



THE
KENDEDA FUND

Southeast Sustainability

Lessons Learned

Transformative Leaders + Transformative Ideas



Scaling Climate and Equity in the American South

There is a growing coalition of nonprofit sustainability practitioners rooted in communities in the American South. With the technical capacity to take national best practices and translate them for Southern policy makers, homeowners, design and construction professionals, **these leaders have what it takes to achieve the sustainability results the region needs.**

These organizations have unparalleled instincts for meeting communities where they are and driving forward ambitious and feasible progress. They have racially and culturally diverse staff and board leadership and often partner with frontline organizations working on equity and environmental justice. They are operating on a shoestring and leveraging volunteer resources and individual donations. They have well-rounded menus of ideas and yet must cope with a regional deficit of philanthropy, government and utility support. But that's never stopped them.

If you're looking for bleeding-edge sustainability solutions, their approaches may not be for you. If you want an expensively calculated Southern strategy, you're missing the point. If you believe state-based policy and regulation is all that is needed to "bring the South along," your theory isn't based in our reality.

Our reality is deeply rooted in our communities. We move at the speed of trust. Rather than waiting for an invite, we show up at the front porch with a casserole. It's having mud on our boots and yet knowing when to wear a suit and heels. Those interested in transformative change have a massive opportunity to get ahead of the growth coming to the South by partnering with these local practitioners. They hold the key to unlocking scalable impact in this region.

As our spend-out was drawing near, the Kendeda Fund convened a select group of these sustainability practitioners to glean their knowledge on scaling climate and equity solutions in the South. We also invited several additional thought leaders: the leadership of the Southeast

Sustainability Directors Network and the executive director of the Kendeda Building for Innovative Sustainable Design. We were most fortunate to have Maggie Ullman, a respected regional voice, facilitate our conversations and distill them in this report.

Our goal was to help position these groups for success after Kendeda's sunset in 2023. These sustainability leaders felt that greater collaboration — both within their existing programs as well as on regional initiatives — could help address pressing sustainability, climate and equity challenges. This report captures some of their wisdom.

Dennis Creech

Fund Advisor, The Kendeda Fund

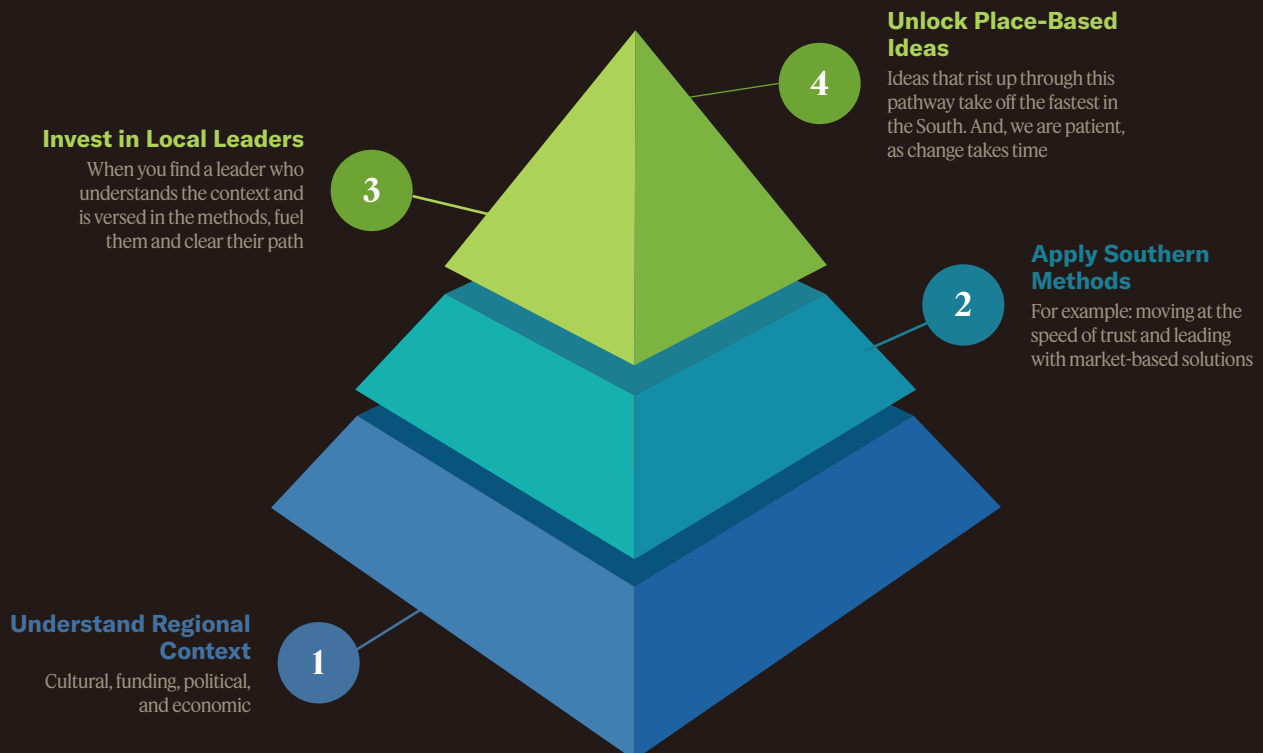


Impact Pathway in the American South

Since The Kendeda Fund started the Southeast¹ Sustainability Program in 2016, we've focused on supporting transformative leaders and ideas at the intersection of equity and sustainability, especially in the areas of energy and climate. In simpler terms, we focused on making buildings and communities healthy for people and the planet.

We did this through trust-based philanthropy and understanding that driving change can be different in the American South. We learned from and with our grantees a theory of change that includes understanding the regional context, applying sometimes uniquely Southern methods and investing in local leaders to unlock place-based innovation.

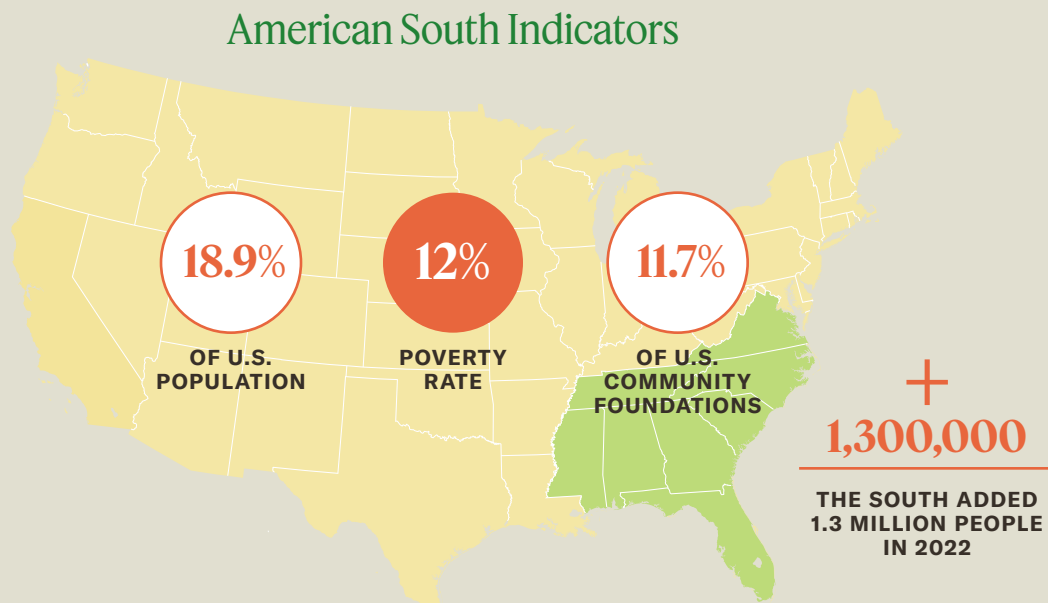
Impact Pathway in the American South



Understanding the Regional Context

Some policymakers in our region are climate deniers. We also have regressive utilities with strong influence over policy and regulation. These realities can slow progress and challenge communities who are interested in advancing sustainability. At the same time, ours is the fastest-growing region in the country, with an increase of 1.3 million people in 2022 alone.² Our cities are becoming more dense, yet urban sprawl continues. With the rapid pace of new construction, there's greater demand for energy and water, and a growing burden on existing infrastructure.

Many Southern communities have inadequate and/or low-quality housing stock, a challenge that contributes to high energy burdens. Additionally, all the states in the region have at least a 12% poverty rate³ stemming from generational wealth gaps, systemic inequity and racism. While Southern states represent 18.9% of the U.S. population, the region hosts only 11.7% of the country's community foundations,⁴ a telling indicator of an overall lack of community wealth. These and other challenges are a part of our Southern story, to be sure. But they do not paint the entire picture. **The South is much more than the sum of its parts.**



Learning Southern Methods to Drive Change

When investing in this region, it is essential to understand that strategies from other regions don't easily copy and paste into the South. How impact is achieved here is often just as important as what is being achieved. Below are five effective approaches we have seen unlock significant change in the South and stories of transformative leaders using them. The sidebars offer insight into each method and examples from the work happening on the ground.

- **Move at the speed of trust**
- **Lead with market-based incentives**
- **Seek partners with place-based relationships**
- **Seek out people who multi-solve**
- **Listen to the storytellers, and help share their stories**

Move at the speed of trust.

When moving at the speed of trust, relationships between people become the center of the work and the center of the goal. Approaches that prioritize outcomes above all, on the other hand, make trust-building difficult. The result is often one step forward, and 20 steps back.

The following principles of trust-based philanthropy (loosely paraphrased) have served as helpful guideposts for Kendeda's grantmaking and as critical methods our grantees use to make change:

- **Prioritize the quality of relationships and honor the treatment of others** on the path to winning as much as the act of winning itself
- **Center equity, humility, and transparency**
- **Recognize power imbalances**, and actively work to rebalance them⁵

Trust leads to greener Community Benefits Agreement

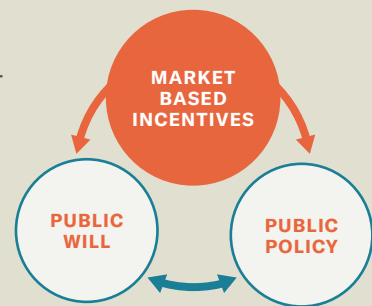


Based in Chattanooga, **green|spaces** embodies “moving at the speed of trust” by building and leading their programs with local communities most impacted by climate change. One outcome of this co-creation process is their **Empower Program**, which provides free classes for residents to learn no-cost and low cost ways to reduce utility bills. green|spaces has helped more than 3,000 people, resulting in 5-25% average cost savings on electric bills.

The trusting relationships created through these programs have resulted in community leaders inviting green|spaces into other community-led efforts as well. For example, the Chattanoogaans in Action for Love, Equality and Benevolence (CALEB) coalition is negotiating a Community Benefit Agreement (CBA) with the city and the developer for the South Broad Stadium. CALEB has invited green|spaces into the coalition to lead the sustainability elements of that negotiation.

Lead with market-based incentives.

Creating change for a better world involves an interplay of market-based solutions, public policy and public will. We’ve found that starting with market-based incentives can greatly inform both public will and public policy.



In communities with deeply ingrained resource scarcity and systemic underinvestment methods, leveraging cost savings and financial benefits is essential. Money crosses political and cultural boundaries. It can be used to influence public will and spur unusual alliances among policy makers. Two effective market-based incentives we’ve seen take off in this region are green building certifications and partnering with nonprofits to green their facilities.

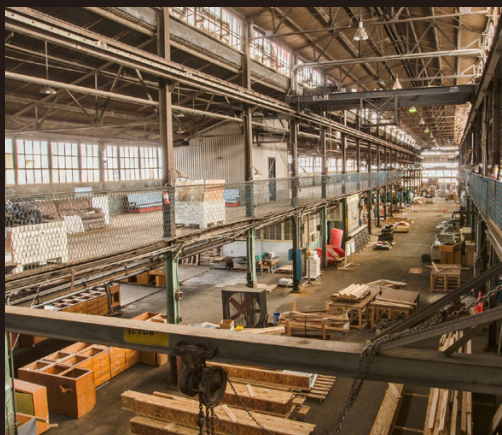
Green building certifications: Trust but verify



Southface Institute worked with the Georgia Department of Community Affairs to develop and pilot green housing criteria for affordable multifamily housing. The pilot was successful and the state provided modest incentives for green developments. Southface also developed the **EarthCraft program**, which over the past decade has certified more than 20,000 affordable housing units, and more than 50,000 market-rate units. The **Green Built Homes**

program of the Asheville-based **Green Built Alliance** has certified some 2,900 homes. And the **RISES program** from the Charleston-based **Sustainability Institute** has certified more than 1.3 million square feet of commercial space.

Greening nonprofit facilities while saving money for their missions



In metro Atlanta, the **Lifecycle Building Center nonprofit materials grant program** helps nonprofits reduce construction costs through reusable building materials. LBC has donated more than \$1 million in construction materials through some 250 material grants. When nonprofits spend less of their resources on building materials, they can direct more dollars toward the delivery of programs and services benefiting the community.

The **Southface GoodUse** program is a similar model, with energy and water efficiency as the target. GoodUse helps nonprofits reduce utility costs and reinvest those savings into their programs. By reducing operating costs, GoodUse builds capacity within partner organizations so they can focus on their mission and better serve their communities. What started in metro Atlanta with a handful of projects has since expanded across 29 states, saving 500+ nonprofits more than \$25 million in utility costs.

Scaling placed-based relationships



The [Southeast Sustainability Directors Network](#) (SSDN) brings together staff from 115 cities and counties to collaborate on municipal sustainability solutions. These practitioners are highly networked within their local and state communities and have insight on the pulse of possibility. SSDN possesses a collective intelligence that allows their collaborations to have deep impact. In 2022, SSDN members formally intervened in the North Carolina Utilities

Commission Carbon Plan proceeding, which will influence the energy mix in the state for decades to come. In Georgia, SSDN members formally intervened in two Public Utilities Commission proceedings. These efforts represent the first times cities have intervened in electric utility proceedings for the purpose of environmental sustainability in this region. By building this capacity and collective voice with place-based relationships, SSDN is establishing a potential for influence previously unseen in the South.

Seek partners with place-based relationships.

Our most impactful grantees have robust local networks rooted in deep, trusting relationships — a critical asset for any organization working to advance change at the community level. Strong networks make it easier for them to source ideas and skills locally, avoiding the need to depend on outside “experts” who often lack relevant regional context.

Solve multiple problems at once

The South’s cultural, philanthropic, political and economic context is unique, and the ideas that gain the greatest traction tend to be rooted in creative problem solving. Often, when complex challenges emerge, resource scarcity drives leaders to explore unconventional approaches

Creativity blossoms in community-based partnerships.



The Sustainability Institute tapped the federal AmeriCorps program for resources to develop their workforce development program for at-risk young adults called the **Environmental Conservation Corps**. Corps members, many of whom come from the same communities being served, receive training, life-skills coaching and real-world experience doing habitat restoration and green infrastructure improvements. Based on this success, the

Sustainability Institute helped mentor green|spaces on the development of an AmeriCorps program in Chattanooga.

The Green Built Alliance (GBA) developed a **volunteer-based weatherization program** for low-income homes. Its volunteers are trained and work closely with Building Performance Institute- accredited staff to perform basic, but effective, weatherization techniques. To date, the program has relied on 115,000 volunteer hours to weatherize more than 1,000 homes, saving homeowners an average of \$195 per year. This program has accessed local government ARPA funding to provide no-cost heating repairs and upgrades and photovoltaic (solar) systems for low income clients. GBA also provides home repair for some clients with local foundation support.

and creative collaborations. Pursuing ideas at the intersection of equity and sustainability, for instance, demands organizations to navigate a multitude of cultural barriers and resist business as usual. The “multi-solvers” have creativity, endurance and navigational skills to address interconnected issues simultaneously.

Impactful storytelling has many voices



The Kendeda Building for Innovative Sustainable

Design at Georgia Tech is the 28th building in the world to earn Living Building Challenge (LBC) certification, the world's most ambitious and holistic green building achievement. The Kendeda Building fosters regenerative and restorative relationships among humans and nature, while surpassing building-performance expectations even in the demanding Southeast climate. Campus champions

have embraced creative storytelling to engage non-technical audiences and amplify the building's remarkable mission among a wider set of stakeholders. In addition, the Kendeda Building prioritizes reaching beyond the "green choir," such as hosting Friday prayers for a Muslim association. Through thousands of virtual and in-person tours, fellowships, and deep integration into Tech's curriculum, storytelling is a critical component for amplification.

A beloved program of the Southeast Sustainability Directors Network is the **GreenMinds Podcast**. Episodes like **Integrated Resource Plans and Why They Matter** and **Urban Tree Canopy** help educate sustainability directors as well as local elected officials. This type of peer-to-peer storytelling fosters trust and collaboration.

Listen to the storytellers.

Every industry has its own language. Regrettably, all too often grant makers expect grant seekers to speak the coded, analytic jargon of philanthropy in order to access vital resources. While there is a time and a place for think-tank reports and academic analysis, successful organizations need to make sure this isn't the only language they speak, lest they risk overlooking sharp strategies for making change in this region. Often the deepest knowledge and keenest insights come in the form of stories. Listening to stories is a critical way to build trust, learn, and grow.

Invest In Local Leaders to Unlock their Place-Based Ideas

The following stories, shared by some of the Kendeda Fund's SE Sustainability grantee partners and told in their own words, reveal the importance of investing in local leaders and unlocking their place-based ideas.



green|spaces — Chattanooga, TN

The **Build It Green** program prepares young adults from underserved neighborhoods for careers in construction and energy service through workforce development training. The BIG program has a 90% graduation and 80% placement rate. One member, Dexter, was a young adult who was justice-involved and headed down the wrong path. One day he drove a friend to a meeting with Build It Green. He decided to stay and find out more about the program. Fast-forward, Dexter became a graduate of the program's first cohort and returned for a second term as a team leader. Recently, he was asked to present the BIG program to session court judges and the District Attorney.



Green Built Alliance — Asheville, NC

At Energy Savers Network, we are on a mission to transform the lives of limited-income families in Western North Carolina by mobilizing volunteers to install energy-efficiency measures in their homes. Through comprehensive energy assessments and weatherization assistance, including installing interior storm window inserts, insulating water heaters, replacing furnace filters and switching out energy-consuming light bulbs, our passionate and skilled team of volunteers and staff is helping to lower the energy burden of some of our most vulnerable communities. One example of the lives that are impacted by this program is from a family who lives in a mobile home where the furnace is located at one end of the house. This design made the primary room very hot, while the rooms where the kids sleep always stayed very cold. Due to the unbearable conditions, they typically relocated all of the kids to the primary bedroom for the winter season. But after the work of our crew, her kids' bedrooms are warm and her bedroom is no longer hot. Through this weatherization work we reduced this family's air leakage in the home by over 30%. [Website](#)



Lifecycle Building Center — Atlanta, GA

Lifecycle Building Center has served LMI communities through its Material Reuse Center in SW Atlanta by providing affordable construction materials, free educational programs and material recovery services. Two stories offer insight in the range and depth of our impact:

- LBC donated kitchen cabinets, doors and bathroom fixtures for two affordable homes on the Westside being renovated by Atlanta Land Trust and the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation. By using salvaged building materials, construction costs were significantly reduced, making the units accessible to families at 40-50% AMI.
- In 2021, LBC collaborated with longtime partner Atlantic Capital Bank to construct garden boxes for seniors within the Grove Park community using reclaimed wood sourced from air freight companies and discarded lumber from TV/film sets. Many residents in Grove Park struggle with food insecurity, and the garden boxes are enabling seniors living on a fixed income to grow and cultivate their own fresh produce. This project also led to a new partnership with Grove Park Foundation to build 40 affordable housing units available at 40 to 50% area median income (AMI) by using salvaged building materials donated by LBC.

Since 2011, we have made 388 Nonprofit Material MATCH grant awards, \$5.3 million in community savings through free/discounted materials and 11.6M pounds of usable material diverted from landfills. In support of these initiatives, LBC formed the ReBuildATL coalition, which brings together residents, community-based organizations, academic institutions, industry leaders and government agencies to leverage our collective resources and co-design solutions that build a more restorative future for Atlanta's historically underinvested communities. [Website](#)



Southeast Sustainability Directors Network— 115 southern cities and counties

From 2017-2020, SSDN invested in local government and community partnerships in 17 communities across the Southeast leveraging more than \$4.9 million in Southeast Sustainability Community Fund (SSCF) funds to help communities mitigate and adapt to climate change. Those investments are already yielding dividends across the region. The common thread is one of learning through listening. Listening to community members, community leaders, implementation partners, and listening to what the outcomes are telling us. For example, one project with SEED and City of Knoxville focused on delivering weatherization and energy efficiency resources for struggling communities. They recognized that their success hinged on whether they'd done the front-end work of understanding how to best meet community needs. “We knew right from the beginning that the best outcomes would be achieved only if the communities we were trying to help were involved in the process,” said Brian Blackmon, Sustainability Director for the City of Knoxville. Through this program well-paired local governments and community organizations working in partnership make a bigger impact together by combining government grants and resources with community-based networks.

[Website](#)



The Sustainability Institute — Charleston, SC

The Sustainability Institute's Environmental Conservation Corps is working on a three-year project to restore tidal marsh in Ashleyville, formerly known as the town of Maryville. This once self-sustaining Black community was chartered and settled in 1886 and offered formerly enslaved people safe places to buy land, raise families and work in the Jim Crow era. The marsh was a special place to these families that, among other things, provided a source for both food and recreation. John Carr's family has lived there for generations — his grandfather served as one of the town's mayors before the SC General Assembly revoked its charter in 1936. He recalls, "We used to walk down the street at low tide and carry five gallon buckets and just catch crabs, and catch crabs and catch crabs — just like that." He often caught oysters in the marsh, too, and spent so much time swimming there that he said no one can trick him to "go back in that mud" again (McCray, Shamira. "Historic Maryville marsh damaged by drought getting new life with volunteers in the muck." Post and Courier [Charleston], Oct 10, 2022).

Today the marsh mostly sits as a tidal mudflat, partially due to a 4-year drought period between 2012-2016 and other environmental stressors common in urban environments. The goal of the project is to use nature-based solutions to restore the tidal marsh through activities such as community-based channel excavation, salt marsh restoration and construction of living shorelines (oyster reefs) which will ultimately protect the resilience of the Ashleyville community from coastal hazards as well as enhance 14 acres of habitat for commercially and recreationally important fish species. The Sustainability Institute Environmental Conservation Corps program will provide life-changing opportunities for service learning and job training for young people seeking conservation careers, particularly at-risk and economically disadvantaged young adults in the Maryville community. [Website](#)



Southface Institute—Atlanta, GA

Boys & Girls Clubs of the Ocoee Region (BGCO) is in Cooper Hill, TN, a once-thriving copper mining town that is now identified as a health-burdened area under Justice40, due largely to the devastating environmental footprint left over from mining operations. In the area, 48% of kids under 12 are living in poverty and 30% of students drop out of high school. A private funder has spent years cleaning up the area and recently donated an old 30,000 sq. ft. facility to BGCO. BGCO was awarded a Southface GoodUse grant this year to improve the facility's water and energy efficiency. Upgrades like these through the GoodUse program reduce energy bills 31% on average. Once the BGCO project is complete, local youth will gain a safe, inviting space filled with resources to help them reach their potential. That can be a game changer for students and the whole community.

Across the GoodUse portfolio, Southface has completed 545+ projects across 29 states since 2008. Annually, these nonprofits cumulatively save \$3.5M on utility costs. BGCO's GoodUse project is just one example of Southface's work. Whether advocating for environmental justice; ensuring access to affordable energy for our neighbors who face barriers to meeting basic needs; making efficiency and comfort standard in affordable housing units; endowing nonprofits with energy and water savings through building upgrades; training workers on 21st-century trade skills; or furthering clean transportation to improve mobility and cut carbon, Southface is committed to sustainable solutions that make a powerful impact on the communities we build together. [Website](#)



Kendeda Building for Innovative Sustainable Design — Atlanta, GA

Four years into its operation life, Georgia Tech's Kendeda Building is fulfilling its mission to inspire change in the building industry. But as the Building's director Shan Arora likes to say, "Inspiration is like a pile of waste. You can let it sit there and stink up the place. Or you can turn it into compost."

The good news is that inspirational compost is being made! Projects are moving forward thanks to engagement with The Kendeda Building. In 2021, Kendeda Building staff planned a two-day visit by a delegation from Henrico County, whose school system was contemplating a Living Building. There was peer-to-peer exchange and site visits to other sustainable infrastructure examples in Atlanta. Henrico County Public Schools is now moving forward with a [Living Building on their Wilton Farm site](#). Another example is Roswell Community Masjid (RCM) whose leadership was engaged by Shan Arora in early 2022 with the goal of guiding the congregation towards constructing the world's first Living Building house of worship. RCM is now advancing towards their "Living Mosque," which will have a global ripple effect once complete. [Website](#)



Footnotes

¹ The geographic boundaries of the American South are as hotly contested in academic circles as much as they are on front porches. For those who find state boundaries useful, consider our humble suggestion of Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Tennessee, North and South Carolina, Virginia and Florida.

² <https://thehill.com/changing-america/resilience/smart-cities/3785388-southern-states-grew-fastest-in-2022-census-data-shows/>

³ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/state-rankings/poverty-rate-by-state>

⁴ <https://cof.org/page/community-foundation-locator> and <https://www.census.gov/popclock>

⁵ <https://www.trustbasedphilanthropy.org/our-story>



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