

Beyond Homes Around a Mosque: Muslim-Led Community Development in a Major U.S. City

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Abstract

This paper examines Dream of Detroit (DREAM), a Muslim-led community development initiative, and its impact on Muslim community-building and Detroit's Dexter-Linwood neighborhood. DREAM addresses housing, economic development, sustainability, and cultural preservation. Born from diverse community efforts, it aims to combat housing insecurity, blight, poverty, and racial disparities.

DREAM has successfully renovated vacant homes, engaged local youth, and empowered residents to shape their community's future. While facing funding challenges and gentrification risks, DREAM's commitment to equity, inclusion, and partnerships positions it as a model for sustainable community development rooted in Islamic values.

This case study showcases the power of faith-inspired, community-driven approaches and comprehensive strategies in revitalizing marginalized neighborhoods. It offers insights for practitioners, policymakers, and researchers seeking effective community development models in diverse urban settings.

Keywords: *Dream of Detroit, community development, housing justice, Muslim-led initiative, faith-inspired, gentrification, equitable development, urban neighborhood*

Introduction

“Choose your neighbor before you choose your house.” The first time I heard this Arabic proverb, I just couldn’t believe what my ears were hearing. Living in such an individualistic society, this concept of considering who one’s neighbors would be before purchasing or moving into a home just seemed so foreign. Yes, it is important to like the home, consider its amenities, and research its location. But to regard one’s neighbors as a priority? How

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can one even begin to go down that path, considering all the intentional obstacles made around housing?

Well, to begin with, it takes talking to and getting to know people, looking for our shared values, and being a reminder to one another that we are meant to live in communities where we look out for each other. From there, we begin to learn and understand one another's needs so we can go from survival mode to thriving. Then, we can broaden our minds and hearts to possibilities for the betterment of everyone. That combination of small-scale communal wellness and large-scale systemic change is the foundation of Dream of Detroit (DREAM). DREAM is at once an acknowledgement of the community-building work of our elders and an ode to a just future we're still fighting to create.

Dream of Detroit is a Muslim-led community development initiative that has been making significant strides in revitalizing homes and empowering residents in the upper-east Dexter-Linwood neighborhood of Detroit by combining community organizing and development. This innovative project is much more than just brick and mortar; it is a testament to the power of a "people- and partner-centric strategy that makes sure current neighbors are leaders and beneficiaries of the area's transformation even as DREAM brings in new growth and opportunities" (Crain 2021).

Origins and Objectives

DREAM – short for "Detroit Revival Engaging American Muslims" – came to fruition in 2013 by a collective effort involving community organizers, activists, mosque-goers, and academics from various racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. In particular, it emerged out of a unique partnership between Black American and Pakistani American Muslims, but has grown to really embody the broader Muslim population, the most diverse faith community in the U.S. today. The project was born of a shared vision to address the pervasive challenges facing Detroit, particularly its housing insecurity, high rates of vacant and abandoned properties, high poverty rates, and racial disparities. At its core, DREAM seeks to tackle not only physical blight, but also the deeper-rooted social, economic, and environmental challenges that have long plagued the city. Its multifaceted and holistic objectives are comprised of the following:

Housing Revitalization: One of DREAM's central goals is to transform vacant and derelict properties into safe, affordable, and sustainable housing options for local residents. Our neighborhood was once written-off by local planners, deemed to have lost too much population over the last three decades. We fought this narrative and determined to create a future where our longtime residents and institutions, as well as aspiring residents, could have a quality of life equal to anywhere else in the city. Through the DREAM Community Land Trust, our latest initiative, we are ensuring stability and creating permanent affordability, as more market-rate development is now encroaching on our neighborhood. As defined by a leading technical assistance provider, Grounded Solutions Network, "community land trusts (CLTs) are nonprofit organizations governed by a board of CLT residents, community residents and public representatives that provide lasting community assets and shared equity homeownership opportunities for families and communities" (Simmons 2022). DREAM holds the value that access to housing is a universal human right

and a prophetic injunction. In the collection of *ḥadīth* from at-Tirmidhī, Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) taught us that, “There is no right for the son of Adam except in these things: a house in which he lives, a garment to cover his nakedness, a piece of bread, and water” (Ṣaḥīḥ at-Tirmidhī, no. 2341; vol. 4, book 10, ḥadīth 2341).

One of our residents, Sister Tasneem, a local photographer and single mother of two small children and a teenage daughter stated, “This house has literally changed my life. It’s given me a haven for me and my children” (Simmons 2022). The housing security she gained as a DREAM resident has allowed her to develop both personally and professionally, as she transitions into a career in technology while also dedicating her spare time to growing her business in photographing Muslim events – specifically Black Muslim gatherings – nationally.

Community Empowerment: DREAM prioritizes community engagement and home ownership, ensuring that residents have a say in the development process. This participatory approach fosters a sense of belonging and agency among residents. In 2018, DREAM community organizers helped found the Longfellow Block Club, an area-wide network of residents acting as neighborhood stewards, to ensure that our neighbors – no matter their religious, racial, or socio-economic background – felt empowered to contribute to the revitalization of our shared community. In Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, ‘Ā’isha reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, “Gabriel continued to advise me to treat neighbors well until I thought he would make them my heirs” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 6014; book 78, ḥadīth 45). In another *ḥadīth* narration, Anas ibn Mālīk reported: The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said, “None of you will have faith until he loves for his brother what he [she] loves for himself [herself]” (Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, no. 13; book 2, ḥadīth 6). These narrations undergird the orientation toward service and the inclusivity of our work.

Recently, Longfellow Block Club members voted to change the group’s name to the Dream Community Association, due to the long-time residents’ growing affinity to DREAM and its contributions to the neighborhood. The community association’s president, Ms. Teresa, who grew up nearby and is a life-long member of a local church, knows almost everybody in the area. She has been a liaison between neighborhood residents and municipal officials while collaborating with DREAM. “We just want a safe and secure neighborhood, and we want to be neighborly. We get together and we make stuff happen,” she said during an oral history interview. During the COVID-19 pandemic, Ms. Teresa and DREAM staff spoke with residents to discuss their needs. Due to the higher-than-usual population of seniors, she secured 20 tablets for the residents so they could stay connected as DREAM continued to tackle the digital divide and connectivity infrastructure problems within the neighborhood.

The intentional participatory approach is also why Project Homecoming, DREAM’s transitional home for formerly incarcerated Muslim brothers, has been a stepping stone for men exiting Michigan Department of Corrections facilities. Brother Dawud, “rightfully convicted but wrongly sentenced,” as he would say, served 31 years behind bars and, in a true blessing for DREAM, became Project Homecoming’s first house manager. He is now a first-time homeowner, newly married, and continues to be one of the

first smiling faces at the Muslim Center, our local mosque, welcoming each soul that walks through the doors. “Before I moved [into the neighborhood], I was living in a hotel. I’m working, I’m trying to find a place to live. And I’m just exhausting myself every day going in circles. When I got in touch with Dream of Detroit, they got in touch with me, and it made sense. It saved my life.”

Prison destroys family bonds, and Brother Dawud often mentions how he wants brothers returning home to stay connected to a healthy community and all of the supportive institutions they need to thrive. He absolutely loves that the Detroit Repertory Theatre, Michigan’s longest running nonprofit professional theater, is in the neighborhood. “I grew up going to the theater, and now I can just walk down the street and see a live play,” said Brother Dawud, with a wide smile as he reminisced on his childhood. “Over time though, it would be great to have more entertainment in the area, and I know we’ll eventually get there, inshaAllah.”

Economic Development: In partnership with ProsperUs Detroit, DREAM has hosted entrepreneurship workshops for the last eight years, helping aspiring entrepreneurs learn the skill sets needed to make their businesses succeed. So far, 105 individuals have graduated from our site, with entrepreneurs ranging from the ḥalāl food and service industry to spiritual art and modest clothing. By focusing on economic growth within our broader community, we seek to reduce poverty while uplifting business owners in some of the city’s most marginalized neighborhoods.

Sister Khalipha is one such entrepreneur who has been thriving with her ḥalāl food truck business, Khalipha’s Mobile Kitchen. She entered the world of entrepreneurship with her catering business Khalipha’s Katering, which has become a staple within the metro Detroit Muslim community. After graduating from ProsperUs Detroit, she wanted to take her food on the road to better serve her clientele. “Ultimately, this is what I feel like God has destined for me ... to cook and to spread love and joy, as I received it as a child, with the world,” said Sister Khalipha, who now has five children, some of whom help her with the business. “My confirmation of my purpose is to spread love and joy through food. It has been fulfilled” (Baetens 2022). You will find her food truck parked outside different mosques after Friday prayers, see her advertisements for iftār meals during the blessed month of Ramadan, and witness her making and selling birria tacos at the DREAM Street Fair, an annual gathering of thousands of local residents to experience a day of arts, commerce, and family fun.

Beautification with Sustainability: One of our aims is to contribute to a more environmentally friendly and resilient landscape by incorporating sustainable design efforts. DREAM is working to create a scalable strategy to provide housing to people in need while challenging the systemic issues that have preceded Detroit’s neighborhood decline and disproportionately affected Black residents (Crain 2021).

Studies have shown that many cities experience the heat island effect, especially in areas that are further away from parks. Neighborhoods that are predominately African-American have been the most affected by this (Popovich and Flavelle 2019). DREAM’s first greening event, done in 2016, was to plant 114 trees throughout the neighborhood. In

a city whose tree canopy was decimated by the Dutch elm disease and by the invasive species of emerald ash borer beetle during the 1970s and 1980s, these 114 magnificent trees are there to eventually bring more cooling and lower the heat index in the area during the summer. They also serve as a reminder of the Holy Qur'ān's 114 chapters as signs for us, as Muslims, and to be conscious stewards of the nature around us.

I personally have found it so incredible and such a blessing to witness the saplings' growth. To now watch the trees bloom in the spring and leaves fall on the ground in the autumn is something I didn't realize I needed until I noticed we didn't have many trees in the area. To watch the sprinkling on the gray sidewalk of splashes of orange and yellow when we previously lacked any greenery to showcase the change in seasons is definitely one of my personal highlights.

Cultural Preservation: Recognizing the importance of preserving Detroit's rich cultural heritage and history, DREAM ensures that development projects respect and celebrate the city's diverse communities.

DREAM's story is rooted in the rich Black history that has shaped the city of Detroit over the last 100 years. It emerges particularly in that vein of Detroit's narratives that welcomes Marcus Garvey-contemporary Duse Mohammed Ali to open a mosque in the city in 1921; Elijah Muhammad to found the "do-for-self" Nation of Islam in 1932; that found a generation of legendary jazz musicians convert to Islam; and that welcomed waves of Muslim immigrants from the Levant, South Asia, and, more recently, West Africa. It brings these narratives together today in a holistic attempt to build community and engage folks from throughout the metro area in the struggle for racial and economic justice in Detroit's neighborhoods at this moment in time (Crain 2021).

"It was a neighborhood. An African-American neighborhood. And when I say 'neighborhood,' I want to put an emphasis on the 'neighbor'; not just a 'hood,' a neighborhood. I think back to that and I think to what we have now; it's a big difference." That was the reflection of community elder Malik Shabazz during an interview in 2020. Brother Malik actually grew up in our neighborhood during the 1960s and 1970s. Today, he primarily attends the historic Masjid Wali Muhammad, another partnering masjid located a mile away from the DREAM neighborhood. His daughter is now a first-time homeowner and the neighborhood's most recent new resident, living on the same street and just one block away from where her father grew up.

One of the most profound projects that DREAM has been working on is the DREAM Storytelling Project, also known as the Detroit Muslim Storytelling Project, an oral history archive launched in 2020 and housed at Western Michigan University. Recognizing that Dream of Detroit's work is grounded by legacies of past and current social justice efforts, we embarked on this project to build and disseminate knowledge about the history and scope of Black American Muslim community leadership in Detroit.

The DREAM Storytelling Project will serve the metro Detroit community as a whole by providing educational materials about how a diverse group of Detroit residents are developing informed solutions to the city's enduring problems of population loss, economic decline, and municipal neglect, while producing vibrant social networks and community life (Perkins 2020). So far, there have been 65 interviews, with plans to conduct

100 interviews in total. Several of these interviews formed the basis for chapters included in a recent publication edited by Zarinah El-Amin, Dr. Alisa Perkins, and Ayah Rashid: *At Their Feet: 50 Black Muslim Elders Share Stories of Faith and Community Life* (Book Power Publishing: 2022).

Impact and Achievements

In December 2023, DREAM celebrated its 10-year anniversary. Over the last decade, we have achieved remarkable progress in our mission of neighborhood revitalization and community building. Here are some of the most notable achievements:

Housing Rehabilitation: DREAM has successfully renovated 15 vacant homes, converting them into habitable and affordable housing units. This has not only improved living conditions for residents, but also reduced blight within the targeted neighborhoods. We have done this by engaging volunteers as well as by working with professional contractors. Our next step is to firmly root the DREAM Community Land Trust and begin new construction projects that signal our neighborhood's vitality. Our membership on the steering committee of Detroit's Regional Housing Partnership is a recognition of our success and positions us to have a wider influence in terms of improving the city's housing ecosystem.

Youth Engagement: DREAM engages local youth through educational programs and mentorship to foster a sense of hope and opportunity among them. Through the Dream Storytelling Project, nearly 20 youth from our local Muslim community have been trained in ethnographic interviewing and the basics of filmography. Another 25 have participated in DREAM's summer internships over the last five years, along with hundreds who have joined us for volunteer activities.

Economic Development: On the path to reinvigorating our local main street, once a thriving commercial corridor, DREAM has trained 105 aspiring entrepreneurs and hosted a local Muslim business directory. We've worked with local community members, academics, and students to create a viable strategic framework for economic development in our neighborhood, and we are on the cusp of building the area's first new commercial property in three decades.

Community Organizing: DREAM has been instrumental in organizing and advocating for policy changes at the city and state levels that keep more Detroiters in their homes and promote equitable development in affordable housing. As a leading member of Detroit's Coalition for Property Tax Justice, we have helped homeowners access resources to avoid property tax foreclosure, conducted faith-based outreach to spread awareness about the insidious effects of over-taxation and foreclosure, and hosted town halls with hundreds of attendees to put public pressure on our City Council for ordinances that will provide compensation to Detroiters who have lost their homes – homes that sometimes had been in their families for generations.

Lessons for Community Development

Over the next 35 years, the American population will grow by 110 million people, and nearly 100 percent of that growth will be in cities, as opposed to suburban or rural America. Our task, if we are to remain relevant to society at large, is to create viable, urban, multi-ethnic, Muslim-led, and values-based communities. And in Detroit, the city with more Muslim history than perhaps any other in the United States, we're gaining momentum (Gomez 2015).

DREAM's success lies in its community-driven approach. By actively involving residents in decision-making processes through the local community association, city-initiated meetings, and community events, our initiatives can ensure that development aligns with the needs and aspirations of the people it serves. This not only empowers the community, but also fosters a sense of ownership. Whether residents have been living in the area since the 1950s like my neighbor Ms. Helen, or are newer residents like Sister Malukah, everyone feels comfortable enough to have a say in how they want their community to look.

Holistic Development: DREAM's multifaceted approach demonstrates the importance of addressing various aspects of the city's blight simultaneously. Housing, economic opportunities, education, and environmental sustainability are interconnected components of a thriving community. Comprehensive strategies can lead to more sustainable and impactful outcomes.

Partnerships and Collaboration: DREAM's ability to form partnerships with local organizations, academic institutions, and government agencies has been crucial to its success. Collaboration can amplify the impact of city renewal efforts and bring together diverse resources and expertise. We have worked with a number of organizational partners, among them the HUDA Clinic, Muslim Center Detroit, the Detroit Repertory Theatre, ProsperUs Detroit, the Indus Detroit Artist Residency, Hope Village Revitalization, the Coalition for Property Tax Justice, and the Live Free Coalition. In total, we have worked with nearly 30 partners over the last 10 years.

Sustainability: Incorporating sustainable practices into the neighborhood development not only benefits the environment, but also ensures the long-term viability of revitalized neighborhoods. Strategies like green infrastructure, energy efficiency, and waste reduction can enhance the resilience of communities. As a form of *sadaqah* to the local mosque, DREAM staff applied for and received a Sacred Spaces Clean Energy Grant from the State of Michigan for the mosque to make energy efficient improvements. Congregational gains for the mosque will include motion-sensor lighting, low-flow water fixtures, upgraded HVAC systems, new windows, increased insulation, and weatherization efforts that will save the masjid hundreds of thousands of dollars in the long-term (Poirier 2023).

Equity and Inclusion: DREAM's commitment to equity and inclusion is helping address historical disparities within Detroit. City renewal initiatives must prioritize the

needs of marginalized communities to achieve true transformation. Ensuring that development benefits all residents, regardless of their background or socioeconomic status, is fundamental to promoting social justice. We have been highly intentional about organizing our neighbors and connecting them to the mayor's office, Department of Neighborhoods, and local city council districts to ensure that our neighborhood's distinct needs are addressed.

Challenges and Future Directions

While Dream of Detroit has made significant strides, it faces ongoing challenges and opportunities for further growth:

Funding: Like many community-driven initiatives, DREAM relies on grants, donations, and partnerships for funding. Ensuring long-term financial sustainability remains a challenge, especially in this era of economic uncertainty. As a community development organization, we have to chart new ground when working with most community development financial institutions to implement sharia-compliant lending options so we can take our work to scale and provide a framework and model for other Muslim-led community development initiatives.

Gentrification: Widespread displacement has already occurred across Detroit as a result of property tax foreclosures and challenging economic conditions (Moore et al. 2022). Now, as neighborhoods within DREAM's impact area improve, there is a risk of gentrification further displacing longtime residents. DREAM must continue to balance development with inclusion, ensuring that current residents benefit from ongoing improvements and that future residents always have access to affordable housing options.

Scalability: Expanding the impact of DREAM's model to other disinvested neighborhoods in Detroit could prove challenging due to each community's unique context. But it is not impossible. Lessons learned from DREAM's experiences can be adapted to fit other settings, and adapting best practices could help different communities flourish.

Policy Advocacy: Advocating for policy changes at the local and state levels requires an ongoing effort. DREAM must continue to engage with policymakers to create a more supportive environment for equitable development. Policy changes are often crucial for sustainable, large-scale transformation.

Conclusion

As Muslims, we understand that community development is a long and oftentimes arduous process. The da'wah of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) took 23 years, and during that time so much happened. From the slow and secret conversions to a physical migration due to economic sanctions and hardships – all had to take place for the Muslims to go from surviving in Makkah to thriving in Madinah.

Today, everything is expected to be done by the time the next TikTok reel loads or your Instagram feed refreshes. This sort of instapot expectation of social change and community development is not effective and, dare I say, is actually detrimental. People's lives and livelihoods are on the line, both at present and generationally. At Dream of Detroit, two of the core values are accountability and being spiritually grounded. DREAM defines the value of accountability as "We hold each other accountable to a high standard in our work and interactions, and we honor our responsibility to the community around us," while being spiritually grounded is defined as "We root our work in sincere service to the Divine and we work in ethical and faith-inspired partnerships to drive our progress forward" (Crain 2021).

I imagine a Muslim-led community based on actively emulating prophetic honesty and compassion, one in which residents are empowered through community organizing, cooperative economics, access to quality education, and local food sourcing regardless of ethnicity, class, or religion. A community in which a flourishing free health clinic serves the uninsured and a well-established mosque sits as the spiritual anchor of the neighborhood. A community in which neighbors benefit from one another's experiences and knowledge, and in which an immigrant mother is mentored through navigating the American health system while teaching an indigenous mother homeopathic remedies from her own country. And, as I reflect on those desires, I'm thankful to be a part of DREAM, an initiative working toward building such a place.

As DREAM continues to evolve and inspire, we are demonstrating how communities can come together to transform their neighborhoods and build a brighter future for all residents. More than just rehabbing homes around a mosque, we're executing a comprehensive community development strategy to make a lasting difference for local Muslims and all of our neighbors. In a city known for its resilience, Dream of Detroit stands as a beacon of progress and possibility.

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