

Chris Cornelius on decolonizing education and design (Part 2)

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SPEAKERS

Chris Cornelius, Olga Stella

Olga Stella 00:06

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 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 applying design thinking to address some of our world's most pressing issues.

Olga Stella 00:49

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Olga Stella 01:16

I'm here today with Chris Cornelius to continue the second part of our conversation on indigeneity and design. Chris is the Associate Professor of architecture at the University of Wisconsin Milwaukee, and currently, the Louis Kahn Visiting Professor of architecture at Yale. Chris is a citizen of the United Nation of Wisconsin, and focuses his research and practice on the architectural translation of culture, in particular, Native American culture. In the previous episode, we learned about indigenous architecture, and how to incorporate indigenous thinking into projects. In this episode, we will dig deeper into what it means to decolonize the practice of design. I know we've talked a little bit about decolonizing architecture and, you know, we're situated in our college in Detroit, like College for Creative Studies, we're talking a lot about decolonizing education. I mean, how do you start to do this? How do you start to change the framework that people are operating in as they approach these problems? You know, what are some of your thoughts about that?

Chris Cornelius 02:25

Well, education plays a significant role in that - significant role. And we haven't really talked about the fact that education has been a tool of colonization, you know, (yeah) since its inception in this country. So for instance, like, so I'm teaching a studio at Yale this semester, I'm a visiting professor, Louis Kahn visiting assistant professor role this this semester, which I'm very grateful to have. So I have 10, non indigenous graduate students working on indigenous housing. And it wasn't until recently that I started to realize like, this is really, it's a, it's hard work, to say the least, because I not only have to teach them about like, this context that we're working in, and we're working in a community in Manitoba, but to I have to teach them about indigeneity. And, you know, these are students, they had their K through 12, education, their four years of undergrad, their one to two years of graduate school. So 17, 18, 19 years, if you want to say, schooling, they've never had anything indigenous, they didn't learn anything indigenous, they didn't learn anything about the indigenous people of the US, much less Canada. So I have to teach that now. And I was thinking to myself just a few days ago, like, this would be a lot easier if I didn't have to, like, teach this sort of level of basic indigenous policy and relationship and understanding to the students. I'm grateful to do it. But and I think that, you know, in my role of teaching non indigenous people this way of thinking, I'm putting, I'm trying to squelch colonization, in the sense that colonization is fueled by a lack of empathy. And so I can build that empathy by teaching these non indigenous people. But I think that if we could begin to think about this land-people relationship, if we started to teach this, as you know, all education but if we were thinking about it in the ways that we educate architects, for instance, if we thought about not just like in a history way, which is the right first place, that should be we, and then I also recently was writing something about my own sort of like education and I wrote this thing came out and I was like, had I really had to think about it. I said, you know, in my entire four years of undergrad and two years of Graduate School of architectural education, I saw nothing indigenous, nothing zero. I didn't see any indigenous dwelling, I didn't see anything. We never talked about it. And I realized, wow, I had to figure that out for myself. But it's in that in that sort of education just like telling people about it. So it's not just in the history, it's in like building technology, the ideas of human comfort is like, that's like a European model of like, 72 degrees, right? 50% humidity, like, who decided that? And why aren't we talking about the technologies of indigenous dwellings? Like there couldn't be anything more highly technological than a teepee? It's crazy, like, how do you have a structure with a fire in the middle of it, and it doesn't fill with smoke, and it's out in the winter, right, like, right out in the landscape in the wintertime? So what lessons can we learn from them? I'm not saying that we would go back to those things. I'm just like, why don't we learn about that technology? How would we advance that technology? How would we begin to think about it? And we're not talking about those things in an architectural education, and we're definitely not talking about them in like general education, we're not talking about K through 12, and undergrad like everyone should. In high school, you should have some American Indian Studies like it, whatever you want to call it, Indigenous Studies, like it just to be a basic thing, that's part of your history course. Or it should be a standalone course. Just so that everyone has like a base understanding of that role of our country and indigenous people.

Chris Cornelius 06:31

There are some states that have these like requirements, but I think they're sometimes they can be a little superficial. But But what if we were like it was just integrated, it wasn't a specialized sort of thing, would be able to build that level of empathy with one another? And then we can start to talk about

reconciliation, and then I don't think we can start to talk about it until we start to really realize what the role of the US government and indigenous people has been, and, and to understand the the positions or where things are colonized. So it is in that relationship to the land that this colonization actually happens. And I think it's particularly, I want to say relevant and specific to the people who are indigenous to the US and Canada. When you look at the rest of North America, Mexico and Central America, they didn't necessarily while they were colonized, but Spanish and other countries, they weren't necessary, they didn't necessarily lose their land base, right? They still have their language, they still have sovereignty of their land, we do not. Right, in 1491, we were 100% of the population, and now we're less than 1%. So let's, let's, let's start there. And there are a lot of people, scholars, symposium panels, and other sorts of things now that are grabbing on to decolonization. And I think it's starting to become a thing that we need to kind of hold on to as indigenous people and say, wait, hold on a second, let's let's really talk about what decolonization means in the US. What does that really mean? So that we can get back one, the sort of dominion that we have over our land. Two, the relationship that we have with that land is, is familial, like, it's like you took you took our mother away, or moved us. And so, you know, we're figuratively the children that are separated from their parents. I know, we need to reconcile ourselves, I think that architecture and design can be that reconciliatory act, I think that we can see architecture as how we reconcile ourselves with the land. And it's in those lessons that we can begin to understand and have conversations about colonization and decolonization. It, you know, the colonization happens of the mind, I think, first. And so if we started to decolonize, that.. As for me, early on, in my like, education, I realized that the education for me it was going to be an emancipation. It was going to be a way for me to kind of break out of like, the sort of system. And in order for me to decolonize the system and dismantle it, I had to be within it, I have to be an academic, I have to be in the discipline of architecture, I have to be the person that advocates for these things, I can't just critique it from the outside, and I can't just like, you know, make up projects on my own, or whatever it is to begin to do that I have to be working within that to have those examples. And so, you know, that's kind of what I've decided to focus my career and rest of my working days on is to begin to have these conversations about it, and to really, honestly have these conversations about what colonization and decolonization actually is. It's not just what I'm afraid of, it's starting to become almost a rhetorical trope in the sense that it's like diversity. Right? Right. You can always say you're for diversity who isn't for diversity, right? Like, if you're not for diversity, then maybe your white supremacist, I don't know, right? But, but it's the same thing. I don't want. I don't want decolonization to go down that road. I don't want want that to be some sort of sort of rhetorical thing. And it's not like, Okay, this is the time for decolonization. And we're doing this in our curriculum and, like, no, what are you really doing? What are we, you know, it has to be followed up with action and policies and understandings of what that really means. We can't just like, throw that because I've, I was over the term diversity a long time ago, because anyone can say that. But what does it mean what what you're really doing? And Equity and Inclusion are starting to go down that road to like, let's really talk about what that means and the differences between those things, and how can we systemically like there's systemic racism? How can we systemically decolonize? How can we systemically have equity? How can we systemically have inclusion, right? Will will always have some form of diversity? But how can we write policies and think of ourselves in ways that we could begin to do those things more, and to do them in ways that really are affecting the ways that people live and the ways that people see how they live with other people?

Olga Stella 11:06

Right. We have been so inspired by the work of Kat Holmes and her book *Mismatch* about inclusive design. And one of the things that she talks about is this idea of you draw a circle, and you design for the people in the circle, and the people who are outside the circle end up being excluded. And you use a very similar description talking about maps. And I think that might be a good way for us to think about how to you know how to end our conversation today, if you if you want to describe that. The role of colonization and mapmaking.

Chris Cornelius 11:38

Yeah, so I borrow those terms from Linda Tuhiwai Smith, who wrote a book called *Decolonizing Methodologies*. And she is indigenous I might get wrong is either New Zealand or Australian, but it's in that part of world. And they, as indigenous people are very similar to us in the US and Canada. So we are those are our brothers and sisters from another hemisphere. So she comes up with this, this vocabulary of colonization, and one of them is the line or even the survey and territory. And then the third thing is the center. So all of those kind of go into that idea of like, Okay, I'm going to draw the circle, right, I'm going to make a boundary, we're inside, you're outside the system of power is, is, is the capital, the church, or whatever it is, is in the middle of that, and it's us and them and keep them out. Like, if we stopped thinking about that, right? If we started this, think about how are we doing that? And sometimes those things can be very aggressive, and sometimes they can be almost unintentional. Are we excluding people? Are we making things that are different for other people? You know, like if we design a museum, and we understand, okay, we put this museum and some sort of cultural center of the city, who is attending this museum? How do we reach out to the people that don't attend those museums, right like that, that's just one example. But it's that we could unintentionally create these boundaries in doing the things the same way that we've always been doing them. I think if we started to just think about where and when are we drawing these lines? Am I drawing a line now that separates me from from other people? Am I drawing a line, you know, where I'm an academic and an educator, and you have to apply to get into the university, and you have to have a certain kind of grade and a certain kind of test score. I rethink those things. You know, as an educator, and, you know, I'm on the graduate selection committee for incoming grad students at our school. And when I see a student's GPA, I'm not like making all of my assessment based on that GPA. I'm looking at their transcript. Yeah, maybe you got good grades in your design studio, but you got bad grades, and you're like, required English course or your calculus course, or whatever it is that kind of like... I'm trying to understand what the student who the student is. And I feel like too much of the past, we've just been looking at these like, standards and numbers and things. And so I think that policies and building codes and planning codes, zoning codes can be the same way. Like if we hold on to the standards, and not question the standards, and what what is the intention of the standard? And when does the standard need to bend or change? We'll always be creating these lines and boundaries will always be saying, well, you can live here, you can't have this. You can't have a business, you can't have a business like... that's always going it's a self perpetuating system. And I think colonization is really sort of designed to be that. And so when I am working with students and I, normally I teach studios where I don't I don't teach indigenous content, but I'm like kind of secretly teaching indigenous thinking because I have students work in here in Milwaukee. I have them working in African American neighborhoods and Latin x neighborhoods of the city, and our city is very segregated, meaning like those people live in certain parts of the city, and everyone knows where they live and like that line while invisible is perceptual. And

so, you know, I talk to students about like, Okay, well, we're going into this neighborhood, don't go into a store and just like, ask people about how do you like your neighborhood? What do you want to see? Buy something from them, like patronize their business, and then start conversations with them about where they live. And I can almost guarantee you the, what you want to know will eventually kind of come out. And so I'm trying to teach them how to engage communities that are not like them to not see those lines. And I'm having them do it as designers. Meaning I teach them how to draw maps in ways that we were not really thinking about those boundaries, we're trying to pack drawings with as much stuff as possible. And that's what I do is, as a designer, I'm trying to put as many ideas into the thing as possible. Because as a designer, as a project progresses, I can come back to that thing. And it's like, it's like a fertile garden I've made of different ingredients. And I might even have livestock or some other sorts of proteins involved. And it's not just vegetables, I can make this most the most wonderful meal at the end, because I have all of these ingredients. And that's how I see mapping. I'm not trying to like, make boundaries and assessments about places at the outset, at the very beginning of a project. And so I'm trying to teach students how to do that as well. And it's in that act of drawing that I think that it starts to get embedded into your brain and a different cognitive system. Even if it's drawing by hand or on the computer. It's not just like, I'm doing research, I'm reading articles and talking to people, I'm looking at demographics, I'm trying to teach students how to integrate all of that. And so that's the role I think that mapping can actually have. Because mapping in and of itself can always be this sort of exclusive act of drawing lines and keeping boundaries and being a tool of colonization. So I'm trying to figure out how do I decolonize the map? How do I like take away those boundaries and, and really thinking about it? And can I use the tools of the colonizer against the colonizer, right? Meaning like, yeah, my drawings are full of lines. But maybe those lines don't stand for things like walls or surfaces, or changes, maybe their trajectories. Or maybe they're maybe I'm drawing magnetism, maybe I'm drawing, Wi Fi signals or technology, maybe it's all of those things, right? Maybe I don't have to decide what it is until I decide to deploy it as a designer in an actual space. And so they can be very powerful tools. And so when I teach students about mapping, and I talk about mapping, specifically, I think of it as a representational tool in general, especially for architects, I think that the way that we always sort of think about how we represent projects and ideas is that the thing comes into our mind. And then we represent it, we draw plans of it, elevations, sections, perspectives, like all of those things can be embedded with a level of mapping, like thinking. And so I have students read articles of people, people like James Corner, who writes a lot about mapping in landscape architect. And then I say, Well, this is what he says about it. So how can we use those tools? How can we now use the tools to think about it in a sort of decolonized way? I think that that's, that's kind of a way of breaking down the colonization is to use the tools of colonization against itself, and not to use it, you know, to perpetuate it in a sort of way. And so we think of even how the country was founded, right, the Louisiana Purchase, like a big sort of line with.. boundary was drawn, and then Lewis and Clark were sent out to sort of survey at tell us what, what's in this? And then when he encountered indigenous people, they were like, they were either friendly, or they were foes, you know, like,

Chris Cornelius 19:07

why, why these two categories? Why can't we be allies and friends and stewards? And why can't we learn something from from this, these people? And so, it's, but I also think that it's in that understanding of mapping that we have to understand, like, historically, how maps were made, and what what, what sort of point of view were they were they made in and, you know, to what end? Were they to be

colonized in the sort of survey, right, creating this grid across the landscape, which, you know, happened here in the US and happened to Canada happens most to sort of colonized landscapes. It's just a way of like, finding the meaning over the land. Again, right? Mapping is a tool and so I like to use it as a tool to, to rethink those those ideas and think about it sort of broadly and not into like Google Maps sort of way where it's not just about geography. And I'm trying to find my way around, you know, and Google Maps says...they took a long time to put indigenous reservations on Google Maps for a long time they weren't even on, they weren't even part of the boundary. And when you look at other sort of mapping tools is a website called native land dot ca. It's a website where you can type in where you are currently, like your zip code, your city and state, and it will tell you whose land Are you on. And when you look at the map, you can see how complex that actually is. It's like a series of bubbles that overlap with one another. And they're a group of researchers that are always kind of trying to find what but those boundaries actually are. And so in that way, it's a kind of decolonized map this to say that these things are overlap with one another. And everything isn't just a boundary or a line. That one thing only, only one thing exists on the inside, and everything else exists on the outside. So it's in that way that I think that mapping as a tool, as a form of agency, as a representational device and even as a physical artifact is really important. And so that's something you'll see in my work, it's usually kind of a way that I might start projects and have been working for a while I've been working on a research project, I'm examining the American Indian occupation of Alcatraz Island that happened in November of 69, to June of 71. And so I've started the whole sort of process, because I started really thinking about that as a thing, that occupation and how complex that actually was. And it was actually hundreds, if not 1000s of years of history that led to that moment. And so if I'm going to draw that I have to use a kind of mapping to begin to do that, I can't just like, start my research with a design proposition. That design proposition has to come out of deep understanding that that for me happens in mapping. And so I think it can be very powerful tool in ways of expressing ideas, and not in just a singular way, but to use a different way of seeing the drawing its images, it's data, it's other sorts of things. And so I like to use it, and I like to teach it to, to my students.

Olga Stella 22:13

I've seen some of the beautiful maps that you made in your drawings, on your website, and and in some of the lectures you've given, and it's really... there's so much meaning in them. And I think just even, I've just enjoyed our conversation today because I think all there's the complexity of what we've talked about, but at the root of it is really this idea of, of empathy and relationships. And, you know, maybe not not being constricted by frankly, colonial structures that are, you know, fundamentally make up our society? How can we start to break those structures down so that we can be people together? It's been wonderful talking to you.

Chris Cornelius 22:56

Thank you. My pleasure.

Olga Stella 23:20

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