



Reimagining and Redesigning Process and Equity Design with Marquise Stillwell Episode 6

ANTIONETTE: Welcome back to Reimagining & Redesigning with Antionette D. Carroll. I am excited to have our next guest here today. And, again, y'all are going to hear me say this every time because, you know, I really find a way to bring people that inspire me, that I consider good friends, good colleagues, individuals that I learn from, and we are able to really challenge each other. And the next guest is one of these individuals.

So, you know, we have Marquise Stillwell with us today. And y'all are in for a treat. There are so many folks in my life that I've met that I go, "So, how do you do all of that with 24 hours in a day? And teach me your way, Obi-Wan Kenobi." [laughter] And Marquise is one of those people. But as always, I never try to start with explaining who they are because I believe everyone has the right to define what's important to them and how they want to show up in a space. And so, Marquise, first, welcome. Excited to have you here.

MARQUISE: So excited to be here.

ANTIONETTE: Let's go ahead and jump in because I know people are excited to learn a lot from you and, honestly, think about how you are reimagining and redesigning different communities and systems in work. So, you actually are a true definition of doing that. And so, tell us a little bit about yourself. And what systems are you working to reimagine and redesign?

MARQUISE: My name is Marquise. I live in New York City but was born a Midwestern kid in Ohio, and so I'm still a Buckeye to my heart. For me, the work that I do both as a designer...I have a design and research firm up here in New York City. I have a film company. So, I have, you know, a few other entities that we may jump into as well.

But for me, I was born into this. I'm a pastor's kid, so the good, the bad of what that could mean as well. But I was born into helping community. My dad was over at Community Action and Head Start. And being in community and always thinking about others was something that I was raised, his mom, so my grandmother, and my grandparents, all of us. And growing

up in communities where if you needed a cup of sugar or to borrow the newspaper was just a way of life.

And I believe that there was always this path of sharing that was leading to this idea of equity. Being equal and trying to find that perfect moment, I think, is always a work in progress. But, for me, the things that I do today as a designer were born into me very early. And I just continued to live that life through the practice.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah, I love that idea of sharing into equity. I think you're the first person I ever heard put it that way, right? Because when we hear...some people talk about it as, like, more of the technical, when outcomes are not predictable based on people's identities. There's the, you know, the more nuanced one that makes people understand it a little bit more, which is giving people what they need when they need it. But, for you, it's through the lens of process.

MARQUISE: Yes. Yes.

ANTIONETTE: And I remember you gave me this quote, and I still put it in a lot of my presentations around how equity and justice are about process.

MARQUISE: Yes.

ANTIONETTE: Tell us a little bit about, like, how you view the process towards equity and justice.

MARQUISE: You have to think about it as a process, at least the way that I see it. Because if you wait till the outcomes and go, "Oh, did we do it?" It's too late. So, for me, equity begins with what people are you bringing together? You know, different thinking, different points of view. So, how are you building the teams? How are you building the language? And so, that's something that you have always done an amazing job. And I really appreciate being around you because you're always challenging language.

And so, for us, in our process, what we call day zero is language alignment. Because, as you know and you've always preached it, we all have different definitions. And those definitions could be based on time, moment, perspective, what the project entails. And so, for us, it's about language. It's about building the right team. And number one, to equity the process, it's about listening. I'm not the expert. And I want to make sure that our process begins with listening and being very open to feedback from individuals who may not, quote, have certain tools that we have as designers, but they definitely have insight of lived experience.

ANTIONETTE: For sure. So, I want you to explain to folks what do you mean by design and designer. Because, you know, I have been blowing that definition of going back to language for a long time, right? Some folks they're like, technical designers, oh, this person built a car, built a house, or you have clothing. But, you know, your work spans film. It spans research. It spans policy. And all of it is rooted, as you stated, in community. You've said designer multiple times now, and I want people to understand what you mean when you say you're a designer.

MARQUISE: One of the entities that we have that helps me to express that is Deem Journal. Deem Journal is a journal that was founded on the idea design as a social practice. And so, design as a place where anyone could come and bring in a lot of their thinking and their work. Because, for us, at the end of the day, design is about adding value.

So, as a designer, for me, my core definition is, are you adding value? So, design as a place where you add value, and through that process of adding value, there's this iteration of building on equity, building a system that allows individuals to come in. And, again, this idea of design as a social practice meaning that we're all coming together. We're providing that yes, and... moment, and we're providing those real moments of challenging, and it is a dialogue.

So, for us, that design, as a verb, is a way to continue to provide action towards opportunities, action towards creating better conditions. And so, for me, I'm a designer that believes in how I show up. How am I showing up to add value? If I walk into a room, I should actually help the room together to become better. And so, that's what our team is really at our core when I say I'm a designer.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah. What I find interesting is that when you were talking about equity, you talked about sharing. When you're sharing, you're adding something.

MARQUISE: Yes. Yes.

ANTIONETTE: Some folks sometimes they start sharing, and you're like, I don't know if you're adding value because I [laughter] --

MARQUISE: That's right. That's right.

ANTIONETTE: But they're adding something. When you think about sharing, sharing to equity, sharing is adding. It is giving us something. And, you know, you talked about design being around adding value.

MARQUISE: Yes.

ANTIONETTE: And I've always felt that equity and design were integrated, even though we never wanted to actively talk about it. And we see this now in the political landscape, where we want to attack anything that's trying to bring in diversity, inclusion, equity, and saying that they're just words to commit guilt against other communities, right?

MARQUISE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: But the reality is, either we're designing for equity, or we're perpetuating inequity, right? It's how, like, when you hear people say, "You can either be anti-racist, or you're perpetuating [laughs] racism," right? [laughs]

MARQUISE: That's right. That's right.

ANTIONETTE: Like, that's...it is not even not racist; it is anti-racist or perpetuating racism.

MARQUISE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: Because those are—and I'm going to bring in the science world—the control, right? In the research world, the control.

MARQUISE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: Have you intentionally, through your work, especially in the interdisciplinary nature of it, started to naturally, progressively see that these worlds go hand in hand, and that's why you went the direction of design?

MARQUISE: Absolutely. I felt like design, for me, was the tool that was just innate in my process. And I say that because design also, is a creative process, right? And so, there's this iterative approach to...and, again, just to break down the word creative, for me, it's about being open to different ways of approaching the same problem over and over again. And so, for us,

whether it's through film and storytelling, through writing, it could be through anything. It could be through sound. What does this problem actually require?

And sometimes, you come in, and you is like, all I have is a hammer. Like, well, I think this one right here, but you're like, well, no, that's all we have. To me, a designer, we create conditions for many types of tools and many types of approaches. And what's key to that is good listening, and I'd call it active and passive listening. There's passive listening, where there's a lot of observation. In our team, we go out, and we observe, and we just kind of just sit in communities, and we just listen. And we're a bit, like, just back. And then there's times where we're active.

But one key thing about being an active listener is I always ask the team, "Are you listening, or are you waiting to be heard?" And so, there is this place of inequality in the process when all you're doing is listening to be heard, right? And so, you can be a designer who will say, "I'm a good listener." But to your point a second ago, you're adding in negative value because you're just waiting to be heard. You're not listening, truly active listening, and being open to all the different shifts that you may feel physically because this work is physical. It's uncomfortable.

I mean, you and I are constantly in situations where it's like, ooh, like, okay, let me hold it, hold it, wait for it, wait for it [laughs] since you know what it's like. And you got to go, okay, stay open, stay open, stay open. Maybe they're going to get there. We'll wait for it. And so, it's very physical for us to have a level of patience. And so, for us, yes, it's about that active listening. It's about observing. It's really about making sure that every part of our process there's equity built in, and we're questioning when an inequality pops up.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah, I think this naturally progresses into your businesses and the work that you do. So, you know, first, you talked about your studio, at least high level, of Openbox being a design research firm, agency. And, obviously, it's expanded when you look at Deem Journal and storytelling through the lens of writing and visual arts. And you also have Opendox, which is looking into film and, you know, storytelling, looking at creativity, and art, and environment, and all of that. And we'll get to the other ones later. I don't want to overwhelm people [laughter].

When you look at those three entities, you know, what projects stand out for you that you believe are good, tactical examples of either proper way or more inclusive ways of doing research and storytelling and also getting towards that process of equity in itself?

MARQUISE: Yeah, I'll give you just quickly one, two, three, on all of them. So, for Openbox design, within the research process, you know, anything that we're doing it is about active listening and setting the language for how we're approaching it with every partner that we're working with. And so, we're currently working up in the Northeast on a project reimagining a museum, and it's a masterplan project for this very large museum. And for us, really helping to center individuals that voices are rarely heard in museums was key, right?

And so, you have, you know, BIPOC communities. You have indigenous communities. You have immigrant communities that don't always feel welcome walking into your traditional model of a museum. And museums, in many ways, are colonial artifacts. They're systems of really building out this colonial artifact of who we have been in this country for a very long time. And so, how do you unpack those things? So, it was really important for us to bring in voices and centering those voices around this project that weren't always represented.

The same thing on the film side. And so, we just released a film. This was not my own, Nellie Mae Rowe, who is a Black, self-taught artist out of the Atlanta, Georgia, area. This example is less about the story. I think the story itself speaks to a lot of what we're talking about.

But the process of filmmaking...I was co-directing it with my business partner, Petter Ringbom. And there's a piece within the film of animation. Through that process, I spent a lot of time making sure that Nellie, as she appeared on film in this character, was beautiful, was well represented. I spent hours looking at the color of her skin, hours looking at her hair texture, hours making sure the way that she moved was done with dignity. And so, you have to be very intentional about that. It's very rare to see an older, Black woman done well in an animation character with voice.

And there were moments where it could have gone the wrong way. And I had to stop, ask a lot of questions, get a lot of different points of view and individuals. And, "Hey, can you come look at this? What do you think?" And that process, again, equity and dignity go hand in hand, which is a nice move to Deem Journal, which, for us, our first issue was all about setting the tone with dignity.

And another good example of making sure that someone is presented in a way was our first issue with Adrienne Maree Brown, and really understanding and giving the breadth of her story. So, Deem Journal was founded on this idea of, from a journalistic standpoint, making sure we have long-form. Too many of us in this industry that are doing this work, individuals like yourself and [inaudible 14:56], you get put in these journals and magazines, but it's like,

these two paragraphs or a quote here and there. No one is doing long-form stories on our work.

And so, for us, dignity is allowing for breadth of understanding and depth of understanding and allowing us as designers, and architects, and creatives that are doing this work to truly express ourselves. And one key piece of the work that we do in Deem, also, is working closely with those individuals that we're interviewing and going back and forth to make sure that before the story is printed, does this represent you? How do you feel?

So, again, I go back to the process. It's all about the process. And process can be very invisible. The things I just described are probably things you would never know when you look at our work, or the film, or read a journal. You just go, oh, wow, this is amazing. Because we didn't wait till the product got to you to say, "Oh, this is done with equity."

It was the process and the approach of making sure that when we did photos with Adrienne Maree Brown...the photo on the cover was actually just this candid shot of her, a lot of the shots in the journal itself. There were some stage ones. But the ones that were just her were the ones that made it. And so, sometimes, you just have to trust the process to get to that place, to actually present itself, and then you go, oh wow, there is equity. That's what it should feel like.

ANTIONETTE: So much to unpack there. You know, I'm personally going to say—I know you will definitely do this—we need to go ahead and make some merchandise, all right? [laughter]

MARQUISE: Yes.

ANTIONETTE: That says, "Equity and dignity goes hand in hand."

MARQUISE: Yes. Yes.

ANTIONETTE: That's the merch [laughs].

MARQUISE: Yes. Yeah. No, people need to know. People need to know.

ANTIONETTE: Everywhere. And it reminds me of early Creative Reaction Lab. So, next year is our 10-year anniversary.

MARQUISE: Yay. I can't believe that. Congratulations

ANTIONETTE: Me neither. Look, COVID, I'm telling y'all, running a business during COVID --

MARQUISE: Yeah, it was rough.

ANTIONETTE: But early Creative Reaction Lab, I remember when we were going through essentially our second mission and vision statement, you know, because early Creative Reaction Lab it was around, like, creating for the human experience. I literally think that was the mission, creating for the human experience. Now, again, this is why I'm such a stickler on language now because back then, I was like, what does that even mean? Like, [laughter] it's just some floppy words on a page. What does it technically mean for us?

So, we started to go through this mission and vision statement process. And dignity was a huge, huge word when we started talking about our vision of what we were trying to do. Most people know Creative Reaction Lab is two sides; you know, it's either from our process of equity-centered community design and really changing the way people are addressing systemic oppression. Or you know it from our programmatic work with particularly Black and Latinx youth, sometimes indigenous, addressing issues around racial inequities and health inequities in our community.

And when we were coming up with a vision centering kind of the outcome of the youth work and our process, we very much was thinking about, how do we co-create a society that embraces the humanity, the dignity, the rights, and the power of Black and Latinx people, right?

MARQUISE: Right.

ANTIONETTE: And so, to hear you talk about, like, equity and dignity go hand in hand, it very much, I think, naturally came from our process. But I think it's the first time I heard it put so eloquently as you did. So, I want to thank you.

MARQUISE: Yeah, it's all good [crosstalk 18:42] [laughter] together.

ANTIONETTE: But I also heard you...you talk about process, but I also hear investment. I hear investment of resources. I hear investment of time. As you said, you took hours to think about how are we representing this individual?

MARQUISE: Yes.

ANTIONETTE: You have to think about, hey, like you said, I had candid shots that we took, and we had stage ones. Those stage ones probably took hours, just like the candid one.

MARQUISE: Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: And you were like, let's [inaudible 19:11] this because this is the story we want to tell.

MARQUISE: Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: What I see a lot in the work of equity, and I name this from the folks that are more the seasoned practitioners, to the people that want to do work and have interest in it but don't know where to start, is that some people don't recognize the time that it takes. And we've been talking a lot lately around how do we move at speed and not urgency? And when we talk about urgency, obviously, a tenet of White supremacy. You know, a lot of folks are like, "We should move at urgency." But then there are some communities that are saying, "We have been dealing with this for centuries."

MARQUISE: Yeah, contemplation is a privilege, and I don't think that people recognize that contemplation is a privilege. And when you travel the world, particularly in Europe, and you go whether to Rome, or to London, or to Paris, and you look at those buildings, and you look at those cathedrals, and you go, "Oh wow," you also have to understand that the individuals that built those over time had time, protection, money, support, space to do all those intricacies.

Like, could you imagine if Brown and Black folks we just had the time, that we didn't have to react to the next thing, you name it, whether it's climate, whether it's violence, whether it's, you know, social economics, whatever those things that we all deal with every day, and we're dealing with in our personal families? What if we had a couple of years without nothing else coming for us to contemplate how we want to see ourselves? Because there are lots of moments of self-induced inequality in the way that we see ourselves.

And if we could, in ourselves, step into a next level of dignity in how we see ourselves, I really believe that this question of equity really starts to, like, build to a place where the power of each individual, because of how they see themselves, washes away any question of the

inequality. Because, at the end of the day, I always say, I don't believe women want the same thing as men, just want to be left alone, just let us do our thing, right?

ANTIONETTE: [laughs] Yeah.

MARQUISE: So, when it comes to being equal, sometimes people get equity and inequality confused. And I go, nah, no, no, no, no, no, no, for me, I want the space. Equity, to me, is about can I have the space to do the work that I want to do without you, those who are trying to stop me, getting in the way? And can we build a process for how we create better conditions for equitable moments and that communities start to do it for themselves?

And we're doing that by making sure that the dignity of each individual is embedded in the work because contemplation is a privilege. And how can we create spaces that allow for Black joy, for Brown joy, for women joy? How can we do that? That's the number one goal that I want for the outcome of the work that we do is: I want to create joy.

ANTIONETTE: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and a lot of people do use equity and inequality interchangeably. Equality and I've said it many times, I'm like, equality is giving people equal access, where equity is equal outcomes.

MARQUISE: Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: Equal outcomes; that takes a variety of different things, right? [laughs]

MARQUISE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: Different...it's different for every person. To me, even when you were talking about [laughs] what I consider the balance...because I tell people all the time, I'm a realist, and I'm a futurist. I'm both, right? And people are like, "How... wait, tell me more. You [inaudible 23:04]" [laughter], right? I'm like, well, I'm a realist because I'm very mindful of the constructs and the systems that we're navigating today. But I'm also a futurist because, by nature of working in equity, we've never had it. So, I am imagining a world that doesn't exist, and it's going to take time. It's going to take investment. It's going to take a lot of personalization. There's some depth in that.

I do believe through the nature of me being a realist, usually, there's folks that are on opposite ends on the spectrum, and they think it's only that. Like, some folks, only name the system.

They say the system is the problem. Some folks only blame individuals and say, "Individuals are the problem." And I'm like, I am an in-between girl and saying --

MARQUISE: [laughs]

ANTIONETTE: There is individual accountability and responsibility, but there's also systems that are in play that impact how individuals navigate the world.

MARQUISE: Absolutely. Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: I grew up in economic poverty. I'm a Midwesterner, just like you. I'm still here. I haven't left yet [laughter]. But I'm still here. I am no longer at the economic level that I was growing up. And it took me years to overcome the limitations that I had placed on myself and systematically had placed upon me, what I have permission to do and not to do. To the point where I now have this mantra where I say sometimes, "Antionette, overcoming poverty of mind and poverty of spirit." Because, yes, I overcame financially, but all of the imposter syndrome, you know, there's fear. There's constraints, restrictions, limitations.

But there's times where I'm like, can I do this? I think by nature of being a designer in thought, and in process and by nature of being an equity futurist in thought and in process, you automatically have, I would argue, this permissionlessness mindset. You are really looking at the world and saying, "Anything is possible."

MARQUISE: Absolutely. Yeah, I've been playing with a very ugly word, but I call it opdimistic [SP]. You know, and people talk about optimistic as the definition of, I believe there's going to be a positive outcome, right? Where you know you have to be optimistic. You have to do. You can't just believe it's going to be so. You have to do the work.

And if you are thinking about the future, what work are you willing to put in? It's physical. And you and I every single day, you know, you go home, and you're like [vocalization]. You know, I was in meetings, and it's like, well, did you run? Did you run a mile? Like, no, I didn't run a mile, but I feel like I've run a mile, you know, [laughs].

ANTIONETTE: Oh, my husband and I have that conversation all the time [laughter]. He's like, I work physical. Your job's mental. Why are you so tired? I'm like, excuse me. [laughter]. I'm like, you have no idea how much work goes into mental work, especially if they are emotionally [inaudible 26:03] as well.

MARQUISE: Yeah, that's right.

ANTIONETTE: I want to take a pause for a second. I do this in the middle of all the interviews because I feel like we've had a good discussion, but I want to get us...because you talked about designing for joy, right? I want to get us to the point of not just talking about, you know, the different systems we're trying to change and different mechanisms of how we do that. We'll get back to that. I want to hear about what brings you joy. I want to hear what brings you closer to liberation or if you're already in your liberatory state. And so, this is what I call a liberation pause.

MARQUISE: All right.

ANTIONETTE: And I'm going to give you a variety of different topics. And then, I want you to...first thing that comes to mind. You don't have to fully process [laughs]. Please don't [laughs].

MARQUISE: All right, I'll go fast.

ANTIONETTE: What is a good representation of liberation for you when it comes to this category? So, the first one I'm going to give you: film.

MARQUISE: Seeing at the end, people ask better questions. I love pushing curiosity. And so, for me, film is a beautiful platform for pushing curiosity.

ANTIONETTE: Now, I'ma push you a bit. I'ma challenge you because I love seeing...I love how you see...you always having [inaudible 27:22] spiritual [inaudible 27:23]

MARQUISE: [laughs]

ANTIONETTE: Okay, because [inaudible 27:25]. I want you to technically tell me, what's a film that you pop in that gives you this sense of joy and liberation?

MARQUISE: [laughs]. So for me, I love laughter. So, I would say anything by, you know, someone like Eddie Murphy. I love laughter and joy. You know, like, any of Eddie Murphy's old films I watch over and over again.

ANTIONETTE: They are good. I grew up on 'em. My father had 'em all.

MARQUISE: Yeah. And just seeing a person as dark as I doing what he did through the times that I grew up and doing it with such swagger has always given me, like, this moment of joy, of that I can be represented, yeah.

ANTIONETTE: Yes. This makes more sense why you pay attention to color so much, right?
[laughs]

MARQUISE: Yes, yes.

ANTIONETTE: Like, you see it all connected.

MARQUISE: I see it, yes.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah. Give me a geographic location.

MARQUISE: Oh, New York City. I mean, it's the reason why I live here, just the proximity of luck and the proximity of the interactions. I love the fact that I could sit in a park by myself and no one really says anything, and I can relax. While at the same time, I can sit next to someone and have the most amazing conversation, and I may never see that person ever, ever again.

And then I like where there's these weird intersections where you'll see somebody, like, you and I could easily run into each other when you're there, and, like, oh, how did you know [inaudible 28:51] going to be on this block, right? So, there's this idea of the proximity of luck that is so beautiful in a city like New York.

ANTIONETTE: I love it. I took my husband to New York for the first time. Now he's obsessed with it.

MARQUISE: [laughs].

ANTIONETTE: Where he wants to keep coming back. And I'm like, we're not moving to New York. Like, it's [inaudible 29:06] [laughter].

MARQUISE: Yeah, yeah, it's a lot.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah, I'll visit, but we're not moving. What about a piece of art?

MARQUISE: For me, you're looking over my shoulder at a photo by Frank Stewart, and I love photography. And I think the combination of Miles Davis and the art...jazz is also the soundtrack of my life. I listen to jazz every single day. When it comes to visual art, there's amazing...I go to a lot of art shows. I love photography. But my love...my real core love in art is jazz.

ANTIONETTE: Okay, okay, just a couple more. Season.

MARQUISE: Fall. I love fall.

ANTIONETTE: Love fall.

MARQUISE: I love changing, yeah, the changing seasons. I get to layer a little bit. You know, I feel like I got some new clothes because you just go back and bring some stuff out [laughs].

ANTIONETTE: I tell my sons...My sons were laughing at me because I was like, ugh, the season is coming. It's jacket season. Like, it's accessory season.

MARQUISE: You're right, exactly.

ANTIONETTE: Like, I'm a maximalist. I need to be able to show as much as I can. [laughter]. Just three more: color.

MARQUISE: Blue.

ANTIONETTE: Blue. Any shade of blue?

MARQUISE: Light, neutral blue.

ANTIONETTE: What about a person? They can be historic, or they can be contemporary today.

MARQUISE: I said it earlier, but Miles Davis is constantly reinventing himself. And I love the audacity of saying, hey, Kind of Blue was great, but, you know, in the '70s, I'm doing something different; in the '80s, I'm doing something different. And he has always reminded me of the mission to constantly reinvent myself, and it's something that I practice all the time. And I try

my best to never get stuck in stupid, trying to regurgitate myself by mimicking something that I'm no longer like who I am, right?

And sometimes, who we are as a personality in design, people go, "Oh, hey, hey, do this," right? And so, we're rewarded of things that we did. And we're challenged when we want to grow, and we're doing something that may be different than what they're comfortable with. And so, what I love about Miles Davis is that he's like, yo, I'm always going to keep growing and changing. He's my baseline for that.

ANTIONETTE: I love that. And then, the last one it's you pick, anything come to mind that brings you joy and liberation.

MARQUISE: Joy? Yeah, I mean, being in the Midwest and the family and being around friends. I was just around some high school friends. And it was such a beautiful reminder of people who remember you when you were just very goofy, and awkward, and all over the place. And you sit around and tell stories, and you're just like, wow.

There's certain people in your life that can make you laugh in a certain way that you almost forgot you used to laugh that deeply. And definitely, my high school friends bring out a certain laughter and joy that sometimes, as an adult, you almost grow out of because we're serious adults now. And then, when you get with them, and they know how to push you in a certain way, I love.

ANTIONETTE: I love that. Thank you for that. I always...this is literally my favorite [inaudible 32:17]

MARQUISE: [laughs]

ANTIONETTE: Not that y'all don't bring me greatness during the conversation --

MARQUISE: No, this is a good, challenging, yeah. Yeah, I like it. I like it.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah. You start to learn people authentically on who they are, right?

MARQUISE: Yeah, yeah.

ANTIONETTE: And I think it also allows anyone listening to recognize that you have elements of liberation and joy in your life already.

MARQUISE: Yeah, that's beautiful. I like that.

ANTIONETTE: And we think about it through, again, only through futurism, like, oh, we're fighting for liberation, but it's like, but we have moments and elements of it already in our life. And how do we maybe amplify that and share [inaudible 32:49] collectively? Because, for your high school friends, that could also be moments of liberation and joy for them as well, right?

MARQUISE: Yeah, yeah.

ANTIONETTE: So, I love that.

So, let's jump back in a bit because I want to hear...I started this conversation in saying, like, you are an individual that inspires me. You touch so many things. And you even talked about this idea of continually reimagining yourself and, Miles Davis being a great example of that. I'd love to hear from you, like, what individuals, projects, groups inspire you when it comes to actual organizations or individuals that are working towards equity, that are actually doing the work and doing it pretty well, where we can use them as examples to inspire us all?

MARQUISE: You and I are lucky that sometimes we live in this space where it's like, wow, everybody is doing this work, which we know that's not true. But, you know, there are so many beautiful examples between, you know, the work that you're doing, and BlackSpace is doing and [inaudible 34:02] Black reconstruction. There are so many groups. And I would say the moment that I had this year...I was blessed that I was able to attend the Architecture Biennale in Venice. And so, I was able to visit that. And, you know, the title of that is Decolonization and Decarbonization, and Lesley just did an amazing job. The curator...It was just [inaudible 34:24]. It was just amazing.

And all of the artists and creatives and architects were there. And I was able to go with the opening. And it was just this beautiful moment of Black joy, and we went out on a boat with a lot of the, you know, the artists and hanging out. And the work was beautiful, but then hearing the process, and it's something that I know I keep repeating, but I just love listening and hearing the process of their thinking, and whether it's the ability to, you know, on my way into Venice on the boat, I ran into Walter Hood at the airport, and so we caught a boat into Venice together.

And just watching him and talking to him about his process and what he did with his exhibit, it's those small moments that are so meaningful because I am someone that just loves and would never...something I will probably always do is like, so, how did you do that, right? Don't tell me just what it is. But how did you do that? And so, there's a couple of collectives like that that I love and individuals in my life. Theaster Gates being another one that was there and seeing a lot of his work and seeing his process, even what he's doing in Chicago. It's some beautiful work.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah, no, honestly, I think you named some great individuals. Walter Hood, if you don't know his work, oh, you have to look at Walter's work [laughs]. And hopefully, I can bring him on the podcast in the future. He and I also met, I think, at TED.

MARQUISE: Oh, nice. Yeah, I mean, TED, the group that we have, that TED WhatsApp group, you know, it's on fire. Now, those are, like, those groups you may not even know about. But it's that type that you and I cross paths with. And the big picture that we take together, it's just beautiful to be able to have a network of individuals that we can text or call and get insight on. And so, I would say a lot of my groups are these secondary groups that may not be formal. There's, like, the informal groups that are just as powerful as the formal.

ANTIONETTE: It's interesting because I also went to...I didn't go to the Architecture Biennale, but I went to the Art of Venice.

MARQUISE: Oh, you did the art one, yeah.

ANTIONETTE: And Simone Leigh.

MARQUISE: Simone Leigh, yeah. Yeah, I saw that as well. It was amazing. It's emotional.

ANTIONETTE: It's so good. And it's interesting because I started to notice her work everywhere else. To the point where I'm like, did y'all already have this, or did she just explode? And a lot of them already had her work. Biennale just was a great accomplishment. If you could look it up online, because obviously it's not there anymore, but if you could look it up online, I think she just had an exhibit in Boston as well around her work. Like the way she talks about the Black body, and Black women, and the sculpture.

MARQUISE: The level of dignity and beauty that's amazing.

ANTIONETTE: Yeah. I want to go a bit to the reimagining part. So, I want to go tactical, and then I'm going to go imaginative. What do you see, right? But I want to have folks learn a little bit more very quickly about what you also touch because we talked about film. We talked about journalism. We talked about research. Obviously, if you [inaudible 37:40] the architecture, you do work around urban planning, like, all of these [inaudible 37:43]. But you also are doing work around environmental justice and oceans and policy. And so, I'd love for you to also talk about the intersection of your work and the climate movement and how you see that pushing you to the next level, I guess I would say.

MARQUISE: Absolutely. It's so important. So, Dr. Ayana Johnson and Jean Flemma are the co-founders. And I think you were with us when Ayana had her TED talk. Yeah, you were because I'm standing next to you in the picture. And so, for us, Urban Ocean Lab is a think tank for coastal cities. About roughly 30% of the population lives in some type of coastline, 60% of those individuals are people of color. And so, again, 30% or so live on the coast, 60% of those are Black and Brown. And the effects of climate change are already being seen and felt by those communities. We can just look at last week in New York City and the flooding that happened.

There are still individuals who are living in shelters right now because of their housing being compromised. And so, for us, there's this balance between what are the actions we can take? And then, what are the policies that help to hold, promote, and fund those actions? And so, there has to be both where we are helping on both spectrums of how do we learn from communities? How do we go into communities and listen? How do we work closely with communities to understand what are their real challenges?

And then, how do we translate those into case studies and thought pieces that helps to inform policy? And then, how do we also interpret policy and understand those policies so that we challenge them based on the insights that we have working with community? So, it's really back-and-forth work that we do. And again, I come in with design tooling because that is not my deeper expertise. I'm not a scientist. But I am someone that understands that these challenges are real. They affect us all.

And so, I put myself in uncomfortable positions of trying to understand the scientific nature of climate and the policy side because I'm not a policy expert either. But how do we bring together community into policy, into science to actually create a better place for us to, again, fund, finance it, support it, and make sure that we build infrastructure to protect?

ANTIONETTE: Y'all heard it hear, y'all. And I say this because I think you gave great examples of micro work around equity to macro work around equity. When we talk about reimagining and redesigning...and I intentionally put both words in the title, right? And, yes, it's a long title; I'm sorry it's not short [laughter]. But it's intentional because I don't want us to stop at imagination. I want us to do or design. And I also don't want us to jump right into doing and designing without first imagining what is possible and even expanding that in many ways.

And I hear a lot on, where do I start? You just heard great examples of the micro work to the macro work. And you yourself even show humility saying, I'm not a scientist. I'm not a policy [laughs] expert.

MARQUISE: [laughs] No.

ANTIONETTE: But I can bring my skill of process --

MARQUISE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: To this space, and I'm open to learning.

MARQUISE: Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: I think that that is an inspiration to really, I would argue, push people beyond the...I won't call it an excuse, but the barrier, as you said, the mental barrier that we may have placed on ourselves on what we can do.

MARQUISE: Yeah, we all have a role. We all...I know my lane, and I know what I'm good at. And, you know, one, I represent one big we. So, as we're talking about all the things we're doing, it's not just me, it's we. You know, I'm lucky I have an amazing team around me and supporting me and supporting us in making sure that we are being able to show up at our best and understanding what I'm not good at every day. Every day, I have to recognize this is not my lane; teach me, learn. Staying humble. Staying humble doesn't mean that you're submissive; it means that you're actively listening. You're actively engaging.

ANTIONETTE: So, now I want to get to the imagination part. I want to [inaudible 42:35] us a bit. So, first, in honor of the late Dumbledore in Harry Potter [laughter]. Y'all, I love sci-fi. I love fantasy. It's going to pop up every once in a while. But, you know, I'm going to give you a magic wand.

MARQUISE: All right. All right. All right. Love it.

ANTIONETTE: You know, imagine you had a magic wand. What's one thing that you would change in your sector? And you can pick one. I would argue your sector is process and design. What would you change in that sector to make it more inclusive, equitable, and/or representative of your culture?

MARQUISE: I would start with the education systems and the affinity groups that support our practice. I think that we need to one, reimagine how we're teaching this next generation about designing architecture. There's not enough history being taught. Empathy is a muscle. And you have to build that muscle through constantly reading and being exposed and touching and you yourself going through things. And there's a lot of students who come out who don't have the insights to even have a depth of empathy that we're asking them to have. So, when we bring up equity, I don't even know where to begin.

And so I believe that we have to do better in our education system. We need to teach rigorous research. There's really large gaps in research and learning how to go through synthesis and really understanding how to break those things down. And that's one of the biggest challenges that we have in bringing on new individuals to the studio. So, education would be one.

And then, the different affinity groups that are out there that have a long legacy in our space but probably should go away. That funding should be redistributed. The large design firms and architecture firms that have had a major head start on being able to be around for many years and have a certain depth of funding that then they're able to go out and fund some of these large affinity groups and foundations...then we're sitting around begging for diversity and inclusion. I'm like, you know what? Nah, let's just go ahead and blow this whole thing up.

And we need to start from the foundation of the word is equity. It is not a program. It is not an initiative. It is not a, oh, by the way, we need to do this also. It is the fundamental reason why you exist is to build equity. So, hopefully, we don't need a magic wand to do that one day, but you gave me one. And so, that's what I would do. There's a couple of things I'd just blow up.

[laughter]

ANTIONETTE: It's funny because, you know, we created these questions. I created them a long time ago. And I ask different iterations of them for different attendees and participants. But what most people don't know is I actually have a magic wand sitting behind me.

MARQUISE: That's what I'm talking about, uh-oh [laughs]. Love it.

ANTIONETTE: [laughs] Because it inspires me. It pushes me, like, when you think about the idea, again, what's possible and really expanding that. So, I want to go back to something you mentioned midway in the conversation. And when you said it, I was like, oh, I want to jump in, but I was like, I'ma wait. I'ma wait.

MARQUISE: [laughs]

ANTIONETTE: And I'ma bring it back around. You talked about cathedral buildings. So, folks that follow me and maybe have seen me in different rooms for the last few years have heard me talk about the state and act of cathedral building being connected to the process of equity. So, for folks that have never heard me say this, I'm going to say it here. You may hear me say it multiple times going forward because I just think it's a great way to break it down.

You know, the question I get asked a lot is, you know, how do you sustain in this work? You know, how do you know you're making an impact? You know, what are we trying to work towards with equity? Or worse, what we see now is we take, you know, the wins that we have for granted, and then they're taken away, right? Like, literally gone.

And I tell people I view equity like building a cathedral. Cathedrals took hundreds of years to be constructed. Yet every brick, every material, every element was just as important as the next. And the individuals that were building that cathedral from the beginning knew they wouldn't see the final product. But they understood the importance of their role. Then, once the cathedral is built, if we don't have people to actually maintain it, take care of it, it deteriorates, right? I'm talking about the built structure of the cathedral.

MARQUISE: That's right.

ANTIONETTE: Equity is the same way.

MARQUISE: Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: Some people view equity as a checkbox. Well, we have it. It's done. It's just like a building. And it's just like a building like a cathedral that took hundreds of years or pyramids, and we know there's some exploitative and harmful [laughter] [inaudible 47:54]

MARQUISE: But I get your point. Yeah, no, this is real talk. This is real talk.

ANTIONETTE: And so, I want to ask you, because I've been starting to ask this question to people a lot more, knowing that we may not get to equity in our lifetime, what is your break in the cathedral of equity that's being built?

MARQUISE: You know, I always [inaudible 48:13]. I said it a moment ago that empathy is a muscle. And, unfortunately, this country and the world is empathetically out of shape. We're great at running sprints, right? We're great at, oh, the George Floyd moment happens or some other moment, and we can sprint to the match. But this is a marathon, to your point, right? It takes time.

And so, for me, my break is to stay ready for the marathon. My push is that no matter what stage I am in my life, I am still pushing it. And I don't take my foot off the gas to [inaudible 48:56]. We still need to keep working. Okay, that was a good moment. We need to keep working, keep it moving. We're not done yet.

And so, I am a we're not done [laughs] type of a person that continues to push and have the perseverance and the longevity by taking care of myself, mind, body, and soul and staying ready because we are required. Because you and I have gifts, and it's a beautiful gift, and I honor that gift. And I stand on the shoulders of many, many that came before us. And there's a responsibility.

I remember meeting John Lewis years ago before he passed away. And in the room, we were just hanging out, and he reached over to put his arm around me, and he goes, "I'm handing you the baton. I'm handing you the baton." And he would say that [inaudible 49:47] multiple people. It wasn't me being knighted or something. It was that that's what he would do. I need you to keep going, brother. I need you to keep doing. And that's what I say to you and everybody else. Our breaks should be perseverance and push.

ANTIONETTE: Wonderful, wonderful. So, now I'ma end on this last question. So, you say perseverance.

MARQUISE: Yes.

ANTIONETTE: We're in the year 2123, 100 years from now. I sometimes make a joke. I'm like, maybe you're Walt Disney, and you froze yourself.

MARQUISE: [laughs]

ANTIONETTE: And you're still here, or it's your descendants, right? But we're in the year 2123. What's different about the world? How have our perseverance led to a different state of the world? How has it been reimagined and redesigned for equity, and inclusion, and belonging? And, honestly, because here's the thing: diversity exists, people. I just want to name diversity exists. It is getting to the space of inclusivity for the diverse identities that we hold, right? But I want you to think about it through the lens of senses. What does it smell like in this new world? What does it feel like and taste?

MARQUISE: My first thing that came up to me that I would say in 100 years is the hope that we have a world that has been built on the constitution of love. Because I really believe that the foundation of the challenges that we have across this world is the lack of deep, empathetic love for each other, and for this world, and for everything that we touch and respect, for the food we put in our mouth, or the clothes. Whatever you have, there's a deeper sense of love and respect and understanding of where it came from and then the respect for where it will go next. So, for me, 100 years is the hope that every constitution, whatever it is [inaudible 51:46] to codify something, is based on love.

ANTIONETTE: Thank you.

MARQUISE: Thank you.

ANTIONETTE: And I'm going to challenge everyone hearing that. I'm going to challenge everyone: start your own constitution of love. Take the time. Give yourself space, and ask, what would make up my constitution? You know, I hear a lot in the civil society space around the social contract. It's always discussed. And what's your social contract or your constitution of love, of joy, of liberation?

MARQUISE: Absolutely.

ANTIONETTE: Because imagine if billions of people in the world started first with that mentality, and then we came together and created that constitution collectively. That's the world I want to live in. And I hope my descendants are able to live in.

MARQUISE: Thank you, again, for thinking of me. I always enjoy our conversations, and you are such an inspiration and powerhouse. And I just want to say it again; I appreciate you and continue to support whatever you lead, the things that you're doing.

ANTIONETTE: Thank you. I appreciate you. So, that is it [laughs]. Until next time, thank you for being a participant. Marquise, it's always great in the room with you, and we'll be in many more. You know we [inaudible 53:09] other.

MARQUISE: Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yes.

ANTIONETTE: And for all the listeners, I hope to see you in the next conversation on how we can reimagine and redesign the world towards equity and justice for all of us, and I would argue, dignity, as Marquise stated earlier. So, with that, have a great day.