

Tanya and Luis Saldivar on creating new talent pipelines

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SPEAKERS

Luis Ali, Tanya Saldivar Ali, 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 00:45

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Olga Stella 01:06

I'm here today with Tanya Saldivar Ali and Luis Ali, a husband and wife duo working to create an inclusive design model to address urban inner city challenges faced by minority builders to their company AGI Construction. Tanya and Luis founded AGI Construction 10 years ago to provide commercial interior remodeling, retrofitting and building services to community development projects. Luis is a United States Air Force veteran, and an Ohio National Guard reservist, who's also a licensed electrician by trade. Tanya has 20 years of experience as a Detroit community leader that advocates for inclusiveness, employment, quality education and access to skilled trades. They're both native southwest Detroiters. And in fact, high school sweethearts. I'm so excited to be speaking with Tanya and Luis about how they're using their projects and their company, AGI construction to mentor and uplift local narratives in the design built ecosystem.

Olga Stella 02:09

Tanya and Louise, I'm so happy to have you on the Detroit City of Design podcast. Thanks for joining us today.

Tanya Saldivar Ali 02:16

Thanks for having us.

Olga Stella 02:18

Well, we have been just so happy at Design Core to have you and AGI Construction and your projects as part of the Detroit city of design initiative, which is focused on helping to really make Detroit a center for inclusive design, both in our own community but also you know, as a, as a beacon to the rest of the world. And I'd love to just I'm really excited to talk to you about, you know, the work that you've been doing in southwest Detroit, and how you know, how you really helped to bring in the construction industry and you know, the design build ecosystem into this conversation. People often separate design from construction in your, your very firmly, you know, putting the two together and say these two things coexist. And can you can you help our audience understand a little bit more about your perspective about that?

Tanya Saldivar Ali 03:11

Yeah, well, thanks for having us. The the journey has been exciting. And it's really wrapped up in our personal journey, our two passions, you know, Luis, being in construction and myself, still pursuing my degree in urban planning. But really, the heart of it has been birthed out of a lot of the personal challenges and the barriers that we've experienced growing up in southwest Detroit and growing up in the inner city, along with, you know, stepping back and realizing that design and construction and development impacts lives every day. So it's been an amazing journey. And really, it started with, you know, us co owning AGI Construction, and, you know, pursuing the different projects. But in roughly about 2016/ 2017, we did our largest project to date that was really fostered and given to us by one of our mentors was one of the largest minority firms in Detroit. And it was a high school cafeteria. And when we started doing this cafeteria, we were managing the whole project from beginning to end all the trades, exterior, interior kitchen equipment, you name it, we were we were, you know, project managing the whole project. And when we walked away, we were kind of scratching our heads and we were excited about being able to complete the project and the largest project to date. But it was really that project that shifted, how how we were, how we approached our business and how we were looking at construction. Prior to the renovation, the kids were eating lunch out of the school gym. And it dawned on me at that point that construction and design is really about accessibility. And there was no reason why any kid in Detroit should be, you know, shouldn't have a lunch room. And you know how how that impacts learning in the environments we were in. And so, from that point, it just became really the center and the core. And it really shifted how we how we were doing business. And every project that followed, we realized the development and the impact, whether it was we were helping a church remain in the community that was displaced for, you know, large development, like the Gordie Howe bridge, or building a cafeteria for kids or a technology lab that was closing the digital divide. At that point, we realized this was larger than a building. And that construction really was about community development in the larger impact of the people and places and the people that have access to those buildings.

Tanya Saldivar Ali 03:16

And how, in your process, the different projects that you do, you know, how do you work with designers? So they are part of your team? Are they part of the larger team? You know, what's that relationship like?

Tanya Saldivar Ali 06:15

So it took us a while to figure that out. And this really was some of the frustration and in coming up with a solution with a design build hub, you know, being a general contractor and being able to manage, I think we realized early on the the kind of silos that everybody was working in, in terms of the architect and, you know, really working with the client. And in, you know, by the time we get the information as the contractor, some things were not even buildable or scalable, or, you know, maybe not just the best practice in building, so that really fostered kind of the idea of how do we come together and learn from each other? So that we understand the different facets and the different lenses that we can look at a project together so that we have a successful project, whether that's buildable, whether that's affordable, you know, meeting the client's needs, and in understanding our clients that was huge. What we found is that, you know, because now we prioritize equitable projects working with schools and churches, nonprofits, small business owners. There's a challenge of understanding the design, build process, and all the aspects that go into making a project successful. And we realized very early on, and we, we started investing a lot of personal time, which is engaging and educating our clients, you know, how these process should work, and how these teams should work. And it became very visible, visible as well, early on that, you know, if the right architect or the right designer, or having the right network of connections and access to resources, early on, the project was going to suffer and was not going to be successful. So

Olga Stella 08:08

Well I imagine Louis, you're often probably right on site with those clients, you know, what is how does that conversation go? And what are some of the things that you've learned through through that engagement with your clients around the role of design and creating the kinds of outcomes that they that they're looking for?

Luis Ali 08:25

Yeah, what I find is, oftentimes, we get to the project, we start talking about budget. And so often, it's, it's budgetary issues. And so we go back to the drawing board, and we re-estimate, and all that's a process and all that it takes time. So we just really tried to get the best product with the budget that the owner or the client has. And when we're out front, and we're part of those meetings in the development stages, we can talk through those things early on. And as Tanya was just saying, it's just so important to really find out what the needs are of the customer. Not that the architects or designers don't do that. But doing that without the person who's actually going to be hands on with the trades, and installing either the architectural pieces or the MEP, mechanical, electrical, and plumbing pieces. Those are the things that, you know, we just really like to discuss up front and try to get the try to see where we can help.

Olga Stella 09:22

Well, so tell me more about the 18th Street design build green hub. This is a project that the two of you have developed with the community, for the community that comes out of your work.

Luis Ali 09:35

Yes, a really for me, the green hub is exposure. And it's exposure for everybody involved in on the projects and people around that live within the communities where we're doing our work, you know, letting the informing the neighbors, informing people who are in the community of what's happening, sometimes getting input and all the different facets of construction and pre construction. I think just the exposure that people can develop with what's happening around them, really gives people the exposure and the knowledge to to make good decisions.

Olga Stella 10:08

Tell us more about the hub itself. And what happens there. You know, in addition to being the home for your for AGI Construction, you know what, what happens there? Maybe , what are you hoping will happen there, you know, after the worst of the pandemic is over?

Tanya Saldivar Ali 10:22

So we're super excited about the hub and in the way that the process has happened. Some of it was organic, some of it was very intentional, when we came across this beautiful historic home, and we weren't, we didn't really have a permanent location for ourselves in terms of our business. And as you know, Detroit is rapidly changing and being able to access buildings and real estate is becoming extremely difficult. So when we come up with one, we came across this property, it had a lot of historical features to it, but also had some sentimental attachment for us, because we were from the community and had some shared experiences from the legacy of the family that owned this property. Right away, we knew that it was something that we could relocate and permanently, you know, put our office at so that we weren't, we were able to stay within our own community. And as we started engaging the residents, it was that part was extremely intentional, because we even though we were from Detroit, from Southwest Detroit, from the community, without what would it look like for a business to move into a neighborhood and talk to the residents and build a trust with the residents and ask them what they thought about a new business moving into the center of their neighborhood. And as we started exploring the idea of a hub and incubator space or shared space, we, you know, realized very quickly that being centralized within a neighborhood could had such an impact, where we could build wealth from the center and be centralized where people could access, which was also, you know, led into kind of the idea around the pipeline, and people having access to us. And so the process was an inclusive process. And then and I will say that it was organic. And because it continued to evolve, as we had some initial ideas about a co working space, workforce initiative. And as we started engaging the clients in our the residents, they had some different ideas, and there was some pushback, and there was some great ideas that came out of it, some that they supported, some that they didn't. And then we were we realized very early on that, you know, if we were really going through this inclusive design process with them, that, you know, there were obviously things that we were going to have to change. And I and I think that that was key, and I think that's probably one of the most strongest aspects of the design build hub is that the intention for it evolved into something that everybody was happy with and had input with. And so you know that that was part of the design process. But when we started engaging with you guys in in, you know, we're highlighted for the Detroit design month, we did some workshops that brought in that input and the stakeholders, and we brought everybody right into the center of the neighborhood, and hosted a design build workshop, which was something that we

designed for Hope Park students to design a sustainable park. And we realized that this workshop was really something special. Because you know, whether we use it with youth or high school students, we could also use the same workshop with clients or just any, anybody that didn't understand all the different aspects and steps towards design, build and building a space or looking at socially designing something like why is this space important? And as we started engaging, we got so much feedback and so many great ideas from that, which then in played of the design build habit really ended up becoming something that we realized that was a lot larger than ourselves, it was a lot bigger than just the building itself. But really, it was about the engagement and the process that we used to really be inclusive in that process. So it's actually built into the actual hub itself. So one of the things that, you know, when we did some of these engagements we were able to we hosted one specific event and it was called Stories in Stanton Park. And the idea behind that was that obviously within development, a lot of local stakeholders are not part of that process, and they don't understand some of the language and the terminology and the complex issues that happen around development. And there's a lot of frustration that that happens with that. And then obviously, there's a huge issue of distrust, you know, because of the way that the resources are used, or, you know, people from the outside coming in, and a lot of the shifting of changing and how does that impact their neighborhoods. And so what stories of Stanton Park we highlighted, and it was also a tool that we use to be able to introduce ourselves because what we also realize is that there had been people in the Hubbard Richard community that didn't know who we were in that we grew up in the neighborhood. And maybe they had been there for 5/ 10 years, but they, you know, didn't, they were looking at us like we were outsiders. So it was a way to engage, to build trust and share stories. But we also realized it was important for locals that had been part of this community for generations, to share their stories about their memories of their neighborhood, in the face of rapid development. And it also would give newcomers an opportunity to hear those stories and, hopefully share a love for the neighborhood or for Detroit, so that we're creating a bridge between the old and the new. And so, you know, we, you know, so as as we finalize the drawings and put together the team and you know, was looking at all this wonderful engagement that we got from the people around us and the residents, we were figuring out how can we include this, this all these wonderful aspects and information into the hub so that it's highlighted. And we can keep these stories and these local narratives in the forefront and why it's important, because the other thing I'll say is that just like the projects that we prioritize, whether it's our clients, or the clients they serve, have these rippling effects in the neighborhoods outside of Detroit. So that's where the, if these walls could talk exhibit came about, and we created these short videos. And we figured we would have these permanent displays within the hub so that whether you know AGI we're having clients coming in and talking to us about projects in you know, seeing if we're a good fit and putting together teams for these projects. People can also see stories about our clients. They're their stakeholders, and also our subcontractors. I think way too often, whether it's a large prime construction company that takes a lot of credit, and don't build real capacity for the subcontractors that serve them. Which really is kind of Luis' role. And I can let Luis talk a little bit more to that with how do we build capacity for those underneath us and those that support us, and also passing on that knowledge and experience, especially as Detroit minority contractors. That's been a huge barrier for for Luis within the trades or our subcontractors that we prioritize, you know, we try to use when we probably do use over 90%, Detroit minority subcontractors, there's just not enough minorities within the construction industry. I believe there's like 11 million in across the United States and only 6% are African Americans and maybe less than 50% Hispanic Latinos. And they're all in, you know, labor mostly labor positions. So the idea was that the hub, then

we're not only building capacity for ourselves, but we're also building capacity for our minority subcontractors.

Olga Stella 18:56

Well, I mean, hopefully to drawing on those stories, you know, what I love about what you're doing, it's not just the physical reconstruction, but it's this uplifting of the stories of the neighborhood, the stories of people and weaving that into the process. And I think a lot of times when we think about redevelopment, especially in a city like Detroit, where you know, outsiders tend to see a lot of, you know, blight or, you know, things that need to be fixed. You know, we see our memories we see our experiences, we see people that we we've loved and maybe lost and and the work you're doing through your your business and through the 18th Street design, build green hub, I think helps create a touch point for that, that ripples on. You know, maybe it would be I think it'd be helpful maybe for our audience to know a little bit more about the green part of the green hub, we haven't really had a chance to talk about sustainability and the green construction techniques that you're deploying and maybe tell us a little bit more about about what that is and why that's so important, especially in southwest Detroit.

Tanya Saldivar Ali 20:03

So we ventured into some of the aspects of the green construction. And probably about seven, eight years ago, Luis was actually approached by a veteran green peer group about starting a chapter here and partnering with the USG BC. And at the time, you know, we were, we were in the midst of really trying to figure it was really before the world really started looking at Detroit in the revitalization. And most Detroiters were kind of scratching their head and trying to figure out what was going on seemed like a lot of other people knew before we did. And we were kind of like, green is extremely expensive, you know, and can people afford green. And those were some of the early discussions that we were having with some of the residents with building some kind of workforce initiative around green opportunities, and entrepreneurs. And at the time, we just started actually, we were working on the live green Campbell project, which is another project that we did over near Cristo Rey, high school, Holy Redeemer. And it was a extremely expensive green project where we, it was a private investor, or I wouldn't even call them investor, he was an engineer who bought a land bank home who really had some really big ideas around hybrid, and having half residential and then a half greenhouse where he eventually wants to use as a kind of an incubating space to teach young people about growing and entrepreneurship, and hydroponics. And so we were engaged early on in that project and walked him through the design, build and did a collaborative design process with some of the people that he brought to the table. And as some of the people that we included in the process. It ended up being, you know, probably under a million dollar project, and everything was custom within that house and had an extremely complicated module, solar panel, flooring system, greenhouse that was custom made to be able to control the environment, a lot of modules from the piping from the downstairs to the to the top, a metal roof. There was so many aspects of this. And as we kind of started walking through that process, we were working on the incubating hub. And we realized quickly on like, how do we pass these these opportunities and engage in this learning workforce initiative ahead of the game, but make it affordable? Because we were we were we were correct. Green is extremely expensive. And most people can afford it. And so we started picking apart that project and thinking like what, you know, what, what are things that we can do to engage in retrofitting older homes and looking at how to save energy, but also in a way that was accessible and affordable for most Detroiters. And so, you know, we brought

on a consultant to work with us through some of these details in the hub. And there were things as simple as the insulation, layers of insulation, how framing kind of works around the window frame, looking at the exterior envelopes of the property, and, you know, making sure that there's insulation or barriers on the outside. And these are things that we're still scratching the surface. And what we hope through the process is we prioritize some of the scopes that we will be sharing publicly through workshops and engagement. And they're also scopes that people can afford. So we're I mean, we're extremely excited about it right now, with the engineering and the team, we have, we've been looking at the Hvac system, which will probably be the most expensive thing, scope that we implement into the house. And it's also something that if somebody is interested in doing that they could do in phases. And so that's that's actually another strength that I think that our core AGI team has within ourselves is making sure that we can work with the client, to bring them to a project in phases where there's a clear plan to execute success, but also affordability in phases. So whether we're you know, building out and looking at the whole scope and then prioritizing, you know, a first floor and then you know, they have everything they need and putting in everything to support that second floor, when you know when they're ready. So I truly believe that's probably how we'll be engaging most of the the scope of 18th Street and it's going to be the one the other thing that I'll say about being inclusive and green, and approaching it this way is that inclusive truly takes time, because you really have to stop and make sure that everybody in the process is engaged but they have access and they understand what's going on. So we also realize early on that everybody learns differently. Everybody comes from different personal experiences. So so yeah, so that's that's kind of the gist of how far we've gotten with the green. You know, we know that the H vac system is a little bit more complex, the installation process, but we will be eventually having the solar panels and what we hope to do is engage the whole community so that, you know, maybe later around, we really can talk about the efforts towards collaborative projects where, you know, why can't a whole neighborhood share an infrastructure of solar panel and have access to the energy, but we're slowly working our way there. But at the end of the day, it comes down to resources, and being able to, you know, in order to execute those things.

Olga Stella 25:47

Well, it seems like the hub itself will be a touch point for people to learn and experience about these things that you that you've you've done that are that are above fancy, you know, gizmos, I think sometimes we think about green and sustainability. And it ends up turning into a conversation about, you know, gadgets and gizmos, and a lot of high end things. When you talk about something like insulation, insulation is something that is still cost money, but it's accessible to people. It's not, it's not a foreign concept. And when you know, when it comes to everyday needs,

Tanya Saldivar Ali 26:23

Yeah, yep. And you're right. And even as things as like, without that, you know, sharing the stories organically in terms of that's part of the sustainability part of it right about preserving culture in the in the neighborhood. The windows, you know, making sure that they're, you know, we're planning to have lots of windows so that, you know, there's plenty of light, we have a live green wall that's planned for the first floor, plant, you know, having access to clean air, there's just so many little things like that, that we're exploring to be able to share with others. So we're excited about it. But I think the, you know, the other aspect of the green and you probably touched I think you touched on it was the sustainability part. Sometimes sustainability is expensive. But one of the things that we talked about early on was trying to

talk about the term through the framework of resilience, because Detroiters are resilient. And we're excited about sharing those stories about being resilient through these times. And even without resources. We've been surviving, we've been doing the work. And I think that's a whole nother aspect of sustainability that we don't talk enough about.

Olga Stella 27:37

I couldn't agree more I especially in southwest Detroit, which is just a very special place for me too. I started my career in Detroit, working in community in southwest and just the resilience of the people there. And just the it's just it's a there's there's a lot of love and hard work and lessons that you know, more people need to know, which is why I'm so glad to have been able to talk to the two of you today. And I'm hoping we can kind of close out a little bit with just kind of what's what's next for the green hub? And what what if we're watching the project and you're developing it, if you can tell us kind of what's next?

Tanya Saldivar Ali 28:19

Yeah, so we are 100% complete with our drawing sets now. We've been fortunate enough to have so many partnerships, we like to say that partnership is the new leadership. So we've been touching base with all of our local partnerships that are, you know, have been with those along the journey. And figuring out how now do we build out the space in a way that we're staying true to our commitment to the inclusive process? So you know, which subcontractors are we bringing in to work on which opportunities? And extremely being very intentional about building out their capacity as they're working on a project. Which scopes are we highlighting and creating workshops out of? Installation was one of them. We've already done kind of a live workshop on site with our green consultant and talked a little bit through that process and probably editing those videos. One of the things that we touched base on I didn't talk a lot about was about the portal. So the the virtual walkthrough where people can walk through is really figuring out to how how we integrate technology in construction. So we've used droning, we use scanning, we've used CAD designing with overlaying and dropping it into the portal so people can see the before and after. And one of the things that Luis talks about all the time, I know I'm doing another doggie. But, you know, he's always told me very early on that, you know, construction is like, you know, we have to bring people along with us. And you know, so often we talk about skilled trades, but we don't talk enough about project management and inspectors, engineers. Our young people need access and exposure to like all these other pathways. So that was also the part of the design build hub was that we're not just advocating and talking about skilled trades and Luis is an electrician by trade. And also as a general contractor has a vast knowledge of all the different aspects. But you know, there's, there's exposure that needs to happen around the whole design process. So hopefully, we'll be launching very shortly here within the next month. And you'll see the a lot of social media and engagement of the process. One of the other things that we've been exploring is the How will Detroit future ops really is the name of the social arm of AGI? How we're legal, you know, creating that legal entity and how we're interacting in the space with each other? And what are some of the priorities that we're going to roll out? And how AGI will use this platform to support DFO and creating social change and around the design build environment. So we're super excited and really honored to be able to share this space with you.

Olga Stella 31:12

Well, I know we'll definitely be including links to many of the things that you mentioned in the podcast notes so that our viewers can get to know the 18th Street design build green hub even better. Well, I'm just so happy to have been able to talk to both of you today and to see the progress you're making on this really important asset, not just for Southwest Detroit but for our whole city. So thank you both. And thank you for being such great advocates for inclusive design processes and for the community.

Tanya Saldivar Ali 31:44

Thank you.

Luis Ali 32:07

Thank you for having us.

32:07

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