

URBAN FUTURES LAB: Yearbook Edition

Episode 3 The Rose that Grew from Concrete/The Lotus Rising from the Mud

Speaker Transcript Key

AA-Ashley Ajayi

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SI-Sabrina Im

AA 0:15

Before we dive in, I just want to make a quick note on this episode. It was recorded on May 8 2020, which was before our realities further changed as the Movement for Black Lives reached a new momentous swell. I gotta say, editing and listening back to this episode felt oddly prophetic as the Fellows talk about the need for change, and even call for revolution. And so, while the world keeps turning, at least for now, there is an even greater need for these radical reimaginings. Upheaval may be our new normal, and its as timely as ever. Let's start the show.

SI 1:09

Hey everyone, welcome to the final episode of The UFL podcast.

AA 1:13

I'm Ashley.

BA

I'm Brisa.

SI 1:15

I'm Sabrina. And it has been so much fun remembering all the experiences we've encountered at Public Matters. If you're just tuning in to this episode, please go back to our first episode so you can kind of hear our setup for who we are and also visit our website which will be linked in the show notes. In this final episode, we hope that if you've been listening up to now you've learned a little bit something about us.

AA

Yup! And whether you've listened to all three episodes or just the one we hope you come to better understand what the Urban Futures Lab is, and enjoy the sense of discovery we hope to impart with you because that's the MO of Urban Futures Lab. It's called a lab for a reason, you know, it's the place where we come together for experimentation observation and testing, and we try out new ideas and cook up something great.

BA 2:05

So as we've elaborated on before, we've taken this podcast journey because we wanted a yearbook to remember our one year anniversary at Public Matters. And the module for this month is "Social Cohesion in a Time of Disruption," which was inspired by COVID-19 and

transitioning to working from home. I do want to highlight some of the previous modules we've completed in the past, what we've learned from them, and what were some of our major projects that we've got to be creative and explorative with. As a Fellow, we get to tap into different forms of knowledge and meet people in completely different positions or professions. And at the end of the day, participating in the fellowship is great for us because we get to become more diverse with our skill sets. And it makes us more competitive candidates when we're applying for future jobs or schools or whatever we may be applying to in the future. So that's just a little breakdown of kind of what we explore within the modules.

AA

One of the first modules, we delved into was socially engaged arts organizations. Do you remember what exactly you researched?

BA

I remember the organization I focused on was *Las Imaginistas* who are based in Brownsville, Texas. I thought they were really cool because they are based in a border town and I also grew up in a border town. So I was like, Okay, cool. I kind of want to explore what they're doing and what they're up to. And the basic idea of what they were doing is "what does it mean to be more imaginative when planning for community and engaging community members in the process?" So it was interesting to learn more about that, as somebody who's an inspiring urban planner. Yeah. So Ashley, what did you work on?

AA 3:49

For this module, I had the chance to explore the Karrabing Film Collective, which is a collective made up of various indigenous peoples from the Northern Territory of Australia. It was really cool because they basically are a group of individuals who are like, our lives are so interesting and you know, different and it's not really something we see represented on TV and stuff. So they make movies that are inspired by events that happen in their everyday lives like land encroachment, environmental changes, or remembering their histories and their language. And it's also really cool because they largely shoot on iPhone cameras. They create these really beautiful experimental films. And so it's like a peek into a different world really, and it's really amazing. But Sabrina, you had a really cool topic too

SI 4:44

The group that I focused on for this module was the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project. And they're based in the Bay Area. They're completely volunteer run. So what the volunteers do is they have these digital maps that they've created and they've also done a lot of community events, and they do a lot of story gathering at these events. And the purpose of that is to hear about how people have been affected by gentrification, especially in the Bay Area. They really, the volunteer group really sets up the historical impacts too. So all of their work, like their digital maps are available on their website, which we'll link in the show notes when we're thinking about what is creative civic engagement, and what is what does it mean to map like cultural assets and what is to be celebrated about a neighborhood or, you know, a people and like the

residents, I think the Anti-Eviction Mapping Project, they do a really awesome job of that. And their, they also have murals that they've done for the community and also video documentaries, too, which are also on their website. So definitely check them out. They're really cool.

AA 5:53

Cool, cool, cool. Let's take a quick break.

AA 6:01

So Sabrina, what's next?

SI 6:03

So our module "Social Cohesion in a Time of Disruption," what does that mean? So that's a question that we've been exploring during this module. And part of that exploration is coming to this framework that we're not socially distancing, but we are spatially distancing. And what that means is that we may not be sharing the same physical space, but we are still coming together virtually, still working together to adapt and shift and think about what forms our work may take on during this time. Part of that is also taking advantage of this time to build relationships with folks in the extended Public Matters networks. What we've been dubbing these chats are Snack Chats. So these Snack Chats are when we zoom chat with people in various fields of our interest and also learning more about their work. And they're, they're meant to be informal and casual, like snack. So it's been really great like getting to know a lot of different people, especially the advisors of Public Matters, because everyone is really spread out. And not everyone's in California. We have people out on the east coast and we're continuing to connect with even once we transition into our next module of our fellowship. So, you know, this has been, I think, part of when we started transitioning into working from home, it was definitely a big shift. And I think a lot of us at least personally speaking for myself, just trying to figure out how to stay creative and also how to stay nourished and I think these snack chats have really been a big part of that, knowing that there are people doing really amazing work and also people that we don't know that well, but we're starting to know even better and they're supporting our growth too. So it's very reassuring and they reaffirm especially as a Fellow.

AA

Awwwww

SI

(Laughter)

BA 8:05

The funny thing is that although it's called a Snack Chat, I've never actually snacked during the chat. I feel like it may be rude.

AA

That's so true. You don't wanna be like (chomp-chomp)

SI Speaker 8:18

I usually have tea or some kind of drink at least.

SI 8:22

Going on that same vein, another thing that we've been focusing on during this time is like, how do we take care of ourselves? So Ashley, like, you want to set that up for us?

AA Speaker 8:32

So how have we been taking care of ourselves? This is really important because as we take care of ourselves, we're kind of we're better able and better equipped to take care of others as well. It's kind of like that whole airport or airline, not that we're going on airplanes anymore. But when we used to, they always say, put your face mask on yourself first and then turn to somebody else to help others and so that's how we think of self care and resiliency, really instilling that within yourself so that you're better able to nourish that in others and kind of come together and work together towards a common good. We've tapped into a couple different resources, some that are virtual and some that are right in your own home. For instance, for me, I know I've been taking care of myself by talking to family members, and I check in with them and make sure they're okay. Because of COVID-19 there's a lot of different changes, but I can say one silver lining is that for the first time, I Skyped, with my parents who are like older, older folks. I mean, Skype has been around for a hot minute. It's not like a new technology, but for some reason that they needed a global pandemic to get them on to the wave of virtual conferencing. And so that was really nice to see their faces. I mean, I like to think I brightened up their their afternoon too. Yeah, so shout out to my fam for holding me down. Thanks, y'all.

BA 10:11

Yeah, and, and on that note, I would also like to say that taking care of myself has also involved family, we've been talking a lot more and somehow I feel we are more connected than we were before. Because in a way, like conversations are more meaningful. And we ask more vulnerable questions like, you know, how are you today? or How are you financially? or How are you mentally, emotionally and spiritually, knowing that everybody processes things differently, whereas if we were in the middle of a pandemic, we may not be asking such vulnerable questions, you know, so openly, I think in a way that kind of brings us a little more together and makes us makes us stronger as a group. So I'm really appreciative of that and also I've been taking care of myself by baking a lot more following a lot more recipes that I see online. However, now that it's getting a lot warmer, I don't want to turn on my oven. So I'm going to have to turn to making some ice cream cake or something.

AA

Facts!

(Laughter)

BA

I don't know. What about you, Sabrina? How are you finding ways to take care of yourself during a pandemic?

SI 11:21

Yeah, I would say continuing on the theme of family that's definitely been something big for me too. Like I'm with my mom and my brother, but my sister is down in Long Beach. Between the three of us definitely checking in more with each other by text or phone call, or you know, webcamming and it's, I would say like similarly to you Brisa but definitely becoming a little more vulnerable with each other. It's been really nice, but at the same time, just like well, Woah! Asian family being vulnerable with each other. I really like becoming closer together despite the physical distance and I think on top of that too, leaning on my my friendships and occasionally, some of my writing friends will have little writing sessions together or we'll just have. Like the other day I worked out with my friend over zoom. So we screen shared the work out video, and my arms are sore, but it was really fun. And I really enjoyed that, like I was never. In any other time, I would not have imagined doing that because I need, I need like an accountability partner to start moving physically. So I really appreciate being able to move and also remembering to sit in the sun spending time outside, in between working. That's definitely been really helpful and yeah, just remembering to make time for play. Whether that's doodling or strumming on my ukelele. Yeah, that's how I kind of keep myself nourished.

BA 13:06

So thinking about all of these things and how we're taking care of ourselves, you know, what are you all aspiring towards, especially for the future that's to come? Like, what are we working towards? And what do you think the future would look like?

SI 13:24

That's a tough question. Someone want to take it first?

AA 13:26

Well, like you all have said, this sense of vulnerability that we're able to bring to our relationships now is really kind of opening up in different ways that we may not have expected. And so like whether that's with your family or with professional settings, sometimes we're taught that vulnerability is not a good thing, but it's kind of like a paradigm shift to appreciating vulnerability and being like upfront and realistic about where you are how you're feeling and how that impacts the work that you do and in what you can bring to a situation. Sabrina, you're laughing because you like Ohh Asian families and being vulnerable, but I'm, I have the same thing. And I'm over here black. So it's like, it's like a crazy thing to think about, like families, those people who like, I've been with you since you're born, but somehow we're not able to always communicate everything clearly in just having an opportunity to work on it, but also just like, take advantage of this time to appreciate stuff. Really awesome.

BA 14:40

Yeah, Ashley, I completely agree with you, you know, family and vulnerability are going to be probably something that we see differently in the future. How do we appreciate it? How do we enjoy that time that we have with family and how we can enjoy those moments? So yeah, thank you for sharing. Something that I've been thinking about like for the future is, you know, what does security mean? Especially financial security, and how institutions like the governor or like the city of Los Angeles, you know, how they respond in times when they're supposed to protect and help us. And I think, especially a lot during these times for those groups of people who may need that financial security the most, you know, like homeless individuals, or like street vendors, or you know, families that are experiencing poverty. Will this pandemic be hopefully, like an eye opener to change a system that has continuously failed those groups of people? And, you know, will it change the way people who are a bit more privileged, like ourselves who have, you know, maybe a stronger sense of financial security, can we learn to be more demanding of those institutions, to serve the people better? Yeah, that's, that's what I've been thinking like, is this pandemic going to create like future revolutionaries that are like, "we know you have money!"

BA 16:13

You injected like \$3 trillion into the economy, you know, like, yeah, I think it's it's definitely an eye opener for, you know, people like ourselves who we constantly hear from the government like, "Oh, we don't have money for that" or like, how are we going to give you know, like, how are we going to end college debt like we don't have money for that, but I'm seeing the the ways that they prioritize certain businesses like it's definitely an eye opener and I think it's going to create a lot of a lot of chaos. It's what we need.

AA 16:44

Haha yeah shake things up.

SI 16:47

Yeah, we need the chaos and that reminds me of this talk that I attended, virtually, with the Common Fields convening, which happened very recently. And the panel was these artists from different parts of the US and each of them have this common theme of talking about like, you know, COVID-19 and all of these shifts and chaos, you know, maybe the the silver lining is that I don't think there's any going back to normal

SI 17:24

Because what was normal wasn't helping the people like and the people in our community and so I think despite the chaos, what can emerge is something beautiful you know, there's that Tupac reference 'the rose that grew from cement.'

AA

Oh shoot!

SI

That is one of my favorite lines by him and I think it is something similar too in Southeast Asian culture, the 'lotus rising from the mud' like despite you know obstacles and things, there's always hope not just hope, but also creativity and love. And that comes out when we come together. So that's what I want to keep building on, and continuing to have the arts be included in community conversations and also building a kind of resilience toolkit. I guess what that might mean is understanding one's responses to stress and uncertainty, especially uncertainty for the future, and also just building on the skills that we learned in our modules for story gathering and storytelling, and I really want to cultivate not just safe spaces, but brave spaces, you know, I'm still learning what that is and what that can look like for different folks, but definitely something that I aspire towards

AA 18:55

Same here Sabrina, I think the storytelling aspect is so crucial in times like these, because I have my limited anecdotal experiences of what COVID is, which is completely valid in its own right. But I think that because of COVID-19, the inequalities that are have existed for a while and rising more and more to the forefront of our consciousness and our to our visibility, really, viewing COVID-19 is a really disruptive thing, but disruptive so that you can maybe see better into what has not been working so well. And it's really vital that we, you know, collect those stories of people who are on the most fringes and the margins of our society because they're so deeply impacted. And cultivating these brave spaces for people to be even more vulnerable about the issues that they face prior to COVID-19. And especially because of COVID-19. I think our hearts are a little bit more open and more receptive to hearing those stories and putting ourselves in their places because we've all been deeply impacted by it.

BA 20:19

Yeah, I think that's a good way of thinking about like, what are the positives that's coming out of this, you know, whole situation. We, in terms of stress, we tend to think of like, all the negative things or all the hardships that we're going through, but it's also part of a learning journey. And similar to this podcast, you know, it's been a learning journey about ourselves and how we're vulnerable with each other and how we talk about things with each other. We get to get more comfortable with our uncomf-abilities. Is that a word?

AA

or discomfort

BA

Yeah, our discomforts. That's the word. I'm looking for, you know, like, when we first recorded the episode, we were so uncomfortable with hearing our voices.

AA

So true.

BA

On the audio, right? Like, we constantly told ourselves like, this is so cringy and by now, I mean it's still a little cringy but I feel like a bit more comfortable hearing my voice and I'm like, wow, I said that, sick!

AA 21:28

It's even part of just hearing you saying, "Oh, my voice is so cringy" makes me feel like "Oh my God, my voice is cringy," so I feel like less alone. And that's how we socially cohere. It's like, by not existing in isolation and understanding that we're to an extent we're all in this together, shout out Disney. It takes teamwork to make the dream work, but I will stop with the platitudes.

SI 21:56

Yeah, I've definitely been really feeling and resonating with what each of you have said, and now as we're winding down on this episode, what has this podcast meant to you? It's definitely been a journey so

AA 22:12

Well for me the podcast has been super interesting and eye opening because we've had a chance to explore a podcast and we actually had an activity where we brought in examples of good media that we really loved and had a chance to facilitate a conversation about it. Just from that conversation, facilitating how people think about the media or how people receive it really makes you think about all the elements that are in a story and how you can either highlight some or diminish some to make a good story and a compelling one. So the podcast for me, has been an exercise in that. And it takes a lot of intention, a little bit of finesse. And also just like a little bit of warmth and a little bit of like bravery. Just got going for it. So I really appreciate the opportunity to just shoot my shot. How about you, Sabrina? What is the podcast meant for you?

SI 23:21

So the podcast, it's definitely been a journey. Um, I think like starting out, actually, you were saying it took some finessing. We kind of had to figure out what is going to be our recording process. What is our editing process, especially since we're all remote. I think as we've kept working on it, and brainstorming and talking with each other, I really love that it's been a way for us to stay connected and challenged and also just tapping into what we know and building on those skills especially you know what it means to tell a story, tell our stories and also move into like how we want to support the community with this and also the next cohort of Fellows, and I think we've done a good job. For beginning podcasters because, yeah, in the beginning like how are we talking. Like, oh, you know, I kind of felt like my voice was cringy. I've always felt like my voice sounds like a little kid. I think like learning to accept,

SI 24:24

all parts of me and being vulnerable with the two of you too and like, the rest of the world listening to this has been a good learning experience.

AA 24:34

All in agreement say aye!

All
Aye!

SI 24:37

Yeah, well, what about you Brisa?

BA

For me, the podcast has been definitely a time to stay creative. It's a great opportunity to kind of just like, lay off everything that's been on your chest and in a way it's kind of been my my self care. Right. Like sometimes you just need to say things out loud. Sometimes you kind of just need to let it out. Get out into the open. And it's been fun that it's been alongside you two. And I think if we were to be at Public Matters in the office, you know, we'd probably be doing the same thing, you know, doing everything that we've been thinking and spilling everything that we've been feeling. And so it felt nice that we've been able to maintain that part of our fellow relationship.

AA 25:25

Yeah in a way, it's just been a different way to process things.

BA
Exactly.

AA

Okay, so that concludes our Urban Futures Lab podcast. Thank you so much for listening. We want to hear about how you've been taking care of yourself and what things you've been baking or what things you've been talking about with your family, your co workers in general, and also the resources that you've been tapping into to help yourself get through these uncertain times. There'll be links in the show notes, and we hope that all of our listeners appreciate this and shout out to the future. Shoutout to the future Urban Futures Lab Fellows. You are the future and we hope that you know this has been helpful for you all, can't wait to meet you.

BA 26:14

It's like a time capsule!

AA
I know! It's kinda cute.

(Laughter)

BA 26:18

A message to the future.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>