



# Optimizing Community

## THE EVOLUTION OF CONTEXT AS SHARED BY DELL GINES

Author: **Paulo Gregory**



DIVERSITY



EQUITY



INCLUSION

*The Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation asked over a dozen ecosystem builders to watch, recap, and share their thinking on the Firestarter talks from the past three ESHIP Summits. This article is part of a series that supports the Kauffman Foundation's ongoing efforts to grow entrepreneurship and explore new models of economic development by elevating the work of ecosystem builders.*

*These talks were intended to inspire conversation and drive engagement in key themes in the field of entrepreneurial ecosystem building.*

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### Summary

Dell Gines is a senior community development advisor from the Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas City who focuses on innovative economic development strategies to help support economically challenged rural and urban communities. At the 2019 ESHIP Summit, he shared the history of economic development models, proposing inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem building as a new approach to economic development. Gines encouraged the audience to take the 7 ESHIP Goals and look for opportunities to create value and wealth at the local level, based upon communities' ability to conceive, believe, and ultimately produce value.

There is no question. Ascendent Cultures, those not reflective of the dominant narrative, are the target of relentless undermining (and over-mining) of the incredible resources these communities bring – from Omaha, Nebraska, to Baltimore, Maryland, the pattern is the same.

Now let's get this straight. Dell Gines is a black man, looking slick as extra virgin olive oil, from his suit to his shoes, working for the Federal Reserve, *and* speaking truth made digestible with drops of humor. As a black man myself – this was a unique experience to witness. This is why I love the ESHIP Summit. The genius of those making the decisions to break up the rigid tendons of our expectations of what the world is, to create room for what could be, is the essence of Dell's message – and the essence of Dell himself.



[View the full Firestarter](#)

## A Tale of Two Cities

Omaha, Nebraska, was a growing and thriving metropolitan area with a population of nearly 1 million – with a concentrated population of 13% African Americans. According to a 2007 Pew Research Center report, *Poverty Amidst Prosperity*, “Omaha had the number one childhood poverty rate in the nation for African Americans and number three adult poverty rate for African Americans.”

Dell describes Omaha as a Tale of Two Cities – making the point that this tale is not limited to Omaha. These same words have been used to describe my own town of Baltimore, Maryland, where you can literally drive under a bridge and feel like you have entered a different world.

“The question becomes, if a city like Omaha can be as astoundingly awesome as it is at the macro level, with so many billionaires, so many Fortune 500 companies, all of this energy around it, how in the world can you have 13% of the population in abject poverty?” Gines asks. “It is an economic development problem that requires new approaches to economic development. As ecosystem builders, you are the evolution of economic development ... you are doing something in a way that has never been done before for people who have never been included in that process – and that’s power – you are the evolution.”

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## The Next Wave: Reinventing the Economy

Gines goes on to describe what he calls the four waves of economic development, beginning in the 1930s with *Industrial Recruitment*, aimed at reducing the cost of doing business through recruitment of firms to entice relocation, and reminds us that this is still the dominant way of doing economic development. In the 1980s, *Entrepreneurial Strategies* were engaged to support small business development. The 90s brought about *Cluster Based Economic Development*, focused on the economic development environment and context for large firms to create competitive advantage. None of these strategies have had a positive impact on the wealth gap or equality for people of color in the U.S. Dell posits that it is the wave in which we are offering something new that can change the game. The 2010s have evolved to focus on inclusive *Entrepreneurship Ecosystems*, prioritizing a nutrient rich environment to support entrepreneurs to start and scale companies. Gines reminds us what makes ecosystem building so unique: “You are creatives, you are innovatives, you are decentralizing wealth, you are giving opportunity for others to innovate and create economic mobility for themselves, you are revitalizing economies based upon how entrepreneurs can produce wealth at the local level.” Fundamentally, entrepreneurial ecosystem builders are reinventing the capacity of community, to create sustainable change.

## The Core Ingredient to Sustainable Change

An exhibit put on by the ESHIP Community initiative at Baltimore’s main library explored the systemic perpetration of disenfranchisement of the black community in Baltimore, through strategic redlining of resources and power. The final panel of the exhibition focused on reinvesting, stating, “We need to re-invest in communities that have been devalued and the target of wealth destruction.”

The center of this panel said, “Ecosystem building is the opposite of redlining.” But many tools intended to allegedly help communities can be used to further disenfranchise them through the same methods that were employed through redlining. Opportunity Zones are the next trojan horse for gentrification unless activation of inclusive ecosystem development, and aligning policies with the protection of community wealth, are deployed.

“If we don’t bake [diversity and inclusion] into the recipe of ecosystem building, what you will do is reinforce the good old boy network that occurred in corporations in the 1980s and in the ecosystem world in the 2010s,” Gines says. “When you do that, what you will actually do is reverse the power of ecosystem building. You will keep the power with a very narrow group of people, who by and large, already have the money.”



[View the full Firestarter](#)

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As Victor Hwang said at a previous ESHIP Summit,

**“We have to eliminate geographic bias, personal bias, identity bias, all of these different biases.”**

“The problem is that we have so many under optimized entrepreneurs,” Gines says. “Inclusivity is not just about listening and then creating programs for inclusion in your ecosystem. It is also about allowing representatives from the groups you are working with a seat at the table in decision making, program design, and strategy ... We want you to do the best, but we want you to do it in the right way. Take the seven frameworks seriously, socialize around those, build the field, and go forth and do great work, because we are there to backstop and support you at every level of the way.”

### A New Lens, a Long Sustainable View

Programs and places have been struggling with how to be inclusive. This is the wrong question – it implies the status quo. In my more than 30 years of working to support the economic standards of black neighborhoods in Baltimore, I can agree – Dell’s got it right. When we focus on inclusion, it implies that “others” are being asked to join existing, rigged tables that have at the head the existing dominant culture. They function with the same rule-set that created the problem, and one which ignores the indigenous wisdom that arguably holds the solution for not only Baltimore and Omaha, but for communities of color throughout the country. The ESHIP Communities initiative being piloted through the Kauffman Foundation is enabling communities to experiment with different models of seeding economic change through ecosystem development.

In Baltimore, we are taking Gines’ words seriously, and have initiated an effort focusing on economic development for the black community, utilizing a framework that begins with largely black leadership alongside white co-collaborators. The people at the table are different, the table is different – and it feels different. There is a level of honesty that is rare in such initiatives, and relationship development is at the heart of the solution-making. We are utilizing tools such as [Cohado](#), with roots in African culture, as support for guiding the work. Most importantly, the folks at the table recognize the genius of adaptation, invention, and innovation that innately looks to the community as the reason for being. This is the heart of the black community, and these are the greatest assets of the entrepreneur of the future. Creating assets and eliminating waste through collaborative innovation to evolve true community – this is [Cohado](#) in action.



**Bio:** Paulo is the inventor of [Cohado](#), an Afro-futurist, collaborative tool for reimagining systems and relationships to generate abundant and sustainable solutions. He is a designer, facilitator, and community builder with extensive experience designing, facilitating, and advancing collaborative planning and transformation initiatives. He also developed the Cohado Strategic Design process that is implemented with individuals and groups desiring to initiate quantum changes personally, within communities and workplaces, and on both sides of the prison walls.

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