

DISCOVERY - Ep. 18 (English)

[00:02:14] Hello and welcome to Discovery conversations about the power of the arts to connect us to each other into place. I'm Victoria Rogers, vice president of arts at the Knight Foundation. Joining me today as Cézanne Charles, designer, curator, researcher, co-founder and director of the design studio Roof of Two, and Olga Stella, vice president of Strategy and Communication at the College for Creative Studies and Executive Director of Design Core Detroit, a part of the college that works to position Detroit as a global source of creative talent. We want you to be an active participant today in the conversation. So if you have questions, please submit them through the show via Twitter using the hashtag Knight Live and in the comments section of the Facebook live stream. We'll get to as many of them as we can throughout the conversation. Cézanne and Olga are two design advocates who've been working on a number of projects, separate and collaboratively, that convey why inclusive design matters and what it looks like in practice Suzanne. And Olga, welcome to Discovery.

[00:03:20] For having us.

[00:03:23] So, ladies, let's start, OK? Could you begin with what it means to be the fact that Detroit is the only city in the US recognized as a UNESCO city of design?

[00:03:35] Absolutely. It is both an honor and a an opportunity for us. Five years ago, Detroit was selected and Cézanne was part of the application process for the designation, along with our prior executive director and our team. And what it really was, it was a recognition from our UNESCO colleagues that the way the design happens in Detroit and what it means is a special and unique and something that the rest of the world could learn more about.

[00:04:08] And we'll talk we'll be talking a little bit more about that today around what it means to try to practice design in an inclusive way. But that's what our colleagues from around the world wanted to to learn about and to see the way that the grassroots in Detroit really helped drive the design discussion. Not so much the grass tops.

[00:04:29] Gotcha. So all I mean says on.

[00:04:32] Title of our talk is designed as a verb know so many people, they think about design, you might think of one of those gorgeous old buildings or a new building. For me, it could be a really great pair of shoes that I really hope are going to be comfortable. Is there a little form and function in that shoe besides just being stunning?

[00:04:52] So what are some of the misconceptions that people have about design and what is design mean as a process?

[00:04:59] Yeah, so I would say that whether we're talking about those traditional aspects of fashion or garment building or even product design and development, they all sort of begin with this kind of listening process. And the way that designers might go about that looks differently, depending on the kind of industry or sector they're in. And they could be listening to the kind of consumer base by paying attention to sort of what they know in terms of market data, in terms of demand, in terms of past history. But there is this kind of foundational start to a project which is around. How are we listening to the people that we're trying to serve through our products or services or our buildings and environments or our technology. But I think where inclusive design and sort of design really thinking about

itself more as a verb rather than a noun goes is how do we sort of continue that listening all the way through? And then how do you actually encourage and empower users to sort of be the architects of that own sense making through the process? So I think it's more about then how do you carry that listening throughout and how does listening turn into engagement and accountability? And I think that's the kind of shift that we're seeing as we talk more about inclusive design and certainly design as a set of processes that are really supposed to be in a virtuous kind of feedback loop with the very people that you're designing with and for. And I think the biggest pivot is that designing with as opposed to just designing for.

[00:06:35] And that sort of goes beyond that term. I'm so used to is the design charrette where it's sometimes it's a one time it's here's the design. You get feedback sort of, but it's not necessarily an ongoing conversation about the process.

[00:06:54] Yeah, that's so true, I think that one of the things that's really hard is, is you have to think about and kind of explode your own design process to really think about where can you sort of be looking at opportunities for ongoing engagement. And those have real, like, timeline and budgetary constraints. And so not every design process will always be fit for kind of running a fully inclusive process. But unless we sort of check our assumptions that we have to run processes that don't have kind of the right kind of timing or budgeting or scheduling, that sort of earmarks inclusion as a principle. So how are we resourcing inclusion as a principle in our projects then? You do get kind of the sort of here's my design, here's this act of persuasion that I'm doing as a designer where we're in conversation. But I've already baked in a lot of assumptions already into the project at work.

[00:07:56] So, Olga, why do designers need other people to be involved in the design process? They're trained and we're getting to that now.

[00:08:04] They're trained professionals with a specialized knowledge. And this experience, why aren't they in the best position to design places and products and services for the rest of us?

[00:08:18] Well, I mean, we certainly at the College for Creative Studies believe in the value of design, education and just the specialized skills that are the designers have to be these kinds of creative problem solvers. But I think we all recognize that as humans we have limited points of view and that when citizens point, as we were talking about what it means to design as a verb, this idea of designing with people, of being engaged in relationships with people, that's a practice that also requires learning. And it's not necessarily the way that designers have work. Of course, there are leaders in the field who have been doing this. As I mentioned before, we have over 60 partners in the city of Detroit alone who have been practicing in different ways, many practices. But our educational institutions have not necessarily this kind of practice of designing with people still needs a lot of work and still needs to be institutionalized. There's still very much a kind of my point of view, my kind of bespoke creation view that a lot of designers have. And sometimes that's that is pushed by budget. It's pushed by the constraints that the designers presented with, whether it's time or the client's expectation or for many reasons. But I think what we have found and we're real proponents of the work that Kat Holmes has done in her book Mismatch, is this idea that when we work with others, when we start to break down this process and really engage the people who are typically most excluded from places, from products, from services, we're going to get better products with better customer engagement, bigger audiences we're going to reduce. Are the issues around

fixing things that go wrong later and we're going to be more innovative. And so this is this is a skill that that does have to be taught.

[00:10:28] And some institutions like this or really look at each other, but is not necessarily widespread through the field. I think one of the personal experience here in Miami, when I was working with the New World Symphony and we had Frank Gehry designing the building and we had W8 as the landscaper for around it, but we were the developer for city property. And how that's different when you're working that in a city space and public private property, but that they all impact us. But Andre Agassi said W8 was a master at really listening and incorporating people's thoughts. And I think they ended up with a really good, workable public space that was outside the front lawn of the building. But let's go let's think about some of the projects that the two of you are working on in Detroit.

[00:11:25] So, Olga, you recently released a design guide for real estate development was a guide.

[00:11:32] And why did you create it?

[00:11:34] Yeah, we this is the second in a series of design guides that design course produced the first one design the design guide for neighborhood business.

[00:11:43] And what we wanted to do with this is really it's not a guide that teaches design. It talked to this guy in particular is talking to real estate developers, especially emerging ones, folks who are trying to work in community about the design process and how to engage with designers.

[00:12:02] And I think one of the things that is special about this guy is what we try to do is pull, pull throughout in each part of each phase of the real estate development process to really try to make the case not just for why a designer is going to bring value to the project, but one more community engage practices will bring value to a private real estate project and try to give some practical tips for developers who are trying to work in different neighborhoods. So I think we're all as advocates for inclusion, equity are really committed to how can design help drive more equitable outcomes as we see real estate development happening in Detroit.

[00:12:47] And another one I was reading in one, I think it was from a speech that you had Gidding had given, but. Not so interested in the development of public space, and I know that one of those, the Wilson Junior Centennial Park Design and the Detroit Riverfront Conservancy, I mean, having enjoyed that and I just wonder if you could just talk a little bit about that, the process that was used or. How what's really important about designing a public space that works?

[00:13:20] Well, you want everyone to be able to participate in it, and it's hard to develop a public space that does that truly welcomes everyone if you don't involve people in the process. And what I love about what the Disturbia Conservancy did with the Centennial Park is they really they didn't just assume that the people that they were engaging had the full range, that they had access to all the experiences and information that would ultimately color their opinions. And so they they really invested in showing people examples of great public spaces and and engaging in a real dialog around what the elements of a great public space would work in Detroit would be, not by assuming that they had already had experiences, those spaces in their own neighborhoods. And I think that's that's a really important part of both tapping into the lived experience of residents and your customers

and people you're trying to engage with you and your audience, but also recognizing that there is an opportunity to broaden what those experiences are, too, and to have a deeper engagement around the content that way.

[00:14:35] The other one that really interested me in this same article was under the title of reforming the criminal justice system, but it was just a city innovation lab and the Detroit Justice Center convening national partners across fields law, design, technology, architecture and public health, which I think also reinforces your point that it's not just about the design of a building that's that's not design isn't limited to the designs of buildings, are those type of products. But when they looked at design alternatives for actually creating a youth detention center, just if if you either one of you could say something about that, about what what came out of that or what will come out of that that you think is really different, that would not have happened had there not been this focus on the approach of using exclusivity in the design.

[00:15:35] I think Amanda Alexander and the justice that is worth so I think reshaping what are possible visions of the future and involving young people and community members and thinking about what is what is a world look like if we have a completely different view of what justice looks like. And I think this is probably has a lot more to add on this. But I think just especially in the last year with the pandemic and everything, Amanda's voice and the voices of others involved in that project, I think have been really helpful in helping us challenge some of our assumptions about just the systems that we're all living and working in. And I think that is an important opportunity for designers to be engaged really by asking different questions they asked, they set the set of problems. The question that they're trying to solve for is not the question of how do we build a criminal justice center. It is really what is justice and what is justice.

[00:16:42] Oh, you got a I mean, Suzanne, do you have a comment you'd like to make in response to that one?

[00:16:48] Yeah, so the thing that I find, as Augie mentioned, really interesting about that project, is the way that it sort of assists to sort of reimagine a kind of reality, a kind of lived reality that we've inherited that often we feel disempowered to do anything about. And so really, that work feels very centered in the way that design can be a powerful force for both collective reimagining and sort of shaping more just and equitable futures. And then the idea that buildings and products and services and policies flow from that flow from that point and also the way that they have thought internally about then what that means as an organization, bringing in kind of artists and designers as residents into the heart of their work in the case they continually make as advocates for the for the idea that the construction of our environment does play a really vital, large role in our construction of sort of civil discourse and civil society. And so I think that that's really a powerful framing for what design can do in service of kind of other realms, other expertise, other other interests.

[00:18:05] Yeah, go ahead and build off of that. Then then you can look at specific products or digital interfaces or so I think. I think the way that that project has kind of questioned this reality in a set of assumptions that allows a lot of more detailed kind of work to happen for the specific things. And I think sometimes, you know, you asked is on like what is design and how are we thinking about? We often focus on those very specific things, like the building or the park or the uniform, whatever it is. But when you design as a verb, you're taking a step back from that.

[00:18:47] And I think you're really questioning what that whole context is. And that's where the engagement with the people who are often excluded, the people who don't get their voices heard, the people who don't get to be at the table or in the room. It's at that point where I think it's most important, because then the kind of design expertise of that trained professional in developing the product has flows from those those experiences and viewpoints in developing better a better website or product or place for four people.

[00:19:23] We're going to we're going to talk a little bit later about a project the two of you are working on, but so much of this is you have people that come out as architects and engineers and all of these other things that aren't necessarily trained in that or not necessarily as aware that you might want them to be. So what has to change, even with the training of people that are in design for for what you're talking about to be really successful?

[00:19:58] I think Suzanne should should take this one, because at the college, we've hired Suzanne and John Marshall, her partner of two, to help develop a new approach for us both as we think about our interface with the community, but also as we think about our faculty and students and staff and the kind of impact that we want the college to make in the future, both through design course, but as an educational institution. So turn over the design to that.

[00:20:27] Think so, so, yeah, we've been really excited to kind of dig in and think about how you sort of feel the idea of a basis of training or curriculum or professional development that in and of itself kind of practices what it preaches in terms of learning how to design with and through communities and residents that may not be coming with design expertise to the table, but come with a whole host and range of kind of expertise that, you know, that is vital for sort of getting the sort of problem framing problem definition or issue, definition and frame right at the start of a project. And so for us, that work has really been about how do you sort of understand some of this kind of tried and true ranges? Like as designers, we may not sort of think of ourselves as being like the most empowered or powerful person in a room. But quite frankly, when we sort of sort of find ourselves in a community, we sort of fail to sort of understand our sort of expertise, our sort of privilege, our own sort of power. And we don't appropriately negotiate or see that in ways that we should. And so what are the set of practices that have to sort of be strengthened in our discipline in order to sort of meet people where they're at and really understand what's vital about the kind of ways that we should be thinking about designing with others for sort of morcha or just and equitable, whether it's products or services or or communities. We have to really think about that. And so we've gone through almost a year long process now where we've been interviewing. We've been working with people, we've been running kind of workshops. We've been benchmarking and looking at kind of best practices from folks who are already kind of doing this, both kind of in a community saturated context as well as in sort of educational context, higher educational contexts and really trying to learn from the field. What are those practices that have found some success and then trying to think about how they can sort of help us operationalize the very things that we're starting to see from the scarcity of design partners in Detroit and others that are not partners in Detroit, who have always been working in this way. And so how do we sort of turn sort of that listening and learning back on ourselves to think about what are the things that in our discipline are quite frankly, problematic? Where do we have to stand up and hold up our hands and say that the discipline has run alongside of capital in ways that have been both pernicious and harming in communities of color across the country and in cities across the country and for sustainability and climate change across the country. Right. So there's a lot of sort of responsibility and accountability that we end up having to think about in terms

of the way that the discipline in sort of assuming its very neutrality has sort of perpetuated these harms. And so if you know that that's the context that communities meet you with, you have to sort of be first able to acknowledge that. I think so.

[00:23:44] We talk about we've got a question that relates to that. So this is from Peter. I don't know which city, but I know here in Miami we think about this a lot. How can design promote a healthier and more welcoming environment? So your last comment sort of touched on that. But what would you say in response to that?

[00:24:06] So my first response is trust is everything, you kind of can't move forward with any sort of design process unless you've established a basis of trust, and sometimes that means really acknowledging deeply harm. You have to sort of think about what may be trauma informed practices that need to sort of be embraced as kind of the start of that. And I think that builds a lot of the kind of capital you need with the with the communities you want to work in service with. And then from there, I think you can sort of start to articulate a vision, much like we touched on with kind of Amanda's work at DGC. Like you can start to really embrace a vision of what is right, what is safety, what is justice, how does that sort of give us the built environment that we deserve and need? How does that give us the kind of access to technology that we might need? How does that give us the kind of products and services and systems that we need? But I think unless you kind of start with that real level setting of where you've been as a discipline, what your own position is as a designer, and then sort of look to sort of build trust off of off of that, you can't really define what is a fully healthy system or city without those things.

[00:25:28] Can you have anything to add before we move on to.

[00:25:31] Yeah, I mean, I would just I think flowing from that kind of problem framing that is on line, like, what do you mean by a healthy, welcoming environment if it's in every single detail? I mean, ultimately what designers are doing is they're arranging parts and pieces to create these systems, places, products, so on. Right. And they have the creativity and the skills to figure out how to make these parts and pieces go together. But sometimes even like a thought, it's a typeface can signal something different to maybe a different cultural community, then to another one. And it is really about being extremely intentional. Every single decision, every single decision matters. And if you do it within the frame, if you properly set your problem, you have a really close view of what the context is. With all these voices at the table, you can make all of those decisions in a much better way.

[00:26:35] So a problem, not a problem, but a project. That is close to my heart anyway. Is this the opportunity to create sort of a for a formal cultural district in Detroit and the work that both of you have been doing on that, but especially a of two. But as we look at that cultural district in midtown Detroit, it's going to unify 13 cultural institutions across eighty six acres. But one of the first four phases of this was the digital inclusion. So, Susan, I wonder if you could talk about. Why the digital transformation matters in that particular district, how you're bringing community members into that conversation so it ends up being the results end up being inclusive and what those 13 participating arts and cultural organizations will learn and sort of these different tools that they'll have available to them for how they can engage and attract people, because at the end of this, it's all about informed, engaged communities and being incredibly inclusive in the solutions that we come up with to address the issues of today.

[00:27:56] Yeah, thank you so much. Yeah. The project is one that involves many stakeholders, many partners, many designers and institutions that are looking at both physical and landscape transformations in the city. And I think one of the things I always come back to is this idea, or especially the way that root of two thinks about this is the way that technology itself is actually physical. It is material. Right. So when we think about kind of play space space transformation, how are we thinking about the way that the built environment is a perfect opportunity to think about how are we including more people? And so one of the things that very early on, we sort of understood about the project and I think even more so after sort of the various lockdown's that the cultural insight for having to sort of pivot and deal with. But I think even before that, what we were hearing from them is the way that they were looking at how they wanted to engage with audiences both before the visit kind of and after the visit. And they think we sort of initially were thinking about that visitor journey right to the cultural center. How do you begin to help people before they've even actually encountered a place to sort of feel a part of a district in the center and the way that technology can empower that. And then as we began to really dove into the world where we have the benefit of having a city wide initiative called Connect three one three that has been looking at digital inclusion more broadly in the city. And so as we dug into the sort of data of what is inclusion look like across the city when 40 percent of homes are connected to the Internet or have a device, really, what does it mean to then understand that midtown, when we tend to think about Midtown as being gentrified and completely done and amenity rich and full of both cultural and educational institutions, what does it tell us when we find out that the data says that only 50 percent of people in that district are connected and have a device and have a data plan? And what do you mean by culture when you think about your public institutions, whether it's the desire or the public library or the history museum, who or the Charles H. Wright who are on the front line of telling us the vital stories we need to learn about ourselves at this moment in time and the way that they now have to reach us through the Internet in the way that they have to think about programing in their own business models and digital transformation as being delivered through the Internet. Right. And so I think for us, it became critically important to think what could we do in the next year over twenty, twenty one that would give us a vital way of connecting people. So the first was to work with Wayne State to extend their wireless and Wi-Fi systems so that we can offer free, publicly accessible outdoor Wi-Fi as a partnership with Rudy to Wayne State University in midtown Detroit, Inc. And then finally, how do we then set up a series of capacity building workshops, as well as test pilots of cultural interventions that the institutions themselves can design and run and get real time feedback with kind of members of the public through? And so we're excited about how that work is going to take place with community able to sort of engage in feedback and something that feels very real and very manifest that then can sort of look at what are the long term possibilities of technology within the district.

[00:31:40] I think it it's exciting for me, having walked it and having been in almost every one of those institutions, but how this access to digital can be used within that and what can be learned and how you protect data, all the things that are going to come out of eventually out of this project. And it can be a great, great test model for how to do something in the right way. So all that anywhere, ladies, we're almost out of time, as I knew we would be in a second. Anything else you would like to add?

[00:32:18] No. I mean, I'm just excited about just the opportunities that we have before us. I mean, and especially this is a really hard time in our country and in our city for many, many people. And what makes me excited is that there are so many committed designers and people working in a lot of really important ways, whether it's around voting rights or placemaking or entrepreneurship.

[00:32:50] And who are this question around? How do we do better? How do we include more people that there is that that the drumbeat to conversation has been going on for years. So it's definitely not new, but I feel less and less like it's a conversation that's going on only in certain corners. And while there's always a danger when things become kind of mainstream, that they'll become Vinnell. I think what I'm excited about we're working on we're working with Cézanne and others is that there's a I think, a greater commitment to solving some of these systematic challenges that we face in and really following the solutions through. And I just hope the people engage with us and and we're all on this learning journey together. So really looking forward to learning from others and from other experiences as we try to implement the training program through the next phase of our design competition, the month. All of this is happening. We want more engagement with more people who are really committed, I think, to this to this work.

[00:34:05] It is always fun to have conversations with the two of you.

[00:34:09] I like being your partners in some of these endeavors, but we are out of town. So for all of the folks online watching us, thank you for doing so special. Thanks to Olga and Cézanne and to our production crew for making this happen for us. The beat you heard at the top of the show were actually created by Chris Barr, our director of art and technology here at night. And the music that is going to play us out is composed and performed by the amazing jazz pianist Aaron Brown. But next up on January twenty, first on Knight Live is a session, an episode of Coast to Coast. And the title for that one is Building Prosperous Communities Through an Inclusive, Accessible. Entrepreneurship, so we hope to see you there again, January twenty, first one PM Eastern Standard Time. Have a great afternoon and thanks for joining us today.