

AMP Seeds Fall 2022 Season - Seeds Event Transcript

Community Rooted Development

Thursday, October 13th, 2022

Nandi Comer: Welcome, my name is Nandi and I am an African-American woman with brown skin and red braids and circular glasses and I am the director of the AMP Seeds program. AMP Seeds is a division of Allied Media Project that supports and amplifies movement leaders, makers, and shakers. I am so excited to welcome you all tonight to 'Community Rooted Development' with Ryan Myers Johnson as moderator and our guests Jeanette Lee, Malik Yakini, and Erik Paul Howard- all organizers who are very close to my heart.

So show them some love in the chat! We really want you all to use the chat tonight. Make sure that you put your finger snaps, your love, your questions. We want to hear everything. This event will have ASL interpretation and closed captioning. Please be sure to turn on captions using the "CC" button at the bottom of the video frame. We're going to invite you to join us at the Seeds Cafe. It's an intimate space to reflect and collect on today's event and we'll put the zoom link in the chat but we'll also send it out to registered attendees. So let's get started with the show.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Hello, welcome everyone. My name is Ryan Myers Johnson. I am an African-American woman with brown skin and curly locks and I am so excited to be able to moderate the conversation. Today we're talking about community rooted development. We're hopefully unpacking some of the nuances, some of the controversies, and some of the hopeful stories with community leaders who I admire, that I have had the privilege to be in conversation with and to learn from and to work with over the years. So tonight we'll be talking with Jeanette Lee, Malik Yakini, and Erik Paul Howard about their work in the fabulous city of Detroit and I hope that this is a



really free-flowing conversation. So to everybody on this call, on this panel, let's just talk amongst each other.

Let's be in dialogue so we can, you know, hopefully learn and share and grow in our practice of community rooted development and again, anybody who's listening and joining us, please put your questions and your comments in the chat! We want to be in dialogue with you as well. So I'm just going to start with saying a little bit about myself and why I'm interested in this conversation. So, as Executive Director of Sidewalk Detroit, we're really investigating, 'How do we advance spatial equity through deep engagement with residents and through arts and culture?' And so that's how I've come to know and learn from so many of the folks that are on the call today. So just want to start off asking you all, how do you define community rooted development and how does it show up in your practice? And as you answer, maybe you can tell us more specifically about your practice. So why don't we start with Jeanette and then just you know keep it flowing.

Jeanette Lee: Thank you Ryan. Thank you AMP Seeds for convening us. I'm Jeanette Lee, a light-skinned, Asian femme with chin-length, dark hair. So a little bit about the practice we've been in for the past four years, it's called the Love Building. It's the future home of Allied Media Projects, Detroit Justice Center, Detroit Disability Power, Detroit Community Technology Project, Detroit Narrative Agency and Paradise Natural Foods—the soon-to-be brick and mortar business of Chef Nezaa Bandele.

So to the question of what do— you know, the framework— why we're here? What is community rooted development? I think it's a really interesting term that gets at, I think, some of the nuances of development that maybe are within but also distinct from like, this kind of umbrella term of “equitable development” that is used a lot, in lots of different ways. And I was thinking about— just like on the metaphor—on the basis of the metaphor of a root— you know it's— and I think for our project as well, an approach to development where the purpose is really arising from a need and a desire within a community.

And that's I think a little different or in contrast to development where the purpose is primarily the enrichment of an investor or a private company. And similarly, in the framework of community rooted development, in an ideal way the value or the benefit that arises from that development flows back into the roots like photosynthesis.



Whatever– you know, learning from the plants as much as we can– that it, you know, it brings that value back down into the community as opposed to extracting it away.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Thank you Jenny and I think that your metaphor of thinking about community as roots and seeds and plants and photosynthesis is a perfect segue into talking to Malik. Can you tell us about your work and how you define community rooted development? Yes my name is Malik Yakini and I'm a brown skin, African-American man with a gray beard and dreadlocks. I have the sacred honor of serving as Executive Director of the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network and we do several things including operating D-Town Farm and we, along with our development partner, Develop Detroit, are in the process of building the Detroit Food Commons which will house the Detroit People's Food Co-op, four shared used kitchens, a community meeting space, and office space.

Malik Yakini: I have frankly never used the term Community Rooted Development and, you know, I don't object to it and, you know, I suppose it's as good as any. Languages is imperfect and, you know, we're trying to find language to describe approaches that really don't exist largely in the society. So we're trying to find terminology to kind of fit the way we're approaching transforming our communities. But I would think that community rooted development would address several areas.

One, as Jenny Lee said it, would be rooted in the history of that community, both rooted in the history of the community and rooted in the culture of the people in that community, and informed by the wisdom that is within the people within that community, informed by the aspirations of the people within that community. Culturally, you know, it should reflect–the visual aspects of the development should reflect the community or communities that it is serving. It should– the governance of the development should rest with the community.

As Jenny Lee said, we have a lot of projects that come into our neighborhoods that are driven by the profit motive and that are not a result of the vision and aspirations of people who live in that community and often are built, as Jenny said, to extract dollars from our community rather than circulating dollars within the community. That would be the last thing that I'll point out, that I think that community rooted development looks at economics in a circular way, looks at how we can push back against the extractive economics of capitalism and use a way of circulating funds,



excuse me, money, wealth within the community that builds power, resilience, and gives community members a sense of agency.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Thank you, Malik, for sharing and as you– as we're thinking about, I guess, new ways of doing things and new ways of looking at development that– and experimenting with things that don't have terminology, I'd like to segue into Eric's work. Can you tell us about your transformative work and how you define community rooted development?

Erik Paul Howard: Sure, thank you Ryan I– so first of all, thank you Jenny and Malik. That's a lot to follow and difficult to follow. I don't know. I'm still soaking in what you all just offered, you know, so to put something, you know, in the atmosphere towards it while I'm still soaking it in is a little tricky. My name is Eric Paul Howard. I'm a white male with uh dark glasses and a burgundy cap and a beard and I work in Southwest Detroit through our non-profit inside Southwest Detroit.

It's a small collection of initiatives in Southwest Detroit that works to organize community through cultural and place-based initiatives. So we work towards the development of youth and community development but we try to obviously utilize the things that folks are passionate about, you know, or good at as a way to be responsive to and meet community identified needs which, again, is a term that I have not used in the past. Community rooted development– I think part of what that can mean for us through the approach that we utilize is just that it's important to be, you know, both fully dependent on what a community is and offers while also bringing something and contributing.

So, in a sense, to oversimplify, you know, community as potluck, you know, other than that, I think it becomes very easy to slip into models that are quantitative and then extractive, right? Things that look at quantity or products and overlook, you know, process and and qualitative ways of looking at the value of a community. Things that talk about stories and people, you know, and circumstances in a particular time and in particular situations, you know, rather than saying, “A model community or a wonderful community is a community that looks like this.”

Leading with economics closely followed by formalized education and then all of these other metrics that we know just don't give you a full picture about a community. So community rooted development, I think, first is about looking at community in a way



that community defines itself on its own terms. Which is part of why these conversations about semantics that, of course, you know, make us groan sometimes are important because language matters, representation matters, and hearing people who are working in community and from the community talk about their community and define their community, I think, gives us a clue as to where we start and how we start when we work with each other in community. And outside of anything that could fit in the box of community rooted development, I think that that becomes tough because it's really there's a lot of pressure to define based on terms that, not only don't give us the full picture, but also are problematic in naming and defining our communities.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Thank you. So I heard so many powerful concepts mentioned from really centering community histories and stories– I heard you talking about a more circular process, a process that invests back, that is not extractive, that is non-extractive, and that grows up really out of the community's history, culture, and their values. So having those perspectives, can you talk about how you've managed to do these quite major infrastructure and development projects in a system that isn't necessarily made for that?

So you I heard you– I'll mention capitalism and planning that is kind of focused more on money, you know? Getting money or being extractive. But that's not what you're doing, but you're changing the landscape of where you are with development. So how have you been able to integrate your philosophy, in your vision that's community rooted, in this system? And let me know if that's not clear enough–

Erik Paul Howard: If I can start, I can be short. I don't remember.

Panelists: [laugh]

Erik Paul Howard: I mean sometimes– I mean really sometimes, you look around not only at what you're doing but what your partners and, you know, and folks are doing and it really takes a minute to remember, “What did it feel like when we were visioning this and what were all of the steps?” And sometimes like it's– you know, always grateful that our networks so much value storytelling and and, you know, taking care of each other because it's not until we sit and share stories, you know, that we're reminded. And also giving clues to how to, you know, support each other. The one thing that I will say



that I always remember are our values that guide because when I get bogged down in the details in my head, honestly it gets very muddy and it feels difficult but there are guiding values that, not only that we put into use and practice in our organization, but that we're often watching our partners and network utilizing. It's always a source of inspiration and wisdom and education and it keeps people available when you need to call on things because one of the ways that we get these things done is by not doing them alone.

The last thing I'll say, wrap up in like 12 seconds but I just said this this morning but you know community development is like a road trip. But a lot of times, it winds up being like that 50s road trip that you see on TV where there's you know a dad that drives and has a map and doesn't really need input. The people in the back are supposed to be quiet and the person on the right is supposed to help make sure that the people in the back are doing that quietness. A lot of times we do community development that way and if community development is human, organizational, physical, and economic development, those are the four people that are in the car. And you can guess who the dad driving with the map is- it's economic. It's great to have them in the car. They need to be there. And Dad, we want you to go on this trip but you may not drive the whole time and you certainly cannot hold the map while you're driving. So while you're driving, you're relinquishing the map. While you're the map, you're relinquishing driving and, by the way, please sit in the back and take a nap. And so I think, just keeping people rotating like to have a good road trip is, you know, part of what's key and I know that's how a lot of us have done our work.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Thank you and Jenny, Malik, feel free to jump in if you'd like to add or you know dialogue about that as well.

Jeanette Lee: Malik, you want to go?

Malik Yakini: Oh you go ahead I'll go after you.

Jeanette Lee: Okay well, I was thinking back to a conversation that you and I had like pre-pandemic. I was at the beginning of our journey. You were like well into the food commons journey and it was- you were like, "It's some fuckshit." And it is. And I think it just acknowledging how hard it is to do projects that push against the logics and the



requirements of capitalism so there's that. And I think that, you know, in some ways the the framework of equitable development can be interpreted as like we're trying to level the playing field for everyone to be able to perform within capitalism but I think that will- inevitably that road will reach its end and the violences and the inequities and the harms that are built into that economic system will prevent the kind of transformations that we seek.

So how have we been able to- I think that like honestly, you know, I want to say like, "We did it and everyone can do it." And it's- I think that like the projects that are represented here, so whether it's the Alley Project or Food Commons or Love Building, there are these like weird glitches within capitalism. Like they're not meant to be. And so we're kind of traveling through a portal to bring them to life and the hope is that they grow and multiply to then break that system. But they yeah, they are not meant to be.

So I think pushing against- like one of the things that comes to mind is, you know, insisting on a value that is beyond the metrics of market value, right? So like the amount of renovations or investments that have been necessary to make the Love Building accessible, like truly accessible. Not just ADA compliant but accessible in a way that our community needs and desires. It kind of breaks the logic of capitalism which wants to say, you know, after this point you are no longer, you know, profitable or this- like the market value, it doesn't recognize the value that's created through certain types of renovations like, you know, adding elevator redundancy. Things like that have really increased the cost of our project but to push against that and say like, "We insist on our ability to do this." And, in doing so, create this opening or this sense of what might be possible in terms of a more accessible built environment.

Malik Yakini: Oh thank you and I agree with much of what Jenny said. So I'll start by saying that I don't really think that equitable development is possible with inside of the context of capitalism. I mean we do have what Jenny described as "glitches in the system" where we're able to make some progress at certain points and certainly we should make as much progress as we can within the context of the current system because that's what we're faced with right now. But I think it's also important that we have a vision that goes beyond the current system of capitalism because certainly if we can't see something in our mindseye, we'll never make that manifest in reality. And so we have to think outside of the box of capitalism.



But I'm a firm believer that true equity and justice requires the dismantling of the current economic system and a significant shift in power. You know people don't like to use the word revolution too much these days. Maybe it conjures up images of people running through the streets with guns but the reality is we need a fundamental shift in power. And you know several years ago, maybe almost 20 years ago, now the Occupy Movement brought to the consciousness of the American public that wealth is concentrated in one percent of the population and the rest of the 99 of us are, you know, struggling pretty much to make it. And so we've got to flip that script and until we do that we're not going to see real justice and equity on a long-term basis.

But nevertheless, we try to create projects that create a vision of what justice and equity might look like and that is a better or greater representation of justice and equity. And so I'll talk specifically about the project that we're leading and how we did that within the context of capitalism. And thank you so much Jenny for using that term fuckshit because I was wondering if we could use it. That's one of my favorite words and so since you have opened up the door, I feel free to use it also.

So the first thing is I think we have to be clear, as Eric said, about our values and our values have to lead. And we have to be clear about what our principles are and what our preferences are because at many points in the development project, you're going to be confronted with kind of seeing how your values play out. In fact, within the food co-op, one of the terms we become familiar with from a sister co-op in Dayton is "mission versus margin." And so how do you, you know, how do you stay true to your values and your mission while still managing the financial complexities of a large-scale development project and of a project like a food co-op which doesn't have large profit margins? The margins and food are very low.

So being clear on the values is, I would say, the first thing. Having a clear vision of what it is that you want to do, what does it look like if you're successful is very important. I'm a firm believer that anything that you can see in your mind's eye or that we collectively can see in our collective mind's eye, we can actually bring into existence. But if you're fuzzy about what that looks like, then you don't generate the kind of power which is necessary to bring that into being. The other thing is, you have to have tenacity and be willing to stay in this for the long game.

We found on the project that we're developing, it's taken us 12 years so far. And if you stay in the game 12 years that means you have to have a certain amount of cash flow to stay in the game because all those 12 years, you know, cost money to keep



things moving. And so often that's what not knocks us out of the box. So having the tenacity to stay in the game but also having the resources to stay in the game is important. Then finally, I'll end by saying one of those glitches in the system that occurred or two of the glitches that occurred for us occurred in 2020. And that was first, of course, in march of that year the global pandemic came to public awareness and many people on the news saw supermarket shelves empty and many people experienced in real life going to their own supermarkets and seeing the shelves empty.

And so that shocked many people in American society including many of the funders who support food system works so we started getting calls in March and April of 2020. In fact, really, money was almost just falling from the sky from various folks who wanted to support more equitable food developments. The other thing that occurred though in 2020 was the police assassination of George Floyd, which caused the whole society to grapple with the question of racial equity. And so that was true both in the public sector, it was true in the corporate sector, and it was true in philanthropy. And so many of the local foundations that we had been courting, you could say, for a number of years trying to get commitments from—once 2020 happened and they shifted their lens to make racial equity a greater priority, our project was perfectly positioned because it's rooted in the desire to create economic and racial equity.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Thank you, so there's some great questions in the audience which we're going to bring forward. But before we've gone to that question, we are challenging language, challenging the way things are done, and I want to bring up this word “equity” because it is something that is a buzzword now that shows up quite a lot from spatial equity to racial equity to equitable development. So can you all tell us, you know, how are you thinking about equity? Malik you mentioned that you know true equitable development might not be possible is not possible within capitalism. So what are we thinking? What is— what does equity mean as it relates to development?

Jeanette Lee: I mean I think it has to mean radical redistribution of wealth, right? Because like, if you think about the equity we bring to the table, right? Like all, you know, our organization— I don't know if the other project or Food Commons has had to take out any debt but you know when you're borrowing money, it's sort of like, “What's your equity contribution?” And that's basically all the money that you just have lying



around to put into your project. And because the wealth of this country is built from stolen labor and stolen land like that's inherently how things are concentrated, as Malik was saying, you know, in the top one percent.

So it's like, in order for any organization or individual who is currently being harmed by systems of development to have a fighting chance to shape their built environment, they have to have equity. And for us, as with the Food Commons, our equity came from private philanthropy you know having their reckoning moment and making a lot of grants in a brief window of time so I think- yeah, I think about it more often than not in a financial transaction kind of way but I know it also has other, you know, connotations of just sort of meaning fairness in a social justice sense.

But I've been thinking a lot about how, you know, as helpful maybe as the framework equitable development has been in some ways, that there's a need to kind of get more granular and more specific. So like with the Food Commons, that's cooperative development or you know the Alley Project is deeply place-based. I think about what reparative development is like and I know this is just- you know, maybe churning out new terms is not the most helpful thing but to the extent that it allows for work to become more specific. And also not attempt- not feel the compulsion to do all things and be all of these things but if you're saying like, "Well what are the specific harms that have been caused through, you know, urban renewal and the destruction of Chinatown, Black Bottom, Paradise Valley? How do we think of development that repairs this specific harm?" You know, that that could be a helpful way of thinking. Maybe, yeah, in a layer deeper than that overarching term.

Malik Yakini: And I'll jump in and say, you know, equity is typically used in social justice circles to mean that people get what they need at the level they need it in order for there to be an equal playing field. But, again, I'm not convinced that that can exist within the context of the capitalist system and not only are we within a capitalist system, but we're actually in a settler colony and you know people don't really want to grapple with that often, you know? Because, you know, America's a couple hundred years old now and so, you know, we've gotten used to, you know, we don't think about it.

It's a settler colony but it is in the same sense that South Africa is or Israel is frankly and so it's occupied land. And so, you know, equity for who? Whose? Certainly not for the indigenous inhabitants. You know, just the fact that we're occupying this land without you know their permission and without their robust participation speaks



against the concept of equity. I think what we're really talking about but when we use terms like “equity” and “justice”, I often frame them as relative equity or relative justice because that's what they are. We can't have true equity as long as we're living on land that has been essentially stolen from the indigenous population and has been colonized and a settler colonial government still is in place that benefits primarily the descendants of those who colonize this land.

Erik Paul Howard: I'll just add, you know, briefly I just- I want to echo- first of all, thank you Malik for the- like, just all of it. I mean again like, it's hard to be speaking out loud while also absorbing, you know, the wisdom coming from your alls' projects. Something I want to echo that Jenny just said, I'm gonna mess up the quote a little bit Jenny, but you know you said since wealth in this country is built on stolen labor and stolen land often wealth is not where it needs to be in order to be in service to equity. You said it a little bit different but that statement is reflective on a past, of course, but it's also evaluative and I think an observation of where we are in this moment and it also looks to the future.

So historically, wealth in this country is built on stolen land and stolen labor, right? Now the same is true and that's why often the wealth is not where it can be in service to equity. So, one [thing?] is when it's built that way- the people who have it want to use it obviously to maintain those structures, right? But the other thing that's true is that is a statement about how wealth is generated now since that's how it's generated often. Organizations, folks, communities that are, you know, anxiously concerned with the needs of their time and their place around equity are not generating the wealth as they are not participating in stolen labor and stolen land and when the system is set up, that's how wealth is generated. It's not that everybody who's not doing those things, you know, is completely poor.

Malik, you mentioned earlier the system that we're in is the system that we have to you know perform in. So what can we do while staying according to our values? But even if we're making it. Even if we're doing things now. Even if we're imagining the future and working towards it, we're not generating wealth exponentially because collectively we are not in tune with a system that's operating off of those same values. So we wind up not having, you know, the stew. We have all of the ingredients but like to stew it all down- those things are really happening hyper-locally and within our networks and within our value-based networks.



That's a little abstract and I apologize but I'm basically naming a facet of equity rather than trying to define the whole thing. And that facet is voice and choice, also. And I think that to be building the resources necessary in a system that is, you know, by its own nature opposed to the values that you're trying to engage in. It sure makes, you know, gathering those resources tricky, you know, and difficult. And so towards equitable development, I think all the unique ways that we incorporate voice and choice which equals agency, you know. And you know, all of those things, I think, is what winds up being special and unique about anything that we were, you know, able to accomplish together.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Oh thank you and so I guess as we're talking about, you know, systems that we're in, I'm going to share a question that we've got in the audience and also put a little bit of my two cents into it. So I will say the question so that it could stand as it is and then I'll add my parts. So the question is, "I'm curious to know how much your organizations are funded by foundations and government versus self-funded by the sale of goods, services, or memberships?" And I want to Part B onto that. Ask the question- make the statement, sort of ask a question in which, you know, I think that, you know, when you're working towards a different paradigm, you know, you're mentioning, you know, anti-capitalism or doing things differently. There may sometimes be the perception that if you take part in the system, that that is selling out in itself. So how do you grapple with, you know, that narrative or you know working with foundations and funders?

Malik Yakini: Maybe I'll start and I'll say that we approach it with our eyes wide open with no illusion that even foundations are part of the capitalist system and they're primarily a way that very wealthy people use to hold on to wealth and to get some benefit from that wealth. In fact, you know, foundations typically only give away a very small percentage of their money each year. You know, something like under five percent, I think it is. And then that other 95 percent is invested in the very things that we're struggling against. And so having an awareness, I think, is important so that you know what you're dealing with and you can make an informed choice so that, you know, the wool is not being pulled over your eyes but you're entering into strategic partnerships with people in order to accomplish something. So I think that awareness is an important part. Maybe I'll just put a period there.



Ryan Myers Johnson: Yeah and I hope that my Part B didn't take over this question too much which was, or that person's question, which was, "If you'd like to share, what's the balance of funding? Or is it coming from foundations, the government or self-funded? Like, how are you paying for things?"

Malik Yakini: I'll address that quickly too and I'll start by saying that our organization Detroit Black Community Food Security Network started in 2006 and operated for the first four years with absolutely no funding outside of our own, you know, putting money in out of our pocket dues. And you know, I'm glad that we operated like that because it built a certain amount of uh resilience in us but since 2010, we have been getting funding from foundations. Which frankly, I have no problem doing as long as they're clear about what our values and principles are. And typically, when we enter into a relationship with the New Foundation, we have a conversation and, you know, I'll say to them, you know, "We are an anti-capitalist, anti-white supremacist organization" and that, you know, "We're not a good fit for all foundations and you can decide whether or not you want to align yourself with us because we don't do funny dances, you know, for funders. We don't scratch places that don't itch." We stand on our values and if we can get money from foundations without compromising our values, we do that.

And so having said all that the vast majority of our funding, our programmatic funding for the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, is from foundations. For the Detroit Food Commons Project, the vast majority of the financing is debt financing. It's either new market tax credits, which is a form of federal debt financing where you don't have to pay the principal back for seven years, or it's more traditional debt financing like you would get from a bank or it's a PRI- it's Program-related Investments from foundations which are low interest loans. So the vast majority again for the Detroit Food Commons Project is debt financing.

Jeanette Lee: I can jump in and say for us it's a mix. So well- I guess overall- to the person's question about like, goods and services versus you know contributed revenue, I think that there's this really acute tension that is like... You know, the paradigm of capitalism is that you keep your expenses low and you keep your revenues high and that's how you maximize profit, right? And like, in a social justice context, it's like the inverse, right? You want- you kind of need to keep your expenses high to do all the



things and you need to keep your revenues low to keep it all accessible. And um I'll talk about like the financing structure for the development itself but when it comes to the the operating budget for the building, once we're all moved in and it's all happening, it's really this tension between like the amount of rent that all our tenants can afford and, you know, because our tenants are all close partners, it's like this is almost like part of their contribution to the fundraising effort is them saying, "We're going to contribute, you know, We're going to be paying two dollars a square foot." So that's higher than they would otherwise, you know? They could get cheaper rent in the city but it's their kind of equity contribution or their investment in the financial success of the whole thing or the financial feasibility of the whole thing.

Meanwhile, you know, our expenses are probably going to be higher than average, right? So we're gonna have, you know, like staff positions that just your average office building wouldn't have and so, in order to make that work, there has to be some kind of subsidy, right? And for us it will be grants like from private foundations but what—I lost my train of thought— yeah so to Malik's point though, right? What there will also be I should say earned revenue from like just renting the space for events, right? And what will kind of make or break our ability to do that is how much will the building have to be paying in principle and interest on the debt that we've taken out while also trying to pay the utility bills and all of that, and, you know, how much of that can come from the rents that come in.

And so I think that it's been one of the really intense realizations of this process— just how interest works and how much banks extract through lending over time. If you're talking, you know, 20 years on a four million dollar loan, that's like a million and a half even with like a relatively low interest rate environment, right? So it's just—it points to the need for more opportunities, like new market tax credits. Although, that's a it seems to be a very complex thing that we're just starting to dip our toes into and time will tell whether that feels like a tool that I would you know recommend or advocate for more of but things that will allow for low to no interest capital for projects to be able to make things happen.

Erik Paul Howard: I think through the couple questions that have been asked. I think that the conversation has been fantastic at like— we've all talked a lot about, you know, because we're being asked, like specifically what's happening at our organizations and in our communities and in this moment. Making cliff notes from the things that have



been shared, you know, by Malik and by Jenny, I think that we have this really beautiful overview that kind of demystifies. When people get confused, you lose people often when you say, “Oh well you know it can't be equitable under a capitalistic system.” “What? What do you mean?” You know, and so they'll either get defensive or else they get confused.

And we've just kind of started to break down some of the parts of like what it is that means. You know one of the things is, you know, Jenny talked about what wealth in this country is built on. Well when we're engaged in practices that are, you know, specifically opposed to those things and that's how it's set up to generate wealth, how do you generate wealth and resources in order to fund these kinds of initiatives with resources? And so there's a lot of talk about economic chemical but obviously also we all operate off of a healthy dose of social capital– how we're engaging and showing up with each other and and you know what we're bringing in and taking out, not as a transaction but as a participant. And when both of those things can be regenerative, when you're in community with one another, it's happening in a way that supports the work. So there was like one more, “Oh this brings it all home and there's like a pin in it” but I'm just like taking mental notes when I'm listening to you all but essentially there's lots of ways to do a lot when there's a little bit of economic resources–

[Erik cuts out]

programs that, you know, AMP has been inspired by, evolved from– like, you know, have some have those same beginnings. The same for us [Inside Southwest Detroit], we've been doing the work since 2002. There was no funding until 2010. You know, that's eight years. We are not a non-profit. We have a non-profit. That became a tool that we put in our bag in 2009, you know? And so there's ways to do those things that fill the gaps, if we're not asked to dance and contort or leave our missions or do things, you know, that, you know– just doing gymnastics like with our values but, you know, when he got more specific with his question, he was saying, “How [did] we do these things, you know, before?”

And the difference is, if you notice a lot of questions that organizations wind up being, you know, “How did you get this idea and then get it funded?” And it's like wait that's not really– we did things together because it needed to exist and then we found ways to fill gaps that stopped us from being able to get our work done. So I just wanted



to say to the person in the comments, all three of our organizations and the work did— you know, have to operate and still do when, as you named it, like money is scarce. But that doesn't mean that all the capital is scarce because there's, you know, there's work that's being done and things are being shared and doing it together. So when you said specifically it was about to how to do more when money is scarce, it's—I think the first thing is not doing things alone, you know? Really relying on each other and that's where work comes from.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Just to rephrase the question just in case every— I'm not sure how everyone has joined, if everyone is able to see that question, but we've been in dialogue with a great community member and one of the part twos or the question was about, “How do you do this work when money is scarce?” Specifically about funding and what to and how to do more when money is scarce. And I'm going to jump [in?] again as a a Part B with your question for everybody else to, “What type of specific steps would you recommend for citizens who might not have a lot of resources at their disposal?” and Erik, I believe that's what you were starting to talk about the different types of capital, so pardon me for jumping in. I just wanted to make sure we're all on the same page.

Erik Paul Howard: No, no great and thanks and that clear map of what I was trying to say helps me wrap up quickly. And I would say it starts with—a lot of times we have a good idea we're like, “Oh we're going to do this and we're going to be all five of the employees ourselves.” That it needs to actually happen. I would say get those five team members in that organization but even then get your organization to link with five other organizations you know. Find lanes, you know? Be in service while you're also receiving from that network. And I think that those are the kinds of beginnings of how, basically, when we find the intersection between our passions and our talents and our community's needs, we find fulfillment, you know? Not just as an organization or a person or an idea but also in community with one another. I think it's the beginnings of, you know, of sustainability and of equity when you not only are okay with, but you force yourself to be interdependent, you know, with other folks. One of my favorite quotes is just that— I'm gonna mess that up too— but essentially that, “When you're used to being in control, sharing power you'll, if you're doing it right, you should feel like you're being dominated and it's hard to overcome and it's hard to put yourself into but I think that all



of our great ideas and programs and initiatives that we have are important enough to they deserve the humility and a sense of community like required to to get them off the ground.”

Malik Yakini: Yeah maybe I'll jump in and say that one of the lessons that we've learned in doing this development project is that we should have put much more time initially into organizing our base, the people themselves. That's the most important thing—having a group of people who have a similar set of values and similar vision and are willing to put in the work to bring that vision into being. So we've, you know, we've refocused maybe about five years ago and really started putting much more intense energy into that. At first, we're putting more energy into the real estate side, the financing side. Those things are important but they're not nearly as important as the people themselves. So that would be my first piece of advice.

Then also, I just want to point out that for projects like the ones we're talking about today, that are rooted in the desire to bring about justice and equity, that there's a relationship between the the level of political activity in the community, the level of consciousness, and the degree to which we're able to get financial support from our community. We find when we have periods of high political activity and people's consciousness is raised and they see the possibilities of us collectively transforming our communities, we see more support for projects. When we're in a low ebb of political activity, then we see organizations struggling for resources. And so we have to really marry these two things together while we're doing more equitable development. We also have to have deep roots in the community and be organized and community members, because ultimately these institutions cannot survive unless they have the support of a large number of our community members.

Jeanette Lee: Yeah I think to echo both Erik and Malik, I mean if—into the question coming from Montreal the, you know, the thing in the absence of resources and tons of support that that you can always do is organize and be building within your immediate neighborhood, within the activist community of your place, within whatever circles of community you find yourself. Yeah I think back to, you know, I think a lot of my political education came in my late teens, early 20s, as part of Detroit Summer. And one of the, probably, first times like Erik and I, and maybe even Malik and I, like were in spaces together were through these monthly potlucks that Detroit Summer would organize.



They were called the Breaking Bread Community Potlucks because there was break dancing at the end. It was a very clever pun and so those were organized with fifty dollars, each one. It was like a two hour affair. It was a potluck but the fifty dollars went to Nandi's mom actually to make chicken usually and like a variety of other things and then the potluck would kind of fill in the gaps, right?

And that was where, I think, like I first- you know, in that era was when I first like even conceived of the idea that I and my community could shape our built environment, our city, what was possible. And it was just through these monthly coming together events that were like very joyful. There would be usually political conversation, food like I said, break dancing and open mic, just arts and culture infused really deeply to make it the kind of thing that wove relationship. And so all of those relationships that were forged during that period, which was like 20 years ago now, are, I think you know, bearing fruit in all these different ways around us including through the work with the Love Building.

Malik Yakini: Is it- Ryan, can I add just a bit to that please? I just want to give an example in the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network. We're currently leading this project, Detroit Food Commons, which is a close to 22 million dollar project. Frankly, before a few years ago, my mind didn't even go that high. It didn't think in numbers that big, right? So even that was a process- to be able to conceptualize something because that was out of the realm of my experience. I'm trying to figure out how to keep the lights on. My mind thought in thousands, not in millions, right? So that's one challenge but we started before, you know, we put any money into real estate, any money into a building.

From 2009 until 2007, we had a buying club which was a precursor to the brick and mortar Food Co-op and so again, we were organizing, kind of, with what we had, with our own resources, you know? That didn't take much money to do. In fact, you know, we operated it primarily on a volunteer basis but it enabled us to kind of get the ball moving to create some momentum. And what I found, not to get mystical or spooky, but what I found is the way the universe works, is that if you put effort towards something, then the universe kind of meets you, but if you're not doing everything that you have within your disposal to do then you're not going to get, you know, that additional help from, you know, however you want to look at that- ancestors, the universe, God, however people might conceive these forces that are beyond the



physical forces. It can assist us and so I would say it's very important to do everything that you can do with whatever you have because, as you do that, you create momentum that draws other people and draws resources towards you. Thank you.

Ryan Myers Johnson: So we are starting to get close to time. I have two questions that I want to ask you all, so hopefully I can squeeze it in. So this first one is, we're talking about, you know, the community and in your work and how you're really transforming systems. What role does local government play in community rooted development? Or are the two completely opposed and is it possible to work or necessary to work together?

Malik Yakini: Yeah, well, I mean clearly if you're going to build a building, for example, you can't do it without getting permits and all of that from, you know, the city government, in this case the city of Detroit because we're in the city of Detroit. So if you're going to build something, you know you have to have a relationship with the people who are authorities whether they're just authorities or not is another question but they are authorities at this point in time. They have the reins of government and so you have to develop some relationship and so, you know, there are— government is not a monolithic thing either, you know. Just like foundations are not monoliths, there are people within government who are more progressive. There are people who are backwards within government and so finding out who your allies are within those structures, I think is important. But also going back to organizing people, typically government and politicians I found respond to pressure and so if you have numbers, if you are perceived as being powerful, then you're going to get more cooperation from government than if they don't perceive you and the collective that you're working with as being powerful.

Jeanette Lee: I would agree it is essential that individuals within local government to some extent believe in and support this kind of development and can help facilitate, you know, the unblocking of different blockages that inevitably occur. Right now, if anyone knows anyone in the Signage Department of the city of Detroit, let me know. I need some help. But I think, you know, on the question of like the kinds of interventions that need to be made in the way development happens, I'll resist saying equitable development but I think that there's, you know, on that 'bigger picture' level, the role of



local government is also in policy making. Whether that's policies like rent control or a really robust community benefits agreement ordinance, or an ordinance which we don't have, but we do have a CBA ordinance. But tools that can really, you know, again like—when well designed and well-resourced to implement, can be just a tool in the hand of residents to really shape the outcomes of development and, you know, in ideal scenarios, bring resources to more, you know, of the kind of like emerging grassroots and glitches in capitalism type of developments through the kind of siphoning off of resources that can happen in a CBA agreement from major developments.

Erik Paul Howard: I think that all of us put forth somewhat of a vision where we dream about institutions and systems that are kind of accessible on their own merit, like just, because they believe in what they exist to do. We just talked about how, “Okay the city exists. You obviously need to use them to do certain things.” And so, to the extent that you have relationships or found somebody that's friendly, which essentially are about identifying access points. Those things are there. They exist. Here's what they're supposed to do but without a special door or knob or access point, they might not be available to you. So I want to agree and echo that those systems exist and so you have to interact with them but I think part of the value of all of our work is that it imagines systems that are accessible on their own merit because they believe in what they're doing, you know?

Somebody might tell you in that department which is something that we get told like often, “Well, there's only so much that we can do and, you know, I have a job and there's only like, this many people like that can do it.” The thing is, the civic functions that the city you know provides for are essential for thriving in community and when those things are not accessible and when those functions are not being achieved, whether that's because of capacity or you know whatever other limiting, you know, factor, our neighborhoods, generally speaking and hyper-locally, are pretty good at filling in the gaps with creativity to get things done and to do them in a way that's innovative and to do them in a way that, essentially, becomes very uniquely Detroit and very uniquely whatever corner of Detroit it's happening in.

And so, one of the things that I'm proudest about and things that I'm always learning about and that I get more involved when, you know like, Jenny starts talking about potlucks from 20 years ago, has been our capacity to fill in the gaps with creativity as we're existing and moving through broken systems together. And, you



know, I love all the different ways it's been characterized. 'The programs that shouldn't exist or in spite of all of those things' but these were born in those cracks that were filled with creativity is why we exist and I think it makes beautiful examples. And while none of us are doing and navigating it perfectly either, for our own ends or you know to withstand any critique, we are all doing it innovatively and creatively in a way that has strong convictions and so we're doing it together and we're learning from each other while it's happening and that's what I think feels beautiful.

Ryan Myers Johnson: Oh and with that, what a beautiful vision, such beautiful stories and I am, once again, so honored to be a student sitting at your feet. So, thank you so much for this conversation and for everything that we've heard in the comments and I hope we can all continue to learn and be in more dialogue. So much has started in me tonight, so I hope everyone is feeling as good as I am and with that I'm going to pass it to Nandi.

Nandi Comer: I apologize. I do this at every single virtual. Still not used to being virtual. I'm gonna say this like, I just feel so fed tonight. Thank you so much. I could listen to you talk for a whole another hour or two but we won't- we'll bury you all with that. We won't burn you with that but I just want to thank you all. Thank you Jeanette Lee, Malik Yakini, Erik Paul Howard, and a special thank you to Ryan Myers Johnson who held it all down for tonight. A special shout out to our incredible ASL interpreters, Lisa and Andrea, and the team that has been supporting us behind the scenes today. This event was recorded and will be available on our YouTube channel but I also want to invite you all, if you've missed any of the events from this season or even of the seasons before, check out our archive. It's also up on YouTube but you can, even better, go to alliedmedia.org/seeds. There you can find past shot series, conversations, guiding questions, reading and listening recommendations from our guests so I definitely suggest going to go check out the archive.

I also want to invite you all to continue the conversation at the Seeds Cafe. We have a special moderator, [Pink Flowers], who is signing on right now as we speak to get us thinking a little bit more about what we were talking about today. Pour yourself a drink or pour yourself a glass of water and come and get fed more. We want to hear your thoughts, so in the chat we're posting a link to a little bit of a survey that will help



give us feedback for what we've done today and the series in general. We really want to hear what you have to say and, last but not least, in two weeks our last event of the Fall AMP Seeds series, "Sound and Resistance", is on October 27th where we're going to be featuring some really great music guests. We have Tazeen and LuFuki, Damon Williams and Sophiyah Elizabeth. You've been hearing from them throughout the season. The music before today's show and the music that we're closing out with all features the artists that we're going to be featuring in the next two weeks. I hope that you all can join us because it's going to be a beautiful moment of looking at some of their recordings, visual representations of their recordings, and we're going to have a conversation moderated by Imani Nixon. So you don't want to miss that. Thank you so much for coming out. Thank you for joining us. We'll see you next time.

