Ecology and sustainability in the post-industrial city
Frances Whitehead (FW) and Janeil Engelstadt (JE) for the MAP radio hour, 2019.

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JE- Hi, my name is Janeil Engelstadt, and welcome to the MAP Radio Hour, a Make-Art-with-Purpose podcast. The map radio hour includes conversations with creatives, scientists, and other people addressing the intersection of cultural, political, and environmental concerns. You can find out more about map and our projects at makeartwithpurpose.net.

JE- Today, I'm talking with Frances Whitehead, a professor of Sculpture and Architecture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a *civic practice* artist bringing the methods, mindsets, and strategies of contemporary art practice to the process of shaping the future city.

Let's start the conversation with your most recent project in Gary, the Orchard Project. And I'd like to talk about sustainability and how we build sustainability into projects like this one over the long term, because it seems to me that's one of the most important things as artists that we look at when we're working in partnership with community, is long term sustainability and how we divest of ownership and really turn it over to the community and give them the tools, or help build in the tool if you will, to continue the project and shape it, and do what they need to do to make it their own.

FW- That's a really important thing to talk about. And the work that I'm doing in Gary, one reason it's been moving so slowly is because we are laying the groundwork. in the community, for this to have a broader base of support than a Frances Whitehead vanity project. And also, for this to be community driven, co-created, so that it is also not dependent on the very limited capacity of this municipal government in Gary. But even if Gary didn't have limited capacity, what I've seen is that when you have elected officials moving in and out of government, and nobody seems to want to deal with a project they didn't create. They want to drop those and start new ones. Which, of course, is a tremendous waste of everything, time, energy, and taxpayer money that they do that, but they all do it. And so I think figuring out ways to work with municipalities, because you have to, and navigate the rules, regs, and personalities in government, especially the career civil servants that stay when the elected officials leave. Really important. But definitely, the projects have got to be rooted in the private sector. Gotta be.

JE- One of the things too, is just contracts, contracts, contracts. That's what I've learned, you know, we've mapped it a garden with an Audubon center in...

FW- Yes. Well, you know, lots of people, including myself, maybe yourself, I don't know, lots of people underestimate the kind of maintenance gardens take. And with more and more artists interested in doing works, actions, cultural endeavors, that involve living plant communities, call it a garden, call it an orchard, call it whatever you want to call it, call it a sculpture, call it an earthwork. Having a maintenance plan is critical. And it's very easy to underestimate the importance and the complexity of that.

JE- Think about that in analogy to the art world where we're making objects, there's also all these issues of sustainability and maintenance of artwork over time, and if you're a successful artist, the traditional terms of success are that you're selling to galleries, you're in museums, and you're in collections, and then someone's taking that over. Someone's taking over that storage, that climate control, the light conditions, whatever it is. Right. The conservation, if necessary. Right. And there's no kind of organization or governing body that really

does that. Yeah, you really have to build that into, okay, who's responsible for this? Is it a collective endeavor? Is it this organization that has the garden on its site, and let's say a flood happens, or a drought happens, and it is wiped out. Then what happens? Is there any kind of restoration process? And it's a complex question.

FW_Right. Well, you know, that question, I think that when art moves as it did, well, as it always was, and then it has once again moved outdoors, you know, ever since, you know, artist gardens became so important, and the boundaries between disciplines began to dissolve, and so landscape, garden, earthwork, merge, and people work with living cooperators, living materials. which is what gardening and agriculture have always been, which is culture. I mean, that's where the word comes from, right? Cultura, it comes from like agriculture, comes from culturing the land. So when culture goes back to acknowledging the role of culturing the land, then you have to also account for entropy. You have to understand that these are living entities. And they die. And that keeps us humble. So the illusion that there are permanent artworks, you know, is, of course, you know, those things are also going away in slow motion. I mean, that's why, that's why the pyramids are so amazing, right? because they've been around so long, right? And bronzes and all that stuff, fine. But I think a lot of artworks that people make now will probably fall apart over time, but it's in a different time frame. And one of the things that you really have to acknowledge when you're working with living entities is time frames. There's the seasonality, is that there's that time frame, and then there's the life expectancy of a given plant. Plants don't live forever. You know, some are annual, some are perennials. A fruit tree might have a good productive life of, say, 25 years. And if you have an orchard, you yank it. You don't just let it become an ancestor. Me, I don't think I could ever do that, but that's what they do. They yank it and start over, right?

JE- How are you building this sustainability into the Gary project? I mean, you have to think about it for many angles. You have to think about not only this sustainability of the plants, but of sustaining interest with the community, and sustaining it financially. I mean, there's all these aspects that come into this project-based work that artists don't have to address in a studio practice. And even though we have all of these programs popping up under the title of social practice, I still think that one of the things that is most challenging with artists entering into this work is understanding all these nuances which go well beyond a creative practice in our political and social environmental. And cultural. And economic. And economic. And that's a big one, because artists have never been really great at economics.

FW- No, and I'm not either. And it's really a struggle. But one of the things that I'm keenly aware of is I undertake what has turned out to be necessary in order to do what sounded like a really simple project, which was to make a community orchard on a couple of empty parcels that were already empty. It seemed pretty straightforward. Turned out it wasn't, because there was no entity or organization in Gary, Indiana, whose mission was to hold these kinds of parcels and support this kind of project. It turns out there is no organization that is there to support community gardens of any kind, as many, many cities have. And so we have made that organization. I didn't really see the necessity of that when we started, but now we have made what we're calling the Gary Commons. And it's to hold things in common. And what's interesting about the food system, of course, is that everybody eats, everybody connects, and there are lots of different food movements. You have people interested in food access, people interested in nutrition, people interested in urban agriculture, people interested in localism, for ecological reasons, and local food to reduce food miles. And for us, the fruit growing is also based in the particular microclimate and the geotechnical sandy soils that we have here. You might say, we discovered an untapped asset and opportunity that was geospecific to this place. But we are also interested as artists in the question of beauty. I joke, We're back in the beauty business, because artists, of course, walked away from beauty, but the flowering fruit tree is going to be beautiful.

JE- One of the things that you just mentioned about learning as you go in a way, or understanding these changes, that is one thing that artists are really equipped to do well, is enter into a process where they discover, in the midst of creation, that the materials need to change.

FW- Absolutely. And that... Absolutely.

JE-I think that flexibility, and that journey of undertaking, if you would compare it to a painting, where you start with an idea, and it evolves as the picture takes shape, is a real asset when you're doing this kind of work, when you're building a garden or doing any sort of process based project.

FW- Yes. Uh, you know, the *What Do Artists Know*? document that evolved out of my practice, these questions of a kind of radical lateralness, and a responsivity, and the in-process problem solving that are cited there is exactly what you're talking about, and, you know, we were talking before about, how do you sustain a project over time, and then also these different time frames? So, it turns out that artists end up, it seems to me, that we have to do some institution building frequently. And so we've made an institution. We've made a not-for-profit, which we hope will be a 501 c 3 in the near future. We have a board. In order to make an orchard, we had to make a conversation. We had to make a group, that group became friends, so it cohered. It became what we call the Orchard Collaborative. The Orchard Collaborative, then made the not for profit, which could then sign the lease with the city on the land. and get garden insurance so that we could get on with making the orchard. We thought we were starting with the orchard, but we had to back up about five steps. And now we're finally, this week, starting to prepare the site for the orchard. None of us woke up one day and thought, “you know, I think I'll make myself a not for profit”. (laughs) Right. It just ended up that there was no choice, that that's what had to happen. And now we are busy learning about not-for-profits and how they operate. And then we will have to get a strategic plan and have fundraising.

FW- But in the process, we discovered that there's this huge need in this area for what the conservation folks call community conservation. So we have all of this vacant land inside the city of Gary. And it's urban, and so the main conservation organizations don't deal with that land. It's not part of their mission. And so they were not willing to take on lands inside the city. urban lands. And in the case of Gary, because of the history of Gary, the question of urban and suburban, or ex urban, is also sharply drawn the question of race and class. Because the inner municipal part of Gary Proper, in the '70s, there was tremendous white flight, and the surrounding collar suburbs are largely white and affluent, and the inner city of Gary is largely African American. and has a very low median income. And so, we're trying to get over wasting land in America. And in the process, of course, the project becomes a social justice project.

JE-That's a really good example of where social justice is not explicit. But rather it's implicit, and along with many other things that you've just talked about, this is a really good example of having an idea, having partners, and building a framework and a structure that allows for all kinds of change and growth and pausing along the way. And that's when you're really, truly collaborating and building something with community that then strengthens the foundation, which goes back to having something that is more likely to be sustainable.

FW- Well, absolutely. And, as you know, I've been working with systems thinking. And so using the 4 pillar model of sustainability, which is social, cultural, environmental, economic, if you ask your project to address all of those sectors, all of those aspirational aims, how can it benefit all of those things? Then you make a project that many people can connect to. If you enter the question of the fruit orchard and fruit growing, you can enter it through the social door, social justice. You can enter it through the cultural door, either localism or the question of beauty and curiosity. You can enter an arts and culture. You can enter it through the environmental door about using native species mixed into the orchard, which we are doing, so that if population declines in the future, and people do not eat this fruit, we are also creating habitat, and the animals, the wildlife will eat the fruit. Because Gary is rewilding, and you see deer and squirrels and rabbits, and everything, coyotes, all in the downtown area.

JE- It seems to me that even more valuable than that is that if something happens to the orchard where it goes away, you have a structure, you have the commons, which then can adapt to create something else. There's a structure here that can respond to new situations, whether that be a situation created by climate change, by population shifting again by people aging out and young people coming up so that you're creating something much larger than a garden.

FW- Well, absolutely, absolutely. And the last piece of that was economic. You know, people are looking to local food growing for economic development. Now, I'm, you know, I'm an artist. I am not an economic development specialist. But one thing that we all know is that we have to grow growers. So the lab orchard, as we call it, is a demonstration project to entice through beauty, curiosity, and programming, multigenerations to the table, precisely for the purpose that you just said. So that we're growing growers, but those growers may also just have consciousness in place. They may have a greater sense of well being. They may go on to produce, you know, foodstuffs. Who knows, in some way? Or they may just come to understand what the commons is and why we call it that. And we are making the orchard as a cooperative. You do have to join and

learn the rules, but membership is free. And we will share the produce in a cooperative fashion. One municipal employee that I was talking to, actually the head of the Department of Environment, she was laughing because she said, well, that itself is new, because she maintains that the economic situation in Gary has been so bad for so long that people are a little bit in a, *every-man-for-himself* kind of mode, and so just making something that is by its structure, commons, and cooperative, she says, is already a new idea.

JE- Right, that we don't see.

FW- And so, you know, going back to what's explicit in what's implicit, to me, it was a no brainer to make it a cooperative. But I didn't do that to be provocative, right? That just seemed like the way to go. And it turns out that that has a certain kind of symbolic resonance for at least some of the long-term residents of Gary. I, you know, it goes back to something you and I have talked a lot about over the years, and it's part of make art with purpose, and it's also part of my practice, which is the renegotiation between the symbolic and the practical. So when art and design split, and art became purposeful, purposelessness, as Cage called it, you know, and design got purpose for utility or practicality. This created a fissure between the symbolic and the practical that became explicit, as you would say. And I think one of the things that artists and designers and other creatives are doing are putting those things back together. So I would say that I was viewing the cooperative as a practical measure for dispersing the food that we grow, the fruit, in non commercial means, because we're gonna be a not for profit, and we shouldn't be selling the food. But she perceived it as a symbolic gesture. to make the point about the necessity of cooperation and collective action, the Commons. And I just thought that was so interesting that she perceived it symbolically, and maybe as an artist, the symbolic is the soup I live in, and it is so second nature to me that I'm doing it, even when I have practicality on my mind, overtly, I'm actually also doing the symbolic without really thinking about it. Right? You know, that conversation with her made me think about that. I thought, oh, maybe this really is largely symbolic, but I think that gets back to the thing you brought up about how do we make projects sustainable? Because if we only live artists, if we only live in the symbolic realm, we're probably not going to do the practical work necessary to make projects sustainable when we walk away. We really have to involve ourselves in the practicalities of making stable organizations and distributed power structures, true community ownership, which means we have to let go. It cannot be. you know, our identity driven, our charismatic identity, vanity, identity driven. We've really gotta let the project be owned by others if we want it to be sustained when we leave.

JE- I wonder, too, about exchange, when you talk about the commons and this idea that membership is free, you just have to agree to the structure and sign into it. And this really relates to symbolism to me, too, because there's so many symbols that have been associated with the inner urban core of cities for decades now. And so this idea of giving, is there any reciprocity that should be a part of that? Is there something, an exchange, if it's not a monetary exchange, because, frankly, you know, the economic system is broken, and, you know, if you talk to someone like Newton Harrison, Newton's whole thing is we have to get rid of money. We have to go back to a barter system. That's all... Absolutely. You know, that's a whole ‘nother conversation, but how do we, you know, build in this idea that, okay, a community member is a part of this cooperative. If they come and they get their fruit, is there any sort of exchange in that, that they're responsible for, and that gives them, it's not even responsibility. It's more an opportunity. I hope, but that could just be semantics, that they're somehow connecting to it and giving of something that's not monetary. And there's value in that. I think there's real value. Because then you're not only continuing to weave the sustainable fabric of this project, but you're also giving value to the ideas or the skills or the material that someone comes with and says, hey, I can do this.

FW- Well, yes, I mean, you're talking about, you know, assessing the intangibles, the ineffables. The qualitative quality of life improvements that come with fitness, which are very difficult to discuss. So I was using the kind of rubric beauty, but what that really, what's at standing in for, is all the stuff that you just said. which is encounter, you know, when fruit trees bloom in the spring, especially when there's a mass of them, it's breathtaking. And how do you assess the impact of that? I don't know, but I'm trusting there will be one. And in this regard, the project is a cultural experiment. Right? And we may never know the answer, but that doesn't mean that something isn't transpiring. Right. The bean-counters may never get their answer, their certainty, but that doesn't mean nothing is transpiring. And this project is absolutely a value proposition. And an economic value proposition in the way that Harrison is talking about. So there are in England villages called *transition towns*, and they are experimenting with post-development, degrowth economics, which includes cooperatives, a sharing community. In the United States, we have community land trusts, where the housing, the ownership

of the house is separated from the ownership of the land as an anti gentrification, economic strategy. These are growing all the time.

There is no viable economy in Gary, and the powers that be continue to look for the return of industry. Well, it's not happening. It has not been happening, and it's not going to be happening. So we began to ask the question, where does the value lie here? What are the assets, and what can we do about it, that is responsive to all of those different future scenarios that we already talked about? *What if people come back? What if people don't?* How do you create a value in the project for multiple future scenarios in a transitional space, like Gary? So, one of the things that we have here is land. We have available land. We could call it vacant land, but we could call it available land. And many people, the people that have remained in the neighborhoods have a lot of despair. They feel very disenfranchised. Many of them feel abandoned. And why wouldn't you? You're surrounded by abandoned houses. It *is* abandoned. But maybe abandoned just means something else is coming. And so how do we create a project that demonstrates that the open space is not just abandonment, but is an opportunity for belonging. So the orchard also becomes a club, a place to hang out, to do *deep hanging out* together, because we will show up to water the trees, to prune the trees.

And of course, the trees take many years to produce fruit. And so this whole thing is unfolding in *long time*. And that's the kind of time frames that cities change in. Cities don't change overnight. It took 50 years for this to happen. It's gonna take 50 years for something else to happen. And so how can you use this orchard as a tool for that kind of incommensurability, meaning changing out of media time and into tree time, group time, climate change time. So it sets the stage for thinking about time. It sets the stage for thinking about that the land is valuable, and that the future can be based a new future can be based in this land. And maybe the beauty makes everybody, in a way that you could never put into words, actually convinces people that this might be the case, right? I think that a lot of people think that cities like Gary are the failure of the develop capitalist, developmentalist, extractionist, economic model. All the value has been extracted here, and people have moved on. So how do we create new value? This is absolutely, at core, an economic experiment, but it's that economics that comes after capitalism, after climate change, after peak oil. We are already beginning the new economy. Right. But that's implicit. We don't talk much about that, because people want to talk about local food and food justice. And that's okay. We can talk about that too, because that's happening today. Right. And then in 10 years when there's fruit, then we can talk about distributing the fruit, and then we can talk about economics. Right.

And in the meantime, hopefully there'll be some beautiful blooms.

JE- The math radio hour is funded in part by the Lift Your Voice Advocacy Fund. Production by Matthew Horton, team song, and logo by Otto Hudix. I'm Janeil Engelstad. Thanks for listening. And visit the *Make Art with Purpose* website. to connect with us on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram.