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SYMPHONY MALVEAUX & CHRIS TYSON



# THIS PLACE WE CALL HOME

**SYMPHONY MALVEAUX**  
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Our connection to home relates to our relationship with places expressed through the various scopes of human life: emotional connections, personal stories, and shared family and community experiences. Our sense of place develops in the way we identify our attachment and meaning to the environment that surrounds us and the spaces in which our life happens. Cities are such places and understanding a city's historical development is an important component of understanding how individual and collective identity are formed.

Cities have a spatial development history. This history is intertwined with other factors, including social factors such as racial identity, economic status, and cultural identity. The spatial development history of American cities is tied to these social developments, and race is one of the dominant factors shaping the spatial character of places we call home. Therefore, a race-conscious understanding of the city's history, development, and contemporary character is essential to any meaningful or productive contemplation of its current struggles and future.

## **Baton Rouge's Development**

From its founding until the early 1900s, Baton Rouge was a small town that didn't extend beyond present-day Spanish Town to the north, the Baton Rouge National Cemetery to the east, the Mississippi River to the west, and Beauregard Town to the south. Like all southern cities, its economy was rooted in and depended upon the institutions of Black slavery. Its 20th Century development followed the path of Jim Crow with rigid racial segregation and the

intentional under-development of Black neighborhoods as its core features. The development of the city's parks, its system of higher education, its system of public transportation, and its interstate highway system all feature design and operational decisions that prioritized race as the dominant organizing principle for the spatial ordering of the city. The city's north-south racial divide is one of many consequences of these development patterns. Those decisions are not in the past – they have all had cumulative consequences which are mapped onto the look, feel, and operation of present-day Baton Rouge.

Within the past two decades, Baton Rouge has experienced substantial spatial and developmental change. Those changes include the rapid, high-end development in the southwestern part of the Parish; downtown revitalization; the closure of Earl K. Long Hospital; and a petition to create a new city out of the southern, unincorporated area of Parish. Additionally, the murder of Alton Sterling, the murders of three Baton Rouge police officers: and the catastrophic 2016 floods have all shaped the spatial character of the city and therefore directly impact the real and perceived sense of place.

Baton Rouge's sense of place differs in large part depending upon what part of the city you call home, and that is heavily influenced by race. Baton Rouge has high rates of blight, crime, homelessness, and disinvestment in many of its core neighborhoods. These dynamics drive neighborhood disparities in

health, adverse educational outcomes, and lack of job opportunities.

### Resident-Led Place Making

Within the last ten years, many organizations and dedicated residents have created and implemented programs that work to address the underdevelopment of so many of the city's neighborhoods.

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For example, Mid City Redevelopment Alliance works to improve neighborhoods and housing conditions through building and repairing affordable houses and empowering residents to take on leadership roles in ongoing community projects. Engaging residents in community revitalization not only strengthens the bonds of community, but it empowers them to help contribute to a better sense of place in their neighborhoods and throughout the city.

In efforts to directly invest in residents, the Safe Hopeful Neighborhoods Initiative (SHNI) serves as a hub for neighborhood engagement, neighborhood leader empowerment, and community improvement. The initiative trains resident leaders who go on to become community organizers. This program provides grant opportunities that allow participants to fund the issue affecting their community directly. In order to directly improve the city's sense of place, SHNI provides a free tool warehouse that provides residents access to tools to clean up their community, rehab their homes, and create significant events that highlight the pride their neighborhood holds.

### Hope for the Next Decade

Our sense of place reflects our historical and experiential knowledge of our community to help us imagine a more sustainable future. We hope that in the next ten years, Baton Rouge residents are well equipped and aware of all resources to successfully advocate for change in systems and disinvestment within their community, to hold officials accountable in efforts to increase their quality of life and sense of place, and to be proud to call Baton Rouge home.

#### About the Authors

##### *Symphony Malveaux*



A Louisiana native, Symphony Malveaux, MPA, holds the position of Community Engagement Manager for Mid City Redevelopment Alliance. She consults, strategizes, and implements community projects that increase the quality of life for all residents and local businesses in neighborhoods throughout East Baton Rouge. To foster her skills in urban revitalization, she's an alumna of MetroMorphosis ULDI, Harvard Graduate School of Design Summer Program, and NeighborWorks America Institute. Symphony also serves on the board for Mid City Merchants. Additionally, she is the Project Lead for Mayor-President Broome's Safe Hopeful Neighborhood which acts as the one-stop shop for neighborhood engagement resources for the city of Baton Rouge. Symphony finds value in training residents through the Resident Leader Academy, where she challenges participants to think outside the box to create impactful projects that yield the sustainable change they desire. She believes to have inclusive communities; we have to cultivate them.

##### *Chris J. Tyson*



Christopher J. Tyson was recently a Newman Trowbridge Distinguished Professor of Law at the Paul M. Hebert Law Center at Louisiana State University. In December 2021 he completed a four-year term as the President and CEO of Build Baton Rouge, the city's redevelopment authority and land bank. Under his leadership the city launched a \$50 million Bus Rapid Transit project, won a \$30 million HUD Choice Neighborhoods grant, was awarded the highly competitive \$5 million JP Morgan Chase AdvancingCities grant, and established Baton Rouge's first Community Land Trust. During that same period Build Baton Rouge acquired and prepared for development over 20 acres of vacant and blighted urban property and administered over \$20 million in HUD Community Development grants on behalf of the city of Baton Rouge.