

# Social Design Now

Reflections & Speculations  
From MICA MASD '25

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Reflections & Speculations from  
Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA)  
MA in Social Design (MASD) '25

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# Letter from MASD's Director

## Letter from MASD's Director

My first assignment in graduate school was called ‘Mapping the Commons.’ Gustavo Crembil had stepped into the role of interim head of architecture at Cranbrook Academy of Art and challenged us—his students—to understand the history and legacy of the program through the lens of past thesis projects, publications that were (and remain) archived in the library, one floor below the great tomes of Piranesi etchings that librarian Judy Dyki insisted we be able to touch without gloves.

That Gustavo was the first of a series of interim program heads that year was something unusual. Cranbrook’s educational model is built upon a studio practice, one which eschews a fixed curriculum and calls for a close collaboration with a singular Artist-/Designer-/Architect-in-Residence. This introductory project asked us to consider ourselves and our work in relation to a place with an extraordinary history that includes Charles and Ray Eames, Eero Saarinen, Florence Knoll, Fumihiko Maki and Daniel Libeskind.

What sorts of understandings and insights could we glean from such a review? What could this archive tell us about architecture at Cranbrook, or the discipline more broadly? Are there tendencies or trends? What are the gaps and lacunae? Who is present? Who is absent? What projects held a saliency which could be built upon? One key finding stood out: the most interesting and important work occurred during ‘interregnum’ years, in between tenures or when directors were on sabbatical. Work during these periods was more experimental, more original and more radical. It was as if students felt liberated, unmoored from the burdens of legacy and tradition. While no one was looking, the students understood they had latitude.

This memory was front of mind as I prepared for my own sabbatical and considered who could lead the Social Design program at MICA while I stepped away. I needed someone who recognized the important work we have



## **Letter from MASD's 2024–25 Interim Director**

I moved to Baltimore last August, after living in Sacramento since 2019 on the same street where I grew up. On Perkins Way, I live across the street and next door to families who have lived there since before I was born. My children call them Aunt and Uncle. There are front yard parties, an annual parade, and a Perkins group chat, where we offer cherry tomatoes and ask for car mechanic recommendations. In the last two years, I built relationships with dozens of other neighbors beyond my block through a Buy Nothing group that mediated the exchange of hundreds of free objects into and out of our home. This practice of “neighboring” has emerged for me as a way of building community with folks who I might not have come into relationship with in other ways, like through family, personal friendships or jobs. It is through neighboring that I’ve come to understand and participate in building community power.

I moved here to lead MASD while its director, Thomas Gardner, is on sabbatical for the 2024–25 year. Thomas and I met a decade ago as high school teachers in Berkeley, and his invitation for me to lead the program in his absence was both brave and intentional. I had not worked in graduate education before this year. I also don’t have a professional background in design practice, though I’ve worked in spaces that are adjacent to social design for many years. Today, I see myself most as an educator, a neighbor, a parent and an artist whose medium is school.

Though I come to the role from a non-traditional background, I bring other valuable perspectives: I taught in NYC public schools during the first decade of my career, earned an MFA at Parsons, and since then, I’ve explored the intersection of design and learning in classrooms, nonprofits, and consulting. Most significantly, I also bring a political orientation that comes from my experience as a neighbor on Perkins Way: I understand the

transformative power of relationships between ordinary people. This is the context that has informed my approach to the program: certainly academic, but also accessible and practice-based.

This book documents and reflects on this unique year in MASD, and speculates on the role of social design in this moment and beyond. Thomas invited me into this role to explore the potentials of this program and the discipline, and I facilitated three curricular experiments this year in response. I see the interim director role, in the sabbatical year, as an incredible opportunity for reflection, innovation and program growth. This book is a gentle (but rigorously researched) offering back to the college, my faculty colleagues, and Thomas to share the results of what we tried and what we’re wondering now.. It is a resource, a provocation, and an invitation to find some answers together.

**CHRISTINA JENKINS**  
Baltimore, April 2025

# Program Overview

## Program Overview

The Master of Arts in Social Design at the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA) is a one-year, 30-credit program that blends design education with social activism, exploring the application of design methods to address complex social problems. The program is grounded in the belief that design can and should play a pivotal role in advancing equity and social justice. Through a combination of seminar-based learning, practice-based studio work, and immersive experiences, students engage deeply with power, race, and inequality.

The curriculum is structured to develop both social literacy and design literacy. Students explore the intersection of these areas by engaging with ethical design frameworks and human-centered design methods that we use to interrogate what we mean by “social problems” in the first place. The program encourages interdisciplinary collaboration, bringing together students from diverse academic backgrounds, including anthropology, economics, fine arts, environmental studies, and public health, among others. The collaborative nature of the program extends to partnerships with government, nonprofit, and community collaborators, offering students opportunities to extend their learning beyond the studio and into the city.

### **THE PROGRAM'S CORE COMPONENTS INCLUDE:**

**Studio:** Students spend 1.5 days per week in studio, which is the heart of the MASD experience. Studio is where students engage with academic frameworks, go on field trips, meet with visiting faculty, develop and critique their capstone work, and fundamentally develop their relationship with social design as a discipline.

**Practice-Based Studio:** PBS is a required elective in the fall semester that engages students in a close collaboration with a community partner organized around a design problem. In Fall 2024, our partner was Ignite Capital, which provides mission-oriented capital to social enterprises in Baltimore City.

**Design Seminar:** Offered for one afternoon per week, seminar is where students deepen their thinking about how to define social problems, how to locate opportunities for intervening in these problems, and how to use specific design methods in service of those goals.

**Fellowships:** The fellowship experience places MASD graduate students with organizations in Baltimore that are seeking design expertise. Fellows collaborate with their hosts using design methods ranging from facilitation and overall project strategy to research, data synthesis and testing.

**Capstone:** The program's culminating academic experience is the capstone project, which asks students to work with an authentic community audience to identify a contemporary problem and propose opportunities for design intervention.

## Dear all,

In January, Thomas Gardner invited me to lead MASD during his sabbatical year. I spent much of the spring and summer sharpening my perspective on the potentials and hazards of social design as a discipline. My approach is rooted in Lauren Williams' call to move away from innocence in design practice, and to embrace a more "critical, culpable and unsettling" orientation to our work. Since August, this is how we have responded to Williams' charge:

We've collaborated with leading designers whose practices are rooted in justice, Black feminism and queer identity. [Learn more about our visiting faculty](#):

- Sloan Leo Cowan, of FLOX Studio, joined us as our community designer in residence to explore facilitation as a site of design practice. They will host a community gathering and offer a public lecture in the spring.
- Kennedy McDaniel ('22) joined us to lead a zinemaking and documentation workshop series.
- Jess Obayan, of Design Impact, joined us to offer a workshop series and personalized consultations with students on design leadership and professional practice.
- Longtime collaborators Annemarie Spitz and Myra Margolin joined us to lead our seminar series on design methods and social theory.

We've initiated and deepened relationships with institutions building community power in Baltimore:

- We opened the semester with a visit to Red Emma's, the worker cooperative radical bookstore, and will close the semester on Thursday with a tour of The Peale, Baltimore's Community Museum.
- The Press Press Toolkit for Cooperative, Collective & Collaborative Cultural Work has informed the way we think about tactics for cultural organizing.



- Our fall collaboration with the JACQUES Initiative, a community outreach program affiliated with the University of Maryland School of Medicine, explored pragmatic and speculative strategies for community engagement (designed by Shannon).
- Four of our students have fellowships with local organizations: Arts Every Day (DJ), Requity (Audrey), Immerse Universe (Carley), and MICA's Center for Creative Impact (Mashal).

**We've been strategic and transparent about how to allocate the program's finite financial resources, while also holding a value that people must be compensated well.** We've secured nearly \$50K in program support, thanks to collaborations with:

- Innovation Works / Ignite Capital (Fall 2024 Practice-Based Studio, led by faculty Ana and Dai)
- Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (workshop supporting their high school interns with a design-centric perspective on data analysis, led by Kaelyn and Alston)
- Bloomberg American Health Initiative (four-part workshop series for BAHI graduate fellows on doing justice work in contested contexts, led by Christina, Thomas and Dai)
- MICA Faculty Grants (Lucas Grant for Faculty Teaching, Baltimore Engagement Grant, Creative Entrepreneurship x2)

**We've grounded our work in an analysis of classic and contemporary writing about social design.**

- In addition to these texts, we've studied materials and methods that respond to the limitations of the traditional human-centered design approach. Those included card decks (the Black School Process Deck, Beautiful Trouble Strategy Cards), frameworks (design

justice, liberatory design, equity-centered community design), and abolition as a value and program of change (eg One Million Experiments).

We invite you to join us in the spring. We will be hosting a community gathering with Sloan Leo Cowan, tentatively scheduled for March 10. Social Design Exchange is April 24, which will celebrate students' individual and collective efforts in the program alongside a collaborative publication on the nature of social design today. We are planning to visit Washington DC, Philadelphia and New York along the way. We're always on the lookout for co-conspirators: Join us.

## Dear all,

We have a motto in studio this week: No New Things. I think we pushed it as far as we could go with the new things—seven months!—and now we’re finally working to narrow, close, finish. Here’s some of what was new to us this spring:

- Our 2024–25 Designer-in-Residence Sloan Leo Cowan hosted a lecture and community dinner gathering with us in March, inviting us to consider the meal as social technology and a site for social change. (That event was documented by Side A Photography)
- We organized a walking tour in Middle East Baltimore with Marisela Gomez, the community activist and physician-scientist whose work to organize VOLOR has transformed the way we think about community power.
- We planned trips to DC and Philadelphia to expand our understanding of the social design landscape. In DC, we met with our collaborators at The Lab @ DC and alum Rhea Gupta ‘22 at AARP. In Philadelphia, we’ll be learning from alum Devika Menon ‘17 at the city’s service design studio.
- Speaking of alumni, we invited Becky Slogeris ‘12, Mira Azarm ‘13, Kayla Joy ‘16, Francesca Bonifacio ‘20, and Thomas Cudjoe ‘23 to join us for an alumni lunch to help us explore professional possibilities.
- We really leaned into printmaking: Allison Tipton of the Globe at MICA helped us to design and print our Social Design Exchange posters. Kyle Van Horn at Baltimore Print Studios hosted us for a risograph workshop where we printed postcards that will be included in a book we’re publishing this month about social design today.
- We hosted an open studio for prospective members of the MASD ‘26 class, showing off current work, speaking honestly about the program experience and learning more



about the folks who are interested in joining us. (We’ve updated our website to be more accessible to folks who are curious about the program.)

- And—of course—everyone has been advancing their capstone and fellowship projects, which has represented the largest ongoing body of work for us this semester.

### SOCIAL DESIGN NOW: REFLECTIONS AND SPECULATIONS FROM MICA MASD

I received a faculty grant from MICA last fall to document this unique year in the program. With the leadership of Kennedy McDaniel ‘22, we’ve organized a collection of essays, photographs and conversations that reflect on our year and speculate on the future of social design. This publication will be available at Social Design Exchange.

### FOR NOW—NO (MORE) NEW THINGS.

We invite you to join us in moving towards clarity, simplicity and peace.

**In peace and fortitude,**

**CHRISTINA JENKINS**

MASD interim director ‘24–25; with

Students **ALSTON WATSON**,

**AUDREY RANDAZZO, CARLEY BRAN,**

**DJ FLEMING, KAELYN CHING, MASHAL**

**ZAHRA, SHANNON WILLING** ‘25;

**IMANI JACKSON, BETH PIEPER** ‘26);

and Faculty **ANA MENGOTE BALUCA**

‘23 and **DAI DANHI** ‘22)

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# Three Pedagogical Experiments

## ONE

### Bringing the Public into the Program: Strategic recruitment of external collaborators

MASD has a 13-year history of building relationships with people and programs in Baltimore and beyond. But, coming to MASD from outside of the city, I prioritized the recruitment of partner organizations and individual collaborators who could offer expertise that I could not. Our informal collaborators helped me to expand my own understanding of the social design landscape, while our formal collaborators—those we hired to support the program—offered distinct student-facing programming. My approach to identifying partner organizations and individual collaborators reflected three distinct values:

- Overall, I wanted to partner with folks who understood—and were prepared for—the reality of working with a graduate program. Working with MASD is not the same as working with a professional studio. Our students are learning, which means that unlike with client-based work, mistakes are welcomed and inevitable. The process is also slower, and the constraints of the academic schedule are not always compatible with timelines outside of a college environment.
- In identifying organizations, I looked for folks who are doing work that presented opportunities for our students to engage meaningfully in the practice of social design. I was less interested in whether students would have an inherent affinity for the sector (like public health, or entrepreneurship), and instead wanted to find partners who could offer us the opportunity to really practice the work: Research, interviews, facilitation, data analysis, relationship building, project documentation and more.
- In identifying individual collaborators, I wanted to bring in folks who offered a distinct perspective on the social design landscape. I prioritized those who were local to Baltimore

Experiment  
Pedagogical  
Three

or the DMV area, and those who had a prior relationship with the program in order to strengthen continuity with MASD's core values and traditional practices.

#### BY THE NUMBERS:

- Eight organization partnerships, defined as an ongoing relationship ranging from one–nine months: Ignite Capital, JACQUES, Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Bloomberg American Health Initiative, Requity, Immerse Universe, Arts Every Day, and MICA's Center for Creative Impact.
- Seven individual collaborators, defined as folks we compensated to offer one-time or ongoing workshops: Sloan Leo Cowan, Dai Danhi '22, Marisela Gomez, Myra Margolin, Kennedy McDaniel '22, Jess Obayan, and Annemarie Spitz.

#### OUR PROCESS:

In early July 2024, I collaborated with Thomas Gardner and MASD faculty Ana Baluca '23 to issue a public call for partners. That call was designed to recruit a community partner for our Practice-Based Studio class and hosts for our fellowship program. We invited prospective partners to share their interest in a Google form, and ultimately ten people and programs applied by mid-July. We circulated the call through our own networks and through MASD's LinkedIn, Instagram and alumni network.

By the end of July, Ana and I had 16 conversations with folks who reached out through the form and with folks who we proactively contacted about collaborating. In those conversations, we described the opportunity, worked to understand the context the partner was offering, and evaluated each opportunity according to their potential alignment with the program. By the end of August, we had verbal commitments from Ignite Capital (for Practice-Based Studio) and six fellowship hosts.

#### HERE'S WHAT WE LEARNED FROM THE OPEN CALL:

- The open call approach expands access to MASD, but our most lasting collaborations still came from relationships to the program. The open call made transparent the program's needs, and created the opportunity for folks who did not have a previous relationship to MASD to engage with us. However, of the original 10 who expressed interest, we ended up working with only three. Some committed, but later fell through. Our other five partner organizations came to us through prior connections with the program.
- External partners want to feel more familiar with our design methods. Deepening their understanding of our approach would allow us to launch projects with a closer alignment between their goals and our skills.
- It can be difficult to manage external relationships within the context of institutional constraints, like funding obligations, the academic calendar, and instructional priorities. The timing of our open call occurred too late for the start of the academic year. This had implications for contract timing, hiring, funding availability, curriculum planning and more.

#### IMPLICATIONS:

- We could consider hosting a design bootcamp just for prospective partners
- We should open a call for partners earlier in the calendar year. This would give us more time to navigate the logistics of bringing a partner into our work, and also offer the space to more deeply understand each others' priorities for a collaboration.

## 2024–25 Fellowship Program

The MASD fellowship program began under the leadership of Lee Davis, former co-Director of the Center for Social Design, whose materials from 2019 I drew on to design the outlines of this year's iteration. Lee conceived of the program as a way for MASD students to "experiment with integrating human-centered design methods and processes into their work" with their fellowship host. "In many cases," Lee wrote, "human-centered design is a completely new approach for host organizations and this provides an opportunity to leverage MASD students' unique expertise to identify ways for human-centered design to help advance the social purpose of the host organization's work."

I studied the materials Lee prepared to orient prospective hosts to the opportunity, and to orient MASD students to the fellowships available. I also studied the feedback he solicited from fellows in the spring of 2020. These reflections were broadly positive, which deepened my commitment to bring the fellowship program back this year after its COVID-era hiatus. Fellows identified three challenges:

- Some named a disconnect between what they had hoped to be working on and what they were asked to do.
- Some observed that hosts could benefit from an orientation to the human-centered design process in order to better understand what fellows could offer.
- Some reflected that the timing of the fellowship - which begins mid-fall - could be adjusted later in the year after students have more experience with design methods.

### DESIGN OF THE 2024–25 PROGRAM:

Drawing on this feedback, I designed the 2024-25 fellowship program by replicating some aspects of Lee's approach and also making some shifts.

- The fellowship timeline, fellow compensation, and application process were largely the same.
- Because of my personal interest in working very locally, and also due to the newness of my own connections, our fellowship hosts were generally small-scale nonprofits rather than government, academic or consulting institutions.
- In order to support fellows in building best practices for working in the field, I proposed to use time in studio for fellows to report back to the cohort what they were working on and what challenges they were facing.
- I prepared additional materials about the design process for hosts, and also transparently shared with them insights about the conditions that best support a mutually supportive experience.
- In addition to asking fellows for feedback about their experience, I planned to also solicit feedback from the hosts.

### HERE'S WHAT I LEARNED FROM THIS APPROACH:

- The smaller-sized organizations we partnered with were supportive of fellows really digging in and participating meaningfully.
- For this reason, several students ended up leveraging their fellowship work in their capstone projects in the spring.
- The application process was competitive, which meant that more than one student was interested in several of the fellowship opportunities. I didn't think the competitive aspect was productive for the cohort, though it probably did benefit the hosts.
- I did not successfully protect time during studio to workshop the fellowship experience as a full cohort. I advised students individually, supporting by teaching them how to prepare scopes of work, offering guidance around

relationship building, and coaching on specific design methods they could apply to their work. I regret that I didn't do this with the whole cohort.

- I also did not keep up with soliciting ongoing feedback from hosts in the way that I had hoped. As of this writing, I still intend to close out each fellowship personally, in addition to coaching fellows on how to facilitate a closing reflection with their host themselves.
- Perhaps because I did not have personal connections with the hosts, there was a significant dropoff between the initial verbal commitments in July to the final official offers in September. It required a lot of capacity on my part to keep up with these shifts, recruit additional prospects, and hold all of those relationships. Additionally, one of these partnerships ended early because of a mismatch in values between the host and the fellow. I could have done more to anticipate this potential conflict in advance, and going forward I would look out for values alignment earlier in the process.

#### **IMPLICATIONS:**

- The fellowship has the potential to be one of the most transformative experiences in MASD, because it creates the opportunity for students to practice social design within real world constraints.
- In interviews, prospective students (for MASD'26) named the fellowship opportunity as a major draw to the program. Elevating the profile of the fellowship program would benefit enrolled students, potentially attract new applicants, and strengthen the program's relationships with local organizations.
- The recruitment, onboarding and ongoing relationship-keeping of partners requires a lot of capacity. It's difficult to hold this alongside the director's teaching and administrative responsibilities. To increase the

sustainability of this model—especially for a larger cohort—I could imagine it being helpful to bring in someone who could act as a fellowship coordinator.

- We could do more to introduce hosts to social design methods before the fellowship begins, bringing them into the process of collaboratively scoping a project that fits their needs as well as the skills and interests of the fellow.
- We could explore post-program fellowships as a bridge to permanent employment.

#### **Project spotlight: JACQUES**

We collaborated with the JACQUES Initiative, a program of the Institute of Human Virology at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, for a four-week human-centered design sprint in September 2024. Led by Natalie Spicyn, MD and Shakima M. Davey, LCSW-C, JACQUES came to us at a unique moment in their trajectory: Founded 21 years ago to support people in Baltimore living with HIV, JACQUES is transitioning to a model that now supports folks who are status neutral. This shift presented an opportunity for MASD to support them in exploring unique community engagement and outreach efforts in Baltimore City. Over the four week sprint, organized on Thursday afternoons during MASD's Design Seminar, designer Annemarie Spitz facilitated workshops and offered coaching that introduced students to the formal design process for the first time. The sprint focused on two goals:

- Documenting the shift from JACQUES' previous model of care to a new model, in service of identifying distinct opportunities to represent this evolving identity to the public in contemporary and accessible ways; and
- Prototyping and testing diverse design interventions in collaboration with key JACQUES stakeholders

The sprint culminated in student presentations of design proposals that addressed JACQUES' goals around engagement, visibility, and connection with Baltimore communities. Students also documented the project in a book.

### **Project spotlight: Ignite Capital**

In our Practice-Based Studio, we explored what it means to make capital more accessible through a year-long partnership with Ignite Capital, a Baltimore-based organization dedicated to closing capital gaps for social entrepreneurs who have historically been excluded from traditional funding systems. I co-taught this class with my colleague Dai Danhi, who brought their design research expertise.

Throughout the semester, students worked in close collaboration with Ignite Capital to understand how social entrepreneurs currently seek, access, and navigate capital. Our learning was intentionally experiential. We engaged in a series of hands-on exercises, including designing our own hypothetical social enterprises to better understand the complex decision-making entrepreneurs face. Students also attended an event hosted by Ignite Capital, where they observed and interacted with a range of stakeholders – entrepreneurs, investors, lenders, and mentors – to gain a 360-degree view of the funding ecosystem. We interviewed over a dozen stakeholders in the space, mentors, entrepreneurs and lenders to properly map the ecosystem of social entrepreneurship. Some of us even took the time to learn financial modeling however, begrudgingly.

In addition, we organized and facilitated a listening session with local stakeholders, using carefully designed guiding activities to uncover nuanced barriers and opportunities within the capital journey. This session allowed students to practice research methods from facilitating activities to cleaning and synthesizing data. The semester culminated in a

formal presentation of insights and strategic recommendations to Ignite Capital's network, accompanied by a written report shared with Baltimore's entrepreneurial community. Our findings illuminated not only existing gaps in funding access but also identified potential interventions – from relationship-building models to reimagined application processes – that could move the needle toward equity in capital distribution.

**KAELYN CHING & ALSTON WATSON**

### **Project spotlight: Smithsonian Environmental Research Center**

On December 7, 2024, MASD partnered with the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) to host a hands-on data design workshop for 11 high school interns participating in a six-week program focused on environmental research in Baltimore. Held at MASD's studio, the workshop was designed to help students explore how qualitative data can be synthesized and transformed into meaningful, action-oriented ideas. Kaelyn Ching led facilitation, which included an icebreaker using Deepa Iyer's Social Change Ecosystem Map and a guided data collection activity at the nearby Jones Falls Trail, where students documented environmental patterns using photography and field notes. Returning to the studio, students worked in small groups to identify themes in their data, craft "How Might We" questions, and brainstorm possible interventions or ideas rooted in their observations. The session culminated in group presentations and a collective reflection.

Throughout the day, students were introduced to design as a powerful tool for storytelling and community impact, while also getting a taste of MICA's studio culture. The workshop was grounded in a broader conversation about survival, ecology, and place, including a lecture on Survival Strategies in the Colonial Mid-Atlantic offered by Alston Watson.

## **Project spotlight: Bloomberg American Health Initiative**

The Bloomberg American Health Initiative (BAHI), a longtime MASD collaborator, invited us to offer a workshop series for its graduate fellows to introduce a human-centered design approach to their work across public health focus areas.

Through a series of four workshops – one in-person during the 2024 BAHI Summit and three virtual sessions in early 2025 – participants explored key design methods, applied them in real-time, and deepened their understanding of how design can support co-created, sustainable solutions. Facilitated by Christina Jenkins, Thomas Gardner and Dai Danhi '22, each workshop featured a dynamic case study tied to a BAHI focus area, key design methods, and space for hands-on practice. MASD facilitators also designed a digital methods handbook, which participants will receive to support continued learning beyond the workshop series.

**December 3, 2024—Working in Contested Contexts: A Human-Centered Design Approach**

**February 19, 2025—Tactical Messaging: Communicating Our Work to Diverse Audiences**

**March 26, 2025—Building Solidarity: Finding Allies Across a Political Divide**

**April 30, 2025—Resilient Programming: Navigating External Pressure by Design**

**MASHAL ZAHRA**

## **Fellowship spotlight: Center for Creative Impact**

As a fellow at MICA's Center for Creative Impact, I was part of the design team of Multiscale RECIPES—a

multidisciplinary research network working convergently to create a more sustainable, equitable, and resilient food system by reducing food waste. The network brings together over 40 researchers and 15 institutions in collaboration with community partners to advance accessible, impactful research.

I collaborated with the design team of RECIPES to assess the network's progress through a design-led, convergent thinking approach. Under the mentorship of Steffanie Espan '18, I conducted and transcribed interviews with network members across institutions and clusters, synthesized insights, and identified common themes. These findings were shared during a two-part network convening, including a presentation and an interactive MURAL activity that invited broader engagement from other network members who were not interviewed initially. The project offered a deep dive into collaborative research, systems thinking, and the role of design in fostering communications within a larger network to solve a global problem such as food waste.

**DJ FLEMING**

## **Fellowship spotlight: Arts Everyday**

Arts Every Day is an arts advocacy organization dedicated to breaking down barriers to equitable arts education and opportunities in Baltimore city schools. I began my fellowship with AED in October 2024, supporting their promotion and storytelling initiatives by developing a one-pager about AED's mission and programs, and reimagining how the organization communicates its impact. Throughout the partnership, I led a design sprint with stakeholders and collaborated with the communications team to align messaging and values of AED. This partnership has since evolved into a co-designed zine project aimed at informing and mobilizing community members around supporting and strengthening arts education in Baltimore.

**AUDREY RANDAZZO****Fellowship spotlight: Requity**

My fellowship with Requity, a nonprofit that provides vocational high school students with real-world trade experience through paid internships, mentorship, and skills training, has been a period of significant contribution and growth. In October 2024 I began my involvement at Requity by engaging in conversations to understand the team's priorities and vision for the upcoming year. Over the subsequent five months, I integrated myself in their workplace and led the restructuring of their project management system, which was an integral part of their productivity and team cohesiveness. My contributions also extended to visual and written storytelling, where I captured student experiences through Requity's programs using journey maps and filmed interviews. When the team sought support for the U.S. Department of Energy's Community Energy Innovation Grant, I provided logistical and visual guidance across three project proposals, contributing to Requity's \$310,000 award. I had the opportunity to act as a project manager in the beginning stages of their 2025 fundraising campaign, supporting their strategy development. This fellowship has not only allowed me to cultivate the design skills I aimed to expand but has also offered opportunities for growth beyond my initial scope.

**CARLEY BRAN****Fellowship spotlight: Immerse Universe**

My role as a fellow at Immerse Universe was to research, ideate, and clarify the planning of a new event with the Founder & CEO, Heather Doggett. NOURISH (Nurturing Opportunities with Unity, Real Impact, Sustainability, and Hope) is a dinner gathering inspired by the Chicago, Detroit, & Brooklyn models of the Sunday Soup series. Local artists and changemakers present art concepts that will have an

impact on social and/or environmental issues. Community members vote on which endeavor will receive a micro-grant from funds acquired by the entrance fee. Presenters will be supported before and after the event with coaching on how to present and implement effective social impact projects. Beyond funding, participants receive training as well as opportunities to network and collaborate to get their projects off the ground.

**SHANNON WILLING****Fellowship spotlight:  
Center for Creative Impact**

My fellowship with MICA's Center for Creative Impact consists of a series of projects associated with the Jones Falls River, a major watershed within Baltimore. The river is obscured by an expressway that divides neighborhoods instead of unifying them. Through workshops, we are getting community input on their vision of the future for the Jones Falls, including, what are the possibilities and limitations of daylighting the enclosed bottom third of the river? We are creating a Jones Falls field guide and asking how art can be an effective tool to engage residents. The project culminates with the planning of a gateway park along the river which would account for stormwater management, removal of invasive species, and celebration of the river's ecosystem.

## TWO

### Bringing the Program into the Public: Writing, facilitating, publishing and thanking

In spite of all the time I spent bringing collaborators into the program, I still found myself tempted to close our doors and keep the work inside our studio rather than going to the effort to make it public. I spent most of the year trying to resist this temptation, to share back what we are doing and how, and still wish that I had been more successful. When we invite collaborators in, I think we owe them more than just compensation or “deliverables.” I think the “social” aspect of social design asks us to move beyond transactional relationships towards ones characterized by reciprocity.

Yet, committing to reciprocity—a practice of exchange for shared benefit—means also committing to vulnerability, personal responsibility and generosity. That is, it goes beyond fulfilling a scope of work or signing a contract; it asks us to show up with a real commitment to mutual thriving. That is hard, which is why I was constantly tempted to dodge it. But as a parent of young children, I know that sustainable, healthy relationships are cultivated through the slow work of reflecting, celebrating, compromising and often apologizing. In social design too, taking the time to practice this can sit at odds with the pressure to produce outcomes that describe “progress” in narrowly defined terms. I see this slow work as an ongoing practice, as something that isn’t ever done even if a discrete project is finished.

For that reason, I used four verbs (doing words) to describe how I intended to approach the choice to open our doors and intentionally bring ourselves more into conversation with the “public:” Writing, facilitating, publishing and thanking.

#### WRITING

As an academic program that is also engaged with the public, MASD has a unique relationship with writing. First,



we use writing to make sense of academic theory amongst ourselves; second, we use writing to communicate our own work and practice to a larger public. (It was through an early conversation with Thomas Cudjoe ‘22 that I really began thinking about how and why MASD students should engage in writing.) If we aren’t writing, then our practice becomes much more ephemeral. Writing expands the audience who has access to our work and holds us more accountable to that audience. And, it requires us to focus on precision, clarity, and rhetoric—something that’s harder to achieve through improvisational speaking.

Unfortunately, teaching, modeling, and critiquing writing was extremely difficult for me to prioritize. I tried an early experiment in asking students to write weekly reflections that lasted about five weeks, but I couldn’t keep up with the individual responses I felt like I needed to offer. I struggled to identify when to offer feedback on ideas or feedback on technical form. I never offered my own examples. And, I never offered a workshop on writing explicitly. Instead, the majority of the writing that came out of the program this year was my own: Newsletters, individual emails with collaborators, and much of this book.

#### FACILITATING

I have an extremely clear point of view about who I am as a teacher, and about the potential of the classroom as a site for social change. So it is strange that, similar to writing, I also failed to explicitly teach students how to facilitate. (I see teaching and facilitating as almost the same in my own work, but would choose facilitation to describe the specific skills that are applicable in a social design context. It shows up in the need to design and lead meetings, gatherings and workshops.) I did model my own facilitation, of course, but I didn’t create enough opportunities for students to learn and practice it.

What we did instead of actually doing it was talk about doing it—and we were pretty good at that. Sloan Leo Cowan’s residency with us was oriented around facilitation. I introduced students to AORTA, the worker-owned cooperative of facilitators, coaches, and consultants devoted to movements for liberation. We studied collaborative practice, learning from and supporting coops like Red Emma’s. The first assignment I gave was an iteration on Gotta Eat, the assignment Thomas Gardner designed to create the conditions for students to plan and complete a collective meal. We took inspiration from Press Press’s Toolkit for Cooperative, Collective & Collaborative Cultural Work, which draws on lessons from Baltimore-based cultural organizers.

And, it’s not that facilitation didn’t happen at all: Students designed and led our workshop with the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center largely independently, designed and facilitated two community gatherings through Practice-Based Studio, and co-designed our event with Sloan Leo Cowan. But still—like with writing—I missed the opportunity to treat facilitation as a teachable and necessary practice. Facilitation brings students into relationship with a real audience. It requires accountability and flexibility in real time. These are essential design skills—and if I had the opportunity to do it again, I would spend more time creating the conditions for students to practice them.

### PUBLISHING

The first thing I purchased with my MICA credit card in September was a coil binding machine, for punching the kind of holes you need to bind a book like this one. The second thing I purchased was \$874 worth of paper. Long before I even signed my contract for this role, I knew that publishing would be a core part of how I thought the program should engage with the public—not just as a way to share our work, but as a pedagogical practice in itself.

Since its founding, MASD has had a strong legacy of printed matter. Under the leadership of Mike Weikert—MASD’s founding director and now co-director of MICA’s Center for Creative Impact—documentation was not just an afterthought but a central part of the program’s identity. Trained as a graphic designer, Mike brought a sharp understanding of the power of visual storytelling, shaping how students, funders, and the public encountered our work. The flat files in our studio hold an archive of beautifully produced materials from dozens of past projects.

I don’t have a background in graphic design, but I came to the program with an interest in contributing to this legacy by publishing materials that help us to participate in a broader conversation about what social design is, and what it can do. Like writing and facilitation, publishing is an exercise in participation. It makes visible the thinking behind the work. It invites feedback and conversation, and exposes us to critique. It increases our accountability to a real audience.

My thinking around publishing is deeply influenced by Harrell Fletcher, founder of the MFA in Art + Social Practice at Portland State University. Several years ago, I came across Shaped by the People, a book he co-edited featuring conversations with artists about participatory pedagogy. I reached out to him in the summer of 2022 to ask if he’d be willing to talk with me. I wrote:

I’m mostly interested in how you think about the book as a form. I have wanted to document my own work—and also use a book as a space for exploring new ideas—for so long, and I know I probably just need to do it and stop thinking about it. But in the meantime, I’m writing to you.

He replied an hour and a half later, and our conversation transformed the way I think about publishing as a practice. I first introduced the practice of documentation with MASD through his book *The Best Things in Museums*

Are the Windows, which describes his 2013 project for the Exploratorium that involved traveling for four days from the museum in San Francisco to the top of Mt. Diablo, 40 miles away. Participants included Exploratorium staff, scientists and members of the public. The book tells the story of that project through photos, reflections, daily agendas and more. We studied Windows as inspiration for how we might consider documenting our own projects, and then students organized themselves around the task of documenting our four-week design sprint with the JACQUES Initiative.

That project sparked a series of publishing experiments: Bridging the Gap, our collaboration with Ignite Capital through Practice-Based Studio; a series of perzines that explored individual design practices; and eventually, this book. We invited Kennedy McDaniel '22 to help us think more holistically about how to represent our collective thinking through publishing.

Publishing this book feels a bit like how I would imagine it feels to take your clothes off in public. I'm not embarrassed about it, but it does feel like a small act of courage to intentionally make transparent the things that could more easily stay hidden. This is why all of the verbs in this experiment—writing, facilitating, publishing, thanking—have been so hard to practice: It's often easier to opt out of public accountability. But publishing in particular forces us into a situation where we are offering with humility our own version of what has happened, perhaps strengthening the conditions for other folks to do the same.

#### **“THANKING”**

When we think of “thankng,” we often mean gestures of courtesy and gratitude. I tried hard this year to do that right. But there’s another kind of thanking—one rooted in care, attention, and sustained relationship—that I’ve struggled with more.

The interim role asks a lot of the folks who surround it.

When I came to MICA in August, I didn’t know how to pay people, buy things, or fix the copier. The things I didn’t know how to do got more complicated from there. I have deep appreciation for my colleagues in Graduate Studies and across the college—Brian Hagermann, Drew Lundholm, Elle Jones, Jacob Rhoads, Stacey Salazar, Mirah Ippolito, Mike Weikert, Lee Davis and Thomas Gardner—who have fielded my SOS calls since last summer.

And yet, I know I’ve fallen short in another kind of thanking: the kind that requires showing up consistently, even when nothing immediate is at stake. I encountered so many people and organizations over the past eight months. While the courtesy and gratitude were there, I often failed to show appreciation in a more durable, ongoing way.

I was in touch with dozens of people last year in regards to scoping potential projects, exploring prospective program guests, consulting with folks on how they think about social design today, and more. I spent time with every single person, and each of those conversations was time invested in building a relationship between MASD and a member of our community. It might feel simpler to experience those conversations as transactional—can we work together this year, or not?—rather than as part of an ongoing relationship, which may or may not manifest in the form of a traditional collaboration. But if we are to practice the social part of social design, I think we have to show up over and over without expectation. I think we have to improve the ways we communicate with and care for our communities (our partners, our alumni, our neighbors). And I knew this, and I still didn’t do it well.

In November, reflecting on the ways that I haven’t tended to this in my own life, I wrote a letter of appreciation and apology to a friend who had been an important influence on my political identity 20 years ago. We had been out of touch,

but I thought about the impact of this relationship on my life frequently enough that it felt necessary to write the letter in order to come to a place of peace. As with this friendship, I think often about everyone I have come into relationship with through this program. In a year oriented around the student experience in the studio, I sometimes let relationship work slip—but I have four months to return to it before wrapping up my year in this role. Our institutions rarely value slow, ongoing care, and I think that's what social design is meant to prioritize.

## THREE

### **Stewarding the Program's Resources: A budget that reflects our values**

I wanted our budget to communicate our values as a program as clearly as our pedagogy. If MASD is committed to building community power, then we need to allocate our resources in service of the same. We can't have our dollars working at cross purposes with our students, which is easy to do when the market incentivizes us to prioritize individual gain over collective benefit. I made the intentional choice to spend our program's resources locally, investing in individuals and businesses whose commitments to community power are aligned with our own, and at a level that acknowledges the value of their expertise and labor.

This choice felt ethical and correct, especially given the nature of our work, but it also meant that our budget did not go as far as it might have if we were focused exclusively on frugality. (If we had chosen to pay our guests less, we might have been able to bring in more of them.) This was a choice that I made transparently and collaboratively with students throughout the year, frequently sharing budget updates about where our money was being spent and consulting with them on their own priorities. The budget itself was a tool for learning.

Because I wanted to prioritize a values-aligned budget, I was also deeply invested in bringing more resources into the program in order to expand my students' access to programming. I made strategic choices throughout the year to translate opportunities for funded partnerships into tangible resources for the program. I approached funded projects in five different ways, each of which involved different considerations and constraints. Each offered unique opportunities (and challenges) for thinking about how other programs might approach funded work—and how MASD might do so in the future.

**Sponsoring a class:** Practice-based Studio is a partnered class. We need a collaborating organization in order to run it. Additionally, that class is very hard to run alone, so I wanted to find funding to support a program coordinator who could assist with logistics. Our agreement with Ignite Capital, our PBS partner, provided financial support for both my MASD faculty colleague, Ana Baluca, as well as a program coordinator (Dai Danhi, '22).

**Sponsoring a programmatic element of a class:** MASD regularly organizes an early-September design sprint in collaboration with a professional designer outside of the program. This year, we collaborated with a health clinic (UMB JACQUES) on this project. We explored the possibility of securing funding with JACQUES to support the design sprint. While funding ultimately did not work out in this case, it offered an interesting opportunity to consider how sponsoring a programmatic component of a class could be of mutual value to MASD and our partner.

**Fee for service:** MASD has a longstanding relationship with the Bloomberg American Health Initiative at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. BAHI approached us in late fall to do an in-person workshop and subsequent virtual series (3 workshops), organized around the idea of using design to support public health practitioners with doing their work in contested contexts. Unlike with the other engagements here, I did not have the capacity to involve current MASD students directly in the planning or facilitation of this project. Instead, I led this project alongside Thomas Gardner and Dai Danhi. This contract provided financial support back to MASD.

**Gift:** The Smithsonian Environmental Research Center (SERC) reached out to the Center for Creative Impact about the possibility of organizing a data and design workshop for their high school fellows. We ended up taking that project on, and our students facilitated a one-day design workshop with them in December focused on

learning from the Jones Falls watershed. They offered a donation back to MASD in appreciation.

**Fellowships:** Five MASD students have fellowships this year. With the exception of the Center for Creative Impact at MICA, which pays our fellows through the college, students were paid directly by their host organization. MASD did not receive direct support from the fellowship hosts.

Those commitments led to an additional \$21,500 of revenue that the program was able to use to supplement our operating budget and spend directly on programming. These additional funds allowed us to:

- Hire Dai Danhi to be a program coordinator for Practice-Based Studio
- Bring in Sloan Leo Cowan as our 2024–25 Designer in Residence
- Bring in Jess Obayan to facilitate a workshop series and personalized consultations with students on design leadership and professional practice.
- Bring in Kennedy McDaniel '22 to facilitate a zinemaking and documentation workshop series that led to this publication
- Rent The Peale for Social Design Exchange
- Increase the compensation for long-standing MASD collaborators Annemarie Spitz and Myra Margolin

The sum of our funded engagements with external partners—including fees directed back to the college, compensation for a MASD faculty team to facilitate the BAHI workshop series, and the fellowships—totalled \$56,000.

Faculty grants also made a significant impact on programming. Funds from the Lucas Grant for Faculty Teaching and Curriculum Development, the Baltimore

Engagement Grant, and two Ratcliffe Center for Creative Entrepreneurship (RCCE) Faculty Teaching Grants totalling \$5900 supported additional projects:

- Printing this book
- Hiring a photographer to document our work, for public display and student portfolios
- Engaging Baltimore Print Studios to host a risograph workshop to print the postcards in this book
- Hosting an alumni lunch to help MASD explore career pathways
- Organizing a walking tour on community development in Middle East Baltimore with Marisela Gomez
- Designing, promoting and hosting an event to bring together Baltimore-based entrepreneurs and lenders through Practice-Based Studio
- Appreciation gifts or stipends for guests associated with our partnership with Ignite Capital

#### **BY THE NUMBERS:**

- Our approach to compensation was \$500/half day or \$1000 per day for guest workshops. We applied the same rate to every paid collaborator we worked with this year. Approximately 75% of our total program investment was on people. Four of our guests are based in the DC-Maryland-Virginia area, and two were not.
- For spending on food and experiences, we prioritized small local businesses and cooperatives. Local providers included Mera Kitchen Collective and Wilde Thyme for catering, Red Emma's (co-op bookstore), Common Ground (co-op coffee house), The Peale (Baltimore's Community Museum, to host Social Design Exchange), Side A photography for program documentation, WORK Printing and Graphics for printing this publication, MICA's Globe Press for poster design and production; Baltimore Print Studios for a risograph workshop.

Approximately 18% of our total program investment was spent at small businesses, largely in Baltimore.

- Only 2% of our program investment was spent at major corporations like Amazon (1.5%).
- 5% is unspent as of April 2025

#### **HERE'S WHAT WE LEARNED FROM TAKING THIS APPROACH TO FINANCIAL STEWARDSHIP:**

It was difficult to plan for programming given the unpredictable nature of funding opportunities. I didn't know at the beginning of the academic year whether several potential partnerships would ultimately come through or not. I kept close records of everything I was spending, as well as projects I wanted to invest in if funding became available.

Asking for money is a skill, and it is also a lot of work. I held my own consulting practice before coming to MICA, and drew significantly on the experience I developed there to scope projects, ask for money, and deliver on promised outcomes with our partners. I enjoy doing this, but it also seems to sit outside of the director's responsibilities in administration and teaching.

#### **IMPLICATIONS:**

I would welcome a more transparent conversation across programs about practices related to financial stewardship. I was strategic in the way I thought about securing funded partnerships, and believe that other faculty could draw ideas from these precedents. I could also benefit from learning more about how other programs think about how their budgets reflect their own values. In my experience, the graduate directors are very receptive to these conversations.

This approach to securing funded partnerships can be replicated outside of MASD. I am appreciative of the Center for Creative Impact (Mike Weikert, Lee Davis) for creating the space for colleagues to explore these possibilities from across the college.

# Remembering is Hard: MASD Photographs

## Remembering is Hard: MASD Photographs



MASD '25 (left to right)  
Ana Mengote Baluca, Christina Jenkins,  
Shannon Willing, Carley Bran, Kaelyn  
Ching, Audrey Randazzo, DJ Fleming,  
Alston Watson, Mashal Zahra



Cohort's Gotta Eat Gathering, Breaking bread and building bonds.



Cohort's Gotta Eat Gathering.  
“Always keep in mind that collaborating and working cooperatively is a survival skill.”—Press Press & Institute of Expanded Research, Toolkit for Cooperative, Collective, and Collaborative Cultural Work.

## COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS

MASD 2025

**WE SHOW WE'RE LISTENING IN DIVERSE WAYS**  
(LIKE EYE CONTACT, SOMETIMES NO EYE CONTACT), ASKING QUESTIONS, AFFIRMING), **AND RESPOND IN WAYS THAT TAKE PATIENCE AND TIME.**

**WE KNOW CONFLICT IS INEVITABLE, BUT OUR SKILL IN HANDLING IT VARIES. WE'RE INTENTIONALLY LEARNING HOW TO MOVE THROUGH IT BY ACKNOWLEDGING AND REPAIRING HARM. WE ACTIVELY PRACTICE CONSENT, GENEROUS CURIOSITY, AND INVITE DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES ON PURPOSE.**

**WE OFFER CLEAR COMMUNICATION ABOUT OUR NEEDS/PREFERENCES/BOUNDARIES. WE ALSO EACH HOLD THE UNDERSTANDING THAT OUR PEERS HAVE EXPERIENCES WE MAY NOT UNDERSTAND, AND APPROACH OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH PEACE AND OPENNESS.**

**WE LIKE TO LEAD WITH OUR STRENGTHS, AND CREATE OPPORTUNITIES TO GET BETTER AT THE THINGS WE WANT TO LEARN. WE CREATE SPACE TO EXPLORE, MAKE MISTAKES, AND OFFER AUTHENTIC GRATITUDE AND CRITIQUE (ESPECIALLY WHEN FOLKS "PUT THEMSELVES OUT THERE").**

**WE NEED BREAKS, REST AND JOY.**

**WE ACKNOWLEDGE (AND SEEK TO UNDERSTAND) THE IDEAS THAT INFLUENCE OUR OWN.**

## COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS

MASD 2025

MASD '25 Community Commitments

Cohort field trip  
at Red Emma's,  
These books have  
challenged and  
inspired us this  
academic year.

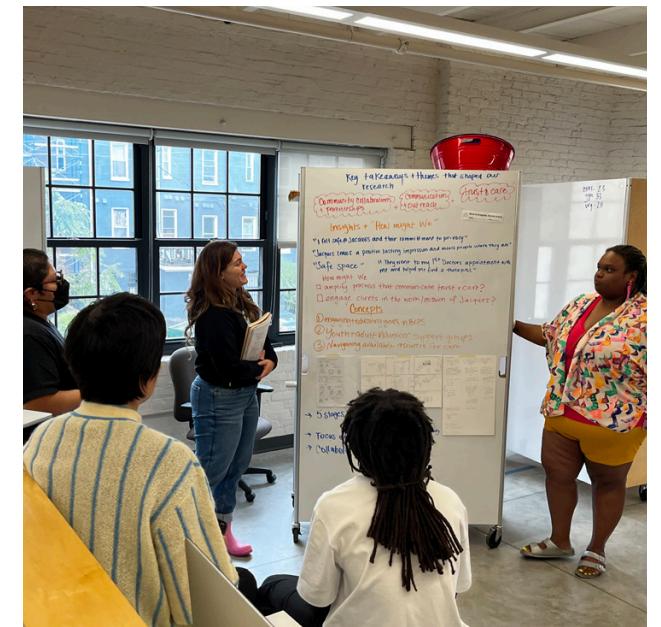


Design sprint-ing  
on community  
engagement with  
JACQUES and designer  
Annemarie Spitz.



Imani and Audrey  
presenting  
prototypes to  
JACQUES.

JACQUES  
Synthesizing Data  
for potential "How  
Might We's."



Practice Based Studio Project; Closing The Gap between social entrepreneurs and lenders with Innovation Works and Ignite Capital. Led by faculty Ana Mengote Baluca and Dai Danhi.



Facilitating Dialogue:  
Encouraging  
entrepreneurs to  
share challenges in  
accessing capital



Engaging in Journey  
Mapping to better  
understand the  
financial trajectory  
and learning  
pathways of  
entrepreneurs.

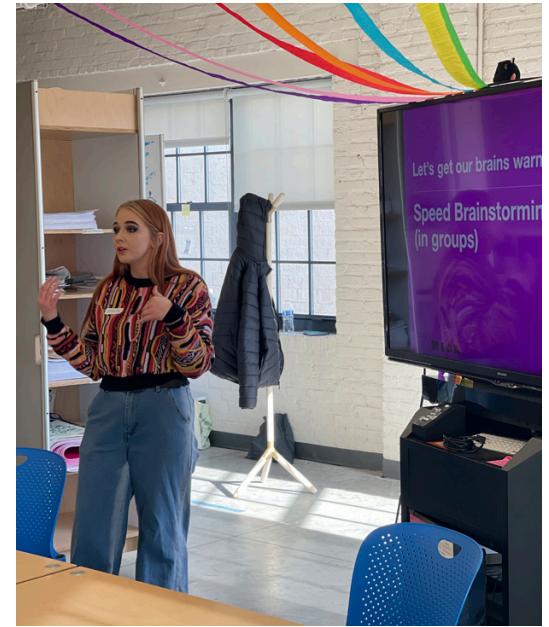


Conducting  
interviews to gain  
insights from social  
entrepreneurs and  
lenders at Bridging  
the Gap event.

Facilitating a workshop for Bloomberg American Fellows on doing justice work in contested contexts, with Christina, Dai and Thomas.



Offering a workshop to high school fellows of the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, on creative approaches to data analysis.



Alston during his DJ set as gum.mp3..



Flyer for Gaza Thrift FundRaver event.

Brainstorming insights and "How Might We's."





Zinemaking and documentation workshop series ran by MASD alumni Kennedy McDaniel.



MASD Perzines from Kennedy's workshop.



Jess Obayan leading a workshop for MASD students.



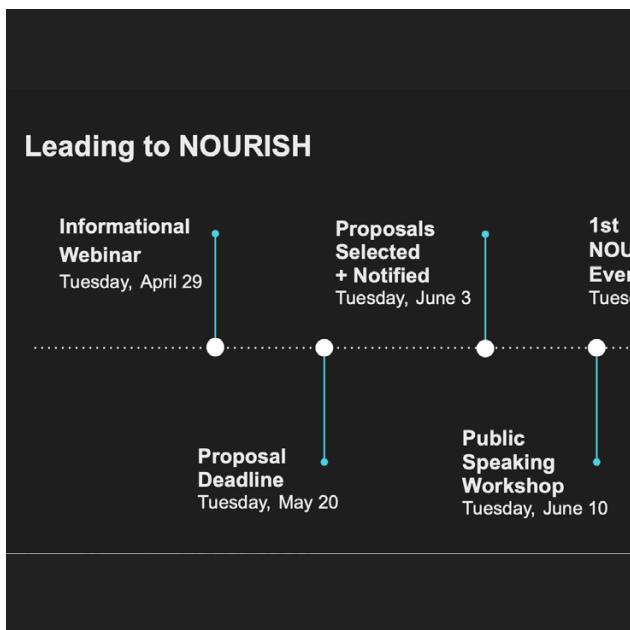
Answering questions around being a social designer—Why does the inner work we do matter?



MASD Fellowship spotlight: Audrey directing the filming of student interview videos for fundraiser initiative at Requity.



MASD Fellowship spotlight: DJ attending Arts Every Day Courting the Arts event.



MASD Fellowship spotlight: A portion of Carley's proposed Nourish event timeline.



MASD Fellowship spotlight: Shannon among attendees of a Jones Falls futuring workshop event.

MASD Fellowship spotlight: Mashal facilitating a MURAL activity with network members.



MASD students visiting The Peale, Baltimore's Community Museum at the end of fall semester.



Indigo Dyeing workshop conducted by Imani Jackson, a artist specializing in indigo dyeing related to natural birthing practices.

Trying out new things!—experimenting with indigo dyeing.



Students on a walking tour of East Baltimore neighborhoods with author and community activists Marisela Gomez.



MASD students visited The Lab, a DC-based research team focused on civic and social design. The class engaged with Karissa Minnich and Anamita Gall, learning about their organization's projects and gaining insights into their careers.



MASD alum Rhea Gupta shared her journey in design at AARP in DC.



Students engaging with art and history at the National Portrait Gallery.

Audrey learning how to roll paper through press.



Students creating Social Design Exchange posters in a workshop run by Globe Press Printing studio.



We Have Come This Far lecture and dinner party event facilitated by Sloan Leo Cowan, exploring how dinner can serve as both a social technology and an art practice.



Shannon sharing her thoughts on the prompt—Where do we go from here?



Christina Jenkins giving opening remarks at lecture.



Sloan Leo lecturing on gathering as research. We've come this far.

Lunch with MASD alumni—Becky Slogeris, Mira Azarm, Kayla J, Francesca Bonifacio, and Thomas Cudjoe.

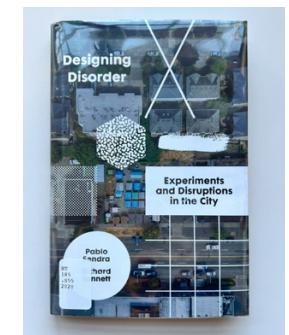
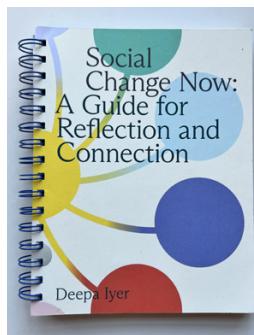
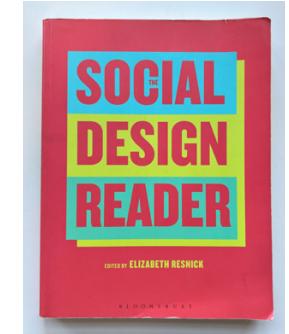
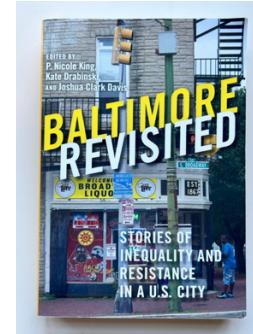
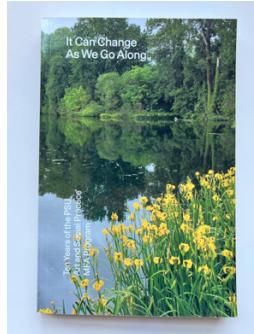
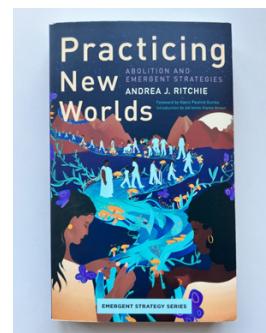


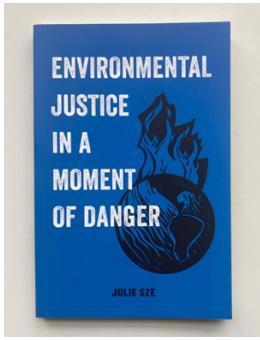
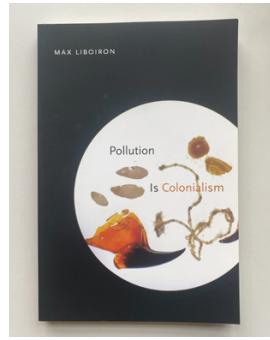
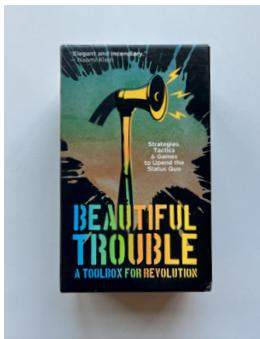
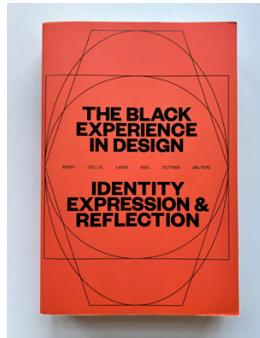
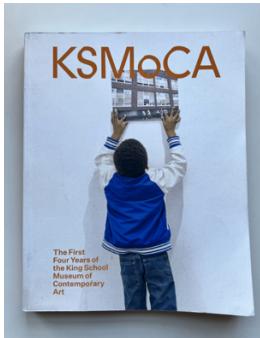
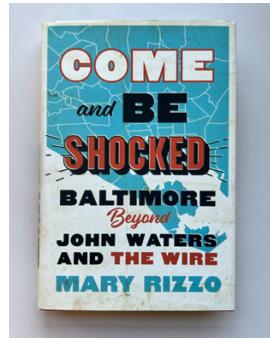
MASD students at Baltimore Print Studios with Kyle Van Horn for a riso workshop to make postcards for publication.



## Our Library

We've gathered and referenced books throughout the year: We purchased some at Red Emma's, borrowed others from MICA's Decker Library, and hauled a few favorites in suitcases when we moved here for the program. This is a collection of some of the titles that have influenced our thinking.





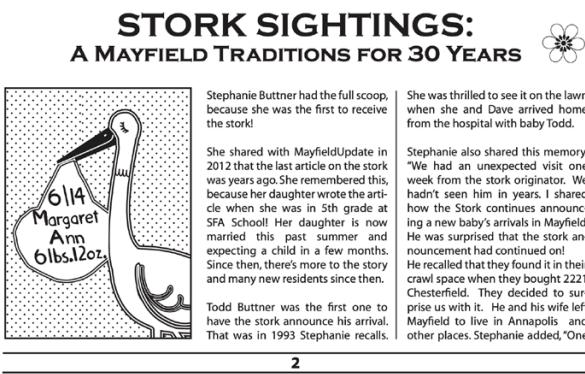
# From North Avenue & Beyond: Perspectives on social design today

## BETH PIEPER

# On Creating Change from the Inside with Ryan Dorsey

## CREATING CHANGE FROM THE INSIDE. HOW BEING A CITY COUNCILMAN USES THE SAME SKILLS AS A HIGH END AUDIO SYSTEMS INSTALLER.

I bought a home in Baltimore back in 2018. It was the only house I looked at in the city and it was perfect. The neighborhood I reside in, Mayfield, refers to itself as “a hamlet in the heart of town.” They have block parties, there’s a weekly newsletter with a print edition, welcome baskets, larger than life wooden storks that get posted on the front lawns of new parents, lots and lots of dogs, some cats too, a little free library, and a decent dose of neighborly mutual aid that comes along with it all.



A stork themed article with endearing typo from a previous issue of the Mayfield Newsletter.

One of my neighbors happens to be our district's city councilmen. Ryan Dorsey, grew up in Mayfield and now lives around the corner from his childhood home with his artist wife in a new (old) house of their own. He has a bit of a reputation in the district and across the city as being unconventional.

He's an advocate for the biking community making major changes to Harford Road's traffic patterns. Known as the Harford Road Diet<sup>1</sup>, these changes were contentious among the local community and even more so among the commuting masses from Baltimore County. For Dorsey the past two election cycles were arguably hard fought. In 2020 he was challenged, oddly enough, by Richard Pryor's daughter and Baltimore district 3 resident Rain Pryor. She lost. In 2024, Dorsey ran his campaign against an alleged carpetbagger named Margo Bruner Settles. Margo's campaign was based solely on ripping out the newly installed bike lanes on Harford. She lost as well.

As a part time student in this program my learning experience has felt a little truncated at times. The program is fast paced and the courses are designed to work together each semester to the point where the boundaries between them become blurry. That overlap is part of the program's strength for any student attending full time.

I'm mentioning this because I wonder how having had the same learning experience of my peers could have influenced my choice of interviewee for this particular project. I'm also mentioning this because I'm supposed to be thinking deeply about why on earth I would want to interview someone in local government and what relation that has to the vaporous field of Social Design.

Government and politics are not pretty and don't inherently fit in with the virtues we associate with something like social design, or ethical design, or human centered design. In theory both government and social design aim to create meaningful lasting change that improves people's lives. In theory they both require a deep understanding of social issues, collaboration, inclusivity, and a focus on sustainable impactful solutions. But government hasn't felt human centered for many of us. So, why would someone intent on making positive change decide to work in government?

As a constituent, I had the opportunity to talk with Ryan about his transition into local politics. Please note this very long interview has been edited for brevity and readability.

**BETH**

So thank you so much for meeting with me. I'm Beth Pieper. I live in your district in Mayfield and I work at Peabody too. I just realized you actually went to Peabody while reading your bio.

**RYAN**

Well, I started college as a violin performance major at Catholic University and then I transferred to Peabody. And that's when I became a composition major and I played some violin in a way among some free improvisors for a while, but I didn't have really particular skill, just improvisational like RawrrRRRarr noise making. And then I went on and I played some electric bass in some bands for a number of years afterwards. I've been playing my bass every day or nearly every day for the last couple of months for the first time. Most consistent playing I've ever done in my life.

**BETH**

How did you go from being a musician to getting into public service?

**RYAN**

Usually, when I'm asked a form of this question, I say the answer is "directly." But, there was one interim step. I went from music to just working in my family's business<sup>2</sup>. and then into running for office while I was still working for my family's business. After working in my family's business for a bunch of years, catering to maybe a hundred very well to do customers in the Metropolitan area each year. In the midst of doing that, and it being sort of ungratifying, at some point I think it occurred to me, oh, you could be doing something for you know, six hundred thousand people in Baltimore City or 40,000 people in one city council district.

I think at some point it just dawned on me. You know, Baltimore has problems and it probably has to do to some degree with the people who are running the show. I bet I could do a better job than some of them. City council seemed like a place to get a foot in the door. And something that was attainable, achievable, something that I was cut out for in a way. When you design home theater systems, you work for the homeowner. But when they are doing a renovation on their house or an addition on their house they hire an architect, a builder, an electrician, often an interior designer,

and a home theater guy. As the home theater guy, I've got to make the architect, builder, electrician and interior designer all do what I want them to do, what I need them to do, so that I can deliver my thing for the customer. Even though none of those people work for me. I need to make sure they all do what I need them to do. And that's what it's like working in city government. I need to make every body in every city agency, do what I need them to do to deliver for my constituent. My customer.

*At this point in our interview (redacted for space) Ryan had discussed his legislative accomplishments and how they often revolve around issues of transportation and public accountability. Ryan takes a very practical and exacting approach in his role. He is clearly confident about his track record and not shy about taking a divisive stance on nuanced topics. As he discusses later, he is very aware of what is and isn't in his control as a city councilman. Working in city government has given him the resources to properly research and support his initiatives.*

**BETH**

So, these things that you've just brought up, nobody else was really taking the time to focus on those kinds of issues because I assume they're too busy working on you know, the other things that seem more front and center, like schools, roads, that kind of stuff.

**RYAN**

Well, I chose from a very early outset to focus on the things that I had a clear ability to change. Schools are accountable to the school board. Um, BGE is accountable to the state and the public service commission. Comcast is accountable to only the people who pay for their service, you know, whatever. But you know, I've become effective at getting agencies to make certain changes or I've become effective at getting them to fix a problem that they have been neglecting. But the bully pulpit is just a place to bang on the table.

Legislators have the power of legislating. Not all city council members approach the job fundamentally from the perspective of legislating. Passing ordinances is our most clear-cut path to making impactful, powerful change. It's irrefutable that if we write a law it goes into the city code. And then you gotta sometimes use the bully pulpit or just like, dogged follow-up to make sure that agencies implement the law. But making laws is our one statutory thing that we're like we have rules about how to do it.

### BETH

I wanted to ask you about some of the projects you've worked on that have gotten a lot of pushback, maybe from its own residents or it's been a little contentious, obviously the road diet and bike lanes. Now the zoning project along Harford Road<sup>3</sup>, can you tell me about that project?

### RYAN

You know, I have no idea how the lawsuit over it is going to play off.

### BETH

Oh, there's a lawsuit?

### RYAN

There's a lawsuit.

### BETH

Why? People are unhappy about the density thing, they're worried about their small town feel... in a city?

### RYAN

That's probably how a lot of people would put it in general kind of terms. People are afraid of the unknown, is one part of it, but they're also biased against a boogeyman. And people are extremely privileged and lack a certain perspective of compassion. People think that because they own property in a neighborhood they own the right to what they believe that neighborhood should be regardless of whether it's discriminatory, regardless of whether it's realistic.

We've had plans, a road map for how to bring about improvement for decades. That was a blueprint created

through community initiative and through partnership with city government and hired professionals to create this roadmap. And then still because of unrealistic and biased outlooks the most critical parts of that blueprint were never pursued in any way.

### BETH

Do you know the numbers for the population density needed to revitalize the commercial district here?

### RYAN

Well, what we have is about two to three dwellings per acre in general.

There's literally a three block stretch north of Northern Parkway where one side of the street has only three businesses in three blocks. It's a car parts place, an old 7-Eleven that's turned into Harford Mart, and then a dollar store. Each of those businesses takes up a whole city block, that's insane. And you do that? And you've just, you've decimated walkability on that side of the street. And you've destroyed the relationship of one side of the street to the other side of the street.

### BETH

Can I ask you one last question kind of related to tax revenue. I attended a meeting about basically tax-exempt institutions like Hopkins paying their fair share and how there's an effort to renegotiate what they put in. Are you very involved in that?

### RYAN

No, not at all. No, I mean I know that there is a group<sup>4</sup>, a coalition, that wants the bully pulpit to be used. I think the bully pulpit works in rare circumstances and that If we want more money we need more leverage.

But, you know there's nothing that we can do to make them taxable. The state could do more. But certain state lawmakers would just like you to think that the only real problem is that we don't stand up and bang the table hard enough. That we're not loud enough about our displeasure.

**BETH****RYAN**

One last question. Troublemaker.

If you were to give yourself a title other than your professional title, what would that be?



Ryan Dorsey's city councilmember photo

#### Footnotes:

<sup>1</sup>In 2019 parts of Harford Road transitioned from four lanes to three incorporating a turn lane and additional bike lanes. Although parking spaces are decreased and traffic runs in two lanes only, “Road diets” like this one have reduced crashes by an average of 29%. This project was completed in several phases finishing the final length in 2023.

<sup>2</sup>Soundscape is a third generation Baltimore based A/V company. Park Radio was originally established in 1930 by Lee Dorsey and located at 604 W. North Ave. The next generation opened Soundscape at its current location in Roland Park in 1975. Fun fact, Video Americain (as seen in John Waters’s Serial Mom) opened next door in 1989, now sadly a Smoothie King.

<sup>3</sup>The Harford Road Overlay proposed by Dorsey, is intended to increase customer supply to businesses along the Harford Road corridor. The regulations for this overlay district are designed to improve the pedestrian experience; increase transit access and ridership; reduce the requirements for a business owner, developer, and the City to allocate resources to cars and trucks; promote sustainable mixed-use development; promote investment in public spaces through new construction; and increase housing opportunity and diversity

<sup>4</sup>JHU along with other Baltimore anchor institutions, participates in a Payment in Lieu of Taxes (PILOT) agreement with the city, making a collective annual contribution of \$6 million instead of paying property taxes. A coalition named With Us for Us (WUFU) has sought to reconfigure the PILOT program.

MASHAL ZAHRA

## A Letter on People, Places, & Community

Community—a word we notice everywhere, in mission statements, conversations, and signage. It is often spoken about as a fixed idea, yet in practice, it is layered. It unfolds through conversation, in passing interactions, in the subtle acts of checking in on one another. It is shaped by those who make time for each other, who listen, who engage beyond their immediate circles. Sometimes, it's as simple as exchanging a smile with a stranger on your way to work.

But community doesn't only exist between people—it is also deeply rooted in the spaces we move through and the more-than-human relationships that surround us. It is an ecosystem, a web of interdependent relationships between humans, animals, land, and built spaces. It is as much about the trees lining the sidewalks, the stray animals that find shelter in abandoned corners, and the streams that carry histories, as it is about those who inhabit these spaces. The very essence of community is connection. These connections form a network of mutual care and shared responsibility, where every action, no matter how small, contributes to the health and vitality of the whole.

Having recently moved to Baltimore from Lahore, Pakistan, I'm still navigating my way through this new world—exploring unfamiliar streets, encountering new systems, and slowly discovering what it means to be part of a thriving community. In Pakistan, community is experienced around shared rituals—communal meals, neighborhood gatherings, and collective support in times of adversity. These practices shape a deep sense of togetherness. But with modernization in urban lifestyle even these familiar community structures are changing. What used to be organically formed gathering spaces are now being reshaped by new development, and at times, disconnection.



As someone arriving from a different cultural context, I've been paying close attention to the ways people in Baltimore connect, support, and build together. What excites me most is the variety within these connections—the traces of care, and the moments of exchange that exist in everyday experiences. These details, which might seem mundane at first glance, often spark reflection, memory, and joy. They tell stories about who built a space, who inhabits it, and who feels welcome within it.

For the first few days in Baltimore, I found myself walking down unfamiliar streets, carrying a heavy box to my new place. I felt unsure about offering a smile or a greeting—unsure if such openness would be met in return. But unexpectedly, people passing by acknowledged me with warmth—some smiled, others offered help. My new downstairs neighbor even took a moment to walk me through how to open a tricky new lock. These moments were small, but they stayed with me. I felt seen. My nervousness began to ease. That day reminded me that community isn't always something you step into fully formed. Sometimes, it's built in the simplest exchanges—an open door, a helping hand, a quiet acknowledgment that we're all figuring things out as we go.

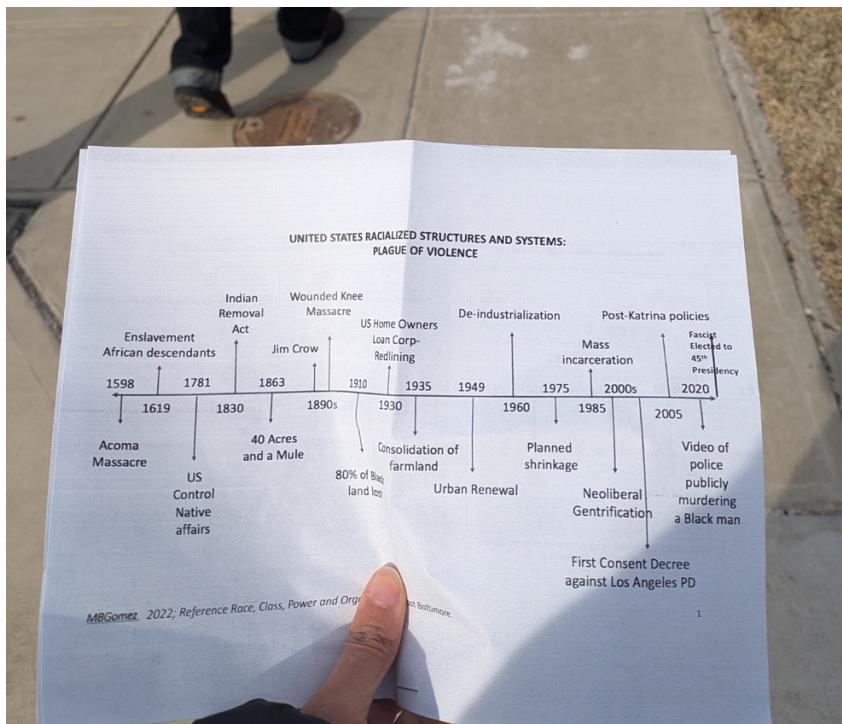
Or after a long day at work, I would step onto the MICA shuttle, tired and quiet, only to be greeted by the driver with a warm "how's your day going?" We'd share a quick chat—nothing too deep, just simple conversation—and as I stepped off, he said "you made my day." It was such a small gesture, but it shifted something in me. I started to notice how these everyday exchanges—ones I might've overlooked before—were actually shaping how I understood care, connection, and belonging in a new place.

Design, in this context, becomes more than a formal discipline. Though often associated with sleek products, rigid systems, or corporate solutions, design is and has always been a communal practice. Long before it was institutionalized, communities designed for themselves—shaping their environments through shared knowledge, collective labor, and storytelling. Design is not just about structure or form; it is adaptive, shaped by the people who use it. Much like community, it is a living process—responsive, imperfect, and deeply human.

Baltimore, with its layered history and stark divides, offers a powerful lens to explore these ideas. The city's neighborhoods hold stories of resilience and rupture, and its urban fabric reflects

ongoing tensions—between preservation and progress. Context matters: how the city has been shaped, who makes decisions, and how people move through and make meaning of the spaces they call home.

Walking Tour of  
East Baltimore with  
Marisela B. Gomez—  
MASD 2025



Recently, as part of our Social Design cohort, we took a walk through East Baltimore with Marisela B. Gomez—a community activist, public health professional, and physician-scientist whose work draws on 17 years of activism and research in the area. This experience provided a direct lens into the city's communal fabric. In conversation and movement, Marisela embodied what it means to be present—to be rooted in place and community. I watched as she greeted people on the street—a nod, a wave, a word of acknowledgment—each gesture a thread in the web of connection that holds a neighborhood together. She spoke about the roles that are often invisible but essential: organizing, holding space, showing up again and again.

In East Baltimore, I saw a city of contrasts—where some blocks are neglected, while others are rapidly transformed by gentrification, often displacing long-time residents. These shifts in urban planning are not just policy decisions or architectural trends; they are lived experiences. As someone new to the city, I may not have fully understood these dynamics without her insights. Who decides what gets built? Who benefits from change? What happens when the people shaping a neighborhood aren't part of it?

## WHO DESIGNS OUR COMMUNITY SPACES?

The idea of design often feels institutional. But in truth, design is also about those within a community who build, sustain, and reshape their spaces. As Deepa Iyer explains in *The Social Change Ecosystem*, design is an ecosystem at work. It comprises different roles—builders, caregivers, weavers, guides, healers, visionaries, frontline responders and disruptors—each playing a part in sustaining the larger whole. Historically, communities designed their own spaces, ensuring that the built environment reflected their needs and values. Today, large developers, disconnected from the lived experiences of these spaces, dictate the landscape.

Observing the ways people contribute to their communities in Baltimore, I noticed a recurring theme: power. Not the power of personal gain, but power amplified for collective good. In neighborhoods shaped by both resilience and systemic neglect, there is a deep desire to do more—not just for oneself, but for others. Whether through grassroots organizing, mutual aid networks, or simply checking in on neighbors, people shape their surroundings in ways that often go unrecognized yet are deeply impactful. This collective strength is what keeps Baltimore's communities moving forward, even in the face of challenges.

## THE NECESSITY OF REFLECTION AND SAFE SPACES

One of the most important lessons I learned from our walk with Marisela is that working within communities requires a deep commitment, but also time for reflection. It is a process, not something that can be understood in a single moment. I have come to realize the importance of taking time for oneself, working in smaller groups, and acknowledging the challenges embedded in this work. It is not easy, nor is it meant to be. But reflection allows community efforts to remain sustainable—to grow rather than burn out.

Writing to the community is an act of preservation and understanding. It is a dialogue with the city, its people, and its evolving stories. City planning often prioritizes external visions over lived experiences, but the voices of those within these spaces hold the knowledge of what is truly needed.

The individual efforts within a community sustain energies and beliefs, laying the groundwork at a grassroot level until the time is right for a significant political shift . These small, persistent actions are not merely gestures; they are the foundation upon which transformation is built. It is in everyday acts—the neighbor who watches over children playing outside, the local artist who paints murals reflecting a neighborhood's history, the grassroots organizer who fights for housing rights—that the lasting shift begins. These efforts, though seemingly quiet and localized, create ripples that strengthen the social fabric. Over time, they accumulate, building resilience and collective agency.

Change rarely arrives as a single sweeping movement; rather, it is nurtured in these ongoing acts of care, resistance, and shared responsibility.

A letter to the city, to those who build it, and to those who call it home.

## A Special Thanks

To Marisela B. Gomez—for generously sharing your time and invaluable perspective during our walk through East Baltimore. Your insights have deeply shaped the way I approach community and connection, reminding me that to truly understand a place, you must engage with the people who call it home. Your words and wisdom continue to resonate, guiding my reflections on the power of listening, observing, and building genuine connections.

To Deepa Iyer—for your workbook, which was incredibly helpful in guiding my reflection on my role as a creative thinker and researcher through your Social Change Ecosystem Map. It relieved the pressure I felt as a designer to be all-knowing or to have all the answers.

To my peers, instructors, friends and family—for the conversations we have shared that have shaped my viewpoints and helped me build a sense of community in this new place. Your support and willingness to create a safe space for open dialogue have been invaluable in guiding my journey and deepening my understanding of these experiences.

KAELYN CHING

## On a “Universal” Approach to Social Design

In early August 2024 when I first embarked on my academic journey as an aspiring social designer, my internal voice of doubt rang loud with uncertainty: Is design a practical career path for me? Am I ready to take this educational leap? Will I regret my chosen trajectory? And frankly, *What am I getting myself into!?* (My fear of commitment tends to get the best of me.) To my pleasant surprise over the course of seven months as a Social Design M.A. candidate at MICA, I have found this voice silenced through collective impact, learnings, and triumph; affirming my pursuit.

Perhaps my early anxieties stemmed from the daunting and prevailing question: *What is “social design?”* Over the span of two semesters, our cohort has spent substantial time deliberating this very question, literally and philosophically. We have explored and engaged with human-centered design concepts, theories, readings, activities, examples, discussions, and more—all of which have sparked inspiration for me on a daily basis. At this point in my education, I have developed a clear vision for what all social design entails and what all it can be; that is, to me.

Yet still, as I travel back to my hometown in rural southern Maryland, passing by cornfield expanses, Amish country, and signage for local trade services, I find myself at a loss in trying to provide satisfying answers to the anticipated inquiries from my family. *So what exactly are you studying again?*

It was during one of these treks home that I came to a realization about the difficulty of this conversation. The reason finding responses to this question and bringing my community into my work is so mentally taxing is because it necessitates code-switching from the vocabulary of my academic community where I generally contend with this.



I believe the gap here transcends the norm of “professional communication” in academia. Rather, it exemplifies more broadly the inaccessibility of higher education and “white collar” professions for certain demographics—populations like my working-class family and small town community.

Marginalized communities such as these are often those furthest removed from access to opportunities in social impact work. There is irony in the fact that as social designers, we value “subject matter experts” (those who have lived experience navigating the social challenges we seek to address), and yet it is only a privileged few of those with expertise who are ever even acquainted with the concept of “social design”; let alone be afforded the luxury to be able to pursue the practice due to resource constraints.

I am a first generation college graduate, a major point of pride for me. This aspect of my identity has led me to commit myself to a career in advancing educational equity. After earning my Bachelor’s degree in Economics from University of Maryland in 2019, I chose to leverage my education to pay it forward to communities like mine through educating high school youth on economics and financial literacy with Teach For America. During my tenure as a teacher leader, I established an afterschool program supporting

fellow [aspiring] first generation college students with exploring the landscape and completing college and financial aid applications.

I was able to identify a need, and I was also able to recall being in their shoes and navigating this process solo. Maybe my apprehension toward pursuing my M.A. harkens back to this experience. When it came time to get serious about searching and applying to colleges, I floundered—completely directionless. With each step up the ladder, I arrived at another obstacle. Once I made it to university, I found myself juggling multiple paid positions with being a full-time student and trying to bolster my resume with extracurriculars, just to [barely] afford rent and tuition. In my second year, my FAFSA application was audited, forcing me to quickly gather onerous documentation and threatening my enrollment status. While I was successful in my ability to adapt, overcome, and assimilate to collegiate life and culture, I have observed an ever-increasing divide between myself and my roots as I progress further in my educational journey. How can this be when my roots are the very foundation for what guides me as an advocate, activist, and social designer? How can we bridge this gap?

As it has been recently ascribed to me, my experience as a classroom educator has done much to inform the way I

operate as a social designer. I must say it means a lot to be affirmed as a lifelong “teacher”, especially given my educator training began in a buzzing, LED zoom room over the blur of time that was the summer of 2020. My most lucid memory from virtual summer teacher training was absorbing the “Universal Design for Learning (UDL)” approach to lesson planning. I suppose it resonated with me in light of my own struggles to keep pace with the academic rigor of college I was ill-prepared for.

The essence of UDL is crafting a lesson plan in such a way that makes the lesson accessible and appealing to diverse learners by way of providing a variety of learning modalities. UDL comprises three core tenets: 1) There are multiple avenues for engagement, 2) There are multiple modes of representation, and 3) There are multiple means of expression. Beyond my teaching practice, I have pushed myself to approach communication broadly in this way—paving a path for accessible conversation with diverse folks across my different worlds; and just maybe we can begin to bring those worlds closer together.

I strive to stay true to myself, and stay attuned to different social contexts. I am mindful that no member of my family has any previous exposure to the field of design. (Nor did I until approximately a year and a half ago.) This is a reality

for many hailing from low-income backgrounds. Admittedly, I caught myself a few times in class, lost and confused in the face of language and terminology that seemingly everyone but me was familiar with.

As social designers working in partnership with these communities, it is our duty to be able to bring these communities into our work through accessible communication. We are highly susceptible to getting caught up in our echo-chambers, abundant with academic jargon. In doing this, we exclude individuals who have not had access to higher education. I am reminded each day of how fortunate I am that I was afforded the resources and opportunities for this to be attainable for me. I am charged to embrace my own internal nuances to find common ground with those who have been disenfranchised by inequitable [education] systems; which begins with opening the doors for participation in the conversation.

I wonder how we can better connect and bring in communities of diverse individuals, and ensure social design is truly human-centered. We must know our audience, and make co-design actually accessible for non-academics, who oftentimes are our true subject matter experts. How can we answer the question: *What is social design?*, universally?

## AUDREY RANDAZZO

### On Creating Opportunity

What is social design? This is a question our cohort was asked on day 1 of MASD. After applying, interviewing and accepting admittance to the program, paying tuition, moving across the country, and now having shown up to the first day of class, we still didn’t know exactly what we were getting ourselves into. Social design sounds important...and the website says it involves working with communities towards projects based in equity and inclusion. But what does it mean? As a grad student and generally curious human being, I set out to find my own definition amongst a scattering of others.

During my first few months in Baltimore, I began to notice community initiatives in action throughout the city. Out of many types of groups, I saw nonprofits, mutual aid programs, and activist organizations being run and fueled by community members. One might not recognize it until they truly look, but the people of Baltimore are passionate and powerful. When a communal need is paired with a drive to make something happen, work occurs—and this work is effective. I’ve found that the entire concept of people working together is an important, if not vital, aspect of social design, as designing and creating something for communities requires key stakeholder involvement (i.e. community members), the power of group work, and a strategic vision. To get a closer look at social design in action, I take a deep dive into my relationship with one organization in West Baltimore.

My fellowship at Requity was a pivotal step in my journey to understand social design. Requity is a Baltimore-based nonprofit that provides hands-on trade experiences for high school students at vocational technical schools. Cultivating an environment centered around equity and experience, students are paid for their after school internships or receive class credit for school day programming. Along the way they learn vital trade skills, life skills, and receive counseling



on career pathways. When I joined Requity as a graduate fellow, I focused on streamlining their programmatic structures and sharing their work with the world through storytelling. I conducted a deep dive to figure out where their current system fell short of its intended goal. Throughout this process, I gained insight on how each team member did their individual work and how they functioned as a group. I worked closely with the team each week, and practiced facilitating the group through projects, meetings, and conflict.

If you sit down at Requity's headquarters, you'll see a lot going on; there's always an event or lesson happening, construction teachers will cycle through to grab supplies, community partners visit for meetings, and students prepare for their shifts. You'll smell the aroma of Bria's cooking on Wednesdays, and see the media team documenting everything through videos and photography. Despite the lively chaos, everything moves forward in harmonic cohesion.

Requity's successful programming can be chalked up to its genuine relationships. Each member of Requity's staff has a relationship with one another and the students, always greeting each other respectfully, bonding, checking in, and providing positive feedback. It's clear that these

strategic yet natural interactions have a true impact on the students' work and success. This environment of trust and mutual respect is something that Requity's founder Michael Rosenband (Mike) has fostered since he first arrived in Baltimore.

Mike, a Chicago native, stands out as one of the few Requity members not originally from this community. After settling in Baltimore 15 years ago, he quickly immersed himself in the neighborhood, notably as the football coach (now, he coaches baseball) at Carver Technical Vocational High School. This role catalyzed his strong community ties, resulting in local community members' involvement in Requity; many student interns, and even a staff member, reside on or near Presstman Street where the high school and Requity's headquarters are stationed. Additionally, 98% of Requity's participating students are from Carver high, where Michael has built his reputation and legacy. I find this long term relationship-building to be integral in Requity's success.

When designers talk about design and what makes it successful, effective research is paramount, and it relies on building connections with community members. Designing *with* the community, not *for* it, ensures genuine impact. Mike exemplifies this through Requity's origin story. In 2020, students

on the Carver High baseball team shared how their electrical teacher had quit just 2 weeks before the Fall semester's start. Mike rushed to help find a replacement, and while doing so, realized that students were missing out on another integral aspect of their education: hands-on practice. So he decided to take action. Working with students, Mike identified their educational needs, gathered community members who could teach, and developed a nonprofit centered around work-based learning. Guided by community, Mike founded Requity on the basis of proven need, rather than an unproven notion of what others believe to be necessary.

Mike, however, doesn't see himself as the designer of this initiative, often attributing Requity's success to others. In a way he's right, as there is rarely a singular designer in any design process. Social designers will consistently emphasize the importance of utilizing community members as experts of their experience, preferably making them the co-designers of changes to their environment. In Mike's case, he sees his role as providing the platform, resources, and connections that empower others to do the work.

**“These kids don’t have to settle for the bad conditions they’re in. [Requity is] turning the focus towards a community that has opportunity.”**

This, in essence, is the heart of co-design: giving communities agency in shaping their own futures. Requity was born from the students' needs, a direct response to their lack of hands-on skills, demonstrating Mike's commitment to listening and responding to the community this organization serves. But in order to stand true to “applying credit where credit is due,” we must equally recognize Mike's own contribution of time, energy, and resources to this organization.

I'd be remiss not to mention how Mike's perpetual narrative of shared credit is vitally important in this patriarchal and racist world. Historically, and even still today, powerful people (rich, white, male, etc.) have stolen ideas and work from BIPOC/under-represented folks, or held a "design hero" ego in group-designed projects, failing to credit those who informed their work. "Individualism and the myth of single authorship" perpetuate white supremacy in design, a concept that Jennifer Low, a landscape architect and organizer at Dark Matter University, articulates in *Six Initiatives Model Ways to Practice True Design*. Jennifer's point models an important lesson: designers, in most contexts, hold a position of power. This can mean, but isn't limited to, the power of access to resources, the power of an audience, the power of education. So as a designer, I urge that we must maintain an understanding of the potential harm that can be done and actively work to raise the voices of oppressed communities and recognize harm. Resources like Design as Protest (<https://www.dapcollective.com>) are accessible to anyone, and encouraged for designers.

Requity is just one example of how social design is conducted in a context where they might not label themselves as designers; instead, they are community organizers and opportunity makers.

Mike leaves us with this: "The work I do isn't revolutionary, but the people are."

*If you're interested in learning more about Requity, and Design as Protest, head over to [dapcollective.com](https://www.dapcollective.com) to view their first Chapbook publication.*

Michael building with Governor Wes Moore.



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**ALSTON WATSON**

## On Neighboring with William Hicks

Baltimore is a city at which many avenues of meaning converge for me. My father grew up here, and now I live in a decently renovated apartment on a street where he used to squeegee windows. He reminisces often about the burgeoning dance music scene of the 90s, and his breakdancer background resurfaces through sparkling eyes that dazzle at the thought of 130 BPM drum breaks. When I'm standing at my turntable setup at the window overlooking the city and I hear gospel house fighting its way out of The Place Lounge and through my apartment walls from across the street, I feel similarly excited. Baltimore is a notably musical city, and this palpable energy extends elsewhere throughout the social fabric.

It's been quite the challenging, yet moving, experience trying to become a local, a neighbor, and hopefully a community member. Growing up in North Carolina, I experienced various degrees of neighborly sentiment. When I lived in Section 8 housing, I became best friends with my mom's best friend's son. My cousins lived a few apartments over, and 2 of my elementary classmates lived in the complex as well. In the small town of Littleton, everybody knew each other and that didn't suddenly stop for me. As I grew a little older, I began to appreciate that everybody knew my dad, or my aunt, or my mom, or one of my grandparents, despite the feeling of constant supervision.

Later, we moved to a slightly more urban city called Roanoke Rapids. My parents, now further in their professional careers, were able to build the house in which we now live. Since then, we've become a lot more siloed. My parents are notoriously shy, and we never really have guests or interact with the neighbors. Granted, everyone kind of seems to leave each other alone on my block. To the right of us on the other



side of the woods, there's a suspected drug & gun smuggling operation. To the left of us on the other side of mom's fence, there's a revolving door of tenants. Perhaps the conditions don't allow for the most robust neighbor experience.

All of this is to say, there's an empty space in my now adult-sized heart that can only be filled by getting to know the people around me in the city that I live in. As a musician and DJ, I'm lucky to have music as a driving force for social connection. I've been able to find my tribe with the local artists and venues, and none more so than the relationship I've cultivated with Mount Vernon Records and its owner William Hicks. He's the ultimate OG—a DJ with a long running career, a guy who seems to know everybody and all the lore, and famously generous to boot. His work with the Read St. Alliance, a coalition of business owners and neighbors on the street of the same name, inspires me greatly when I think of the role of musicians and artists in grassroots organization. The interview to follow comes after our performances at The Compound for a Gaza fundraiser, and just before our performance this weekend for an intergenerational vinyl-only DJ night at Le Mondo around the block from my apartment.

**ALSTON****WILLIE**

Could you introduce yourself and yeah, introduce yourself and tell us how you started running Mount Vernon Records?

Okay. So my name is William Hicks. I've had a bunch of DJ synonyms and nicknames throughout the club and rave scene. Most recently. One I'm using is Cheeky Willie. I've been DJing for 25 years plus, and not just in a group of friends, but going and touring and having residencies at places – mostly in the Baltimore, DC and Philadelphia area. I started the radio show Audio Infusion at Morgan State University in 1999. I did that five years straight, Saturday night, midnight to five. It was called the Audio Infusion because at the time, electronic music was starting to get kind of mixed up. Even though you would go to a big event or a nightclub, one room would be say, house or techno or drum and bass, but then the other rooms would have something totally divergent from that, but still in the same vein somewhat. So for Audio Infusion, that was the whole concept of the show. This is how all of this music works together. That led me to move to Florida and open up a nightclub with some friends down there called Envy Lounge.

I was down there for four years in southwest Florida. It was dope. It was nice, but the thing I missed most was the seasons. Then I realized what I really missed was Baltimore and I came back.

**ALSTON****WILLIE**

Are you from here originally?

I grew up in Columbia, Maryland, right down the road. So going between DC and Baltimore all the time. Growing up, it was really good for experiencing good music.

Right now, there's a lot of homegrown music. So then you get to meet the actual other people who are working in this homegrown music, and it was really a positive thing for me. When I decided to open up the shop, that's what led me to build it out the way that it is, is to have it as a community space.

**ALSTON**

What year did you start?

**ALSTON**

Or a guy and his friends.

**ALSTON**

It's tough to let it go.

**WILLIE**

2022 was when we opened up, October. Our mission then and now, even though it's expanded, was to make a record store that was for DJs and producers. When we first opened up, people were coming in like, "God I don't know where to find anything." Well, back then it was just like, "no, just dig!" I mean, we've got turntables for you to listen to stuff and hang out for a little bit. This doesn't have to be a fast thing.

And especially with dance music, a lot of the stuff, if you don't know exactly who they are, you don't know what it sounds like. A lot of people look for names that they recognize when sometimes it's this guy using a different name.

**WILLIE**

Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly. Or the crew, you know what I mean? And boom. With dance music, I really feel people should just grab a stack and go through 'em because you may find something that you weren't looking for as well. And I mean that works with all the records, but dance music especially because it's so anonymous at the time. Yeah, it was a goal to sit there. I mean, my main goal was to get rid of some records, man, I had so many, I felt like my floor was going to cave in. It was the stories of the people's basements falling in. I mean, I kid a little bit about that, but I figured it was something that I'm continuing as a learning process for me now as I'm learning to let go of records. I collected so many over the years and I'm like, ah, but I need to keep these.

**WILLIE**

It's a good freeing experience. I know this sounds really wild, but the records themselves get to have their purpose back.

**ALSTON**

How did you decide on this location, this building?

**WILLIE**

This particular location kind of opened itself up to me. Before Covid, we were on Ground Three Media. The recording studio up the street is where I was looking to open a record store because that was where the original Modern Music was, which was the first record store that catered to dance music. It's already got musical energy in there. Covid happened. Luckily enough, I know people in the neighborhood and when this became available, I spoke with a landlord, explained to him what I wanted to do here because we're part art gallery as well. Even though our walls look bare now, we usually have art on the walls and we try to cater to tangible things. Anyway, it kind of just opened up and I've been here ever since and hopefully will be here for a little bit longer.

**ALSTON**

What's it like being a business owner specifically on the street and being a neighbor to other businesses and other people on the street?

**WILLIE**

Oh my gosh, I can't imagine trying to do this anywhere else. Literally every other business owner I've become friends with. We talk and we hang out and we help people with everything. Every shop on this block, we connect with each other and it feels like just a group of friends working together. Because of that cohesion and because we became friends, that's how we started our nonprofit. The Read Street Alliance—our mission is to help the neighborhood grow together for things that we actually want to have in our neighborhood. Even though we have a small footprint, we want to make sure that everybody's voice is going to be heard because we're not part of the other sanctioned parts of Mount Vernon. There's a couple of neighborhood associations all around us that we don't have any benefit from. We don't have any say. So we started our own to say, we are our little sect and we matter too here in the city. Because it's interesting how the different neighborhoods have their own little perks.

The Bromo Arts district is named that, and people go there to see all the art because Charles Street has its main street. People say, "oh, we can go do that!" Well, we can't be part of any of the arts districts here, even though every place on the block is a boutique place that has stuff. There's handmade jewelry next door, you know what I mean? You want to go shopping for clothes? Boom, you got Bottle of Bread. You want to get some retro toys or something weird? We have Adam Galaxy. We have everything on our little block, and yet, the money gets allocated to different neighborhoods or different parts of our neighborhood, I should say.

I want to get the community together to figure out what we can do about some of the things that really concern us, not just about having the events that we want.

**ALSTON**

Can you tell us who you're working with and what roles everybody's taking right now? How does it all work?

**WILLIE**

So there's five members that we have and five members that are on the board, and each just five businesses, and then we all have our different roles. Somehow I fell into the tech part of it.

I don't know how that happened, but one of the managing partners from the Drinkery, the president, and then everyone else has, we have a secretary across the street as far as trying to get members from our community. We've just wrote a letter to go around and leave in people's mailboxes and kind of knock on doors and just as a group and say, Hey, this is what we're doing, blah, blah, blah, and if you'd like to be involved with any concerns, so that's how we're going to get it out to our neighborhood. We really want to make it more of a personable thing. We want to make sure that it is something that, no, you're not going to get lost in 60 people. Five people gang up and try and do something like this. We're not going to do that.

There seems like there's a lot of that that has happened in just even in Mount Vernon that I've been finding out because of

now this weird stuff. It's like, it's weird. Politics is weird. I don't like that part of it because it feels like that's what you are. We're representing people, so then we have to have this. For me, I'm just like, yeah, y'all know me already. You know what I mean? I'm not trying to do anything other than what I was doing.

#### ALSTON

I feel like just since being here since May, it's become really clear to me that Baltimore has a really robust activist scene. Everybody seems to have something they care deeply about. Everybody's down to work down to work together, down to band together in these types of ways and try to make Baltimore a better place.

#### WILLIE

Hundred percent. I can't even add anything. That's exactly it. Most of the people who are living here—they're living here and they're raising their kids here because they see something better here. People who are out actively and trying to donate their time for these charitable events, they're helping. Yeah, man, Baltimore's cool.

#### ALSTON

I'm curious how you feel about the music scene's role in doing all that. Do you feel like local musicians and people who work in music in general are trying to find their way to improve the community politically and stuff like that? Do you feel like they're socially engaged, or is there room for room for growth in that area?

#### WILLIE

I do think that there are a lot of people who are active and vocal about it. When I do see the people who are being active in that way, it's kind of a local thing that they're doing. I do see that, and this is across almost all genres of music. We

have so many diverse scenes here. Musicians will rally around other musicians regardless of who they are, and you'll see people come out and support and make sure that whatever needs to happen, happens. I think that's just the Baltimore vibe. I think that's what more people should think about. If you want to help, do stuff that really matters to you in a local space.

#### ALSTON

What do you think needs to change here in this neighborhood? What's a kind of long-term goal you guys might have?

#### WILLIE

One of our long-term goals is definitely to bring back more events back to this neighborhood. The Fells Point Festival, well, that used to be the Read Street Festival. It stopped happening here, and they moved it to Fells Point, so there was always this energetic, artistic vibe that was here. Some of our goals are definitely to finish up our spring and summer planning, and to do things that are going to showcase Baltimore, as well as Read Street specifically.

As far as the neighborhood side of things, we want to figure out how we can stop this illegal dumping that's happening in the neighborhoods. We really have to see if there's any type of pest control that we could do as a neighborhood for the vermin that we have and schedule it quarterly or twice a year. Neighborhood cleanups, so we can get a dumpster out here. We want to make sure that our neighborhood is super nice because we are a main street. You know what I mean? We are an arts district. We're all of these things. We have these beautiful houses, and so we want to let other people know we're not just the left side of Mount Vernon.

Cassandra (Cakes in the City, 212 W Read St), one her focuses for 2025 and 2026 is to do classes and teach people how to bake—teach a trade and say, "Hey, you can take it from your kitchen here, and you can do it for 50 people." You start to do a workforce development aspect there. The Drinkery also is going to figure out if they could get the right sponsors to host classes there for people. I do think that there's a space for doing it on the community side and then

also doing it on the for-profit side as well. The way I see it, they both benefit. If we're making tons of money here, we have no problem doing these free classes.

#### **ALSTON**

Does any of this involve working with the city council, city government side of things?

**WILLIE**  
We're definitely going to be reaching out to our city council. I'm speaking as an owner of Mount Vernon Records. I'm very happy that there is a new council person for our district. Zac Blanchard, he really does care about what's happening. He does want to make the neighborhood better. He did help with an issue, and so we're hoping that we can figure out different ways to use some of the city's resources to do the ideas that we were talking about implementing.

Literally right now, there's people who have to walk a block and a half who live on Park Avenue. They have to go all the way around this block to find out where they have to put their trash. These things shouldn't be happening.

#### **ALSTON**

Yeah. It's good to be able to advocate for yourselves collectively. If you can use that towards any kind of benefit, it is always worth it. It's like, yeah, why not? Nobody's going to do it for us.

#### **WILLIE**

Right. There's something to be said about a lot of people coming together for a common college, you know what I mean? And have that collective energy going in that direction. Just so cool.



DJ Cheeky Willie at Alston's Gaza Thrift event

## CHRISTINA JENKINS

### On Political Identity with Lauren Williams

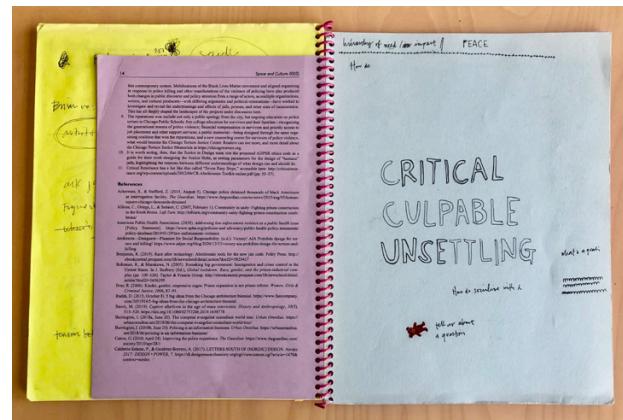
I joined LinkedIn on April 9, 2010, a month before I finished my MFA. I already had a job: I had been hired to teach design and technology at a New York City high school in the fall. LinkedIn doesn't seem to have much utility for teachers whose professional connections sit largely within their own school, and I'm not sure what I thought I'd get out of signing up. At that point, my profile said I had been the managing editor at my college paper, a middle school social studies teacher, and a technology coach.

Fifteen years later, my LinkedIn says I am an artist whose medium is school, and the 2024-25 Interim Director of MICA MA Social Design. I am grateful to not experience impostor syndrome, because if I did I might have wasted quite a lot of time wondering if a high school teacher is actually qualified to lead this program.

As it turns out, yes. But I was also not naive to the truth that I needed to more deeply understand the context that this program sits in. Upon realizing that this job was becoming a reality in spring 2024, one of the first things I did was to read as much as I could about the state of social design today. How do practitioners think about it? Where does it stand as an academic discipline? What do students want to understand about it today?

I encountered Lauren Williams' work through this research, initially from a reference in *The Black Experience in Design*. Chris Rudd's essay in that book, *A Reading List for the Politics of Design*, names an article Williams published that eviscerates the apolitical orientation of "design thinking." In it, she calls for us to "move away from innocence in design practice," towards an approach that is more "critical, culpable and unsettling."

"Critical, culpable and unsettling" became my motto for how to approach the year. It was an invitation to reflect on how human-centered design practitioners can make a choice to embrace or ignore the political nature of the work we do. More than an invitation, the motto felt like permission, a recognition that there is no other way. This was helpful, because while LinkedIn offers a sanitized platform for describing our professional work, my actual worldview sits far beyond the jobs I happened to have had. The gap between the two is something I sometimes struggle to articulate, which is why I wanted to understand more about how Lauren came to her own political identity and how it manifests in her work today.



DJ Cheeky Willie at Alston's Gaza Thrift event

#### CHRISTINA

How do you describe who you are and what you do?

#### LAUREN

Usually I say I'm an artist and designer. Sometimes I add other labels, like researcher, teacher. Most of my work focuses on either critiquing forms of oppression using various types of interdisciplinary media or imagining other possible realities that are more liberatory than the ones we have now. ... I spend a lot of time doing work with other people—facilitating, or making things together.

**CHRISTINA**

Can you help me understand how you came to your political identity?

**LAUREN**

It's been a long slow road. I'm a military brat and grew up mostly overseas. Went to a PWI (predominantly white institution—UNC Chapel Hill). I don't think I really understood the implications of my entire life being about occupying other countries in military spaces. It was through college, studying policy and economics, I spent time working in community foundations in the south. I was learning about inequality and especially racialized American inequality.

I don't think I really understood any of this as being politicized until much later.

I visited Palestine in 2014, maybe later, with a young Lutheran's group in DC. Palestine really shattered my—I don't know, we just really don't learn about it at least in the school where I was in. Coming back and becoming more active in that church—they were doing organizing work, I did some trainings, had some friends who were organizers.

Around grad school was when I started to understand what it meant to have a politic. 2016—Trayvon had happened, all of these police killings were in the news. [After graduating] I moved to Detroit because I had taught a course here where we brought students to Detroit for the summer—a design research course. Because I was TAing, I was helping students get around and I was meeting a lot of people. [I thought] I would like to be a part of a community where I can learn from folks like this. Once I got to Detroit, I was a lot more intentional about being part of study groups, organizing.

**CHRISTINA**

What is your relationship today to the article you wrote? You wrote it five years ago.

**LAUREN**

I think the thing that isn't in the article but is central to it is the idea that there was a time when I thought design thinking is it, this is the answer! I was watching things get more and more bastardized as they came to life in the way funding happened. It was 2012–16 when design thinking was really blowing up. I thought it was so cool. I found graduate programs that were design-thinking focused, but

Art Center was the strangest of all of the programs I applied to. Coincidentally once I got there, there was an antipathy toward design thinking. I came out of it similarly critical.

The example I chose [in the article] is pretty benign. There are much worse examples of design thinking. It still colors the way I think about design. I'm not going to come in and do a hackathon with your team.

When I asked Lauren to describe the evolution of her political orientation and practice, she said, *I just pivot a little bit, a little bit, a little bit*. I nearly cried when I heard this, because it felt so resonant to me: We just try something, stop something, fail at something, learn something. We move, shift, pivot—towards justice, freedom, peace. This is the thing that I aspired to create the conditions for in the program this year, and that I aspire to myself all the time.

Listening to Lauren's reflection—on Palestine, on grad school, on Detroit, on abolition, on her experience working for a DC nonprofit—I wondered: How do we represent the impact of these experiences on our personal and professional identities? What does it mean to be "qualified" to work in this space, anyway? Of course, LinkedIn camouflages that truth behind the way it fragments our professional identities in a linear, scroll-down story: Experience, Education, Skills, Interests.

What a myth! Just pivot a little bit, a little bit, a little bit.

Lauren Williams is at <https://www.williamslaurenm.com/> and @ldubalicious.

**CARLEY BRAN****On Hubris, Humility & Confidence**

I struggle with balancing humility and confidence. As a woman and person of color, I often feel caught between taking up space and making space.

This essay pulls together something I have been wrestling with as I develop my Social Design skill set: how to better understand my strengths and insert myself with humility and confidence into a web of complex social problems.

These themes were central in the conversations I had with Laura LeBrun Hatcher and Jess Obayan. Each are working designers whose collaborative experiences with community members and organizations have informed the way they approach and view their work.

They build relationships, hold space, problem-solve, and work on change - big and small.



Thank you, Jess and Laura, for your time and insights - they have been very meaningful and salient to me.

The following is my attempt to weave together the overarching themes of our separate conversations, how they apply to my learning journey and the state of Social Design now. I hope it is helpful to you. But first, some more context...



Jess is an equity design strategist, creative social worker, and parent energized by exploring how curiosity, empathy and creativity can illuminate pathways to a more just lived experience.



Laura is a design educator, creative entrepreneur, health care and disability rights advocate, and mom.

Credit: Howard Korn

## Hubris to Humility

In the fall of 2024, I was frequently having big, reflective conversations inside and outside the classroom about entrenched, intersecting social problems - in classes, at church, with family, and friends. In classes, we were reading about and discussing social issues and their underlying causes. We reflected on intention and impact. We thought about the world as it is, the world we want to live in, and how we can collaboratively work to get there at the micro and macro levels. I was becoming more aware of values I want to embody in my relationships and work going forward. I try to apply these new values practically but of course I fall short. I am often frustrated with myself. Then I find myself even more frustrated after I realize I am unintentionally replicating the thinking I am trying to get away from - binary, perfectionist, urgent, fearful mentalities (Okun, 2021). Remembering is hard - remembering that these internal monologues and external messages out in the world are hard to break from and disentangling takes time (Okun, 2021). I pushed myself too hard - this ultimately led to feelings of defeat. Yet at the same time, my unrealistic expectations conflated my importance in the work and put heavy emphasis on my performance. I recognize now that I did not give myself enough space

to rest well while constantly stretching myself intellectually and personally. I was not pursuing the rest and joy I need to sustain this challenging mental and relational work.

I am learning to give myself grace, be vulnerable with my work, and humble my perfectionist mentality. It is easy to attribute success to independent work and persistence, but no one works in a vacuum - people, past and present, inform and support us along the way. There is this tension between giving myself all of the credit or none of it, sliding between extremes - but the truth lies in the middle. I can be proud of the hard professional and personal work I have done throughout the years while also acknowledging that I did not get where I am by myself. I draw strength, inspiration, joy, and meaning through the knowledge of others and my connection with them. Like all the lovely people I have met (east coast, west coast, and in between), I contribute to and draw from the regenerative system of community, of give and take - even when I make mistakes, even while I am learning.

I can produce good work alone, but it can be so much better when I am not in a silo. Ultimately, this work is not about ego and self-perception; it is about the communal capacity to envision and create better collective futures together because as Lilla Watson states, "your

liberation is bound up with mine." I am constantly working on being present and to listen instead of jumping five steps ahead, to go against my first instinct to fix, problem-solve, and jump in with suggestions and solutions. Instead of trying to prove my value, I can pause to hold space for others and welcome open, honest conversations with humility.

Part of that humility in Social Design takes place when approaching others who are directly experiencing these complex social issues. As I was talking with Laura, whose work spans from healthcare and disability civil rights advocacy to graphic design professional and educator, she said she is known for admitting, "I don't know what I don't know." She spoke about how we might not identify with all the communities we work with, but we can educate ourselves and pay attention. That we have to start somewhere and should not jump in with a solution when we may not fully understand the complex issues and layered experiences of people who are multiply marginalized. We have to ask who is missing from the conversation, meet people where they are, and listen.

I don't have that lived experience. So I think that the humility piece of it is key, but then also I think that we need to have the hubris to assume that maybe we can make a difference. How do you balance those things? You kind of have to have them in equal measure. You have to have the bravery to go into the space in the first place and say that you might be able to help with something. And then you have to have the humility to say, but I don't have all the answers and I'm only going to be able to do this with your help. And let's work together.

- Laura LeBrun Hatcher

We have become accustomed to isolation, to our perceived independence. We forget our interdependence. Laura explained how we often believe services will be there when you need them, then emergencies arise and you quickly learn what services are actually available to you, how long you might have to wait for them, and if you qualify. Fortunately and unfortunately, others have experienced and are experiencing the same thing.

This is the importance and power of community. Laura urges that there are other voices out there – people who are already doing the work, so it is important that we find and join them. In creating community we can build and share power, leadership, and voice.

Being part of a community requires participation. Yes, community requires effort and time, but it can provide strength and understanding. Laura points out that when we stay in our silos, it “diffuses any power we might have for actually making a difference in all of these shared issues.” Because of division and individualism, we have forgotten how to find common ground, see our resilience, and how to build collective power. Social Design can provide a constructive container where we can have conversations, acknowledge the barriers, build capacity while recognizing experience, and create solutions together. We do not have

to tough through it, advocate, work, imagine, or create alone.

### **Big Ideas, small change**

Jess, Director of Creativity and Co-Design at Design Impact, co-facilitates with the people immediately around her and is flexible in changing the route or destination. Since our conversations, I am learning to let go when something is not working. I am learning to be more adaptable, to change direction when it does not turn out the way I had expected or prepared for. Jess countered my either/or, all or nothing perspective by setting a powerful example, “I definitely approach design with a lot of reality and a lot of flexibility and a lot of humility.” It was not until writing this piece that I reflected and understood how deeply her words applied to my internal learning process and graduate work so far. Change might be small. I should not rush progress with my ego, impatiently trying to achieve a larger goal. If I push ahead before I and/or the people around me are not ready, the effort is counterproductive.

I consider myself more of a facilitator in the sense [that] I'm not going to push anyone or push anything because my ego says, I want to achieve this. If there's no real harm being created, I think a lot of it is just me being okay with change looking or feeling small. Me honoring the fact that the people who I'm designing with are also frustrated by the boundaries and barriers that are in place too. So honoring that struggle for them I think is part of it too and always grounding myself in the complexity of the problems that we're solving and the humility that these things don't continue to exist because we haven't had good ideas. They continue to exist.

- Jess Obayan

Small change is valuable. We might have big ideas but we are coming up against even bigger problems. We often look to the outer, physical world to assign value, measure success, scale growth. We give value to big change. An intangible thing, like changing your mindset, is smaller and hard to quantify, but our inner worlds have big impact. Jess spoke to how our mindsets act like a filter and shade how we view the world, creating patterns in how we interact with others and react to everyday events. We need to get curious about these mindsets and how they impact us. When we do not address them, they show up in unexpected places.

Small can be powerful. Jess also led a workshop series for the Master of Arts in Social Design (MASD) cohort and offered our group a thought exercise: Have you ever had a moment when something seemingly small sets you off into a spiral, and you react in a way that is disproportionate to the size of the problem? She asks us to explore: What is behind that reaction? What messages are we telling ourselves? How do these messages build our power or get in our own way? On the outside, changing one's outlook might seem like a small change, but shifting a mindset is a powerful thing. As facilitators, Jess emphasizes that we need to create space

for people to see their own resilience. When we shift our mindsets it impacts our behaviors, conversations, and collective expectations. We can practice communicating these shifting mindsets in constructive ways and put our power behind problem-solving as a community. When we find people who feel passionately about the same things we do, we can build community and support each other in ways we define as meaningful. We can name and build around our values. None of this is easy, but this can lead us towards a new reality through healing and dreamwork - "Dreaming is not passive. In dreaming, our communities materialize a world where, through fury and love, transformation in all its rebelliousness thrives" (Kafai, 2021).

## Hubris & Pace

Design sprints are a common tool in Social Design. They can produce interesting, informed brainstorming sessions, but there is often a disconnect in applying these solutions to big problems. As we were talking, Jess described how as a discipline, We need to shift the way we think about Social Design. Change takes time. Approaching deep-seated issues with sprints is not enough. Laura pointed out, we often "only visit with a problem and then attach a cool

solution and then we walk away and go do something else. In order to really solve or start solving any kind of issue, you have to embed yourself." It takes time to build relationships, build trust, foster community, and have honest conversations. In our interview, Jess commented, "We don't really make space for slow innovation or small innovation. There's some misalignment there and what we assign value to."

## Hubris to Confidence

We also need to shift the way we talk about Social Design. We have to share a language and "professionalize our profession" says Laura, to help it be more understandable and recognizable. When I tell others that I am studying Social Design, I am often met with the question... What is Social Design? There are so many word variations being used to describe similar processes. The language we use is similar and general, therefore it is confusing. While there may be different design iterations such as: Co-Design, Equity-Centered Design, Human-Centered Design, Social Design, there are people who are already doing the work, could be interested in joining the work, or looking to join the conversation but are left out because they do not know where or in which direction to look.

We create space for big ideas but that doesn't necessarily translate to a big reality. A lot of the barriers cannot be designed through or around. Design is shaped in a way that a lot of things we do are sprints or are supposed to happen in three days. The pace of design versus the pace of how change happens is misaligned sometimes.

- Jess Obayan

Having a shared language establishes meaning and furthers the work by removing the barrier in more easily finding aligned partners and potential employers. When organizations listen and are accountable to those they serve and those who work for them, we can step towards progress as we share this framework. Kind of like the neural pathways in the brain that get stronger and stronger the more they are taken, so change can ripple out when others see how effective joint problem-solving and communication can be. Those pathways do not get traveled often if others do not know it is a possible path to walk.

It is important to be clear about what we do, what to expect, and how it supports and builds on the work of others. Because Social Design is not easily recognizable, it makes sense when clients are hesitant to get involved and then surprised with the results. During our interview, Laura pointed out that using case studies can demonstrate Social Design's value and measurable impact. Social Design can challenge and morph organizations to start thinking and working in different ways. It is time we examine how we look at problems and integrate voices so we can arrive at better solutions.

## From Hubris to Humility with Confidence

I acknowledge that I have a lot of high aims articulated here and I have fallen short of applying these values in practice. Like everyone else, I am learning as I go. I actively work on accepting and trusting my whole self, contradictions and all. This concept of complex personhood (Tuck, 2009) goes for all the people we work with and are in community with. Without learning from established Social Designers experiences or identifying our goals and values, we cannot apply them or refer to them as guidance in the road ahead (Price & Ennis, 2018).

As Social Designers, we need to step back and look at the progress we have made and where we need to improve. We must take stock and reshape the current aspects where hubris exists in Social Design in order to benefit everyone involved.

We need creative problem solvers. We need to take that dose of humility and combine it with confidence. There is a beauty to Social Design: in gathering people, facilitating conversations, giving voice and structure, understanding mindsets, seeking empowerment, uplifting and stretching existing capacity, forming meaningful relationships, seeing the connections. It is not just work meant for our clients,

we share in it too; it is communal. It is the work my fellow students and I have been doing this year. Jess says as designers, we take feelings and data and make sense of them. Social Designers find themes and brainstorm solutions that are grounded in the reality and will of the clients we work with.

Laura acknowledges that although it is scary, we can speak truth to power. But as designers, we are the weavers. Author and justice worker Deepa Iyer explains in her Social Change Ecosystem Framework that the weavers “see the through-lines of connectivity between people, places, organizations, ideas, and movements.” We can boldly show up to the table while also, as Jess counsels, staying humble. Just imagine what we can do when we apply this to organizational culture, collective expectations, and policy. But as Laura would say, don’t imagine, just start.

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## DJ FLEMING

### On Embracing Conflict

#### On conflict

I am often described as a ‘happy-go-lucky’ person with a naturally positive outlook. I get excited easily, which often is effortless. This mindset impacts me professionally, interpersonally, and in my work as a Social Design student. I never really had issues with this way of being, but recently this disposition has left me feeling naive to approaching some forms of tension and conflict within Social Design that I had not given a deeper appreciation for.

**Definition of Conflict:** When talking about conflict, I mean the setbacks and tensions—both external and internal—that arise in socially engaged work. These conflicts manifest personally, interpersonally, and systemically, adding layers of difficulty to already challenging impact work.

#### Personal Story

On the first day of Social Design Studio in the fall of 2024, I was filled with both excitement and anxiety as I started this new chapter of my graduate studies. As I sat at the table with my fellow cohort members, I couldn’t shake the feeling that I didn’t belong. I questioned whether everyone around me was more qualified, wondering if I was too young, not inquisitive or critical enough. I also doubted whether I was socially active or ‘woke’ enough (whatever that means) to be in this space when I first began.

My fear of not belonging grew when I realized that my overly positive attitude might be hindering my ability to critically engage with the conflicts within social design, specifically within collaboration in this field. This feeling grew when, on our first day, our program director asked us to share our attitudes toward collaboration and how we feel working in



those spaces. Eagerly, I responded with “excited” and “fun,” believing that teamwork was always the best approach to making change. I believed this response was the right one for a space like this, thinking that others would share this attitude and we would all feel the same way since collaboration is a key aspect of social design.

However, contrary to my eager attitude and belief that this response was the “correct” response, my fellow students expressed quite the opposite feeling. They slowly shared that they weren’t always thrilled about working in groups or collaborating with others. Many expressed feelings of frustration and resistance long before experiencing any sort of excitement. While we all recognize the importance of collaboration, it seemed that for many, they wouldn’t be so eager to categorize it as being “fun,” as I had shared.

Almost immediately, I felt myself feeling out of touch and succumbing to my early thoughts of being unsure if I fit in. This was reinforced when we discussed how my initial response of “fun” for collaboration clashed with the consensus that many others felt the opposite. As my classmates shared their hesitations and negative experiences with collaboration, even in socially engaged work, I felt that my “happy-go-lucky” character had left me in a state of naivety and being too eager and excited.

Since this introduction to conflict in social design in the academic world, my perception of conflict and social design has evolved. This experience made me realize I needed to reassess my expectations of collaboration and acknowledge the presence of conflict in social design. I now see that conflict and tension are inevitable, and I have learned to embrace the complexities of social design with a more critical perspective. I want to be prepared for this while also keeping “fun” in the equation.

Since this introduction to conflict in social design in the academic world, my perception of conflict and social design has evolved.

#### Who DJ Interviewed and Why

Just as I learned about conflict in social design through the classroom, I also had the opportunity to interview two individuals who could speak to the complexities of conflict in social design in the real world. Baltimore’s M’balu “Lu” Bangura and Sam Green both met with me for interviews to discuss their journeys as change-makers in the city, highlighting their professional roles, personal missions, and areas where they have faced conflict while trying to impact their community. This conversation enlightened me on my goal of exploring the landscape of social design in Baltimore and uncovering

how we define it. From these conversations, I have learned that you cannot comprehend and understand the social design landscape without focusing on the tensions and conflicts that are faced within it.

Sam Green works as the Arts Integration Schools Manager for Arts Every Day, a nonprofit dedicated to arts advocacy, and M'Balu "Lu" Bangura from the Enoch Pratt Free Library is the Chief of Equity and Fair Practices at the Enoch Pratt Free Library, Baltimore's official public library. I believe these women represent the dedication of people who are driving positive change in Baltimore forward. Through their work, they both embody the principle of "working with, not working for," which is an essential aspect of social design. Both are grounded in the values of listening to their neighbors and are consistently striving to create opportunities for those who are often underserved or undervalued. Their work is tied to social design, and in each of our conversations, I was able to grasp a clear understanding of what this looks like in Baltimore and how conflict plays a role in it.

Our conversation started off with me asking them each "what they would call themselves beyond their professional titles." Each of them shared what they think their titles are, how they show up in their work, and additionally they

discussed conflicts they had worked through. I interviewed Sam first. Here is what I learned:

### Talking With Sam Green

When Sam shared her personal title, she called herself a "Direct Supporter," working to improve education systems for students and educators. She went on to say that her focus is on "building capacity," listening to teachers, and trusting them. Sam further explained, "I think my personal true north is working to make systems of education more equitable, more student- and learner-centered, and more accessible."

As we went deeper into our conversation of social design in Baltimore and how she has situated herself in it, I learned how she shows up in her work and what specific conflicts she has had to face toward her goal of capacity building for those who need it. Sam shows up by working to mitigate the barriers between Baltimore City schools' access to sufficient art education, art opportunities, and helping bridge educators and students to resources. Through Arts Every Day, Sam channels her passion for art and her dedication to creating opportunities for others, turning both into a professional pursuit. This platform allows her to focus her talents while making a direct impact in the lives of others.

"In the realm of my work with Arts Every Day, I feel like it gives me a local focus on that true north of thinking, of what can I do to directly support arts educators within Baltimore City Public Schools?"

This is how Sam shows up for her community. By being the person who listens to the people she wants to impact. Knowing that they are the experts who understand the issues they face. Sam understands that they know what they need, and she works to get others to listen and trust them. She says that "We don't need to make choices for them; we need to listen and work alongside them." With over 10 years of experience as an educator, Sam is well aware of the strength and knowledge teachers bring to the table of decision-making for better art education systems. However, she also understands the challenge of getting stakeholders to truly listen to teachers and trust their perspectives for change. This led to the first instance of conflict that she had shared.

### Conflict With Getting People to Listen to Teachers:

Getting decision-makers, principals, and even parents to fully appreciate the perspective of educators is the uphill battle Sam faces. Her work to get others to take teachers' needs more seriously—

so they can create better learning environments—is a constant challenge. This is the first area of conflict we discussed. Sam is often in the position of advocating for teachers but too often also pushing others to believe teachers are the experts in identifying solutions to issues within arts education. Sam expressed that, "I just want people to listen and believe in teachers when they explain what is and isn't working for them systematically," she shared when I asked about a key takeaway from her work. This role of being the middleman requires Sam to tirelessly explain what she believes to be necessary and obvious. She emphasizes the importance of listening to educators and valuing their insights to create better education systems that support both teachers and students.

### Conflict With Collaboration:

Another example of conflict that we discussed was with collaboration. We know that collaboration is foundational to making a community impact—it's a strength that drives work forward and unites people. However, it often comes with tension and challenges. Sam discussed these conflicts through her experiences navigating working collaboratively and stated that "You have to know how to move effectively in spaces that can become more

harmful than helpful." She further explained the challenges of balancing differing priorities from various groups. In her role, she balances serving the community with answering to partners, funders, board members, and also coworkers. We talked about the challenge of aligning these expectations, especially when they conflict. Sam expressed that "there are times you work to please everyone but you can't and must consider those who support and endorse your work." Sam emphasized that she strives to "work to not please everyone" and focus primarily on those she's impacting. However, there's always a balancing act that must be done.

#### **Conflict of Ameliorative vs. Systemic Impact:**

The final conflict Sam addressed was the internal struggle of balancing immediate versus systemic impact. Starting as an art teacher with a direct approach, she later realized her desire to create broader, long-term change. At her first teaching job at Monarch Academy in Glen Burnie, Maryland, Sam worked tirelessly to lighten the load on teachers and enhance art experiences for students. In her efforts to revamp the arts department, she realized systemic barriers were still preventing her from seeing the impact she wanted. Frustrated, she decided to shift her

focus and work on changing the systems that were failing her students through working at Arts Every Day. This internal conflict—deciding between direct impact and systemic change—is something Sam faced and is often a challenge for those working to support their communities. It's a difficult process of finding where to make the most meaningful impact and balancing immediate needs with long-term change. This is a question I constantly grapple with in my own journey.

#### Talking With M'balu "lu" Bangura:

In my conversation with M'balu, she shared her personal title as being a "Builder" above all else. She explained, "I would describe my work as building and myself as a builder—not in terms of brick and mortar, but in terms of capacity and opportunity." She stated that her approach is all about access. She shared that in her work, "Everything is about inclusion and focusing more on community building." She also has been given the title of "Inequity Eliminator" and adds that she wants to provide opportunity for people in her community who are "underserved and overburdened" to see themselves in public spaces such as the library and know there are spaces that serve them equally.

M'balu shared that her focus has been on creating change at a systemic level,

emphasizing the importance of working to "change what needs changing and break outdated traditions." Through her leadership in creating the Pratt Free Market—a free grocery store, community refrigerator, and educational resource program—M'balu tackles food insecurity and resource accessibility with an innovative approach. M'balu describes her role in initiatives like this as "working to make tomorrow easier." While she recognizes that changing the world won't happen overnight, she believes every step she takes brings her closer to a bigger goal, while lightening the burden for those in need.

When I asked her how she got to this level of intervention, she stated that "through Baltimore City Library, I try to work on a systemic level. And everything I do is with the purpose of helping people live self-fulfilled lives, making sure they are given access and the opportunity to see themselves in places in the city, especially in the library." As a civil rights advocate and leader in Baltimore, her goal is to create spaces for people by mitigating barriers to essential resources they deserve but can't always access. This is how she approaches her work—committed to her goal of building and creating for others, making the next day a little bit easier.

#### **Conflicts of Self-Doubt:**

What drives M'balu is her relentless passion to do more. Always seeking greater impact, she's never satisfied with what's accomplished. M'balu's drive to push herself forward reflects her strength and identity as a "Builder." However, this same determination also leads to some conflicts she and I discussed, particularly the struggle to balance her work with personal time and feeling fulfilled. M'balu shared she has often felt torn between wanting to achieve more and feeling unsatisfied with her efforts. She has been her harshest critic, always pushing harder, thinking there is always more work to be done. Early in her career, she was "bold" and willing to stretch herself, but it took support from colleagues and friends to help her recognize her achievements and slow down to appreciate her impact.

"I was always on the go. I was working a lot because my motto is always, I work for tomorrow, not for today. Because that's my mindset, I do tend to be hard on myself. And it just took someone to say, hey, pause, you're doing good. You're doing OK. And it took them repeatedly saying that to me for me to now repeatedly say that to myself."

She shared that it was a long journey for her to learn when to pull back and recognize that she had done enough. Despite this, the internal drive to do

more is ever-present in her mind. As she puts it, this is “simply part of the nature of the work.”

### **Conflict Getting People to Listen to Trusted Voices:**

Similarly to my conversation with Sam, a form of conflict M’balu shared was the challenge of juggling multiple groups with opposing priorities and building trust with people she wants to impact. A key part of this conflict was with getting decision-makers and those in power to listen to community members and recognize their authority. M’balu emphasized the importance of listening to the community when working on impact projects. She explained, “Hearing from the community about what they want, rather than assuming it, is what is working.” Which is what they did for the Pratt Free Market—listening to communities and gathering input and feedback to bring the project to life. M’balu emphasized the importance of listening to the communities you aim to impact in order to create any meaningful change. She says that “Every community has tested voices, and if you’re not one, then you need to work with someone who is.” While gaining trust is difficult, collaborating with trusted individuals is crucial. However, both M’balu and Sam note the challenge of convincing decision-makers

to listen to these voices, a challenge M’balu continues to work through.

### **My Relationship to Social Design Today**

Through my conversations, I aimed to understand the landscape of social design in Baltimore, and it quickly became clear that I couldn’t grasp it fully without acknowledging the inevitable conflicts. Whether it’s struggles in collaboration, balancing ameliorative vs. systemic impact, or dealing with self-doubt, these tensions are inherent in social impact work and must be recognized.

What stood out to me was not just the range of conflicts these women have faced, but their attitude toward them. Both acknowledged that in this field, “there will always be days when you want to give up” (Sam Green), but then also emphasized that while we can’t change the world overnight, “we work to make the next day easier” (M’balu Bangura).

These conversations deepened my understanding of social design and the role conflict plays in it. While I value staying positive and don’t want to dim my excited energy, I recognize the importance of not letting that hinder my approach to design. I want to ensure I’m not driven solely by unchecked enthusiasm, but that I’m also aware of

the complexities and tensions in impact work. I understand now that addressing conflict in social design is crucial, and I’m committed to continuing my learning, particularly in the context of Baltimore. I think that while I want to keep asking those who work toward social change what is working and going well, I really want to keep asking: what’s not working? Where are the pain points? and What is hard?

One final point: When I asked Sam and M’balu if they considered themselves social designers, both proudly confirmed they do. It’s now a title they wear with pride.

**SHANNON WILLING**

## On Community-Led Development with Raychel Gadson and Meleny Thomas

Thomas  
Raychel Gadson  
with Meleny Thomas

As a creative working in the field of graphic design, I view design less as a European-centric grid standard and aesthetic and more as a tool to facilitate communication – specifically, communication as a tool for community. This is why I gravitated to social design, to explore how to support equitable change. Prior to this program, it felt daunting to approach as an individual. How could I make change all on my own? I was disheartened by systemic barriers I didn't yet have an understanding of. Society reinforces individualism and concentrates our attention on one's immediate family unit or living space. But as a result, we are isolated to the point where I even find it difficult to get to know my neighbors. Social design is challenging work to pursue, but there is strength and healing in what can be done collectively. Throughout my time with MASD, it has become clear to me that community driven action is the core of social design. It is a practice of building community, bringing disparate voices together, identifying and understanding differences, and expanding capacity through collaboration. You don't need to use design frameworks in order to be a social designer. Anyone who picks up the torch to do the work with equitable intention is a social designer.

By designing Baltimore as intensely focused around the city center, we have weakened the city and its ability to form community. Designing for the borders of the city, or bringing attention to areas in the city that have historically been ignored, will create much needed connection. My focus with social design resides in supporting residents to renew their communities and to have a voice in the decision-making where they otherwise wouldn't. Though I emphasize that having a say should not also mean having the burden. The investment has to be dispersed as well from those institutions

who have historically overlooked these places.

Baltimore's hypersegregation – spatially solidified by the colloquial label of the White L and Dr. Lawrence Brown's designation of the Black Butterfly – creates physical and economic barriers that continue to affect black neighborhoods. Separating or caging place and space has become an increasingly popular practice under colonial capitalism. Real estate values equate to growth. But prosperity, like poverty, is created by society, and directly results from the commodification of land for profit by the privileged few. The focused prosperity of the White L towards the middle of the city is a detriment to the formation of community within Baltimore. The historical practice of center-focused development is used as justification to reinforce the false notion that community life is built and strengthened from the center of a city. This only serves to treat the edges as a void. Richard Sennett, a sociologist of urban design, writes that when modern planning continues to layer boundaries onto the edges in the form of highways or industrial zoning it creates rigidity and prevents access. Interpersonal exchange between different communities of race, ethnicity, or class is diminished. The potential strength and endurance of a city found

from the need to share resources is weakened by centering privilege (Sendra & Sennett, 2020).

It is possible to create impactful change in a racially segregated city like Baltimore by recognizing spatial equity as a path towards racial equity. Removing barriers creates the potential for solidarity between communities going through similar struggles and allows for alternative solutions to develop. Communities learn from each other, exchange knowledge and skills, and pull together expertise into a collective voice. They can then propose alternative plans for more inclusive and democratic city strategies. History and its continual systems of oppression for residents in redlined communities have proven the need for community input through democratic and participatory decision making. The forced segregation of the Black Butterfly and the White L "rob residents in redlined communities of their capacity to hold leaders accountable, to become self-determining, and to contribute to the community economic development process" (Brown, 2021).

South Baltimore is an environmentally overburdened community. There is a heavy industry presence and concentration of pollution sources, including two incinerators and a landfill. The South Baltimore Community Land Trust was built

around a resident advocacy movement in 2012 which worked to prevent the construction of an additional, large incinerator in the neighborhood that had been sanctioned by the city. The local air quality and exposure to air pollution has been a continual concern of the community. It has a measured impact on the physical health of its residents and has led to a number of vacated homes and displacement within South Baltimore neighborhoods.

This deliberate design of inequitable space in South Baltimore has developed because, historically, individuals have not had a voice in the decision-making within their own communities. These decisions made outside of the community affect residents' immediate surroundings, and therefore, their wellbeing. After five years, through organizing and community-voice, the movement's efforts led to the cancellation of the third incinerator contract. This became the South Baltimore Community Land Trust, which grew by building around the community and providing a new way forward in the development of their neighborhood.

The intervention of community land trusts is one method for community-led social design in Baltimore. They use collective action as a means of creating connections and listening to the needs and wants of community members.

I reached out to South Baltimore Community Land Trust to learn about the work they do to organize resources, voice, and autonomy within South Baltimore. I was able to interview Raychel Gadson, the Development Coordinator for the South Baltimore Community Land Trust. Additionally, I also received input from Meleny Thomas, their Executive Director of Development, through email exchange.

Raychel emphasized the development goal of the organization is to create healthier neighborhoods by focusing on housing quality, access, and affordability. The vision of the land trust places people's needs in the forefront to ensure that what they are building is done with intention and dignity. These values stem from the Principles of Fair Development, which outline a path to equity for all city residents and produce neighborhood development without displacement of current residents. The community land trust also prioritizes quality over quantity to create neighborhoods that are healthy, stable, and in community with each other—as opposed to neighborhoods built at the whims of speculative developers. They are redirecting capital to South Baltimore based on resident input, and, Meleny added, “getting diverse subsidies to support the quality development the community needs.”

Community-led development, Raychel continued, does not look like being accountable to, or in communication with every member of the community. Rather, the fair principles of participation and transparency mean being accountable to the concerns that have been expressed by the community and staying the course. Because development takes a long time. Their priority is finding out the community's primary concerns and carrying them throughout all of the transformative work they do.

Current development projects from the South Baltimore Community Land Trust are focused around building long-term affordable housing and an Environmental Justice Center. In recent years, the organization was prompted towards environmental justice after an explosion at a local coal transportation plant. Much of South Baltimore neighborhoods are zoned for industry, affecting air quality through open-air pollutants and heavy throughway truck traffic. “They call it a sacrifice zone because the area has been sacrificed by the city,” said Raychel. In response, the idea formed of building a community-based Environmental Justice Center in the location of a recently closed rec center evolved out of the growth of local community science programs, and the success they have garnered. The plan is to use the space to hold community

meetings and host summer programs. They will also use the space to hold data. The land trust is partnering with local universities to measure air quality using monitors residents have set up at their homes. Now they can have a space to hold their own air quality evidence. When the coal explosion happened, no one was answering questions about it. They couldn't get clarity. This center would now have a space to respond from when things occur.

“Equity is in everything that we do,” Raychel affirms. “Because there is a century of harm and lack of investment, we can't fight to adjust this one problem without understanding the whole.” To work towards healthy communities requires a holistic approach. One which encompasses quality, affordable housing, but also longevity without displacement, safe jobs, and air outside that residents can breathe. The South Baltimore Community Land Trust references the Just Transition process to guide their development practices to include the social, cultural, environmental, and economic experiences of their community. Just Transition encourages a shift in power towards the local through investment in community and divestment from ecologically harmful systems. A democracy of connected workers and residents can advocate for their rights in the face of an extractive authority

(Movement Generation Justice & Ecology Project, 2017). Meleny underscored that “we are creating and building what the community deserves and not what statistics decide the community and its members are worth.” By organizing around zero-waste practices to divert food and waste from the local incinerators, the land trust aims to make the business less profitable. Then with the collected the food-waste, they are creating a local system for compost and a new job market.

These actions, which build community economics and collective wealth, are essential for development in redlined neighborhoods (Brown, 2021). This development prevents displacement of longtime residents when creating healthier communities. “We can make neighborhoods nicer without forcing people out of their homes,” stresses Raychel. “I want people to really familiarize themselves with the land trust model. It is one of the only tools for longevity in community development. Anyone can form one and it takes property off the speculative market. Housing shouldn’t be a get rich quick scheme.” Through the land trust model, community Investment can occur without displacing neighborhoods and people can afford their property taxes.

A community land trust purchases land for the common ownership of the community. The land is not individually possessed by a resident, the city, or a private corporation—as with traditional real-estate—and it is removed from the volatility of the market not to be resolved by the non-profit. The land is then leased out to steward or develop based on the needs of the community. Any constructions built on the land are owned by individual community members who purchase the structures. This dual ownership model separates land cost from building cost to maintain an affordable rate and increase access among neighborhood residents. The land remains with the non-profit and is leased under a 99-year contract to promote long-term affordability. If the structure owner decides to sell to another community member, they maintain a continually affordable rate and split the market equity with the land trust (Davis, 2010). Whereas with other affordable housing programs the subsidy disappears after the first owner, with a community land trust they are securing individual and generational wealth gain while also contributing to the interests and wellbeing of the community.

Meaningful connection and ownership by the community are also built into the governing structure and decision-making of community land trust.

The elected governing board of the non-profit follows a community-based structure consisting of equal parts land trust residents, neighborhood community members, and public technical experts or representatives from local mission-driven organizations (Davis, 2010). This practice gathers a support system larger than the land trust itself and welcomes input from neighboring community members. By establishing a large network of connections, these efforts decentralize the focus and allow for collective insights on necessary economic resources, programs, and interventions (Sendra & Sennett, 2020).

There are a lot of non-profit organizations with similar missions who are doing great work concurrently—in some cases competing for the same grants—but are not engaging with each other. Baltimore feels siloed. If we keep expanding our networks, we can have more capacity to do the collective, necessary work. South Baltimore Community Land Trust is a part of a network of six land trusts under the organization SHARE Baltimore. The combined effort of the disparate land trusts establishes shared administrative tasks, development methodologies, and distribution of the city’s Affordable Housing Trust Fund. The SHARE network facilitates shared capacity-building, and fundraising

opportunities. Even with this support, Meleny shares, “like many in development... capital funds and getting diverse capital sources is a challenge. Concepts may be great, but not large enough or too large for local developers. A lot of nonprofit partners have lost and continue to lose funding as a result of the administration and many other factors.” Meleny poses the question, “what would social design look like that won’t require too much from groups and help contribute to larger collaborative fundraising efforts?”

I agree with Raychel’s advice to others: organize. Talk to your neighbors and go to meetings. Go to community meetings or even city meetings. Raychel suggests people attend Baltimore’s Taxpayer Night where the city publishes its draft budget, then people can come and make comments on it. There are many ways we can show up for our communities. In Meleny’s email, she encourages us “to never stop believing that your communities deserve good things and keep working and creating those possibilities because the reality is if you do not create it, then it will not exist! No one is coming to save us, so we HAVE to save ourselves.” And don’t be afraid to start small. There are little ways to do things that can make a big impact. “We could do something about this quickly,” Raychel remarked about a house next to hers that is vacant.

She's been trying to call the city for a year to clean it up with little success. Now she's planning to organize her neighbors to clean it up and plant a garden on it. Social design doesn't have to have a framework. "It's pretty amazing what people can do together when they start working together," Raychel summarized. So, go forth and, "do radical shit at small scales."

*The ideas in this essay are not solely my own. They are inspired by and referenced from the writings of Dr. Lawrence Brown, Richard Sennett and Pablo Sendra, John Emmeus, as well as the websites for South Baltimore Community Land Trust, Chapel Hill Alliance for a Livable Town, and Movement Generation.*

*I would also like to especially thank Meleny Thomas and Raychel Gadson for sharing their time in answering my questions.*

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KENNEDY MCDANIEL

## On Black Imagination, Worldbuilding, and Social Design



Social design has traditionally been defined as a collaborative approach to understand problems and address complex social challenges. It uses a set of design thinking mindsets (be empathetic, start with deep listening, make things visual, etc.) and methods (journey maps, photovoice, prototyping, etc.) to problem-solve for social good. Born out of institutions like Stanford's d.school and made global by organizations like IDEO, social design/human-centered design/design thinking are the white man's language and the white man's framework. So why should these methods matter to a Black ass city like Baltimore? In this essay, I posit Black social design as one emergent strategy that can serve as a bridge between Black imagination and Black worldbuilding.

Let's start with an inherent truth: Black people are quintessential social designers. It's part of the Black design tradition to make a way out of no way. To make something out of nothing. Our food, our music, our communities. People act like Black imagination, creativity, and artistry come naturally, and this is partially true - we really are all that and a bag of chips. But there's a design behind it all, too. There's intentionality in how we create and meld and style. There's an alchemical property to Black imagination, transforming scarcity into abundance. We have always had to design our own, to operate outside of systems that dehumanize and denigrate us. As white supremacy has continued to evolve, we have continued to adapt. Our resilience and survival are no coincidence—they are evidence of successful ancestral design. Black social design.

Hailey Jordan, a Baltimore-based information designer, describes Black social design as "relational and consequential. It's an expression of emergent strategy. It's connective, power-building, active, and generative. It's also responsive

and flows with who has the bandwidth and capacity, because it is labor. It is often invisible labor done by Black women in the community, who are organizing and making sure people are fed and included, and that facilitation is labor." The white man's social design is extractive. The Black woman's social design is relational. The white man's social design controls. The Black woman's social design liberates. The white man's social design is reductive. The Black woman's social design is expansive.

The white man's social design is rooted in the legacy of colonial thought, white supremacy, and white saviorism. The Black woman's social design is rooted in the legacy of Black feminist and womanist thought: Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, bell hooks, Octavia Butler, Toni Cade Bambara, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, and countless others.

Perhaps one way to understand Black social design is to reflect on past and present examples of community care and movement building, and view them through the lens of design and strategy. Part of my entryway into social design was recognizing the design that I was already doing every day when I worked at Greenmount West Community Center. We offered adaptive programming based on the changing needs of legacy residents in our

community. Whether it was providing free laundry services because there was no laundromat in our neighborhood, or conducting social prescribing during the pandemic, or offering digital literacy classes to our seniors when much of the world went online - we designed our offerings to meet the needs of community and were responsive to those changing needs.

One critique I have of social design (and I have many) is the bevy of examples of white people parachuting into worlds they know nothing about to 'solve problems.' What's left out of this narrative is Black social design and how we've always had to design effective systems outside of what mainstream institutions offer, within the communities of which we're already members. We made our own schoolrooms, created our own newspapers, designed a world within a world: one where we were treated with dignity and humanity. So much movement building within the Black community took and takes design thinking and design strategy, yet these aren't the 'design case studies' that are highlighted. Why?

Here's another question - why does using the language of design even matter? For me, it's empowering. To not be a victim of design, but to be a designer. To be a creator. To be an architect. To reject passivity. To be the

actor, not merely acted upon. To design as resistance. How might we explore the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of social design? And what does it mean, then, to see Rosa Parks not as a tired old woman on the bus who had had enough, but as a wise and strategic activist who understood her individual and collective power? Revolution doesn't happen by chance. It happens by design. To acknowledge this is to awaken the radical designers within us, the designers that know our true power: that we can create the world we wish to live in.

Now, do I practice the white man's social design? No. I use a more liberated, decolonized methodology in my personal design practice. This is Black social design: social design that gets us closer to freedom, to community, to the Earth. This may include partnering with nature as a source and collaborator, relying on spiritual and intuitive methods for synthesis and building understanding, centering storytelling, moving at the pace of trust and community, rejecting false senses of urgency, and valuing alternate ways of knowing, sharing, and communicating. Other Black social designers, like Hailey, are shedding the success indicators that are often associated with the viability of a solution from colonial design thinking practices, like the constant desire for scaling and growth. While Black

social design may take different shapes depending on where it's being used and by whom, the constant thread is that it uses multiple voices and perspectives to co-create a desired outcome with a shared vision and intention in the collective mind: to live in a world where Black people are liberated and living in the fullness of our humanity. We get to this shared vision by experimenting with the Black imagination, we layer intentionality using worldbuilding, and we bring this vision to life through Black social design. How might we begin to imagine and establish Black social design methods and frameworks? What tools, both ancient and new, do we need to utilize and/or create so that we can build the Black worlds of our dreams?

Black imagination can be defined in many ways, and yet it's so expansive that it resists definition. Black imagination is infinite, is limitless, can exist as a reaction or response to the reality of this white supremacist world, or can exist outside of it entirely. Black imagination is a dream space, but not one without impact on our real world.

Nekisha Durrett's installation, *Frontier*, is a portrait of Harriet Tubman and her visionary leadership, exhibited in 2023 at the Baltimore Museum of Art. The piece is a dark mirrored circle where the viewer can see their own reflection, with a bright white line bisecting the

circle, representing a vision Tubman once had: at one end of the line was suppression and at the other end of the line was freedom. The piece provokes the viewer to understand this: we are free Black people. We are living inside of Harriet Tubman's vision. She imagined a future where Black people were free, and we are living in that imagination. Of course, Harriet Tubman didn't stop at her imagination - she moved from imagination to action, designing strategies that helped her personally lead 70 enslaved people to freedom. Black imagination is abstract, but we can concretize it in our everyday actions as we embody the world we seek to live in. If Black imagination is a dream space, then worldbuilding and Black social design are tools we can use to manifest those dreams.

In *Experience Design: A Participatory Manifesto*, Abraham Burickson situates Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *I Have a Dream* speech in the context of worldbuilding: "This is worldbuilding at a large scale: an attempt to rebuild the social rules of a whole nation. It starts, however, with worldbuilding at the smallest scale: a dream, which is to say, a piece of fiction providing a model for how the greater world might be rebuilt." Dr. King's dream, what he imagined, was enticing enough to move hearts and minds to active worldbuilding. In a 1982 interview, Toni Cade Bambara

said, "As a cultural worker who belongs to an oppressed people my job is to make revolution irresistible." Our visions, our dreams, our Black imaginations, are powerful enough to seed new worlds within our current reality, and important enough to be anchored by today. Ayana Zaire Cotton, creator of the Seeda School and For the Worldbuilder's Podcast, speaks to this beautifully: "rehearsing the worlds we need and the futures we desire is how we start to embody liberation now. We don't put off this work of freedom. We design playgrounds for freedom using the tools we have today."

Burickson identified four elements of a world: Place/Physics, Aesthetics/ Material Culture, Population/ Language, and History/Myth. For the purpose of this essay, let's focus on the latter two elements: Population/ language and history/myth. Story and narrative lie at the core of history/ myth. Stories and dominant narratives, told and retold over time, mature into history/myth. The tradition of storytelling throughout time and space in the African diaspora makes story and language particularly relevant to the ways in which we worldbuild. For example, Sun Ra, a jazz pioneer and OG Afrofuturist, renamed himself, sported a wardrobe that blended spacesuits with Egyptian fashions, and shared his story of alien abduction to Saturn with the

masses. He described this activity as a self-conscious form of myth-making, privileging “mythocracy” above “democracy.” According to Sun Ra, “reality equals death, because everything which is real has a beginning and an end. Myth speaks of the impossible, of immortality. And since everything that’s possible has been tried, we need to try the impossible.” Through his art, identity, and way of life, Sun Ra used many creative forms of “doing language” (as Queen Mother Toni Morrison says), to myth-make and worldbuild. The stories he told provoked our people to detach from fixed time and space and dream of life on new planets, beyond our current reality. Sun Ra’s expansive worldbuilding seeded a new generation of Afrofuturist thinkers.

Hailey sees storytelling not just as a key tenet of worldbuilding, but as a practice of worldbuilding in itself: “Storytelling is worldbuilding to me. They are one and the same. When you look at what goes into building a world, you look at the lore of the world, the laws of that world. There is [an] inherent narrative in the world that we create, and within that narrative there are roles and certain outcomes for folks. The story is all in what we give our attention to.”

If storytelling is worldbuilding, what would it mean to tell a story in which all Black people are designers and creators?

What does it mean to recognize our practice of design in movement building and organizing, and to use that as a call to action to design the communities we live in? How might we use the language and lens of design as a pathway to empowerment? How might we use Black social design to practice thinking globally and acting locally?

What drew me to Cebo Campbell’s first novel is a premise centered on Black worldbuilding and social design. In *Sky Full of Elephants*, Campbell imagines a world where all the white people in America walked into the water and never resurfaced, leaving Black folks in their wake to create a new world - or recreate the old one. The designer in me is obsessed with this concept. If given the perfect (or imperfect) opportunity - what world might we imagine? What world might we build? Would it be one both ancient and new, combining our ancestral wisdom with contemporary and liberated ways of being? Or would it be a re-creation of the same old white supremacist systems - but with all Black faces at the helm? Would we feel empowered to design this new world at all, if we’ve never thought of ourselves as designers? Wisely, Campbell writes his protagonist as not just challenged by co-designing this new world, but by designing a new identity and definition of self completely outside of the white gaze. We cannot look

externally and begin worldbuilding and practicing social design without first (or at least simultaneously) looking within, building our inner worlds, and designing our very beings.

What Campbell’s characters get that we lack in the real world is a resounding wake up call. For them, America changed overnight. There were white people and then there were white people no longer. I don’t think we’ll experience a change so striking. Yet I think that’s what many of us are waiting for. A battle cry, a spectacle, a straw to break the camel’s back. Waiting is a luxury that we can no longer afford. The price is too damn high. Every bleak headline we absently scroll by while the world burns is a sign to get organized and design strong, adaptable, and responsive communities.

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## Speculations

**Christina Jenkins:** We're almost all here: All 7 members of MASD '25, Beth Pieper of MASD '26, Thomas Gardner and Ana Mengote Baluca. We're missing Imani Jackson, '26. I wanted to organize this conversation together to create the space for us to reflect on this past year and speculate on the potentials of this program. How do you describe the program to folks who ask you what MASD is all about?

Shannon Willing: When I'm talking to my family, I describe it as a combination of sociology where you're learning history and culture, and a design degree where you're following a process.

Alston Watson: Usually I say we use art-making skills and design thinking to engage with social justice issues. And then I use examples to show the many forms that can take.

Mashal Zahra: We use research and design methods to respond to social problems, and learn ways of how we can engage with the community.

Audrey Randazzo: I say we're in a practice-based learning space where we work with Baltimore-based community partners. It is also a space that encourages us to create our own definition of social design, allowing for open questioning and critique on the field of design in order for our thinking to flourish.

**CJ:** This is fascinating, because on the first day of the program I remember asking you all to describe what you thought social design is, and your answers really lacked the kind of confidence you're bringing here.

DJ Fleming: I think about it in two parts: This is a program that helps you develop as a designer – what kind of person you want to be as you're collaborating with other people, and it's also about self reflection too. This program offers an opportunity to explore new ways of thinking about community, impact, and the root causes

of social issues. The second part of the program helps you in terms of connecting with the groups you want to impact, it opens the door to get you in the environment of changemakers and be in socially active atmospheres.

**CJ:** I'm curious to learn more about the gap between what you thought the program was going to be like, and what it ended up being like. Was there any mismatch between expectations and reality?

MZ: From what I remember, I was expecting the program to be super rigorous in terms of the design process. I was surprised to experience no - it had a lot to do with learning stuff about yourself as an individual. I've grown a lot. I have a different perspective on the world.

AW: It's not that I didn't have any expectations, but I don't know. From reading the description, I thought I knew what I was getting myself into and by the time I got to the beginning of the second semester, I wasn't really surprised by anything. I didn't feel bamboozled.

Thomas Gardner: I'm super interested in what we say we do and what we actually do. The space between the manifesto and the manifestation - we're always trying to shrink that space. It's funny because in my travels this past year, meeting people and describing what social design is, my go-to answer is "we use design to respond to social problems." Lately, I've been thinking that it's about design for better lives.

**CJ:** Thomas, you have the longest relationship with the program - you came here in 2016, four years after the program began. How have you seen the program change over time?

TG: I think people are coming and they're much smarter, much more engaged, better equipped. Even though I think we're all naive, I think students are less naive now. I don't mean to be flippant, but like "I'm going to save the







# Appreciations

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