

Linyee Yuan on the role of design in the food system

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SPEAKERS

LinYee Yuan, 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 applied design thinking to address some of our world's most pressing issues.

Olga Stella 00:45

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Olga Stella 01:06

Please welcome LinYee Yuan, design journalist and founding editor of Mold and online and print magazine about designing the future of food. Linyee is a New York based journalist and editor who has been writing about design for over a decade. Inspired by her work as an editor at Core 77 and the Global Food Crisis, LinYee started Mold in 2013 as a platform about food design. In 2015, the United Nations issued a report warning that if we continue to eat and drink the way that we do, by the year 2050 when there are 9 billion people populating this planet, we will not be able to produce enough food to feed everyone. In today's episode, we are going to explore the role of design in the food system, how designers can help us address the oncoming food crisis, and why food activists should be working with designers. Please help me welcome LinYee Yuan.

Olga Stella 02:02

Welcome LinYee to the Detroit City of Design podcast. Thank you so much for joining us this morning.

LinYee Yuan 02:08

Of course, thank you so much for having me. I'm so thrilled to participate and have an opportunity to speak to the great people of Detroit.

Olga Stella 02:17

Well, I am really excited to be talking to you because food is such an important issue here in Detroit, especially food access and food security, and food sovereignty. And I know these are all issues that you have worked on through your work at MOLD. And so I think one of the things, though, that we don't talk enough about in Detroit is where design intersects with these issues of food security and access sovereignty, the food crisis in general, I'd love for you to help our audience better understand what that intersection is.

LinYee Yuan 02:51

Well, it's interesting, because Detroit being the Motor City, the kind of template for our modern day food production system really comes from these industrial processes of, you know, that are seen at their best in, you know, the production of things like cars, where everything is kind of standardized, and put on a system that allows for things to be modular and controlled. And as anybody who has ever dealt with like a pet, like a fish tank or something, knows, or even tried to, like, you know, grow house plants or started your own garden, you can't really control biology, like that, and all the food that we eat is part of a living ecosystem. So the crisis that we're about what we're facing beyond the immediate crisis of food insecurity that has really swept our country, during this COVID crisis, is the fact that in by the year 2050, which is, you know, less than 30 years away, United Nations has predicted that if we continue to eat the way that we do, we will not be able to produce enough food to feed everybody. So imagine the compounding crises of the climate, of climate change of migration of, you know, and add to that the crisis of just literally not having enough food to provide for the exploding population on Earth. It's a real tinderbox and a real crisis of not only kind of a physical crisis, but I would say a moral crisis.

Olga Stella 04:46

Absolutely. And so then how do designers...how can designers intervene at that crisis? What are the some of those opportunities that you've been exploring through your work?

LinYee Yuan 04:56

Well, like all thorny problems, it's sometimes really challenging and very hard to understand how an individual designer or you know, a team of designers might be able to address something as complex, as thorny as the food crisis. And but my argument is that designers who are professionally trained to work in interdisciplinary ways to research across different disciplines solutions to frame the right questions, and hopefully are learning to design with people and other entities are really, you know, professionally equipped to offer solutions at different scales, for the food crisis. So this can be everything from taking a look at the ways that your local community does or does not deal with organic waste in offering a kind of solution that works specifically for your community, to creating kind of a visuality around, you know, to help raise funds for your local favorite restaurant that might be struggling during the the kind of this pandemic and you know, thinking about how you might extend the tools of design, to service your community, and that community can be defined in any way you see fit.

Olga Stella 06:34

I've been paging through MOLD both you know, figuratively and literally, and I've just loved some of the examples that you have showcased, you know, through both the print issues, and also, you know, on the website, and just is there an example or two, that, you know, really helps, you know, would help our audience kind of visualize, you know, a design solution for the food crisis, that maybe, you know, maybe we're not thinking about, or maybe is a little bit, you know, more forward thinking than some of the conversation that's happening in the mainstream media right now?

LinYee Yuan 07:08

Well, I think that, I'd like to start on a very kind of intimate scale for design, which is about how can design create product and relationships between people and the food that we eat? So, you know, I think right now, most of us are used to going to a grocery store or a market or the corner store or whatever, and getting something to eat like a package something often pre packaged. We have no idea where any of those ingredients come from, there's no storytelling beyond the fact that it's something that, you know, is going to be hopefully delicious. We don't have any idea about the kind of nutritional density of that thing. And I think that's a huge problem. I think the fact that we don't have a relationship with our food, is really the kind of starting point for reimagining what a food system could be, when we actually understand where our food comes from, for example, there... I love using this example, in my talks, because there was a project by the British design team Burton Nita, and it was it was created a couple of years ago, but it's basically a wearable algae farm and it was, you know, kind of conceived in a way that really underscores the ways that we could potentially have a, like a symbiotic relationship with our food. But it's basically this kind of headpiece that captures carbon dioxide as we breathe it out. And algae need carbon dioxide in order to thrive. And so then the algae that lives within this wearable algae farm that looks almost like a cross between like a face mask, and a helmet, would then kind of feed off the carbon dioxide that you as a human are exhaling. And eventually you would be able to harvest that algae for its nutritional and hopefully very delicious kind of output. And so this kind of intimacy, that it in genders, is something that could only happen through the vision of design. And I think that it's an interesting idea to consider what would happen when you actually have some sort of relationship with what you eat every day? And I think, you know, we're seeing that day, especially this year, and a renewed interest in baking in, in the forced cooking that we've had to do this year, that people have really slowed down and really kind of considered well what's really important to me in something that is necessary is eating every day. And if you are have the time, the space, the privilege to be able to execute that task with care, I think that there's something really valuable there. And so I think, yeah, just starting from a place of how can we have a relationship with our food? How can we be more intimate with our food? And to consider how do we use our the act of eating, the act of preparing food as a kind of daily active care? I think these kind of tools in these design perspectives, have a real, there's a real opportunity to kind of transform individual relationships with food, and then potentially see that ripple out through design to larger communities.

Olga Stella 10:59

You can really, you know, as you speak, I'm just, again, reflecting back on the MOLD itself and the content that you put through, but it's also the way you put that content out because you are humanizing what has essentially become an industrial...and I think you've used the term fetishized process and product into maybe, maybe talk a little bit for our listeners around just how the design of MOLD itself,

the, you know, the online and print media, how that how that is a tool in trying to combat the food crisis and help more people understand.

LinYee Yuan 11:39

Yeah, I think that, you know, our both our online and print magazine has the way, the way we've always thought about it is as a tool to reach out to designers. When I first launched the online component of the magazine in 2013/ 2014. You know, it was it was originally intended to just be kind of like a Tumbler, it was not, it was something that I was doing on nights and weekends in between editing, the industrial design website, Core 77, which was a huge influence on kind of the way I think about design in the way that I see designs potential. And, you know, I, at the time, the kind of emerging field of food design was, I mean, it was and still is quite undefined. And I was really frustrated with this kind of constant refrain that I was receiving, which was like, I don't really understand food design, is it plating? Like is it just visuals? Like it was, it was just so unclear to people that what the potential of it could be. And I realized that there's no better way of engaging designers in a dialogue around the opportunity and potential of food design, then by creating a designed a beautifully designed and thoughtful object, and the types of objects I know how to make our magazines. And so that really launched me into considering, well, what kind of magazine would I want to make, that could be this designed object that designers would want to really sit down with and think about and in, in page through, I love the idea of slow media, I love the idea of magazines being this relic of slow media, that, you know, are the print magazine is quite dense, it's good to be sat with and page through, over the course of like six months to a year, it's something to be returned to. It's also an archive of kind of ideas that we've been considering in this moment. And so, you know, the visual language of MOLD, I think, really reflects that, because food is obviously the most primitive and basic of needs. But when talking about the future of food, that question is so wide open, and there's so many different ways of approaching that. And so everything from the design of the logo for the magazine, to the ways that the interior is art directed, are really informed by those kinds of questions. And so, you know, we work with artists, and photographers, and writers who may not who aren't typically invited to participate in the food media world. I mean, we are not food media. We're not really part of the food media world ourselves. We're definitely outsiders, for both design world and food world people, other media, I would say. And so kind of having the, the privilege of kind of approaching both disciplines, and really examining that intersection, from an outsider's perspective, allows us to kind of bring more voices into the fold. And so I think that that's kind of what makes MOLD such a signature... That's what that's that's our signature really, is that we have scientists, neurologists, fashion photographers, you know, illustrators who are doing comic books, like creating work for the magazine. And that really underscores another theme that we work really hard towards amplifying, which is that we see the potential of design and food designers, designers working in food, as a way..as a call to arms in some ways to be like, hey, you don't have to just be a consumer, you need to be a creative collaborator in the food system, like, there's no, there's the time to be like a passive consumer and just kind of, you know, be part of the system that really gives you no choice, no information, there's no transparency, around one of the most important things we do every day, that time is over. Like, now it's time for us to be active participants, and creative collaborators in this very complex system, and do make the change that we can at the at the scale that we can and see how those imaginaries then kind of ripple out to the larger world.

Olga Stella 17:01

So and how do you do you feel that that you're accomplishing that maybe in a different way than then mainstream, you know, publications or, you know, kind of conventional media might be through MOLD? You know, in terms of your choices? I love the diversity of collaborators that you have, you know, is that a point of difference?

LinYee Yuan 17:24

Absolutely. I mean, anybody who's ever made a magazine can attest to the fact that it's truly a collaborative effort to make a magazine, we have soil scientists writing about the importance of soil. And in the context of food in the food and design context. We have farmers writing about how seed saving is a form of design. I think that by inviting different people who are experts, who have perspectives, from their specific discipline, to participate in a larger conversation about design is really the only way that we can prevent ourselves from replicating the systems that we currently live under. And I think that that's that kind of interdisciplinary approach is something that design excels at, that that's actually taught in design education, and it should be leveraged in thinking about and addressing and coming up with solutions with the communities that are most impacted by this food insecurity, by lack of access by environmental destruction, because of monoculture approached to food production. This kind of call to design with communities, is I think, one of the most valuable professional tools that we have as designers.

Olga Stella 19:10

So the global food crisis is such a huge issue. And this call, you know, you're speaking around equity and inclusion and justice in many ways, how do you how does food sovereignty fit into that? How do issues of equity and justice fit into, you know, some of the potential solutions around the global food crisis?

LinYee Yuan 19:35

I mean, that should really, justice and sovereignty should be at the foundation for any conversation that we have when talking about design being a solutions driven profession. If we are not approaching the, you know, the framing of our design questions from a place that is inclusive. From a place that considers and designs with the communities that are most impacted, then we're not doing our job. Like we're, you know, that's not, that's not design. You know, I think that I teach my students to really think, from, you know, Alice Rossburn's kind of prompt, which is to imagine design as an attitude. Like, it's not just about making things anymore. In fact, I think we can all agree that we have been doing making just making things for too long, right, are we considering the consequences of it. And, you know, Victor Papanek, from like, you know, the 60s and 70s, or was saying that, you know, industrial design is the most dangerous profession there is out there. And his example was actually about cars. And so I think that, like, you know, this is this is, it's, we're, I don't want to say we're too late. But I think that there is a real urgency around this idea of designing with. And then it's not, I don't see the role of design, as, you know, offering this like, one shot deal solution, silver bullet, for resolving our food crisis. But what I do see is that design as an attitude design, as a tool can be leveraged to offer solutions with the communities that we care about, the communities that we live in. And again, community being defined in whatever way makes sense for the individual designer. But again, it requires a designer to design with and not designed for.

Olga Stella 19:39

Yeah, we we couldn't agree more here it was at Design Core, and and through our work with the Detroit city of design initiative. This idea of inclusive process as being kind of fundamental to equitable futures is at the core of what we're doing. So you're definitely, definitely preaching to the choir when it when it comes to why it matters. And I guess, you know, what part of what we're trying to help more people understand is, you know, what does this look like? How do you do it? What do you need to be aware of? And I and I think, you know, especially given that the, in many communities, especially in Detroit, you know, food justice is grounded in a really is it's part of the civil rights movement, it's part of, you know, it's part of a much larger kind of human rights conversation. And so, you know, what, how do you do this? How do what are some examples that you're seeing, that designers can really learn from, you know, the, the how part?

LinYee Yuan 22:53

I think that like the black ecologies movement, something that we've been really inspired and informed by, for those of you who might not be familiar with black ecologies, it really started as like an online communal study of, of the ways that the knowledge produced by black communities can help inform political interventions and ecological futures. It's a way also of recognizing that black communities, and the African diaspora as a whole, in general, are more susceptible to the effects of environmental crises because of environmental racism. And so by designing with communities of color, who are all communities who are most affected by the the injustices that our food system has been designed to produce, I think it allows for a very grounding starting place for any designer to work from. And so it's not it's, it's not up to me, from my, you know, apartment in New York City, to tell designers in Detroit, how to start working. It's really up to those designers to reach out to those in their community who might be really feeling the brunt of food insecurity and food injustice, to ask how to start. Because the the crisis that we're facing here in New York, and in Brooklyn, in particular, in my neighborhood here in Crown Heights, is going to look very different. And the solutions, therefore, will look really different.

Olga Stella 24:40

That's right.

LinYee Yuan 24:42

So I think just kind of starting from that place by asking those questions by participating in your own community. Again, however you defined it is the most important, important starting place.

Olga Stella 24:56

That's exactly right. And I think often there's a predilection just to charge in and fix it. And I mean, I think our whole conversation today is really been around, you know, stop, understand what tools you have, but listen and ask and try to be part of something maybe that's, that's bigger than than just your own ideas?

LinYee Yuan 25:18

Absolutely. You know, food sovereignty as a whole is about, you know, allowing is not allowing but, you know, giving agency to communities to define what is appropriate for them, as opposed to being like, Oh, no, everyone needs to like, you know, I'm going to put an apple orchard here, maybe nobody in

that community eats apples, or, you know, I grew up, I'm a first generation Chinese American woman, and I grew up in Texas. And, you know, I always laugh when I hear from these kind of tech bros who are talking about like growing lettuce in a vertical farm. I didn't grow up eating salad, or lettuce, like lettuce is like the most the least interesting vegetable in my mind. Right? And just because it's not part of my kind of cultural culinary history. And so, you know, there's lots of reasons why people grow salad in vertical farms. But that's a whole other conversation.

Olga Stella 26:23

Right.

LinYee Yuan 26:24

But, you know, I think that, you know, it's important if you're somebody who's interested in, you know, creating different functioning, growing systems, to ask the people who would actually use them, like, what would they grow? Not everybody just wants, like an herb garden. Like, like, you know, basil or something.

Olga Stella 26:49

That's right. Yeah.

LinYee Yuan 26:51

So yeah, I think that that type of, you know, asking that type of framing, is what designers are taught to do. And so when it doesn't change when you're talking about food, in fact, I feel like it's more important because food is emotional. And food is historical. Food is cultural, it has all of these other implications, beyond just, you know, nutrition. And so, when we work as designers in a food space, it's really critical to remember that, that food is is so much more than just like a product. That it is.. food can be revolutionary, and it should be revolutionary.

Olga Stella 27:44

So just as we wrap up our conversation today, we've talked a lot about, you know, how designers can interact in and be part of solutions for the food crisis, whether it's, it's, you know very local, personal solutions, or are maybe thinking about about some of these other issues. And I wonder if maybe if we flip it and think about for the food activists for the the people who are working on the ground in the food system, and thinking about these issues, what might be what might be something to inspire them to reach out to designers?

LinYee Yuan 28:21

One of the...in the newest issue of MOLD, which is about seeds, both physical seeds, but also the seeds of an idea or project that we might want to bring with us through the portal of uncertainty that we experienced this past year. I spoke with the philosopher and activist Vandana Shiva. And she talks about the importance of cultivating an aesthetics of biodiversity. And I think that that's something that has really stuck with me as a kind of a goal for working with design. And I believe that those who are, you know, working in food justice, food activism, can also take heed of Dr. Shivas kind of vision of an aesthetics of biodiversity. Because I think that, you know, we as people seek beauty, and there's so much beauty in the world, and the power of leveraging a diverse type of beauty, whether it's in seed

selection, or produce selection, or in the visual culture, around activism, and even, you know, the market of selling and producing food. I think that all of these things are going to help us again, have a more broad vision of deliciousness of flavor, a broader appreciation for diversity as a whole. And so I think that's that's something that designers could share with those who are working in the justice space.

Olga Stella 30:07

Well thank you so much, LinYee for your time today and for these just wonderful conversation. I really enjoyed talking with you.

LinYee Yuan 30:15

Thank you so much for having me on your show.

Olga Stella 30:33

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