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SARAH HANSEN: Today on the podcast, we're exploring the world of civic design and re-imagining what public engagement in demographically complex communities might look like.

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SARAH HANSEN: I'm your host, Sarah Hansen. In this episode, I'm talking with an MIT professor who bravely navigates along the deepest rifts in our public discourse, and who works with students and communities alike to step consciously into these spaces. My guest today is Professor Ceasar McDowell, who teaches course 11.312, Engaging Community.

But before we get into our conversation, we wanted to pause to remember that so many of our OCW team members, and probably many of you, have lost people that they love over this past year. And so we're dedicating this last episode of Season 2 to all of our loved ones, and to all of yours, and to all of those who carry their light forward.

Professor McDowell approaches his work with community engagement like it's an art form. In fact, he's built an entire design framework for practitioners to shape and facilitate these engagements. But before we get into all of that, we need to understand the main problem his work seeks to address, his why, if you will.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: Things are actually changing in this country. Our populations are changing. And right now, in cities, I think we're just seeing that more pronounced than anywhere else. Right?

That the people who are living in cities just happen to represent a complexity of human experience that we've never organized around. And if you have a democracy, and you need your public to be able to be engaged, you need to have a system for doing that. We actually don't have one for that kind of public.

SARAH HANSEN: A lot of Professor McDowell's course and work center around the idea of democracy. But in this episode, when we talk about democracy, we're not talking about elections and voting. When Professor McDowell speaks of democracy, he's talking about the engagement, the communities, the conversations, the processes that we have as a public to come together and make decisions. And a lot of these processes that we traditionally consider democracy in action are a little outdated.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: I'll tell you what I mean by we don't have a democracy that works for who we are. I'll give you an example of how we hold on to something as a way of thinking about democracy that does not serve us well right now. You can go back to the founding of the country.

And you look at the original colonies. They weren't the original colonies, the people came and occupied the land and created these opportunities for themselves here. And if you look at those, they created this thing that we hold as a myth today, which is this thing of the New England town meeting, town hall.

But if we're really serious about looking at that, there were some things that were very true about that. It was mostly open to men who were property owners. Most of these people who were men and property owners lived in enclaves that shared a religious belief. OK? So you take that as a core, and you then build your processes around that core that allow you to come to decisions.

Over time, what we've been doing is saying, well, we don't want to be that exclusive. We want to let a few more people in. So we modify that a little bit more. And over time, that's what we've been doing. We've been modifying it more, modifying it more.

And then you get to something like the presidential debates. And what do we have? What do we say is the way we let the public into this conversation? These televised town halls, they have no reality or connection to the complexity of who we are. But we hold on to them as our evidence that we are doing and engaging the public around a dialogue.

So this is what I mean is we don't have it. We actually don't have a functioning infrastructure for democracy, given the complexity of who we are. So that's what I mean by that. It's not just about voting. It's the infrastructure that allows people to do the work that the public has to do in order for democracy to function.

SARAH HANSEN: The new infrastructure Professor McDowell is talking about here involves a shift away from the more traditional forms of civic engagement and participation. Professor McDowell's way involves looking at a given situation from multiple perspectives, and then spending time to reflect on our own values and the needs of our community.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: At one point in my life, I lived in Alaska way up above the Arctic Circle. I was associate superintendent of a new school system there that was the size of the State of Indiana. It had 100 villages, 5,000 people, no roads. OK?

So that's the context, predominantly Inupiat. And there was this one instance in the village where we had a teacher who was actually not performing very well in the school. And we were really concerned. The principal was concerned. We were concerned.

And the teacher was Anglo in this predominantly Inupiat village. And we had decided to remove the teacher, because this was the best thing for the kids, just wasn't performing well. And there was a meeting in the village, where we talked about that. And there was a lot of resistance.

And so the superintendent asked me to go and try to find out what's going on. And so I went, in these little villages you could do it. I talked to almost everyone. [LAUGHS]

I talked to a lot of people in the village. And here's what was happening. The school was saying, this person is not a good teacher. And people were saying, this person is a good teacher. And we couldn't reconcile.

But what we learned, when we started to talk to people, is that we were evaluating the teacher in very different ways. Inside the school, the good was really applied-- For the school system, the good was applied to how well is this person taking care of the educational needs of the children.

For some of the people in the community, teacher was a role. Good was the value to the community. She was good for the community because of other functions she played in the community.

And so we had this totally different use of language. And they knew that if she wasn't there as a teacher, she wouldn't be there. Because she'd have to leave.

And so other values to the community would be lost. That kind of perspective taking, I think, is so required. And as we find ways to bring people together, we have to start to construct mechanisms that allow people to do that kind of reflection and that kind of perspective taking in relationship to the other.

SARAH HANSEN: One of the challenges of getting people to practice tuning into different perspectives is a physical one. In our current political climate, how do we even get people with different perspectives in the same room?

CEASAR MCDOWELL: So we start this campaign where we're testing out now. It's called America's Path Forward. In the campaign, we're actually reaching out to people in the public. And we're asking them to do one thing, actually, two things. One is to donate the question they have about the future of America and the experience of their life that led them to their question.

And then what we do is we bring people who have similar questions, and sometimes not, into small conversations. In those conversations, all people are doing is sharing a question, sharing their experience. And what people find is, one, when they go into these rooms with people who have similar questions, they're surprised at who's in the room. Because the thing that they hold as what's theirs, they're realizing that's a different set of people who actually hold this too.

And then when they have different experiences, they're beginning to realize, oh, this question manifests itself in totally different ways. Right? It's the same question, but it's living out differently in our society. And for me, this is a way of helping the public build its own kind of reflection and connection to others.

And what we try to get people to do at the end of these conversations is to say, if you could reframe this question so that if it was addressed, it would more likely attend to the different ways you are experiencing, how would you reframe the question? Just getting people to start and think that way, holding the public as curious intellectual beings, and encouraging them in that, to say, yes, this is hard work. And yes, you can do it.

SARAH HANSEN: Professor McDowell has worked with a team to create a tool for having better public conversations. The tool is called the Civic Design Framework. I was curious about how the design element fits into this kind of community engagement work.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: Yeah. So when I think about community engagement and design, the reason I put those two together is to talk about the purposefulness of how we go out in the world and create engagement processes. And that they actually are designed and can be designed.

The main thing I'm trying to get people to pay attention to is, when you're putting together an engagement process, you have the ability to construct it for certain kinds of outcomes and processes that you want to have happen and the connections you want to have happen. And therefore, that's a design challenge. Given the population you work with and the issue you're going out to the public with, how then do you construct that? The sets of things that can happen, so that they actually allow you to bring people, not just closer together, but also, what I like to say is help people, the public, build its muscle for democracy.

SARAH HANSEN: The Civic Design Framework gives us a way into these conversations that are central to having a truly functional democracy. Professor McDowell teaches the framework to students in 11.312, Engaging Community.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: We, really, use the Civic Design Framework as a tool for organizing thinking and projects. And the framework really has two components to it. It's based on the notion that part of the issue of bringing the public into any engagement process is we're not clear about what conversation we're inviting them into. Our problem with our public discourse and engagement process is we often invite people into one conversation. And then when they get in the room, we set them up for another.

So we will say to them, tell them, imagine a new Sarasota, Florida. And you go into the room, and you have three choices to make. So basically, you've set people up. And no wonder people are really dissatisfied.

The other thing why it's important to know which kind of conversation you have, is that they each require something different. If you want to be in a framing conversation with someone, that's totally different. You're using really different cognitive structures than if you're in the ideation process. Because in the ideation process, you're trying to ignite imagination.

In a framing conversation, you're really trying to deeply understand experience and what's happening in the world. So those are very different. And so if you don't know what kind of conversation you want to have in public, you're not going to design it the right way.

SARAH HANSEN: What's really exciting about Professor McDowell's class is that he doesn't just teach the theory of this Civic Design Framework. Students are also invited to bring forward actual cases from the communities with which they're already engaging, where they can implement the design framework in real life.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: I always try to generate this opportunity for students to say, here are the things we want to work on. And then to negotiate among themselves which ones they really want to move forward on. We did one in Mexico, and that one, it's actually interesting. It was a former alum of our department who had just stepped into this major role in a new government in a town in Mexico.

And they had got there through a popular, all grassroot campaign. And now they wanted to figure out, how do we carry that into a structure, into governance, that actually allows to keep the public involved? And so the class was really helping them through that design. So it's always that some problem, some place, where people are trying to figure out how we broad and diversify how they're engaging with the public.

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SARAH HANSEN: One of the realities of collaborating with real people in real communities is that practitioners often find themselves in situations where solutions are complicated and, sometimes, not complete. Professor McDowell offered some important words of wisdom for practitioners new to field work.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: I think it's not just this course, but in any real practice-based course, that puts you out into the field. There are a couple of things that you have to contend with. One, there are no complete solutions.

You have to learn how to make decisions in the midst of ambiguity. You just, you have to do it, which means, for you internally, you have to have your own dialogue with yourself to understand how you're holding onto the things that you believe. Even if you're not able to really achieve them, within the midst of any one project or any one initiative, but you're still not letting it get to you.

And one of the ways we talk about this is I make a real distinction in our class around how we talk about things. So for example, in our society, we're really good at what I would say is this kind of language of evaluation, how well something is or not. And we're also good at language of critique which is different than evaluation. And we're really good at this language of possibility. We're looking into the future.

What we're not really good at is talking about the reality, what I call the language of transition. And the reality is we have things we want to do. And as we're trying to do those things to change systems we want to be different, we have to support the systems that we're trying to change.

And so we live in this in-between space, this space called Nepantla. That's where we live. And in that space, we have to learn how to talk to each other. And this is why I always use these terms like grace and stuff like that. Because of the recognition that that's where you are.

So in my class, I try to support folks of being able to talk about that, about what they're living with in the middle, what they're having to hold onto that they don't necessarily feel good about. But they know they have to do it as they're trying to do this other thing. And to support them through that kind of conversation. This is a reflection of the transition you're living in, and just a recognition of that, and honoring it, and letting it be OK. It's almost being able to have a dialogue of forgiveness with yourself.

SARAH HANSEN: I wanted to know what these engagements look like in practice. So Professor McDowell shared with me one example that took place in my very own city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. The dialogue was around domestic violence and how the city could better address the issue. And the engagement was simple. Professor McDowell and his team asked residents of Cambridge to donate a question they had about domestic violence.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: Think about domestic violence. That is not a public conversation. That's not a thing that people talk about.

Because we have a structure of all you have to do is donate a question, a group of young people from Cambridge Rindge and Latin set up a booth at Harvard Square. They put up a board, and they made cookies. And they just basically had a cookie for your question.

And people would write their question about domestic violence and put it on board and get a cookie. And then people start having conversations in public about what's on the board and what they're hearing. So you're taking something that we don't talk about and moving forward.

At the same time, what we did is we took all the questions that came in, printed them out very large. And we had a space in Cambridge that we could use, where we put all 2,000-something questions up on the wall. And we created a public event where people would come in, read the questions, and sit down to have conversations with each other about what they were seeing and hearing.

And then we had people from the public come in and say, let's figure out, can we organize these questions in certain kinds of themes and issues? And then we had conversation with people about themes and issues. So all of this is taking something we don't talk about and creating an opportunity for people to do it.

Because you're, in some sense, recognizing that everyone has something to say about this. But if you do it in the right way, you don't try to tell them what they have to say, or how they have to say it, you just create an opportunity that equalizes voices. People step up.

SARAH HANSEN: This idea about equalizing voices and bringing everyone to the table is incredibly important in Professor McDowell's work. One specific aspect of his design framework speaks directly to this idea. It's built on the notion of equity. And it's a concept he calls designing for the margins.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: The reason I use this concept of design for the margins is our default in everything we do in design is designed for the middle, where most people are. And we do that because we want to scale. We want things to grow fast. We want to make sure we're taking care of a lot of people.

But the thing about when you design for those that are in the middle, you're mostly designing for people who, more or less, can operate within systems that are there. And then what that ends up doing is pushing people margins further and further out. And as other things in our systems fail, we end up putting more and more people into that margin. And by the margins, I mean those who are living with the failures of the society.

And so if we're going to attend to that, and actually bring their voices in, we have to first design opportunities and engagement processes that work for them first. Because those in the middle will find their way into that. Because they have the resources, the opportunity. They know how to negotiate the system.

The other thing when you design for the margins you do is, because they're clearly living with the failures of the systems, you're able to design around the things that would normally keep people out. So it's a purposeful thing that actually benefits more people. If you actually do that-- and we have instances of that in everyday life that shows that, some physical ones, like the curb cut.

The curb cut was a thing that came up, very particular movement from the disabilities community decades ago to create some access, and a lot of fights to get it done, but the interesting thing about is is you look at it now and say, well, who benefits from that? That's a design for a very small population of the country. Who benefits from it? Who uses it? Well, everybody that rides a bicycle, pushes a trailer, carries a grocery cart.

SARAH HANSEN: Stroller.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: Right? Strollers, it's all there, right? But that's not what it was designed for. It was designed for the margin, but yet, all these central activities that people are involved in and what I would call the middle, are able to benefit from that too.

The interesting thing about it, and why I actually like to use an example, is what have you noticed about changes in curb cuts in the last decade? They have bumps on them now. They have texture to them. And they have texture to them, because it helps people without sight to know if they're coming to a corner.

So the thing about designing for the margins, it's not the thing you've achieve. It's a thing that you're always working at. Because the margins will keep emerging.

SARAH HANSEN: If you're anything like me, you may be thinking to yourself that this is exactly the kind of work that our country and, really, our planet could use more of, better, more open, more connected ways to engage groups of people around complex issues, and a design framework that allows us to keep working at those issues. Part of what I love about Professor McDowell's work is that it's grounded in doing the hard work of community in community together.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: The way that our systems are set up right now, they really are designed to keep people apart, to disconnect people from each other, or groups from each other. And they draw these false dichotomies. But in reality, people live with a much more complex set of things.

So for example, you take the movement for Black lives. And you take the way that, in a very powerful way, using the notions of defund the police, and [? some other ?] views, and others to change what policing is. Because they have seen that evidence over and over again of the devaluing of Black lives within the midst of the police.

However, even with that same experience, knowledge base, you can go into the Black community, and people have very different feelings about do we defund the police or not? The trading off of their I know there's a risk, but that risk is in here, and it's out there, and I don't know how to balance it. I don't know what to do about that.

When we put things in an either or, then we really lose the opportunity to really connect people, to create some opportunity for people to acknowledge what's the complexity out there. And how do you go through that in a way that doesn't leave people behind? Or leave them to the side, I should say.

You can use policing as some. You could use what's happening with vaccinations as another. There's a lot of things that are just structured. And the way we talk about them in the public doesn't recognize one thing that we know is really true. Our values kind of lie on a continuum.

And what we're always doing is trading off one for the other. We're going back and forth. People looking at things, and they're looking at that value versus another value, versus another value.

And why that's important for public conversations is, if we can step away from saying, your value's this and mine is that, and you can get people in the space to realize, oh, this is how you're trading off this set of values. And this is how I'm trading them off. Then what you realize is that people are holding --have within them-- the same values.

They really are just shifting and weighing them differently at different times. And that creates more of an opportunity for people, at least, to see the other. They may not agree. But they begin to see the other. And that's, in our society, where so many groups of people have been so dehumanized, our first step is to let people be seen.

SARAH HANSEN: Through all the social upheaval and the many defining events of 2020, Professor McDowell has continued to spend a lot of his time engaging with students. He often works with smaller class sizes. So that he can develop the close relationships he feels are essential. This kind of close contact allows him to see into students' lives beyond the classroom. And he shared with me some insights into what he's seeing and what educators can do to help.

CEASAR MCDOWELL: I think students are dealing with a lot right now. And it's not just because of COVID. I think our society is in a huge transition. I can't tell you how many students I have right now who don't feel connected to their families anymore because of what's going on politically in this country, that disruption that people are sitting with.

And so then you ask, how do we, as educators, knowing they're sitting with this, help them to actually move forward in a way that is going to allow them to be generative with other people in the communities they work with and also find their own path? And so for me, teaching always has to be grounded in reality. You have to be working with others who are actually dealing with the problem, or the issue, or who want to do something, and you just have to work with them.

And it really is about lifting up and supporting people through that process of working with others and working with yourself. In some ways, a lot of my teaching is, yes, it's about substantive issues. But it is also about helping people develop, not only just a theory or practice, but a reflective strategy for themselves as they move through their careers and through their lives.

SARAH HANSEN: There's a lot of excitement about Professor McDowell's work and teaching. So we had some really wonderful listener questions sent in for this episode. And we're excited to share two of them with you now.

Here's one a listener sent in. For people who are used to having privileged access to policy discussion and implementation spaces, what habits should we watch out for? Are there subconscious attitudes or behaviors that get in the way of including historically excluded people?

CEASAR MCDOWELL: That's a really beautiful question. I think the number one habit we have to watch out for is a habit that we actually understand the issue. That we fully understand it. We have to make space for people to be able to reframe the issues with understanding.

If we hold onto our frame, from that position, we will never really fully be able to include others. So for me, that's the critical issue. And that means we have to make time and space for that.

And that pushes against so much of what we who are in these these policy areas think about is because we try to do everything. We've got to do everything. We got to do it, and we've got to get it right.

And I think the mantra should be we're going to do something. We're not going to get it quite right. You can take some time to maybe understand it a little different. We're going to do something then.

We're not going to get it quite right. We're going to take time to understand it differently. It's like-- because that's the reality. It is the reality. So we have to acknowledge it.

SARAH HANSEN: And to close, one more listener question, one that very well may have been on your mind while listening. Is it easier or harder to have difficult conversations in small groups or large town hall settings? How do we scale up dialogues? How do you adjust the questions, the tone, the pacing to accommodate large and diverse audiences?

CEASAR MCDOWELL: I'm a firm believer in small scale dialogues to deal with really difficult issues. If we try to do it in a large scale audience, we, one, you can't have everyone's voice in there, which means you're inevitably silencing certain people. And I'm not saying don't do large-scale events, because it's good sometimes just to sit in a place and listen, and hear, and watch others. That has value.

But the transformational piece [? everyone is, ?] I think is being in small space dialogues with others. I think we need work at turning our technologies and designing our communication systems to support that kind of listening and conversation. And that's not what we have.

They're driven by other things. That's one of the problems with them. So I think we can get there if we shift our intention, our design intention, to that. And the reality of it is all of our incentives for creating things like that are in the opposite direction. [LAUGHS]

It's like, it's really hard to build technologies that are designed for the margins that are going to actually scale. Because you have all these other things going on. It's a challenge. I don't think it's a challenge that can't be met.

SARAH HANSEN: If you're interested in learning more about Professor Ceasar McDowell's work or teaching with his open educational resources, you can check out his course 11:312, Engaging Community on our MIT OpenCourseWare website. You can also listen to his podcast, *We Who Engage.* It's available wherever you listen to podcasts.

Thanks for tuning in for our second season of*Chalk Radio.* We hope you enjoyed these episodes and will consider sharing this or any of our other episodes with a friend, family member, or colleague. We have more in store for Season 3 and are already working hard to bring you more episodes to inspire your teaching and learning when *Chalk Radio* returns in the fall. Signing off from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I'm Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

[AUDIO BUMPER] Ma, park the car.