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HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: Welcome to the third episode of *Design Now,* a quarterly podcast from the Harvard Graduate School of Design. My name is Harriet Fitch Little, and I'll be your host. In each episode of this podcast, we focus on a particular question in the field of design and architecture and look at how leading architects and designers are approaching it.

This episode, we're talking about social justice. We'll be looking at some of the ways in which inequality and outright discrimination have been baked into the environment as we experience it and talking to the people who are trying to do better. This is a subject where I find myself impressed by those particular designers, but also awestruck and, frankly, overwhelmed by the limitations of individual action.

Designing for social justice doesn't just mean designing better public housing, it means, for example, creating transportation links between poorer communities and areas of opportunity. It means overturning the single-family zoning laws that make certain suburbs homogeneously wealthy. It means thinking again about which communities get sewage plants allocated nearby.

At the other end of the scale, social justice means convincing private clients of the need to serve requirements other than their own. The first speaker we'll hear from is Rahul Mehrotra who is Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design and John T. Dunlop Professor in Housing and Urbanization at the GSD. He's also the Director of RMA Architects, a firm that works out of Mumbai and Boston. Rahul describes the work he does as softening thresholds.

So even when he's working on a private commission, such as a vacation home for an affluent family in India, he will find ways to ensure that the project partly functions as an outdoor community space, for example, when the family is not there. Here, he begins our conversation by laying out his approach to social justice in broad terms.

RAHUL MEHROTRA: Social justice means different things in different contexts because the makeup of societies, the economic disparities, the political ideologies, and the access that different groups within a society have to whether it's opportunities in terms of jobs or access to housing and its affordability, et cetera, all collectively really combine to understand or to read how just a society is.

Of course, architecture, urban design planning, landscape design play a huge role in facilitating a more equitable city and creating forms of access and eventual justice for especially the marginalized in those places. In fact, I think we should be judging any society or any city or any urban system by the way they treat the disenfranchised, the poor, and how they create ways that the most marginalized can get access to amenities within a society.

So social justice, actually, you have to think about it more ecologically. There are many aspects that collectively allow you to read whether a city is just. And so as designers, we really have to be mindful of the implications of the design decisions we make.

In fact, I think like in medicine where they take an oath to work in the service of society and not harm human beings, I guess as professional urban designers, planners, architects and landscape architects, in professional schools we should perhaps take an oath where we commit ourselves to understand the implications of anything, any form of intervention we make in ways that we understand whether it would be good or bad for this planet, and then make the decision of getting engaged or not.

HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: Rahul has applied this philosophy to an extraordinarily varied group of projects. Along with private residences, in 2018, he built housing for 100 elephants and their caretakers in Jaipur. Daniel D'Oca who we'll hear from next, works mainly in the US. As well as teaching courses at the GSD as an Associate Professor in Practice of Urban Planning, he runs the New York-based firm Interboro Partners and has published a book on how design enforces injustice and the tools used by planners to maintain various forms of urban segregation.

DANIEL D'OCA: Social justice is a pretty broad concept that means different things to different people. I think some things just are unfair and unnecessarily so. So when it comes to the built environment, what's unfair is the uneven distribution of opportunity and the barriers we sometimes put up to keep people out of the places where opportunity abounds. So one way to think of it, if people have a right to health, wealth and education, shouldn't they have a right to live in the communities where you find health, wealth and education?

And wouldn't barriers placed to access these communities, if they were in the form of a moratorium on apartment buildings that could maybe provide affordable housing, wouldn't these be barriers to education, to wealth and wellness? So I think removing these barriers and creating more opportunities for people to live in more places is just. How would we address removing those barriers? How would we make a more just condition?

And I think something like fair share laws are something that's important, like laws that distribute, let's say, waste transfer stations or polluting industry or noxious highways, things that equitably cite these things evenly around a region so that no one particular community bears the brunt of these facilities that pollute. That's something that I think is just and something we should strive to do, something that I think is important to the concept of social justice in the built environment.

HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: Fair share laws can mean the equal distribution of waste water treatment facilities, the things that no one wants to live next door to. It's also a term used to refer to laws implemented to ensure that all communities are providing their share of a state's affordable housing needs so as to avoid affluent neighborhoods sectioning themselves off from the larger community.

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A key focus of research done at the GSD is to push practitioners and policy makers towards greater awareness that architecture is always a social act. Every building leaves a trace because it changes the pattern of lives lived around it. A new school built on a vacant plot might mean better education, but it might also mean the loss of an informal green space or a shortcut for commuting to work. It might also mean an increase in polluting traffic.

We'll now hear from Mariam Kamara, the architect behind the Niger-based firm Atelier Masomi. Mariam delivered the Aga Khan program lecture at the GSD in early 2022 and spoke then about the importance of understanding local practices and materials in order to create buildings that truly belong.

MARIAM KAMARA: We make social spaces. We're an art form that makes artifacts and spaces for people to live in or to represent themselves or to enact their life and aspirations through. So by default, this is a social art. We don't really get to not acknowledge that and not embrace that and not take that seriously because at the end of the day, whether we decide to act on the fact that this is a social act, it still has a social impact.

The minute you put a building out there in the world, you have impacted that world, you have impacted the people who enter that building, you have impacted what it does to their psyche, you have impacted what it does maybe even to a city, what it does to a country, you have impacted all of those things. And in the same way, and I say this often, that we can use architecture and architecture has been used to subjugate, to segregate, whether you talk about redlining in the US or you are talking about apartheid and how entire cities are built for control almost, like these massive prisons, architecture is very much a social act always.

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HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: Anita Berrizbeitia, who we'll hear from next, is a Landscape Architect and the Chair of the Landscape Architecture Department at the GSD. She sees her field as providing a critical link between the micro and the macro, between the designs that any one client might have for a project, and the impact that project has on the wider community. To Anita, landscape architects must be activists and advocates, standing up for the interests of those not on the typical client list.

ANITA BERRIZBEITIA: It only takes a quick view on Google Earth of any city in any part of the world to immediately grasp the extent of social injustice in cities. And just look at the difference in the distribution of, quote, unquote, "green," and you immediately know where people in the higher strata of socioeconomic hierarchy live and where the marginalized communities live. And that's all you need to know to understand how that city is working and where are landscape architects working and where they are not working.

And this is perhaps the most evident and easiest way to detect it. Of course, it doesn't really tell you why and what are the historical conditions that have allowed that vast inequity in the quality of the built environment. There are, of course, other signs that is the presence, for instance, of air pollution, the absence of potable water in certain communities, the location of some neighborhoods near contaminated industrial zones or waste disposal sites such as landfills, or the location of neighborhoods near sites that are vulnerable to flooding and to landslides. These are classic cases.

And I would say that another symptom of social injustice in the built environment, and because landscape architecture also entails infrastructure and infrastructure of connectivity and that means ease of opportunities to access to workplaces, we can see that social injustice is also manifest in lack of public transportation or in the need to spend extraordinary amounts of time commuting to and from work because gentrification has pushed people away from proximity to their places of work.

And we know that there is an unfortunate pairing between, let's call it now, greening of neighborhoods and gentrification. If one wants, let's say, climate justice, that means to distribute the green and city such that the heat island effect is not felt more in some neighborhoods than in others, and you plant trees where there are no trees that unless you take the right measures, you will trigger a process of gentrification and of displacement.

HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: The climate crisis has multiplied the ways in which a city can be divided. In many parts of the world, parks and street canopies might have previously been valued because they created a more pleasant living environment. Now in many places, they're essential to combating dangerous urban heat. In Daniel D'Oca's book, which is called the *Arsenal of Inclusion & Exclusion,* he talks about some of the more explicitly planned ways in which urban spaces have been carved up to the advantage of the already privileged. We'll hear from him again now.

DANIEL D'OCA: I think when we talk about dividing lines, we emphasize race because so many of the lines were drawn explicitly to divide people by race. Lines were certainly drawn to divide people by income. So we could think of things like large lot zoning. That's a policy that was weaponized basically to divide people by income, but even those policies have a racial element and, I would argue, are primarily motivated by race. So we focus on race because the effects of racial segregation have been so damaging.

I think that's the second reason. People in this country are divided in all kinds of ways, age, political affiliation, religion, interest. There are communities of astronomers, for example. But living in these communities is a choice, and the lines that divide astronomers from non-astronomers or lines that people voluntarily put up, so segregating yourself from young people or Republicans or whatever, that's something you can do because you think it helps you live your best life.

Just compare two zip codes in the same metropolitan area, in the same city, you could find 20-year life expectancy differences, you can find radically, radically different rates of asthma, of health, of income. You can find communities in one place where home values are stable and accrue value and another place where that's not the case. The whole history of urbanization in the 20th century in the United States is basically creating a situation where people have the deck stacked against them or the cards stacked against them, but people who haven't experienced this kind of division, obviously, have a lot to learn.

I think one of the problems with segregation is that it really reinforces itself and a lot of people have made this point, including Dr. Martin Luther King, who said something to the effect of it's really bad for people to grow up with only people their race and they develop prejudices, get provincial views, and it's really important to bring people together so people can better understand and learn from each other. And I think that's really true. I think we've made a lot of progress. And I think I've been really pleasantly surprised by some recent legislative victories.

Back in the '60s, we had the Fair Housing Act, and we made a really major step by outlawing maybe more obvious kinds of housing discrimination, but now I think we're taking on the less obvious ones. For example, California just basically banned single-family housing. That's really, really good news, and I think it marks an increased understanding by people that some of the policies that we use and weaponize to effectively segregate people along race lines were profoundly unethical.

In recent years, White communities have proposed blood relative ordinances. These are ordinances that require tenants of rental housing to be related by blood to their landlords. That's obviously racist, especially when that policy is put into place by communities that are, in the case of one community we looked at, 95% White. So we look at that, we look at kinship ordinances that require tenants to secure a letter of recommendation. We look at exclusionary amenities.

This is a term for some kind of amenity in a housing development that people in that development pay extra money to maintain because a willingness to maintain that amenity is a good proxy for other desired membership characteristics. So an example would be like a golf course. If you built a golf course in your community because so much of the golf playing public is White, it's almost a proxy for racial homogeneity.

Support education about the built environment, it's something that's severely lacking, and I think most people go through high school and go through college and never think about the implications of space or are never really taught to think about the process of city making. And so we all know that cities don't just fall from the sky looking the way they do. We know that they're the result of policies that shape them in a particular way, and in some cases, shape them in a way to maintain and reiterate segregation and to disempower, but we don't know the history. We're not taught it.

And I think it's really, really important to understand how built environments get shaped and how decisions we made led to outcomes that privilege certain populations and don't privilege others. I think that's really important, but I also think laws are important. I think the Fair Housing Act is critical. I think that is one reason why we could fight against some of the policies I've mentioned. That's all really critical. I think it's really about education, empowerment, and litigation when it comes to that.

HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: Amenities can often create invisible lines between communities, even ones who share the same buildings. For example, a new housing development might be required to include public housing, but exclude those residents from accessing amenities such as the gym or, in some cases, even the playground.

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We'll return to Rahul Mehrotra now. In this segment, he moves from talking about social justice as a whole to talking about the design considerations that go into creating an equitable city.

RAHUL MEHROTRA: In any city, there's what I call a holy trinity. There is dwelling, which we call housing, but people dwell in places. There's livelihood, which keep people alive. It gives them an income. And there is mobility. Mobility in the classic examples of the shophouse, you lived above the shop, you walked down a flight of stairs, and that was your livelihood, and your dwelling was right above where your livelihood resided.

In our contemporary cities, mobility is a critical connection between livelihoods and dwelling. And if this trinity is not in balance, which means if people can't access their jobs or their livelihoods or if people don't have adequate dwelling, you get problematic kind of conditions in societies, you get very injust societies and, of course, social justice is something you can't achieve. And that's why often the best form of subsidy for housing is not direct subsidy, but it's indirect subsidy by subsidizing mobility, which is transportation.

The current mayor in Boston has decided to make certain bus routes free, without a cost. This is to compensate because economically marginalized people who live in those areas who then have to pay disproportionate amounts of money to get to their jobs, and by indirectly subsidizing the connection between their livelihoods and their dwelling, you probably make life sort of better for them. It's a form of correcting injustice.

And so that ecology or that ecological construct for a city, that is that holy trinity of mobility, dwelling and livelihood, is very critical in achieving an equilibrium with regard to social justice.

HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: In the US, several pressure groups have used the framework of a transportation bill of rights as a way of framing social justice issues. One proposed for Washington State earlier this year included provisions such as the right for every household to access groceries within 20 minutes without a car. It is surely not a coincidence that some of the most equal cities in the world also have excellent transport networks. Just think of the Nordic cities with their bike highways and plentiful buses.

This is partly because a community with good mobility creates its own virtuous cycle. Transportation networks open up new job opportunities. Shorter commutes improve one's quality of life. Daniel D'Oca sees this as part of a wider pattern of privilege reinforcing privilege.

DANIEL D'OCA: I think in some ways there's a tendency to overlook the complexity of privilege as a concept, but something else about privilege, it's a feedback loop. Privilege gets you access to what we call high opportunity communities to good quality public space, and high opportunity communities can be bubbles. I think the central story of urbanization in the US is a story about-- used to be called the secession of the successful, the migration of wealthy, mostly White, families to communities composed of other wealthy, mostly White, communities.

And urban policy in the 20th century really incentivized this migration by facilitating suburbanization, allowing suburban municipalities to incorporate and thereby control land use. We talk about single-family zoning and minimum lot size requirements, apartment building moratoria, these are all policies that were weaponized to really maintain race and class-based homogeneity. And as I was mentioning before, I think that homogeneity breeds intolerance. There's a feedback loop there.

It's intolerance that in turn causes people to weaponize policy, to maintain race and class-based homogeneity. Segregation and exclusion perpetuate themselves because the more we are separated from people unlike us, the more we want to craft policy to exclude people not like us. So I think that that's ideology right there.

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HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: We'll now hear again from Anita Berrizbeitia and Rahul Mehrotra, who both want to emphasize how important it is that people other than private clients are involved in deciding what gets built and where.

ANITA BERRIZBEITIA: In the United States, there is a lot of private funding of public spaces, and this private funding in many instances goes to spaces that will benefit a particular segment of the population, but it doesn't go to build landscapes where they are needed most. The typical situation is that there's a kind of circularity here where the people that are funding privately with their own money public spaces, in general, invest it back into areas that are close to where they are rather than ask the broader question, where in this city is this best utilized?

It's a very different question, and that is how the concept of privilege and wealth play a role in amplifying injustice. I think there's a phrase that is used commonly here, which is that you have to pay to play in the realm of philanthropy. If you are going to give $200 million for a project, then you get to choose what it is, where it is, and what it does, and that should not be the case.

RAHUL MEHROTRA: I think one of the big shifts that have occurred in the recent past is where the role of the state has receded in planning, and really you can't have planning if you don't have the state involved because that's the only mechanism by which the common good can be safeguarded.

Under neoliberalism with the private sector gaining sometimes unreigned freedom, you began to have what I call the cities or the urban form of impatient capital because capital is intrinsically impatient, and the places that make the realization of its value, which is which allow capital to land and realize its value instantly, become these havens for capital, and we began to call them global cities, the Shanghais and the Dubai's, which make the arrival and the realization of value of capital frictionless.

Now, this makes for very brittle form, and capital becomes the overriding factor in making decisions, how quickly buildings can be built, how high they can go so that you maximize the value of that land, et cetera. Clearly, this has to shift back to some collaborated form of a relationship between the private and the public in order to safeguard the common good.

And as we begin to face the challenges of climate change from which comes the notion of climate justice, this collaboration will have to become very critical because the human being and the effects all of this has on the human beings will become much more central in the discussion. It's interesting for me if you look at the last 50 years or 60 years the kind of categorization of city types, we had world cities in the 1960s. People like Peter Hall defined world cities, and these were cities that disproportionately controlled financial, political, cultural capital.

So the New Yorks, the Londons, the Parises. And then you had a shift in the late '80s and '90s popularized by scholars like Saskia Sassen, and we move to global cities. And global cities were cities that controlled disproportionately global capital, and it was bizarre because it had nothing to do with size really, in spite of what the word global city might suggest. So Dublin was a global city because it had large financial control, but it was a tiny town really.

A place like Mumbai, which has 15 million people, but didn't control that much capital in proportion to many other cities wasn't a global city, and that's kind of bizarre because that seems to be a disjuncture. And now, for me, really the word megacity is an interesting one because a mega city is something the World Bank defines and agencies that fund city development defined, and they use the threshold of 5 million people, they increased it to 7 million people, because through the metric of the human being, they know what infrastructure and amenities are needed and, therefore, they can lend according to that.

Now, what's interesting about the megacity as a definition its humancentric. It places the human being as the metric, and that's interesting. So we've got to find metrics like this, which place people more centrally. And that is the first step to achieving social justice because if society is not central to our imagination of the city and what the city even means, how are we going to achieve social justice?

For our disciplines of architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and planning, I think we have to situate the notion of social justice within the larger rubric of climate change. And so climate justice is the way we can think about the agency that we have as professionals going into the future. The disruptions that climate change will cause for many parts of our societies will be massive. And so to reframe the notion of justice within those emerging contingencies would really be a way to act.

More recently as I've been researching what is happening in India in terms of its future urban trajectory, it's a research project that I call Becoming Urban because India isn't yet 50% urban, it's 40% urban, 43% urban, it's 70% urban, depending on the parameters you use, but what this research is really showing is that our urban condition, and this is important because India has 1.2 billion people, is in a state of flux.

Now, when you have a state of flux, the implications of that is that people are moving back and forth between what you might call the rural and the urban, although you can't even define them in that binary any longer because many of these places are maybe rural physically, but urban in that people are not engaged in agriculture necessarily, their incomes come from bigger cities and they move back and forth.

And my guess is that there are about 200 million people in a country like India that move back and forth on a seasonal cycle. And that's why during the pandemic, when India and the government in India decided at 48 hours notice to close the country down, there were 30 million people who walked back to the rural areas. Of course, some of them took transportation in bits, but these are the images that had become so visible across the globe of this dislocation.

And that was because these are folks that move seasonally, which means they don't have access to the regular amenities in the city. Now, in that condition of flux, how do we even define social justice because when the city is not a stable entity, how does one even begin to build out the forms of access? And with climate change, this condition of flux is going to be accelerated, and we are witnessing it around the world.

Climate refugees is the time bomb that this planet is sitting on, and the only way we are going to have to deal with that kind of flux is thinking about solutions that are transitionary in nature, and that are not absolute. We can't solve these problems with absolutism. We'll have to create holding strategies, which work on a temporal scale, that allows this flux to be absorbed while creating viable lives, while creating forms of social justice.

And that's why embedding the rubric of social justice within climate change and addressing it as climate justice, I think, will propel us as designers to re-imagine our agencies in dealing with the crises that are going to engulf us.

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HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: If there's a through line to this episode, it's the idea that social justice will always be about so much more than building one good building. It's about the planners, the clients, the city and state officials making decisions. It's also about who gets to build buildings in the first place. To finish, we'll hear from two people who were thinking closely about design pedagogy and the question of who gets a seat at the table. First, we'll hear from Esesua Ikpefan, a Doctoral Researcher at the GSD, and then again from Mariam Kamara.

ESESUA IKPEFAN: In the climate that we live in and in the kind of global climate of what is right, especially what is right to say, I find myself being a little bit afraid to say things or to join conversations that I'm not 100% sure that I'm going to be right in those conversations. And I think that is a very precarious place to be, to be in a place where we only want to entertain conversation that sounds familiar to us, that aligns with our goals or that affirms our beliefs.

And I think it leaves the issue of social justice as also one of a collective social consciousness that promotes equity. So that promotes looking at someone that looks entirely different from me, has different from me, lives different from me, and still being able to give them their respect as an individual, not just from person to person, but also on paper. So policy-wise, systemically.

And I think that really does start with these very difficult conversations that I believe are, I won't say happening less, but there are more conversations that exclude people who may not think exactly like us. It's much easier now, especially with the different groups that we have online to create for ourselves these societal bubbles where we're not entirely engaging with people who may think different from us.

MARIAM KAMARA: Ultimately, it all goes back to the education when even the textbooks we'll have access to in school, in architecture school or even earlier, where they only give 10% or 15% of the books real estate to the rest of the world versus 85% to the Western world. You already have a problem because you're already creating an idea of inequality. You're already creating an idea of superiority just by doing that. So that's already a starting point at which everything is skewed.

It's a point at which you implant in people's minds that there is something incredibly more valuable and incredibly more superior about Western culture and architecture and history. That is where everything starts, and that is what makes it so difficult to then unlearn that superiority complex from a Western point of view later on.

Whereas if we actually had the intellectual honesty of acknowledging that actually there is equal value in other cultures, architectures, and histories, and techniques, and that there are very much valuable contributions made beyond just Egypt, beyond some of the just sort of usual suspects that are picked, four or five of them, throughout the world to present, but as just full complex cultures and civilizations, that would be a huge part of the problem resolved right there.

And if in architecture education that intellectual honesty was really in the forefront of Harvard educating, then we would actually have a much larger toolbox to draw from and to solve problems from rather than, again, always thinking that we need to go back and look at Le Corbusier or something for everything great that ever happened in architecture or to the Renaissance or anything like that, but there's just a vast amount of knowledge and of value way before that from all over the world.

It does really come down to education and to the bias in our education and to the lack of honesty that we have in the way that we frame history.

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HARRIET FITCH LITTLE: Thanks to all our interviewees for speaking about their work in this episode and trying to provide some entry points to this enormous topic in a few short moments. You can find out more about what everyone is working on via the show notes. And if you haven't already, you might like to listen back to our first episodes on designing for the climate crisis and on designing for health.

This podcast was produced and edited by Maggie Janik and hosted by Harriet Fitch Little. To learn more about the Harvard Graduate School of Design, visit us at GSD.Harvard.edu, and follow us on social media @HarvardGSD.