

AfroUrbanism For Thriving Black Communities with Lauren Hood...

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SPEAKERS

Paty Rios, Lauren Hood

P Paty Rios 00:24

Hello and welcome to threesixtyCITY, a podcast delving into the future of urban life. I'm Paty Rios, NewCities Executive Director, and I will be hosting today's episode to kick off our third season. Today, I'll be joined by Lauren Hood. Welcome, Lauren. It's a pleasure to have you here. I'm actually looking forward to leading this conversation today around human-centered community development and equitable urban revitalization. I have gone deep into your work and I'm very happy to have you here today on our podcast. I know that you're a native Detroit and Afrourbanist working at the intersection of Black aspiration and city change, you apply a reparation lens to your work that applies strategies like storytelling, visioning and relationship building to address communities past harms, present needs, and future hopes and dreams. And I'm just fascinated by the fact that you are using participatory action research to approach your work. I'm looking forward to hearing more about what you are up to and I feel very grateful that you are a hero in this community that is actually diving into having the difficult conversations, holding safe spaces, and advancing what is needed in terms of bringing equity to the facilitation and community building realm. So welcome, Lauren, why don't you start by telling us a little bit about yourself, and how you got into community development and equity facilitation.

L Lauren Hood 01:53

So technically, if you were to look at my resume, it looks like I've only been engaged in the work maybe 10 or 15 years, but I feel like as a person of color, who has been socialized around people that weren't, I've been doing equity facilitation my whole life, always being a mediator between groups. So I was raised in an all black neighborhood in Detroit, but got bused out to a mostly white school in the suburbs. So I've been playing this kind of intermediary role for as long as I can remember. And I bring that work to community development, because at this moment in time, those are the dynamics that we're seeing in the city. So people that never used to come to the city are now moving into the city. And there, again, is a need for some mediation between different groups who have different sets of values, different belief systems,

different priorities. And I think that's something I like to hold our sector accountable for, is recognizing that we can't be prescriptive with the work of planning for the future of communities, because different groups of people need different things. I came into the work, because I have a background in the music business. So I have an undergraduate degree in business and marketing and I thought I wanted to be a music mogul. So for a long time I was working at record labels, radio stations, promotional companies. And there came a point when I started to pay attention to what was happening in the city and saw that so many of the people leading the work weren't from the city, a) weren't black in an 80%, black city, and b) weren't native to Detroit. So I'm like, I feel like there's something I can do there. So I did a whole career shift, went back to school to study community development and that's what led me on a different path.

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Paty Rios 03:54

That's amazing. And thank you for sharing that last bit about yourself. I wasn't aware of that. And I can just imagine, I have a partner who is a fan of music who has dragged me into every music store in the different cities that we visit. I'm just going back to this idea that when you work in a business, a local business, you actually have that feeling that feet on the ground kind of perspective of what is happening, what your community needs, and start talking with people. And you get a very, very different perspective than the usual stakeholders that come in and out of a community without knowing what's happening and trying to solve the problems that maybe haven't been properly discussed. So that's amazing. Thank you for sharing that. One piece that we were very curious about is where you grew up, obviously shapes a lot of the community work you are doing. Can you give us some place-based context on the history of disinvestment into Black communities in Detroit so that our audience can start getting a sense of what's happening in Detroit?

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Lauren Hood 04:59

Well it's not dissimilar for what has happened in black communities across the country. As far as Detroit's history is concerned, I look at 1967's uprising as a turning point for us. Growing up, I actually heard about the uprising in terms of being a riot. And it was framed that black folks just went crazy one day and tore up the city, which scared the white people and all the jobs away. But, having studied social justice, and applying that kind of a lens to the history, I know more about the conditions that led up to the events of 67. Black people were being over policed, and not just to a way where it was inconvenient, but to what we see today, being harassed and harmed and killed by police and stopped by police. We weren't allowed decent housing, there were instances where we could afford the housing, but because of redlining, we weren't allowed to live in certain neighborhoods. So if you can imagine the pressure of people who had money to live in good housing, but weren't allowed to live there; had the knowledge and know how to obtain certain jobs, but because of racist hiring practices weren't allowed to get those jobs. And then on top of that, to be harassed by police in the street just for existing. So there were a combination of things that happened leading up to 67's uprising. But I think that the dynamics we see in Detroit communities today stem from the events on that day, which led to, again, companies locating outside of the city and taking all of their jobs with them. And all of this was incentivized, the highways were built at the time, there was incentives for people to to get mortgages for houses in the suburbs. It wasn't happenstance, it wasn't organic, that these things happen. It was all orchestrated and intentional. And I think that's

something that is missed in the conversation about why things are the way they are today. We don't talk about the government's role in making some of these things happen, the Federal Housing Administration, the Federal Highway Act, like all of these things play a role in why the city looks like it does today. And I think that, black folks often end up as scapegoats. It's like, people are lazy, and they don't care about their community. And, they don't want to work, and they don't want to take care of anything. So, we bear the brunt of these institutional governmental decisions that got us to where we are.

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Paty Rios 07:42

As I'm listening to you, I acknowledge this part about how you are comparing black people and the black community to scapegoats. And at the same time, there's a reparation process that needs to happen about what were the actions that were taken, and how the black community ended up feeling the way it's feeling and having access to opportunities in this precise moment. And at the same time, a reparation piece, that is also about acquiring, again, self confidence, and also acknowledging that this is something that wasn't caused by them, but how the government may be trying to explain things. So I'm starting to understand a little bit more about all of this reparation approach that you're bringing to the conversation. Before we dive into what you're doing right now, just as a preview of what we're going to be speaking about, Lauren has had a longtime vision that is now coming to life into the newly established Institute of AfroUrbanism. And this is a research and education organization out of the University of Detroit Mercy School of Architecture. So we're gonna get there. Just before we go into this, can you tell us a bit more about your experience in consultancy, your previous experience with Deep Dive Detroit, and how that work fed into the creation of the Institute for AfroUrbanism?

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Lauren Hood 09:06

Sure. Deep Dive Detroit is the moniker I've used when I'm doing consulting work on development projects. So whether it's around a specific project, more often than not, it was around a neighborhood planning process, where either an architecture or planning firm would find that they needed somebody to manage engagement. And that is the role I would be invited to fill. But what I've always known as engagement is more than just coordinating meetings, like finding a location and facilitating a meeting. Good engagement is woven throughout your entire process. And it was always such an uphill battle to get my colleagues in planning and development to understand that so I just got so frustrated with my colleagues even. They couldn't even listen to my input, let alone the citizen input that I was trying to facilitate on behalf of the project. Let me see if I can enter the process at a place where there are still certain decisions to be made. Because by the time you get to the point where you're implementing a strategic planning process, city government has already decided what the focus areas are, how much money's gonna be spent, there's this consulting team that's working on it. So much has already been decided by the time you get to community that there really isn't an opportunity to impact the process in a way that makes it more inclusive for folks. So I was like, where do I need to enter the process, so that these planning processes can really be a place where people can have their voices heard, and not just heard, but adhered to; validated. So the Institute is really a platform for validating and proliferating, celebrating citizen voices, and citizen opinions and experiences about the places that they live in.



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Paty Rios 10:59

That's amazing. I want to highlight this piece that you were mentioning that good engagement goes beyond just convening, and engaging the different stakeholders or facilitating meetings.

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Lauren Hood 11:11

So frustrating. I thought it was time to thought leadership my way out of the tiny hole that this team had created for engagement. When you are a subcontractor, there's a very small hole that's created for you to do what you do. And I was like, yeah, I don't fit in there. So I'm like, I need a different kind of proposition around how we answer community because these tiny holes they make for the engagement to happen, isn't working.

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Paty Rios 11:37

It's very funny that you mentioned this, when I was studying my graduate degree, one of the reasons that I came to do my case studies in Canada was because I was truly amazed by the consultation process. I'm talking about this 12 years ago when I started my PhD. And I was fascinated just because comparing it to Mexico, it was a completely different approach. In Mexico, if people are not familiar about this, things just happen. There's no consultation process whatsoever. There are efforts that are trying to change this. And there are great champions out there that are trying to make a difference. But the community is most likely to be left aside. And especially when you're talking about marginalized communities and vulnerable populations, this is a big mistake that has been happening across the world. So I was mesmerized by what Canada was doing. But at this point, after learning all of the things that could be included to turn a good engagement process into a co-creative process, where everyone's voices are actually listened to, there's gaps that we need to address. And I'm so glad that you are one of those people in the industry that are trying to address this. And I'm sure that the AfroUrbanism Institute is going to be holding this space. In conversations that I had with colleagues, I heard about this piece of bringing the qualitative approach. These days, decision makers are very interested in hearing about the metrics and the quantitative things, but what about the storytelling and the life histories that have led us to this place? So that's definitely something I'm interested in learning more about. But before diving deeper, let's pause since we've been talking a lot about the AfroUrbanism Institute. Can you start by defining the concept of AfroUrbanism for our listeners?

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Lauren Hood 13:28

AfroUrbanism is an attempt to normalize putting culture at the forefront of the work you're doing in communities of color. So I think there's totally a lane for LatinaUrbanism, there's a lane for AsianUrbanism, whatever a majority population is in a community, that culture should lead the planning and development work that happens in that place. I think that too often we like to generalize, and again, get really prescriptive like, this thing worked in Manhattan, certainly it'll work in a small neighborhood in Metro Detroit. And that just isn't the case. Because you have to look at the demographics. And anytime there's an overwhelming majority of folks that is representative of a certain culture, that culture has to be at the forefront of the work, you can't be afraid to talk about it. And the power dynamics in Detroit are such that a very small group of white folks and white ideologies are controlling how we do development in overwhelmingly

black communities. So naming it AfroUrbanism was intentional. And it was to put the black right in front of the urbanism be like, this is what we need to be thinking about when doing work in black communities, no exceptions.

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Paty Rios 14:48

I've been listening to threads about Jay Pitter mentioning that the language we are using is very important, so that the right language is actually making a point about what is important and what is a priority. Lately, for instance, she has been advising to use enabling communities instead of empowering communities because the power is already there.

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Lauren Hood 15:09

I made a whole glossary for the Institute. I can't remember if I send it to you, but I don't use certain words. Like I'm not marginalized, I'm not disenfranchised, I am not at risk. I feel like these become self fulfilling prophecies. When you use these kinds of words to describe communities, we start to embody the characteristics associated with those words. I'm trained in that language, that's what you learn in the academy. So I had to untrain myself. And one way I did that was I created a glossary that uses all affirmative language, so I can replace the negative implications that we normally associate with communities of color. So I've got a whole glossary of terms that I like to use, and also associated with that are terms around the future. There's a futurist lens to this work as well. I actually included a lot of words from science fiction, that are fantasy and dream related. I have found when you're talking to people in community that are so accustomed to struggle, and you ask them, so what do you want for your future? The responses stem from things that are happening presently, and I'm not saying we don't need to pay attention to what's going on right now. But there are enough agencies in organizations doing that. I'm specifically trying to get folks to think bigger and broader. So I always talk about Wakanda the way it was in Black Panther. So there was this community where black people had their own technologies. Our culture was at the forefront of all the things you saw in the streetscape. So how do we get to our Wakanda future in places that are majority black? You have to start using a different language and a different way of thinking. And I think that Afrofuturism is a way to expand people's imagination because I can't tell you how many times I've asked people what they want. And so many times people are like, I don't know, or there people who are like, trash pickup and to fix the lights, or these very basic things. That's like asking for oxygen. Of course, we should have those things. But if our wildest dreams stop there, we're never going to get anything more than we have right now. So you have to have not only a new language, you have to have other ways of expanding people's imagination, so that we can get to the Wakanda future that we deserve.

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Paty Rios 16:01

Well put. I want us to also make space to get to one of my favorite topics that I wanted to discuss here are the Black Thriving Index, that's going to be one of the Institute's first programs. And so can you tell us a little bit more about what it will measure and what you hope to accomplish with it?



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Lauren Hood 17:57

So the Black Thriving Index was conceived as a way to really validate the things that black folks have been saying for years. My experience as a consultant when I'm reiterating things to my colleagues in planning and development, they dismiss certain comments as anecdotal, or just one person's opinion. It's easy to invalidate what people are saying, and be dismissive of it. In my mind, this year long conversation that some research fellows are going to be in with citizens, and then a subsequent report comes out, is a way of validating what people are saying. And in my mind, it's got foundational support right now, but the more corporate sponsors and foundations that sign up is more institutional validation of the word of the people. It seems kind of superficial that you have to seek validation in those ways. But I've seen community input invalidated so many times that I know it has to be done. So okay, we're gonna do a year long survey sponsored by all these agencies, we'll put out a report, and there you'll have your validation for what people have been saying this whole time. So it's a conversation, it's different than the way that we normally get information from communities. I've been a part of a lot of door to door surveying, a lot of email surveying, so it's not just like we go out on one day and ask people about their lives. It's a conversation that's had over several months with people that are known to the citizens they're talking to. So I'm not hiring academics. I'm not hiring planning or development practitioners. I'm hiring longtime residents of the communities that we're working in. So the number one set of criteria for being this sort of research fellow, and I'm still consulting my glossary on what I should call the research fellow, because there's a certain kind of language there. But until I figure that out, the research fellow is just a longtime resident of a place. I don't want to see their resume, I just want them to talk to me about their future vision for the place and about the network they have within their community. Because I think that, it lends to the authenticity if people are having a conversation with people they know. Versus I've been that student going door to door and that is not a fun conversation to have with people, because they want to tell you all the things that the institution you're representing has done wrong in their community, you're viewed as an outsider. So what does the input look like when someone's talking to their neighbor of 25 years or their cousin that lives down the street? So I think the relational aspect that these fellows will have to the people they're interviewing will lend us higher quality input.

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Paty Rios 20:55

I'm curious to learn, Lauren, if through facilitating these dialogue, I mean, you're going to understand how development efforts contribute to or hinder the wellbeing of Black residents. I'm curious to see if at some point, the way that we are measuring wellbeing for different communities might be different, or we might find specificity to it?

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Lauren Hood 21:16

In theory, the point of the Index is to distinguish between what communities of color need, and how it's different from what white folks and community need? I think there needs to be a documented process for getting it that. We can speculate, but I think we need a process by which we really unearth that.

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Paty Rios 21:43

And you heard that you were just in Paris on the Institute's first global expedition. Did the

And we heard that you were just in Paris on the Institute's first global expedition. Did the expedition meet your expectations? Tell us about it.

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Lauren Hood 21:53

I'll say that's to be determined. So yes, the Institute took 11 black folks who are thriving in Detroit overseas to Paris for a week to really lean into the meaning of black thriving and the conditions necessary. So the first round of interviews in the Black Thriving Index is me having a one on one conversation with 50 black folks who are thriving. And my working definition of thriving is that three things need to be true, you need the three A's: Agency, Abundance, and Audacity. You need to be aware of your power to have control over your own outcomes; agency. Abundance; you need to be okay with having, and it's not like having just wealth or success, but also having abundant relationships, having joy in your life, having abundance of rest and self care. I have found in social justice work in particular, we're taught to think we're just gonna be broke. So, the real joy is just being able to serve the people. But how are you able to serve people if you're constantly worrying about how to take care of yourself? So the abundance piece is really necessary in order to holistically thrive. And the third A is Audacity. That revolves a lot around identity, the audacity to show up whole in whatever situation you're in. Something I've noticed in Detroit, we have a lot of black folks in leadership positions, but they don't get to embody their full black selves in their leadership roles. So they're showing up with a black face, but we're not really encouraged to have any kind of black thought or black ideas that we get to work on, we're here to just implement some colonial ideas that were in place before we got there. So audacity means you have the gall to show up in all of your blackness. So all those things have to be true in order for a black person to be really thriving. And so the people that I took with me to France, each of them were the first people that were interviewed, and there'll be a total of 50 that are in that first pool. And then we'll do an initial report on what we found, like, what were the common themes that all of those people had in their lives through their stories that helped them to thrive. And then after that report comes out, which should be in the second quarter of this year, then we start the fellowship program where the fellows will do a city-wide conversation to have the same conversation that I did with those first 50 people, but over a series of months in different kinds of conversations. So not just a one off, but they're talking for a longer period of time.

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Paty Rios 24:42

I really love the idea about investing into longer periods of time and also putting your finger on the fact that engagement needs to be addressed in a way where the timeline actually is measurable to the outcome. Sometimes we just say, like the engagement process is gonna last two, three months, but it needs to actually be done.

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Lauren Hood 25:06

It's determined by some grant deadline, or in many cases by an election cycle. There are all these outside factors that are determining when it needs to start and end. Trust takes time. So what's exciting about this is I'm setting the timeline, and there's no rush. I'd rather have really good work than work done really quickly. That's an important piece. We're never given enough time to do proper engagement when it comes from the top down. But also, that reminds me I didn't finish talking about the France trip. The point of taking those folks to France, the trip was

formulated around Josephine Baker being inducted into the Pantheon. So the Pantheon is where France buries all of its war heroes and other literary artists and other luminaries and it's the first time they were putting a black American in there. So I had wanted to go witness that for myself and just explore like, what's going on in France, where they think a black American is that important to put in their pantheon? And a friend of mine suggested, why don't you make it a study tour and take a few people with you. I'm like, that is a fantastic idea. So instead of me just exploring on my own, I've got 11 other eyes experiencing the same thing so we could talk about it and parse out what is it about the dynamics in France that allow something like that to happen? What do black folks need in France that might be similar to what we need here in order to thrive? So it was kind of to get it, what might be universal across the diaspora that we need in order to thrive? And then also talk about the things that are placed base that we might need in order to thrive. So we had a number of tours and conversations with black Parisians about those things.

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Paty Rios 26:56

That's great. I'm looking forward to hearing about the similarities and then what might be the differences and the approaches that are place-based as you're mentioning. So we're close to wrapping up, Lauren. What I'm thinking is I want to make sure that our audience and our listeners know how they can find out more or support the efforts of the Institute for AfroUrbanism. So do you mind closing up with that information?

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Lauren Hood 27:23

Sure. You can sign up at the website, which is just afroubanism.com.

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Paty Rios 27:33

Perfect. Well, we will be following closely your work, Lauren. Thank you so much for your time. It's been a pleasure talking to you today. And thank you listeners, as always, for joining us. We will be back next week with another episode of the threesixtyCITY podcast.