods, safe places to live, convenient places to exercise, clean air and water and a range of other factors contribute to how healthy we are. In fact, where you live can dramatically increase your chance of living a longer, healthier life, in some cases by as much as 13 years.

One of the main factors in helping or hindering someone in becoming healthy is what is known as the built environment, e.g., the infrastructure—parks, sidewalks, roads, local businesses, etc.—that surround (or don't) someone. Not only does intentionally building healthier communities lead to improvements in the public's health, but it improves the economy, education and infrastructure. Basically, everything impacts health, and good health can benefit everyone and everything in a community.

This concept of intentionally focusing on health when looking at the built environment is exemplified by East Lake in Atlanta and the work of Purpose Built Communities.

In 1995, East Lake Meadows was a community that consisted of 100 percent extremely low-income residents, distressed public housing, and a crime rate 18 times the national average. The community was poor (just 13.5 percent employment), under-educated (just 5 percent of fifth graders met state math standards) and dangerous.

To address these systemic, pervasive problems, community groups partnered with one another and local government to focus on health and everything that affects health—ultimately forming the East Lake Foundation. This new nonprofit served as the quarterback to assure that the revitalization work was accomplished in a coordinated, comprehensive way and at very high standards.

Health was at the center of revitalizing East Lake—the work focuses on three interconnected strategies:



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1. Replacing distressed, low-income, unhealthy housing with high quality mixed-income housing;
2. Creating a cradle to college education pipeline;
3. Bringing the community wellness partners/programs together to create healthy sustainable neighborhoods.

In total, the collective actions of the community created a new wellness center by partnering with the YMCA, intentionally built health into the school day, ensured the entire neighborhood was walkable and bikeable, and worked to attract businesses and markets that could offer fresh, affordable healthy foods.

After the work in East Lake, Purpose Built Communities was created by the founders of the East Lake Foundation to help civic and business leaders apply the model to create opportunities in other struggling unhealthy neighborhoods.

The Purpose Built Model is a deep dive into a clearly-defined, narrowly-tailored geographic area: a neighborhood. Within that neighborhood, over a 10-year period, distressed low-income rental housing is replaced with high-quality mixed-income housing; a cradle-through-college education pipeline is created to serve the neighborhood; and wellness and health-related facilities and programs are implemented so that everyone in the neighborhood can be healthy, in the fullest sense of the term.

These strategies are executed by many partners under the direction of a newly-created nonprofit organization—modeled on the East Lake Foundation—whose sole reason for existence is to make sure that the revitalization model is

fully realized at very high standards. The new nonprofit, called a “lead organization,” doesn't necessarily deliver programs itself, but serves as the quarterback of the initiative.

The successes in East Lake are expansive and The East Lake neighborhood has come a long way since the days when residents called it “Little Vietnam” because it felt like a war zone. All of the adults in the Villages of East Lake work unless they are elderly or disabled. In 2013, 99 percent of the third through eighth grade students in the neighborhood's Charles R. Drew Charter School passed the state assessment in reading, and 98 percent did so in math. The crime rate in East Lake is also dramatically lower—now 50 percent of the average crime rate of the city of Atlanta.

Research shows that people are healthier when they live in communities that include high quality mixed-income housing, top-notch education and opportunities for recreation and civic engagement. It is the job of those in the community development arena to marshal existing resources in an effective way to create communities where the healthy choice is the easy choice.

Over the last decade, thousands of people have visited East Lake to learn and see if they could replicate the outcomes in their own community. Across the nation, Purpose Built Communities supports local leaders in eight cities who are already replicating this model, and is in discussions with leaders in 20 additional cities.

There is no denying that this work is hard and complex, involving multiple players and systems, many of which do not have a track record of working effectively together. Nevertheless, we now have a model to rebuild neighborhoods so that they can serve as a platform that allows families to break the cycle of poverty by improving their health, safety and economic prospects.

As Tom Cousins, the Atlanta-based developer and philanthropist who spearheaded the revitalization of East Lake and then created Purpose Built Communities to replicate that model nationwide says, “There is a solution. It can be done. East Lake proves it. New Orleans and Indianapolis prove it. And if it can be done in these neighborhoods, it can be done anywhere.”





PURPOSE  
BUILT  
COMMUNITIES

## Breaking the Cycle of Poverty in Urban America

Purpose Built Communities is an Atlanta-based nonprofit consulting firm helping local leaders to break the cycle of poverty by transforming struggling neighborhoods into vibrant and sustainable communities where everyone has the opportunity to thrive.

Purpose Built provides consulting and coaching services at no cost to help local leaders plan, implement and sustain neighborhood revitalizations using a holistic model to ensure success. The Purpose Built model evolved from the successful revitalization in the late 1990s of East Lake Meadows, a poverty-stricken, crime-ridden failed 650-unit public housing project in Atlanta, Georgia.

As the story of East Lake's transformation spread, leaders from other communities wanted to learn how to apply this model to their neighborhoods. In response, Tom Cousins, Warren Buffett and Julian Robertson formed Purpose Built Communities in 2009 to help local leaders replicate that holistic model in their backyards. The Chair and CEO of Purpose Built is Shirley Franklin, Mayor of Atlanta from 2002–2009.

Purpose Built works where invited, and where the criteria for success are present. Once local leaders have thoroughly vetted the Purpose Built Model and committed to implement each piece over a ten-year period, the local leadership organization may be invited to become a Purpose Built Communities Network Member. Purpose Built supports the local leadership and their partners, at no cost, as the local leadership adapts and implements the model. There are currently 8 Network Members and over 20 additional communities exploring whether this model will work in their neighborhoods.

The intent is to foster a network of up to 25 large-scale comprehensive redevelopment initiatives across the US in the next few years, based on the Purpose Built model. This network will encompass more than 20,000 mixed-income housing units and high-performing schools for approximately 15,000 students.



### Our Vision:

Purpose Built Communities breaks the cycle of intergenerational poverty, creating a world where geography no longer limits human potential.