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Introduction

Elgin Cleckley

ON JULY 12, 1898, IN CHARLOTTESVILLE, VIRGINIA, on what we can assume was a sweltering summer day, John Henry James, a Black ice-cream salesman, was lynched. James was falsely accused of assaulting a White woman, Julia Hotopp, at a homestead built on a former plantation just north of downtown. On that site today you'll find the city's largest park, Pen Park, which you can visit and never know of this story. James was lynched just west of town, off Route 250 at what was once Wood's Crossing, just where the rolling hills begin on the drive to the Blue Ridge Mountains. There is no way to know exactly where Wood's Crossing is in the thick mass of tree growth just west of the entrance to the Farmington Country Club, since there is no historical marker. I drive past the site often, and it's always the same—I feel vibrations run through my body and must pay attention where the road starts to undulate as I head east, in the direction of Staunton, Virginia.

Staunton was where authorities were taking James (reportedly for his safety) to face a jury. He was taken off the train at Wood's Crossing by a horde of angry White men, who didn't bother to cover their faces, according to accounts.¹ James's body was shot by "twenty or thirty revolvers . . . with perhaps forty or fifty bullets."² Carl Hotopp, Julia's brother, arrived at Wood's and, according to accounts, "emptied his revolver in James's body." Pieces of James's clothes and body were kept as souvenirs.³



Figure I-1: According to Charlottesville historical researcher Jane Smith, Wood's Crossing, where John Henry James was lynched, is near the entrance to Farmington Country Club, Charlottesville. (Photo by Elgin Cleckley)

I often search in downtown Charlottesville to see if I can find the site of Dudley's bar on East Main Street, where I once lived. At Dudley's, James was arrested by authorities who determined that he "answer[ed]

somewhat the description of Miss Hotopp’s assailant,” according to the *Charlottesville Daily Progress*.⁴ No luck finding it yet—I keep looking for historical records and asking colleagues and community members to see if there are any hints of where Dudley’s once was. One day I’ll find it, given that the level of consciousness of doing the public work of uncovering and telling Black narratives here in this small city of just over forty-seven thousand is high.

Over 120 years later, the narrative of James’s lynching finally became spatial in the city and county through the Albemarle County Office of Equity and Diversity (then led by Siri Russell) and the Community Remembrance Project, led by the Equal Justice Initiative (EJI) of Montgomery, Alabama. The project collaborates with communities “to memorialize documented victims of racial violence throughout history and foster meaningful dialogue about race and justice today”⁵ with design interventions that EJI says concertize the experiences of racial terror—bringing forth untold narratives. One of these design interventions is EJI’s Community Soil Collection Project—which in 2019 gathered soil at the site where James was lynched (shown in figure I-1) to add to the multicolored, granular memory wall holding row after row of soil from the 4,400 sites documented by EJI at the Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama, the first stage of one’s visit to the National Memorial for Peace and Justice. When I visited the Legacy Museum, I immediately recognized the red soil of Charlottesville in the glass jar holding James’s name—the same color as the famous red brick of the Academical Village at the University of Virginia.

Empathy in Design

You should be yourself some of the time. You should be with people who are like you, who are facing what you’re facing, who dream your dreams and fight your battles, who recognize you.

And then, other times, you should be like people unlike yourself. Because there is a problem as well with those who spend too little time being anyone else; it stunts the imagination in which empathy takes root, that empathy that is a capacity to shape-shift and roam out of your sole self.

—Rebecca Solnit, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*⁶

Sociologist and researcher Karla McLaren defines empathy as “a social and emotional skill that helps us feel and understand the emotions, circumstances, intentions, thoughts, and needs of others, such that we can offer sensitive, perceptive, and appropriate communication and support.” McLaren also shares that empathy helps us engage with structures—“buildings, public spaces, and living and working areas.”⁷ McLaren’s definition of empathy is one of the few I’ve found that takes us into a spatial understanding, and in my work, I add a Black lens to move beyond the co-opting of empathy, popularized by the business field as a scenario-building stage to consumer-focused design thinking. This is not a take on empathy that occupies, possesses, or extracts from the existence of another for gain.

I explore ways to activate the imagination to spatially see outside of myself, referring to Solnit’s quote opening this section. I add to these definitions a cyclical understanding of time and place—moving, walking, exploring, and researching. This forces us to look outside ourselves to generational lived experience to deeply understand what to uncover and what can be translated into built form. I propose that if we explore, discover, and investigate empathically to reengage, as McLaren notes, we work our empathic muscles, becoming better designers and practitioners.

I believe that inclusive public space needs to be of two things: the first, care (based on empathic connection and support); and the second, space in the design process that seeks to understand and translate the

past (and its foundation to the present) through designs that inform, exhibit, interpret, and educate. The result is inclusive public spaces with intersections of identity, culture, history, memory. The result is spaces that care for and support humanity.

Empathic design is part of the design justice movement. Designer Sasha Costanza-Chock explains, from the work of the Design Justice Network, that “design justice rethinks design processes, centers people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face.”⁸ Empathic design supports by recognizing that people are seen and acknowledged in public space through layers of identity, culture, history, and memory. It affirms that our layered emotional responses to places are both valid and complex and that in the built environment, form, symbol, material, and scale all play a role—ideally, one that culminates in deeper relationships with nature and the landscape. It says, “We are here,” and, equally, “We see you.”

Empathic Design Defined

In feedback from community members, I’ve learned that empathic design offers communities the opportunity to acknowledge the full history of a place and engage in a healing design process through planning for future uses that engage and embrace everyone in a community.⁹ Here in Virginia, the wounds are deep and are seldom recognized or dealt with in a restorative way. There is more work to be done.¹⁰ I believe that if we design with empathy, we can begin to rethink, rebuild, reckon, and reengage with public spaces that have untold narratives. Most often, especially here in the South, those untold narratives are Black, Native, or female.

Empathic designs push back on the historical and ideological approaches of designing public spaces exclusively for and by dominant narratives. In the words of architect and humanist Robert Lamb Hart,

we “read relationships between buildings, landscapes, and streetscapes in social terms, too, imagining their dialogues and conflicts and sensing them rejecting or welcoming us, almost like a family member or friend.”¹¹ Hart’s words speak to me, taking me back to my first explorations in Charlottesville as an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia’s School of Architecture, an empathic perspective on the discomfort I felt here then but requiring a lens of Black American lived experience. Empathic design requires a deeper sense of emotional response depending on who you are, who defines your community, and the history (seen and unseen) of the space.

EMPATHIC DESIGN

- recognizes how people are seen and acknowledged in spaces and the built environment through layers of identity, culture, history, memory, and place;
- culminates in deeper relationships with nature and the land;
- devises and develops designs that are a visual representation of inclusive imagination melding with emotion, resulting in a space that reestablishes trust through connective encounters;
- believes that design is iterative, changing, and shifting to say, “We see you,” and “We are here”;
- believes design works with and by the communities it affects;
- understands that marginalized lived experience holds deep memory, requiring designers to shift through time in their work to approach these memories with respect.

EMPATHIC DESIGNERS

- understand that the methods and approaches that create harmful designs can be retooled and rethought to produce designs that help, support, and bring community together;
- develop approaches and methods that respectfully acknowledge

often untold, marginalized narratives of the past, with goals of operating with care in the present, to create inclusive and equitable design futures;

- work co-creatively and facilitate spaces of trust in all stages of the design process, always honoring lived experience;
- redefine public space—working with nuance and meaning in material, reflection, respect, honor, and developing generational spaces for joy, their work generates meaning in form;
- work with care, bringing forth untold, marginalized voices into form, changing ideological or dominant narratives in the built environment;
- constantly self-analyze to work with care, always open to change to meet the needs of the communities in which they collaborate.

This Book

My design experience and my personal experience of spaces as a Black man offer but one perspective. In this volume, ten other designers and activists share their perspectives and their empathic design approaches and methods, modeling this design justice movement in practice. You will see that the agreements and different points of view feel like a community meeting. I believe that this is the spirit of co-creation our field so desperately requires.

The contributors all demonstrate how empathy plays out in their work and personal approaches.

Welcome to our time together.

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CHAPTER 1

From Empathy to Ethics

Christine Gaspar

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO HAVE AN ETHICAL DESIGN PRACTICE? In sixteen years of practicing community-engaged design in nonprofits that collaborate with marginalized communities, it's a question I've asked myself a lot. Even more than in conventional design studios, practices that directly involve communities affected by their work raise so many questions about power, responsibility, and what designers owe the people impacted by our work.

In his talk “When Design and Ethics Collide,” George Aye of Greater Good Studio pointed out that “we lack an ethics-based framework for good design” and instead have proxies to guide us, which can make designers “quite dangerous.”¹

The idea that empathy should play a role in design—which over the past ten years has become a mainstream idea, alongside the rise of design thinking and human-centered design—has been one of those proxies

for ethical practice. When empathy emerged, it was an important idea in design—one that questioned the historical relationship of design and power, saying it's not enough for those with money and power to hire designers to do their bidding and let those impacted by it live with the consequences. It asked designers to consider their “end users” in new ways and bring them into the conversation. In mainstream design practices, that's often driven by a profit motive—better product research leads to more money. But in community-engaged design, at least, considering end users' needs is central to the values that guide our work.

But how to do that? Many designers have used the empathy framing to identify meaningful ways to genuinely center communities in their work. But when we use empathy as a proxy for ethics, it seems to hold the potential to lead us somewhere meaningful but without the rigor to ensure we get there.

The Limits of Empathy

The core idea of empathy is “the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences.”² It's related to sympathy but differentiated in that “while *sympathy* is a feeling of sincere concern for someone who is experiencing something difficult or painful, *empathy* involves actively sharing in the emotional experience of the other person.”³ In design practice, “empathy” has come to mean the idea that we should incorporate the perspectives and lived experiences of our end users into the design of products, spaces, experiences, solutions, or whatever we are designing.

Melba Sullivan is a psychologist who led a clinic that provides support services to asylum seekers who have been tortured in their countries of origin. When I was collaborating with her organization on a guide to applying for asylum, she told me that understanding trauma and lived experiences in this kind of work is not about empathy “because

you *don't* know their experience. And to think you do is narcissistic.”⁴ Though it's our responsibility to try to understand as much as possible, we also have to acknowledge the real limits of what we truly know about the experiences of others, particularly when our community of focus has experienced forms of oppression that we have not, but also in the more mundane ways that our biases limit our perspectives.

Another way the idea of empathy in design feels incomplete is that it's not clear how to use that understanding in the design work, leading many designers to believe that with only a few conversations, a focus group, and a journey map, they could speak for and design for their end users. Asking designers to rely on empathy is the equivalent of what George Aye calls the “BYOE, or bring your own ethics” approach to design, which he argues can lead to exploitation and concentration of power.⁵ Focusing on a vague idea like empathy prevents us from naming something more substantial, such as making sure people who have lived experience or who are directly affected by a design project are fundamentally involved in the design process in meaningful ways.

So, What's the Alternative?

I'll start by saying I don't have the answer. But maybe empathy is taking us in the right direction—it holds an important idea about the relationship between designers and those affected by their work that we were missing before. It's suggesting something about how the designer shows up for this work and something about how that work is tied to the people affected.

As I've reflected on my own experiences, both successful and decidedly not, the pieces that have felt like they really grounded the work in meaningful ways are ones that are explicit about the relationship to the community and, increasingly, ones that delve into the work I have to do within myself to show up and hold space for the experiences and

perspectives of others. Rather than empathy, I would call these two things accountability and compassion.

Accountability—How the Work Is Tied to the Community

Accountability more or less involves taking responsibility for a set of duties that we have to show we've followed through on, and for which failing to do so leads to some kind of consequences. In the talk mentioned earlier, George Aye argued for a code of ethics, standards of practice, and other tools that I would argue are all mechanisms for creating a clear chain of accountability between designers and the communities impacted by their work. Among other things, these can include guiding practices we use within our organizations, agreements we make directly with partners, external guiding practices we create with other practitioners in our field, and how we use evaluations and feedback to keep improving.

Consequences are an important part of accountability because no matter how well we do this work, we will get some things wrong. We should anticipate that we will make mistakes that cause harm and, obviously, try to prevent that from happening. But when we do cause harm, having consequences means taking responsibility for the impacts of our actions and being prepared to make amends.

Compassion—How We Show Up in Our Work

One of the things that draws us to empathy is the idea that there should be something going on internally for us as designers beyond just problem-solving. The empathy framework hints at some emotional labor in how we understand the experience of others and hold space for them.

I think compassion is really what we mean when we talk about empathy.

Compassion, as I've come to understand it through the writings of contemporary Buddhist practitioners Lama Rod Owens and Sharon

Salzberg, is the ability to recognize and actively show up for the pain and suffering of others, despite our own discomfort. It's different from empathy in that it does not require us to share the suffering of the other person, but instead to feel concern and care for them, and "motivation to improve the other's wellbeing" but with some perspective that allows us to show up and be helpful.⁶ Compassion asks us to see what the person is feeling, to see their full humanity, including their strength and resilience, and to see our own role as standing alongside them to support them in ways that are appropriate and consensual.

What Does That Look Like in Practice?

What does it look like to be accountable to and compassionate toward the community your work is intended for?

There is no one answer, and in fact, the chapters in this volume speak to all the ways this work can be done. The ideas I share here draw significantly from my time at the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP) from 2009 to 2022 and at the Gulf Coast Community Design Studio (GCCDS) from 2006 to 2009, though I also reference some examples from other practices that I've found to be useful guideposts. They reflect some of the elements that I have found grounding in my work and that have felt like embodiments of the ideas of compassion and accountability. Below are brief introductions to the ways GCCDS and CUP work, and the subsequent section highlights some of their key practices.

The Resource Ally Model: CUP's Approach

The Center for Urban Pedagogy, based in New York City, is a nonprofit that partners with marginalized communities to create visual explanations of complex policy and social justice issues those communities are organizing around. CUP applies the "resource ally model" in its work,

which centers the leadership of community organizing groups; these groups identify the issues and strategies for change they want to work on and then call on partners such as CUP to support that work when it advances their needs.

Most of CUP's projects are created through programs in which it hosts an open call for participation from community organizations and advocacy groups that want to create such materials as part of their organizing work. The work is driven by organizers and community members themselves and is a means to build power and advance self-determination. The projects help community members gain access to rights and public services and make their political voice heard.

CUP staff facilitate the collaborations, which are three-way partnerships of CUP, the community organization and its members, and a design team that creates all the visual content. CUP does extensive outreach to let organizations know they can apply and how to do so. Transparent criteria are shared publicly, as are the application questions. CUP also tries to build as much transparency as possible into the collaborations, detailing the roles of each participant in the project early on and sharing timelines and other relevant information.

CUP selects and pays leaders in the art and design worlds and organizing and advocacy worlds to be jurors who will select both the community partners and the designers who apply to collaborate on the projects. The jury process is seen as another way to be publicly accountable to the communities the work serves. CUP also sees the makeup of its staff, all of whom hold marginalized identities that overlap with the different communities the organization collaborates with, and the organization's board, as spaces to build in accountability in the form of representation of lived experiences that inform decisions about the organization's structure and programming.

The community organization brings directly affected individuals into the process at various points, either as part of the core team that comes

to every meeting or at key moments in the design process. CUP pays community members a stipend for their participation, to ensure that they can participate and to value their lived experience as one of the critical expertises needed for the project.

Those expertises include helping the project team understand key information, such as what their perceptions, questions, and experiences are with the policy or system to be explained in the project; where they have experienced challenges in that system; and what kind of information they need now or would have wanted when interacting with the system. This helps the team shape the content of the project. The team also works with community members to understand how they want—and don't want—to be depicted in the projects. They talk about the language, visual directions, illustration styles, and other aspects of the design and content of the materials, what resonates with them, how it reads to them, and how to prevent perpetuating harmful stereotypes. Participants weigh in at different points during the development of the project and get to see how their input shapes the final product. Often, community members are also involved in using the final publication or distributing it to other community members.

CUP does not play the role of designer in these projects, leaving that to the skilled graphic design teams. Instead, CUP staff lead the creative process, create the text content, manage the overall project, and facilitate the entire process. CUP provides training to the design team on bringing a racial justice and equity lens into design methods. Design conversations take place with the whole team at the table, and CUP facilitates these conversations to ensure that everyone can comfortably participate and move the process forward.

The final product is then used by the partner organizations in their organizing work or is distributed by them and other partner organizations. Some projects have gone on to be adopted by city agencies as well. Many projects have led to organizing wins for their communities,

several have led to actual policy changes, and all help communities better understand and navigate the systems that impact their lives.

To Be Useful: The GCCDS Approach

The Gulf Coast Community Design Studio is a nonprofit design studio on the Mississippi Gulf Coast that is also part of the architecture school at Mississippi State University. It was formed by David Perkes after Hurricane Katrina devastated the Mississippi communities along the Gulf Coast in 2005. The studio was based in East Biloxi when I was there, a historic area of the city located on a narrow peninsula whose population was predominantly Black and Vietnamese American families. Though it is part of the university, the studio is made up of a full-time staff of architects, urban planners, and landscape architects who live and work in the community. When asked what its mission is, Perkes always responded, “To be useful.” This account of GCCDS is based on my experience there in 2006 through 2009; the studio’s practices have continued to evolve over time, so my experiences may not reflect current practices.

The work of the studio grew organically over time through deep partnerships with locally led organizations. For many years, the design studio was housed within a larger Coordination Center where design services were provided alongside case management support for accessing benefits and rebuilding resources, volunteer construction teams, and a community group supporting the Vietnamese-speaking community. The center focused on serving multiple client needs, and design was only one piece of the puzzle, not the driver.

At GCCDS, our community members were largely low-income people of color whose homes had been damaged or destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. Community members opted in by coming to the shared space called the Coordination Center and meeting with caseworkers at the partner organization. Amid all the confusion, bureaucracy, and

paperwork of disaster recovery, the center was a place where community members could talk to real people and get help in sorting things out. Once their case was processed, they would be introduced to the design studio, where one of our staff would work with them to design a new home that met their family needs, local updated building codes, elevation requirements post-Katrina, and any limitations related to the funding for the construction. Design staff also worked with the Coordination Center's construction managers and volunteer construction crews to make sure the home was built according to the approved plans.

Facilitating design conversations with community members took a lot of skill building for design staff. Clients were often reluctant to ask for too much or to make their needs known, both out of not wanting to seem ungrateful and simply from never having had the chance to genuinely have their needs met in this way before. The staff learned to support these conversations, working against the power differential and helping individuals feel safe stating their true needs, which often took extensive conversations both in the Coordination Center and in informal social settings such as porches and front yards.

Though most of the designers moved to Biloxi to work at the studio and were not originally from the area, their daily presence while living and working there connected them to the community. Individual home repair or rebuilding projects could take several months from the first meeting to move-in, and staff and residents would see each other regularly in the neighborhood even after the projects were completed. Seeing people living in their homes and what worked for them or didn't also created an important feedback loop and sense of accountability to community members.

Over time, the work of the studio also grew to include conceptual design work for local nonprofits and local government agencies; larger-scale community plans that gave residents being left out of more top-down planning efforts a voice in redevelopment conversations; research

and development on how floodproof construction could be used in small-scale commercial buildings; and architecture studio courses exploring local bayous that ultimately led to a large-scale landscape project restoring a major wetland area in partnership with the local housing authority. The work has continued to evolve over time, always driven by the underlying commitment “to be useful.”

Some Elements of an Ethical Practice

Though the two organizations are different in their sizes, locations, types of services provided, and organizational structures, both incorporate methods that hold them accountable to their communities. This section explores those and draws on related practices from other organizations and practitioners who are exploring what it means to shape an ethical practice.

They don't exactly fall into the two categories of accountability and compassion, and many factors overlap, but they're presented here in roughly those groupings, in an effort to flesh out what those qualities might mean in practice.

Accountability Practices

If accountability is how our work is tied to the communities it affects, accountability practices in community-engaged design are the ways in which we structure our work to ensure that it is explicitly bound to the needs of the communities we work with and that the communities have some control over it.

DECENTERING DESIGN

Design is a specialized skill that not everyone has access to. That means it always creates a power differential between those who do and those who don't. We as designers make choices about where and in whose hands

we place that power. There are many different ways to think about that power structure and where in the equation a designer is located.

In my experience with CUP and GCCDS, both organizations decentered the role of design and placed it alongside other participants in the process. This created accountability from the outset: instead of the design practice holding all the cards in the projects, impacted communities had a say in determining what the work was and how it was shaped.

At GCCDS, the design studio was embedded in and sat alongside other service providers. It was called on when its services were needed, so that design was not the driver of activity but a useful tool to meet community needs. This also allowed the work to change considerably over time as new needs emerged.

As mentioned earlier, CUP framed its work as using the resource ally model, which centers the work that organizers in marginalized communities are doing to identify their own needs and solutions. In this model, design service sits alongside as a resource to support that work when it's useful to meet the community's needs. A similar framing was used by Melba Sullivan in her work with asylum seekers, which she described as using "a compassionate conduit approach." She framed her relationship to her client as showing up in this way: "I see what you're going through. I see your resources. I give and take nothing from you. I am not saving you."⁷

THE AGENCY TO OPT IN (OR NOT)

Both GCCDS and CUP also decentered design and fostered accountability to communities by creating clear ways for partners to opt in to projects. Designers didn't generate the projects; they responded to community needs.

Clients came to GCCDS through the Coordination Center and accessed design services only if the services met their needs, they were eligible for the services, and they opted in.

CUP often used open calls for partners, doing extensive outreach to let organizations know about the services and selecting partners at specific times of the year. Organizations opted in by applying to participate in CUP's programs.

Opting in also extended to how participants in different efforts could choose whether to participate, when to do so, and what information to share. Public Policy Lab, a service design nonprofit that conducts research with marginalized communities as part of its work, has guidelines for how it solicits informed participant consent, leading with a series of questions that should inform those practices, including the following:⁸

- Are you offering participants fair compensation for their time?
- Are you conducting the consent process in plain language?
- Are you maximizing participants' control over their data?
- Have you been explicit about potential harms?

This framework suggests other guidelines we as community-engaged designers might build for our practices and share with the communities we partner with.

WHO IS AN EXPERT?

How are the perspectives, experiences, and voices of impacted communities included in the design process, from beginning to end, to ensure that, rather than our empathy for them, they have the agency and power to speak for themselves?

Both CUP and GCCDS valued lived experience as an important expertise in the design process. At GCCDS, residents didn't get pre-designed houses; they got ones that met their specific needs, which required them to be an active part of the design conversation. At CUP, both community organizers working on the issues and individuals with direct lived experience of them were key parts of the project teams and

process. Working together to create the projects with those affected by them made it harder for designers to ignore their needs. It's still possible for designers to steamroll their partners, however, so this alone is not enough.

WHO MAKES DECISIONS?

CUP used juries of organizers and advocates to select projects they worked on, explicitly creating accountability to its constituent communities. This is another instance of direct experience and knowledge replacing the need for “empathy.”

For projects that didn't rely on open calls and juries, such as when CUP was hired directly by a project partner for customized work, the organization used a rubric for evaluating the project to decide whether to take it on. The rubric included questions about who the project was with and for, what potential it had to cause harm, whether it was appropriately resourced, and other questions related to CUP's values.

Greater Good Studio in Chicago (where George Aye is one of the founding partners) also uses a rubric for evaluating potential projects, which staff refer to as their “gut check.” It is another example of internal accountability structures designers might use and includes these questions:⁹

- How desired is this project from the perspective of the end users?
- How likely is this project to have a positive impact on the end users?
- What type(s) of positive impact might come about as a result of our work?
- What is the client's mission, and how does it relate to social equity?

WHO PAYS AND WHO GETS PAID?

Both CUP and GCCDS also fundraised for the work ahead of projects, so that when community partners did opt in, the resources were in place

for the project to move forward and community members' time was not wasted. CUP also made a point of paying all participants in the projects, including designers and community members. These were ways of being accountable to what we asked partners to contribute to the projects, namely, time, energy, and knowledge.

Detaching who pays for the projects (usually government and foundation grants, in both GCCDS and CUP cases) from who the clients for the work are requires additional accountability. While this creates opportunities for groups and individuals to access design services who might not otherwise have been able to, it also means the design organizations need to make clear who they will accept funding from, how they will limit potential interference of the funders in the projects to ensure the centering of community needs, and how they will address the power differential created by being the ones bringing funding to the design project. Creating community advisory boards or other bodies that can help guide this work, as well as internal policies about funding ethics, can be some ways to make that accountability explicit.

TRANSPARENCY

Another way to maintain accountability is through clear communication and transparency. At CUP, for example, staff members tried to make the process and the expectations for all participants as clear as possible from the start. Project teams kicked off each project by discussing everyone's expectations and reviewing a written set of agreements that made all the roles clear.

In projects that collect personal stories or data from individuals, there should also be transparency about how that information will be used, and there should be a way to share that information back out with community members when possible so they can use it as well. Both Public Policy Lab's consent guidelines and the Design Justice Network

Principles address this issue. The latter, which were created by a broad group of practitioners and which suggest a framework for a community-engaged design code of ethics, also include sharing “design knowledge and tools with our communities,” another way to build transparency into the design process as a whole.¹⁰ CUP saw one of the products of its work as the increased capacity of community groups and individuals to participate in and lead design processes on their own in the future, another way to increase self-determination and community control.

CONDUCTING AND USING EVALUATIONS

Collecting and using the learnings from evaluations is another way to stay accountable to communities. If conducted well, it gives participants a chance to share their perspective and gives designers the chance to learn from their mistakes and build on their strengths.

At GCCDS, designers received feedback from community members in informal ways. At CUP, project evaluations were used to assess the successes and failures of project processes and their overall impacts. Staff met annually to review evaluation results for multiple projects and to identify ways to improve our methods in response. This also helped us to recognize and respond to changing conditions and emerging needs we might not otherwise have seen. Significant program changes were made from year to year and whole new programs and training initiatives created in response to partner feedback.

Compassion Practices

While accountability focuses on the more formal, structural ways we shape our collaborations and organizational practices, compassion practices focus more on the ways we show up as individuals in our interactions and how we build our capacity to be present with grace and understanding despite our own discomfort.

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, NOT TRANSACTIONS

It probably goes without saying that an ethical practice is built on relationships rather than transactions. Both GCCDS and CUP built relationships with partners over time (though relationships did not all have the same level of depth and trust). GCCDS did so by being embedded in the community in which it practiced and by letting projects emerge over time in response to partner needs. CUP projects were developed through a slow and deeply collaborative process. Projects typically took several months to a year to complete, allowing time to build trust.

FACILITATION

The overwhelming majority of CUP's work took place in the form of how staff facilitated project meetings and conversations. As at GCCDS, it takes careful facilitation to make everyone feel comfortable in a design conversation and to ensure that they can share their honest feedback. CUP staff spent a lot of time building their facilitation skills and learning tools such as how to use plain language instead of technical design terms; breaking design concepts down into component parts so people could feel more comfortable talking about things like colors or fonts rather than an overall design; and supporting both designers and community partners in conversations when there were disagreements about what was working.

Designers at both CUP and GCCDS had to learn these tools because they are not ones we learn in design education. Whereas design school trains us to share our ideas as the best possible solution and to try to convince others of the same, strong design collaborations require that we ask our partners what we missed, what we got wrong, what isn't working. This also means emphasizing that community members, not us, are the ones who hold that expertise, and that we really need their perspective to get the project right. This not only emphasizes the value

of their knowledge but also explicitly grants them permission to share critiques, which might feel uncomfortable or overly critical to them at first.

TAKING CRITICISM

The flip side of that coin is that we as designers need to be able to show up in a supportive and receptive way for that criticism. Our brains are not wired for that! It's something that requires personal internal work as well as active practice. CUP created a training to help staff and the designers they partnered with to reflect on the ways they showed up in design conversations and to practice receiving difficult feedback. The training encouraged designers to start from an assumption that the critique is true and to practice scripts they might easily reach for when feeling defensive. For example, they might take a deep breath and ask for more time (maybe even until the next meeting) to reflect on the critique before responding.

Design education focuses so much on our egos, but collaborative design practices need us to show up as part of a team and bring deep compassion especially to the moments when we're feeling most misunderstood.

Internal work, such as a meditation practice, helps with this, but so does training about power, privilege, and how we are holding our own and others' identities in these spaces.

SELF-REFLECTION

As designers, we need to develop our ability to reflect on our own identities and lived experiences and how they inform our practices. This means being willing to look at our own marginalized and dominant identities and understanding where our privileges, our blind spots, and our own traumas show up in our work. If we're doing it right, it can be pretty painful and uncomfortable.

In addition to conducting regular racial justice and equity trainings for staff, CUP created a training for its design partners to reflect on their own power and privilege and how the biases of their own education and socialization impacted their design work.

UNDERSTANDING TRAUMA

Community-engaged design often takes place in partnership with individuals and communities who have experienced trauma, and we as humans may also be carrying our own experiences of trauma. To do this work well, we need to learn about the ways that trauma can manifest and how to engage in a collaborative process that is sensitive to its participants.

At CUP, staff received training from partners and hired trauma-informed design practitioners to train staff and design partners.

On a larger scale, the training helped us understand trauma responses when we saw them in our work and to learn how to make space for how they manifested, which could include anger being directed toward us, people raising seemingly unrelated issues, or our realizing we may have unintentionally triggered someone.

That awareness can also manifest in how we design the details of our engagements with community members, looking for opportunities to foster transparency and agency, from small things such as letting participants choose where to sit to giving participants control over what they choose to share and how their information is used, or using agendas to be transparent about what's happening when.

Conclusion

Empathy opened up an important conversation about how we as designers engaged with the people impacted by our work. But design as a field, and particularly community-engaged design, would benefit from

(continued...)

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