

Joshua Edmonds and Cezanne Charles on the intersection of design and community technology

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SPEAKERS

Cezanne Charles, Joshua Edmonds, Olga Stella

Olga Stella 00:00

Hi. I'm Olga Stella, the executive director of Design Core Detroit, and the Vice President for Strategy and Communications at the College for Creative Studies. Thank you for joining us for season three of the Detroit City of Design podcast. As stewards of Detroit's UNESCO City of Design designation, we aim to raise your awareness of how design can create conditions for better quality of life, and economic opportunity for all. In season three, we will hear from thought leaders who view our world through a lens of empathy and apply design thinking to address some of our world's most pressing issues.

Olga Stella 00:47

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Olga Stella 01:17

I'm excited to be here today with Cezanne Charles and Joshua Edmonds who are both doing transformative work in the space of Design and Technology. Cezanne is a creative industries executive and a designer working at the intersection of design research practice and public policy. She's the co-director of Root of Two, a hybrid design studio. Joshua is the Director of Digital Inclusion at the city of Detroit and is responsible for developing and implementing a citywide sustainable Digital Inclusion strategy on behalf of over 100,000 Detroit residents lacking fixed broadband access. Today, we will learn more about the work Cezanne and Joshua are doing together with Design Core through the City of Design challenge. This challenge invites participants to develop community tech hubs through the process of inclusive design. Joshua and Cezanne, thank you so much for joining me today on the Detroit City of Design podcast. I'm so glad that we're able to be together and talk about digital inclusion

and inclusive design, and what it might look like in practice in Detroit. Thank you for again for joining us today.

Cezanne Charles 02:23

Thanks for having us.

Olga Stella 02:24

Yeah. So before, you know, before we talk about the future and what might be possible, I think it would be helpful for Joshua to set a little bit of context about, you know, where things sit with digital inclusion in the city right now. And, you know, a little bit about the work that Joshua that you're doing through the the city's Office of Digital Inclusion.

Joshua Edmonds 02:46

Absolutely. So when we look at digital inclusion, specifically within the context of Detroit, it cannot be separated from the larger narrative as it relates to poverty, and specifically poverty in a racialized sense across your urban cities in this country. And the Federal Communications Commission, and folks in Washington, you know, are now being able to allocate resources in a way where we're going to see much more investment in broadband, but that wasn't always the case. So for the past 10 to 20 years, you've had internet providers who have agreed to provide services that aren't really all the way in line with the current situation that we're seeing on the ground, and how that manifests in Detroit currently, based on the most recent data that we have from the American Community Survey, now that you're talking about 25% of Detroiters without an active internet connection, in addition to you're talking about 46% of Detroiters who don't have a desktop or laptop. 46%, who also don't have high speed wired internet access, and around 20% Detroiters who are only using their cellular data plan as their sole source for connecting to the internet. So when we look at the role that poverty plays, these larger populations I was mentioning within those percentages, what role does perpetual billing have on this conversation? And what role when we begin looking at larger community technology or the lack of community technology resources in our community? How does that contribute? And so what the Office of Digital Inclusion is doing what we've been doing since the inception of the office in 2019, has been trying to build out a larger framework and a larger model that allows residents, corporations, the public sector, obviously, to work together on developing an ecosystem-wide, I'll say digital equity and empowerment plan that then pushes residents along the lines of from Digital Inclusion to digital equity to digital empowerment. And so we are doing our best to steward this process. But at the same time being fully cognizant that we're the first city office in the United States to at the municipal level, to have a Director of Digital Inclusion With me recently hiring a deputy director as well. And so as we were figuring this out and charting the path forward thing, other cities are asking us the same question. And looking at what we've been able to do thus far as enough ammo to be able to justify taking this on, and hiring and staffing similar offices. But on the ground here, we have a lot of work to be done. But that being said, we've been able to make some critical interventions, such as last year being able to deploy over 50,000 devices and internet connectivity with tech support to Detroit Public School families, as well as doing an additional 7000 devices for seniors in Detroit around telehealth activation. And we also did around 10,000 more devices for youth for summer employment purposes. And as we continuously find ways to get more devices, more internet connectivity expanded to folks, we still have to have the larger framework conversation. That's why I'm grateful for conversations like this, because it allows us to be

able to take a step back and say, yes, these interventions that we're doing need to continue. But they have to continue in an intentionally designed way. And so this conversation is really helpful for us to be able to expand the way that we're thinking about this issue.

Olga Stella 06:10

So Josh, it's so interesting, thanks so much for providing that context. And I'd like to bring Cezanne into the conversation, as someone who has also been working in some different ways, in digital inclusion over the years, both, you know, their work with Allied Media Projects, and most recently, you know, through the Cultural Center planning initiative and an expansion of Wi Fi into Midtown. So I don't know, Cezanne, if you'd like to just add a little bit about some of your perspectives around, you know, the state of digital inclusion in the city right now, and, and kind of where we're going.

Cezanne Charles 06:44

Yeah, I mean, I think, you know, my creative practice, into Root of Two have always kind of had our work at the intersection of sort of technology and, and the sort of under imagined consequences of technology rolled out at scale. And that includes kind of in society and in the built environment. And I think, so much of our issue is that, when we think about technology, we think about it as like, you know, dematerialized or femoral and we don't really think about it as being physically manifested in our cities, and in our city systems in a lot of different ways. And that it also mimics some of the same problems that our cities have, as a result of kind of the the wave of sort of urban planning policies that have rendered, you know, neighborhoods that are able to, quite frankly, have fiber or not, or have sort of connectivity or not. And so when we only sort of think about the problem as a problem of the payer, or the payee, or the company to the individual resident, we sort of forget that, you know, these things are a part of our fabric of our cities, like they're part of our streets, they're part of our neighborhoods, they're part of the amenities that we can and should be thinking of. And I think, for us coming into the conversation of what can culture do and creativity do, we were very interested in the fact that, you know, we've got, you know, three universities and colleges within the cultural campus, we have the Public Library, and the stories that all of the stakeholders were telling us was, were about the way that they've been trying to empower either students or residents or others to get connected and be connected, and to sort of see them as a as a hub for communities to sort of access technology. And not access technology, just for the way that it can sort of enrich learning and knowledge, but also as part of critical infrastructure for delivering and getting access to services and benefits. And so we thought it was just a really compelling way to sort of think physically about digital technology and the built environment and whether or not there were ways that we could expand that access on the cultural campus. And then also really, you know, dive into this idea of like, you know, what, what would be some of the rights and principles that could be looked at if we were trying to think about, you know, technology and governance in society. So I think that that's why we were really excited to kind of partner around the Connect 313 initiative. And also really take a an intentional digital inclusion lense. But I also say that like, it's not easy for cultural institutions. I will say that, like, particularly during the pandemic, I think it really showed how much they themselves are challenged with thinking about digital transformation. And so I think this is something where it's like, we all need to be in it together, trying to figure out what we can and also bringing the richness that each of us would have to the table to a conversation around digital transformation in technology in Detroit.

Olga Stella 09:56

I think it's interesting, just this context that both of you have laid out that, you know, it's a, there's a systems design issue here. But and there that's maybe amplified by some of our, you know the the inequalities that exists in Detroit, but that there isn't necessarily kind of silver bullet issues or opportunities on either the on the kind of the institutional side or on the community side. And so there's really there's, this is ripe for a lot of innovation, a lot of possibility. What I'd love to kind of talk a little bit about, you know, especially Josh is the, I would say, the user of design, maybe in this context, but, you know, we've been so happy Joshua, to work with you, you know, through Design Core to start to really think about the ways that design can help support the city's efforts around digital inclusion. And if maybe, just, from your perspective, a little bit like what, you know, what are you hoping designers and design can help add to the conversation that's taking place around this in the city?

Joshua Edmonds 11:08

I love the conversation around design. And this is something newer for me in a sense that, you know, I've never really had the opportunity to work with designers, at least in a more outspoken way. So I mean, I think that this is just a unique opportunity to leverage a newer way of thinking as relates to digital inclusion. You know, digital inclusion is not a super old field, to give a brief history lesson. I mean, the term the digital divide was coined by Larry Irving in the late 90s. And that was when he saw that there would be a digital divide off of the internet. Now, this was before, obviously, the internet was super, super widespread, and everybody had it from a consumer standpoint. And then fast forward, obviously, to now, no Digital Inclusion really hasn't had that, I mean, we're talking about 20 years, our discussion here. And so inserting design into this conversation, I think is long enough to be able to make up this stagger for the lack of design. And so as we're talking about neighborhood technology hubs, as we're talking about workforce, digital literacy, training, planning, whatever, I think being able to have a design element to that conversation, it makes the conversation go further than it is. So again, as I mentioned earlier in the opening piece about all of our various interventions of getting people computers, getting people internet, tech support, whatever. But it's like, okay, those are great, tactical interventions. But the larger strategic framework necessitates the need for design in a way where we then can say this is what is exported. This is the replicable model that has we're looking at Black and Brown communities across this country that are all suffering from the digital divide, that might there be a really unique opportunity for us to be in questioning how these spaces are designed, and questioning the outputs that we need to see in these spaces. Because let some other folks tell it to you know, we're doing everything to get people a job. And it's like, well, that's part of the equation. But even at Connect 313, we have a real unique focus on getting people have access to the technology that they need, and want as it relates to improved learning, improved employability, and improved well being. So I gave this example in another conversation recently. But if we were to give a child a computer, and that child wanted to do nothing but watch Netflix, okay, that is fine. That is a well being argument that is being made now. And I think that, you know, we on the city side, do not need to force the way that people are using this. And I think that the design side can say can we just create spaces that are tailored to individual wants and needs as it relates to technology period. And so I think that we're really excited to be able to look at a new way of looking at this issue, which in turn allows other interventions to be that much more fruitful and aligned with larger community needs.

Olga Stella 14:00

And what it really speaks to me that this is ultimately about people and what people need and want and not what any institution thinks people need or want. And this is a perfect segue into the work Cezanne that you've been doing with your partner, John Marshall, for the College for Creative Studies and Design Core around inclusive design, training and learning opportunities. And I know we're really excited that we're going to be able to embed inclusive design it directly into the process that the City of Design challenge participants are going into, but maybe just help our audience understand a little bit. Like when we talk about inclusive design and inclusive process, what do we mean? Why is this something that needs to be taught? Why? Why, you know, we're all are we all talking about inclusion these days? Isn't this something that we're all just you know, going to do naturally, I'd love I'd love for you to be able to share a little bit about your perspectives about that.

Cezanne Charles 14:59

Yeah. Thanks for that. So I think I come to this conversation as as a designer, researcher and someone for whom it took a long time to even sort of claim those titles for the way that I approach work. And I think the big part is, for a designer to sort of step away from the kind of role of of kind of authorship into sort of make space for how they kind of can facilitate sort of larger design decisions with and through members who are sort of most impacted by the change. And that can be both positive or negative. It could look at the very known consequentiality of an issue right now, as well as trying to take into account, you know, maybe some of the downstream impacts that we can't see. And so all of a sudden, the role of a designer is fundamentally reshaped. It's no longer just about being able to deliver quality design experiences, environments and products, it becomes about your ability to really facilitate and hold kind of conversations with communities, and to really excel at sort of learning with and from others who may be unlike you, and who definitely are coming from a different set of experiences, how those experiences should be really shaping the sort of new systems and products and services and environments that we're attempting to deliver. And I like to think of it as like, there's all the things you might learn in design school. And then there's all the things that are really hard to learn, without actually having a real sort of opportunity to apply it in practice. And, and the nice thing about sort of thinking about a sort of community situated, you know, training program is that you're actually getting to apply it to your project, right? So you're working on these issues as they're coming up in your project. And you're getting to sort of explore them with a set of peers who are all bringing their own sort of expertise to bear on this. And I sort of think that that's like, you know, both where formal education is going, sort of in colleges and universities is how do we make this project based? How do we make this applied. But I also think that there's a role for designers who have been working in practicing and doing work in community situated contexts and even those who maybe haven't, to actually get an opportunity to sort of formalize some of these things. Because if you've never had to think about, you know, the way that a city is built around a set of racialized policies that were enacted in the past that still have present consequence, then when you enter a process around trying to design community technology, you might be missing a vital link to the real struggles that the constituents you're trying to design with and for are experiencing on the ground. So you need a different set of aptitudes to even sort of explore the dimensions of those problems. And that's where a sort of community situated applied training program, professional development program can really come into place because it can, it can give you the framework, it can give you the language, and then it gives you the opportunity to try things out and experiment with these things as they're coming up in a project based process.

Olga Stella 18:29

Can you help us understand maybe some what the elements of the training program might start to look like as we deploy them this summer?

Cezanne Charles 18:38

Yeah, so we've really started with the idea that, you know, because I think when we first imagined it, we imagined that we would be in physical spaces with one another. So that was kind of the first challenge was to, to really understand that this is going to be a blended learning environment that is going to require a certain amount of facility around technology to begin with. And so what we've really thought about is how do we make this something that can be delivered in 90 minute chunks to sort of minimize screen fatigue, put the emphasis on sort of flipping the kind of learnings and how do we make sure that the you know, seven sessions roughly model, any sort of inclusive design process. And we sort of broke that down as there's like a start, there's like an embarking in that, you really want to make sure you understand what is meant by inclusive design, you really want to understand, you know, how are you even framing up the problem or issue? What are some of the personal gains like where are you at, you know, as an individual, but also as a team in a group. And so we kind of explore that really in the first one and it sort of moves from there. It really works from the point of view of you've got to get to grips with kind of like, who you are where you are your positionality within a design process - your agency within the design process? How do you understand power within a design process? And then sort of radiates out from there into thinking about how does that play out in a group or collaborative team context? And then how does that make sure that you're already scaffolding in the way that you can, with humility and purpose, begin to apply that to working with communities and with partners, so that it really is designing with rather than designing for. So we sort of are like, get yourself right, then you can bring all of that to bear with communities and partners. And then we started to branch out to really thinking about, you know, how does that enrich the project? How do you then get feedback into your actual project that you've designed through a series of design clinics, and then we sort of move into what we think of as like, kind of some of the really important things that we foreshadowed all the way along, but we really are thinking about where does the accountability set, right? Sometimes the designer steps out of the process, and it has to then become something that is owned, and and continued to be run by the community. So what are the practices you need, as a designer, to sort of make sure that those accountability measures are there that the expectations are there, and that you have a broad way of thinking about what success looks like? Because I think, you know, the wrong success measures are also often baked into design processes. So, you know, we're wanting to think about how all of those things become up for grabs in terms of co-design.

Olga Stella 21:35

And Joshua, you've been our partner in developing the City of Design challenge and thinking through kind of how to deploy this. So in hearing, you know, what Cezanne is sharing, how does it you know, fit into what you're trying to do, both in your in your work and with Connect 313? And kind of what you see the benefits of what Cezanne has been, you know, what Cezanne and John have have developed, that we're going to embed in the in the City of Design challenge?

Joshua Edmonds 22:03

Yeah, I think one of the pieces that I'm going to mention with Connect 313 specifically how we just facilitated a community governance election. So explaining the connector infrastructure a bit more, we establish a Connect 313 fund. And that fund was primarily from the Rocket Mortgage Classic, last year's golf tournament, we were able to raise about \$2.7 million off of that. Of that 2.7 million, some of that money already got allocated specifically for getting more mobile devices, some went to the scaling up of neighborhood technology hubs, and then some went into investing into a larger data infrastructure, specifically as it relates to the digital divide from a metric standpoint. And so with that approach, we said, well, there's still lots of leftover funding, what do we do? And this conversation even goes back to March 5, right before, right before everything shut down last year. And there was a meeting that we had, and Cezanne was present at that meeting as well. And we It was about 45 different organizations crammed into one room, which yes, that was really ill advised in retrospect, however, we didn't know how serious Covid was going to be. And we had this conversation about, we need to create a coordinated mechanism. For us to one be able to distribute resources, but also for us to be able to work together as a community, as a collective. And so insert the fund where we said, alright, we have this fund now, we know we need to create this coordinated mechanism. How do we do that? And so from July of late July of last year to December, we met every week, with workgroups and a workgroup structure with really, anyone who had an interest in devices and connectivity in Detroit, visual literacy and scaling in Detroit. At the time, we call them special projects and shared resources, policy and ecosystem. All these were different workgroups, and that was leading up to a December election, where now we have elected committee leads, who are now staffing their committees. And now we're saying, hey, anyone in Detroit, who has a suggestion for how we need to bridge the digital divide, we now have a body that is set up. And we have legitimate committee leadership and is able to then take recommendations and push them out towards for funding from this fund. And I think that what I'm getting at is there's a participatory process here that is embedded in community. And I think that what Cezanne is talking about that's an enhancer and enhances the way that we think about the work that that we're that we're doing. So as we look at the the macro ecosystem of Connect 313, we need micro processes in place. And so we've already done our due diligence in the Connect 313 operations side to say, Alright, we've operationalize this committee structure. We have community representation, who is making decisions out of a larger body of funding that we have. But in addition to that, now we're able to look at from a design standpoint, how as funding gets allocated, these spaces are designed, and then allows us to have some type of rubric of understanding of how to replicate this over and over and over again. So as you hear what I'm saying, Connect 313 is a larger operation rooted in the community governance framework. And what Cezanne is saying is that there are ways that we can even take this better and design this better. And so I think that the excitement on our end is like, great. As we're making investments, we already know, one of our values that we say oftentimes, locally-led, expertly-informed. And so we're able to to highlight local leadership and local interventions with seeking the counsel of experts like Cezanne and that then influences and enhances the way that we do this work in perpetuity. So I'm excited because again, we're allowed to open this often go one layer deeper, to get a better, I don't want to say get a better product. But realistically, to get a better experience for Detroiters.

Olga Stella 26:03

Well, I'm I love by what you're both saying is, ultimately, this is really about changing the culture, the culture of how things get done. And, and not just, you know, I think it is really just exemplary, that the kind of governance structures that you've implemented for Connect 313. That is, that is that is really a

model. But then there's the every day work that happens in the field and the neighborhoods, the way that people frame up problems, all of this and together all of this together, to start to really change the culture of how things get done. So I'm super excited, I'm super excited to have leadership like both of yours, working on these issues here in Detroit and many others as well. I think as we try to bring your conversation to a close, I would be wonderful, just to hear from both of you kind of as you look out, you know, both think about the City of Design challenge, which will take place through 2021 and 2022, to start to see the fruits of what the teams have been working on, you know, actually in community by both the kind of the, you know, the outcomes of the challenge the outcomes of, of working together in between Design Core, the College of Creative Studies and the city and Connect 313 and all these other partners. You know, what, what are you looking forward to? What do you what do you envision a success?

Joshua Edmonds 27:24

All right. So, I think success is, I pray that success is going to be something that is both shared in a way that we all like and I mean, collectively, the city, not only the administrators and the administration as part of this definition, but we all say, wow, that's valuable. And while that has changed my life, now the degree at which it changes, you know, could be incremental. But at the end of the day, I think that ultimately working back from that definition, or everyone's gonna be able to get something out of this. And it could be something as small as someone sees a space that's designed, they may never use it, but they could just say, Well, I care about Detroit, and I'm happy that Detroiters are getting an opportunity to, you know, have spaces designed for them and their digital needs or digital desires. And I think that that's a great way to frame that, you know, the metrics that oftentimes are pushed my way, as specific as as relates to, hey, we need more people internet access, hey, we need to get more people with computers technology or training. And I'm like, Yes, yes, yes, yes, we need to do all those things. But ultimately, at the end of the day, we're changing lives, I want people to be empowered. And so people at the end of the day are saying this is maybe they're not gonna say it as literal, all this empowered me- it might not be that piece. But it could be I'm using this space for X or Y, or Z, or for an infinite amount of reasons. I think that ultimately use and utility and empowerment are really the benchmarks for what success is going to look like. And I think that off of that, we're then going to be able to find additional ways to sustain that. And I'm not saying that, ultimately, success has to be rooted in sustainability as it relates to this stuff has to be community infrastructure for the next 20 or 30 years. But I am saying that I hope that whatever we do here can have that residual rebounding change next 20 or 30 years.

Olga Stella 29:17

What about you Cezanne? I know we've we've been working together for many, many years. You were never original supporters and advisors on the Detroit's City of design designation and on and the work we've been doing around inclusive design. What do you see as a success at the end of the day?

Cezanne Charles 29:34

Well, I would say I just want to also take a moment to acknowledge that over the 12 years that I've been doing work in city of Detroit, this is one of the first times that I've had the benefit of really experiencing where design and technology meets. And I think that in and of itself, that would have been one of my indicators of success, which is how those conversations around driving inclusion in our city

in terms of thinking about all the ways that design is applied as part of city building happens, and then seeing it applied again in technology is something that I would have long held as an indicator of success. But I think going forward, it sort of picks up on and maybe adds my own definition to what empowerment would look like. And so when I think about what empowerment would look like, in terms of both design, and design and technology, as it crosses in the city, it really for me is that residents are able to be makers and builders and owners and users of technology and design, as well as critiquers, and holders of account of technology and design. And that for me, it's about like this sort of, you know, not just informed and engaged like residents, but like that, that that model of governance is that Josh is using is no longer strange or novel or new. But it's the way we work. Because we know that if we work together on design, or if we work together on technology, if we sort of give the residents leadership positions in those spaces, then that's what makes us better. Like that's what makes us relevant that makes that's what makes us resilient right? To use something that is now so commonplace a term but I sort of that would be my idealistic sort of indication of success is like, the more that my role gets to be facilitative rather than expert leader is where I think I will know that the change has happened.

Olga Stella 31:41

Well, I couldn't agree more with either one of you, you're just it's just so been such a inspiration just to work with you through this process. I know for our whole team. So with that, I just want to thank you both for joining us today and for your work on the City of Design challenge on our this inclusive design training. And just in making Detroit a place where really everyone, everyone has a chance to thrive and just really appreciate you both Thank you.

Cezanne Charles 32:11

Thanks so much.

Joshua Edmonds 32:12

Thank you.

Olga Stella 32:36

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