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Marisa Zapata:

Hi y'all. I'm Marisa Zapata. And this is the podcast where we examine homelessness by talking to researchers and experts who of course include people with lived experience of homelessness to understand what we're missing in the headlines and soundbites. In each episode, we will help clear up misconceptions about homelessness, and to answer what it would take to prevent and end homelessness in Portland and beyond.

Marisa Zapata:

I'm an associate professor of Land-Use Planning at Portland State University and director of PSU's Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative, a research center dedicated to reducing and preventing homelessness, where we lift up the experiences and perspectives of people of color.

Marisa Zapata:

Hello everyone. Today we are here with Todd Ferry, an officially licensed architect, who is a professor at Portland State University. He is part of the Center for Public Interest Design and a co-founding member of the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative. How you doing Todd?

Todd Ferry:

I'm well. Thanks for having me.

Marisa Zapata:

Today we're going to be talking about Todd's work around what we call alternative shelter. And I'll let him talk about what that is with a good deep dive into the village model. We've recently produced a report at HRAC with partnership with CIPD the Center for Public Interest Design that evaluates and then produces a how to guide about all thing villages. I like to start off my interviews talking a little bit about who you are, how you got into this work. You know, the bio.

Todd Ferry:

I'm an architect. I took kind of a circuitous route to get here. And I operate in the realm of public interest design. And that is design and architecture aimed at serving traditionally underserved communities and addressing really challenging problems using the power of design and tools of architecture.

Todd Ferry:

I often describe it to students as architecture that doesn't presuppose buildings. Because if we wait until a building's required just to do architecture, then we're not part of the big policy, big structural conversations around how we can affect real change for the betterment of our communities or the betterment of our planet.

Marisa Zapata:

So I need to pause you here because you're starting to sound like an urban planner, and I am an urban planner. So how is what you do different, or is it?

Todd Ferry:

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I think there's a lot of overlap. But with public interest design, it's still using the tools of architecture. So looking down to the level of construction, and site, and individual building, and thinking about the ways that we live and dwell.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. I'm going to admit right now, I have a little bias against architects. There is a fierce territorialness between architecture and planning. And as a planner, and Todd can talk about this and attest to this, I am always a little skeptical of the architect.

Todd Ferry:

And I'm going to say that you're more than a little skeptical of the architect. It's a strong skepticism.

Marisa Zapata:

I had some bad experiences. You reinvigorated me to be open-minded about the architect.

Todd Ferry:

Well, I'm glad to hear that. I appreciate it. But in terms of how I got here, so I studied philosophy. Then I was working as a musician and actually a carpenter, and kind of in the realm of social work for years. And ultimately combining those things and kind of thinking about carpentry and social work, when I realized that there were architects out there doing impactful things and weren't trying to serve client need, but address community need. And then suddenly, I thought that this is something I could get really excited about.

Marisa Zapata:

Where did you start learning about this other path within architecture? Because most people I know go into architecture wanting to design buildings, and then kind of discover through coursework this other way of thinking about architecture and having an architecture practice. But it sounds like you actually found out about this before you even decided to go to architecture school.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah, that's right. And actually, while I was studying philosophy, I had a mentor who took me under her wing. Her name was Dr. [inaudible 00:04:36]. And she was the director of UGA's African Studies Institute. She took me on a Maymester program.

Marisa Zapata:

What is UGA? Is that what you said?

Todd Ferry:

University of Georgia. So we went over to Tanzania and spent some time there, and made a lot of friends. And they asked if we could help with this school that they wanted to build, expanded this school. And I was young and dumb enough to say, "Sure, why not? We'll start a nonprofit and do that."

Todd Ferry:

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So that's what we did. And I worked with the African Studies Institute to start this nonprofit. And we spent a couple years over in Tanzania building onto this school. And it was through this process of thinking about all right, so we're putting these buildings. What if they were arranged this way? Or what if they could be more like this? Or what if we could think about them in a different way? But I didn't have any training or tools to design. I had some ideas, and thank God nobody listened to them because they were terrible. I started to think about all right, there's going to be this big change in the built environment that's going to impact people's lives. So how can we be really thoughtful about it?

Todd Ferry:

And while I was over there, it was actually the people who were building in the traditional way that taught me carpentry. That's where I learned hand tools and stuff to do carpentry. But that's what got me thinking about could this be more. And I started to learn about groups that were working over the world. I saw a documentary on PBS that was like a Brad Pitt narrated documentary that talked about this guy Sergio Palleroni. He was doing this work in Mexico and all over the world. So that was really compelling. Of course now for those who don't know, Sergio is a colleague of ours at Portland State University.

Marisa Zapata:

We are talking today with Todd Ferry from Portland State University, and he is sharing insights into alternative shelter. Let's pivot to what the Center for Public Interest Design is.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah. Our center, we operate a lot like a nonprofit design and architecture practice within PSU School of Architecture. So we take on real world projects to address community needs, working with community clients. So those things range from thinking about disaster response, preparedness, and resilience in places like Haiti or Ecuador post-earthquake. So we'll take students and do design build projects there. We've had collaborations with the Crow and the Northern Cheyenne in Southeastern Montana for years. And a lot of our work locally focuses on issues here, which include a range of things. But housing and homelessness is a huge area where we put our attention.

Marisa Zapata:

The tie to homelessness with your work is around alternative shelter. And I think this is really interesting because this lines up with the center's kind of origin story. Todd was getting a lot of attention for his work around villages in particular. And Greg Townley, another co-founder of the center and I were very concerned about the village model, and what that meant, and what that would look like. So when we were talking about founding the center, we knew that it would make no sense to not work with you and Sergio. But also, we didn't know how you might enter the conversation. And it was really amazing. It was really amazing that you were excited to even think about the questions and concerns that we had. And then we had to realize, we also have to be open-minded that this could be a really powerful and hopeful model. So I think that that is really important to thinking about at least how we've come together to create an entire research project around villages. But before we get into that, I wanted to start just a little more broadly with this concept of alternative shelter. What does that mean to you?

Todd Ferry:

A lot of people use alternative shelter in different ways. To me, I think that the most general way that we can look at alternative shelter is through a recognition that traditional congregate shelter models aren't

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working for a lot of people. So what it's trying to do is to kind of use the mechanisms at the city level and through different kind of funding and social support streams to give people shelter. And then if we can look at new ways to do that on a spectrum from traditional shelter all the way up to transitional housing, then I think that we can open up a lot of unexplored areas.

Marisa Zapata:

And when you say areas, you mean literal geographic places and so forth? Do you mean that conceptually or both?

Todd Ferry:

Both. Both. But certainly conceptually, I think that there's a lot that's been unexplored. In Portland, I think the village model offers a whole lot of really interesting, amazing opportunities to learn from and to study because we have the oldest village with Dignity Village founded in 2000.

Marisa Zapata:

Why don't you start with talking about Dignity Village? How did that even come up? You're talking about the oldest known living model of a village. What's the story for Dignity Village?

Todd Ferry:

Great question. And just an acknowledgement that my involvement in villages began much later in 2015 or 2016. So what I'm sharing is what I've learned over the years.

Marisa Zapata:

I think this is such an important note for listeners. Today, it's definitely a lot of perspective as more traditional researchers, people who've dug in to particular projects and ideas who weren't necessarily involved with the work. Todd will talk about some of the work he's been directly involved in. And we just want to acknowledge and thank everyone who has shared their stories with us, and to recognize that we might make mistakes. And those are on us.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah. Thank you for that. So Dignity Village really began as activism led by people experiencing homelessness. And just through really thoughtful, beautiful, and kind of genius ways of protesting the way that people experiencing homelessness were being treated, started to demand something else. So there were a few things that were happening at the time. Street Roots started the out of the doorways campaign, which was protesting the way that people experiencing homelessness were being swept along and declaring they should have a right to stay where they are, informed communities. And then through strong leadership of houses activists, people like Ibrahim Mubarak and Jack Tafari, and a whole bunch of groups. They started to make this act of declaring their rights to stay together as a community public through what were called the shopping cart parades. So every time that they would get swept by the police, they would make a show of it. Go all together across Portland's bridges. And pretty soon, every time this would happen, more and more people would join. And it would get increasingly attention to the point that it was getting national attention. And eventually, it was through that and it was through support of housed activists that allowed them to really start to form.

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Todd Ferry:

And from an architecture point of view, architects were getting involved at that point. People like Mark Lakeman, and Tim [inaudible 00:11:54], and people who worked in the built environment like Eli [inaudible 00:11:57]. And we're really thinking about this question of what role can design architecture play to support a movement like this.

Marisa Zapata:

And so now, Dignity Village is on property out by the airport? Is that accurate?

Todd Ferry:

That's right. It's on a property called the Sunderland Yards property. And initially, it had split into three. This is the one that has lasted since about 2000, and they have been a self-governed organization ever since.

Marisa Zapata:

And they are pods. We're going to talk about with the pod villages in our study. But they've been around for a while, which I think speaks to some of the concerns around village work and the alternative shelter models, which is that these are supposed to be temporary and serve as basically a patchwork because of what you mentioned, the issues with congregate shelter. But the ultimate goal is supposed to be housing and housing quickly. And yet, we're finding that that actually hasn't happened for people in Dignity Village. And at this point for some of them, it's a choice, right? They really are happy where they're at. They don't want to move into housing, but the village model is still there. The village is still there. So as Portland expands villages, are we actually just creating a secondary, substandard housing element for people experiencing homelessness? So that's always been my concern.

Todd Ferry:

I get that concern. I think we should continue to be advocating for funding and policy that is permanent housing. At the same time, my feeling is, and I'm wondering your take on this is that if it's people experiencing homelessness forming in a community for themselves, and they want to think of that as housing or their long-term base, then there are ways that we should be supporting that. It doesn't mean that that should become the bar to which government or social agencies try to reach in terms of what investment looks like and housing looks like. But I think that if people can define it for themselves, then that's a whole different conversation.

Marisa Zapata:

I agree. I think it's really different. And that's what I try to say this idea of when is somebody making a choice because they really see no more options versus when is somebody making a choice because it is a true preference. And I think the other thing that always concerns me is that you always hear these stories about people who don't work in homelessness going up to somebody who's experiencing homelessness and just asking, "Would you move inside?" And that person is like no. And that becomes the story. Whereas some people are saying they don't want to move into traditional housing because of trauma in apartment buildings. Poor management. Because they're afraid of being evicted.

Marisa Zapata:

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So I think that part of it is also a failure for us to meet the expectations and needs that someone might have. And if we actually try to address those and someone is still like no, like this pod in this community is where I'm at. I do want to support that. And yet, I don't know how we support that and stop the government from simply mass producing pods and putting them out and saying congratulations, solved.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah. I think we need to be looking at it from both angles. I think if it is the government doing it and it does feel more top down, and they're looking at a solution. Then no, they're not providing housing and they shouldn't be thinking of it in that way.

Todd Ferry:

Following the state of emergency on homelessness in Portland is when I first started getting involved in the village movement. I was invited to be part of this group called The Village Coalition in 2015. Because the state of emergency was declared and some people were saying, "Well, if there are close to 4,000 people who are on shelter on a given night, then let's find warehouses that can have cots for 4,000 people."

Todd Ferry:

And a lot of folks were saying, "Well, that sounds like an interment camp. That sounds like a nightmare." They were inspired by what Dignity Village had done and saying, "We want things more like this."

Todd Ferry:

So a group called the Village Coalition formed that was largely led by people experiencing homelessness and a new village that we're just forming called Hazelnut Grove, another self-governed village with amazing activist leaders. One thing that was really fascinating there was that as they were talking about forming this village, it was all about community. It wasn't about this choice between pod and permanent housing. What they were talking about was we want to live in a way that is connected. In a way that people, even if you have permanent housing, you're disconnected from one another. So the focus was really around this ethos that was started at Dignity Village, which is it's about supporting community and being together in that way.

Todd Ferry:

So I think that this is an important part of the conversation around villages that often gets overlooked, and certainly by municipalities that are only looking at it as non-congregate, right? Individual sleeping units with shared common facilities. And they're not looking at these other pieces, which are shared community goals and agreements, and agency over place and social structures.

Marisa Zapata:

So I don't know if we've actually talked about this Todd. But I think it's also just an important lesson around how we both develop market rate housing across the board. But particularly affordable housing, which often ends up in the form of apartments. We could still have community space. We could still have cooperative-led apartment buildings, right? We simply choose not to. And we often because of the pricing mechanisms and our unwillingness to pay, end up removing the best kinds of community spaces. Right? I just think that if part of what we want to help promote is that beauty of community. Because I

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totally agree with you, it's there. Why aren't we looking at cottage cluster models for affordable housing, if we think we can't actually replicate things in apartments? And I'm just thinking about my house backs up into a dirt road, one of the unimproved roads in Portland. For listeners, yes. Portland has a lot of unimproved roads. It's really funny, and there's a whole history to it that's embedded in the land use history and annexation policies. But it means that I've got a road that's pretty short, full of potholes that hardly anyone drives down. And all of the neighbors talk to each other. It's very organic, but because we can just hang out in the street and talk to each other.

Marisa Zapata:

So feel like that part of village community, wanting to support that when making more villages. And also maybe challenging our current development practices to think about community and how we could be doing that better.

Todd Ferry:

Yes. Yes to all of it. And in another time, let's talk about how cars ruin everything.

Marisa Zapata:

The transit listeners just cheered.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah. They ruin everything. But I think in our village research and how to guide, we interviewed so many people with direct experience living in, designing, building, or operating villages. And we definitely heard over and over that villages don't necessarily have to be the pod model like they were studied. That it could be in a motel. It could be in apartment buildings. That really, the social aspects of the shared community agreements and goals and the agency over, over the physical and social aspects of the place where it could really happen anywhere. But it isn't looked at nearly deeply enough in most of our housing approaches.

Marisa Zapata:

So wait. What we're saying is that people prefer to live in places where they actually have autonomy over their lives and the ability to live in community with the people around them.

Todd Ferry:

Shocking revelations. Right?

Marisa Zapata:

Oh my God. Oh my God. It's almost like I don't know, like a productive homeowner's association. Because there are some out there. We call them neighborhood associations here. I mean, they're not quite the same thing. But just again, I think that we set up and we're so stuck in this punishment model against poor people that we deprive them of these basic things that you're finding. And I just think that it's really important that we always highlight that.

Marisa Zapata:

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This is Marisa Zapata, Portland State University. And I am here with Todd Ferry today from Portland State University as well. He is at the Center of Public Interest Design and a co-founder of the Homelessness Research & Action Collaborative. Can you talk a little bit about what it meant and what it looked like for you to deeply engage in the creation of villages? You've been really engaged early on with Hazelnut Grove and Kenton Women's Village. Correct?

Todd Ferry:

I wasn't involved in the creation of Hazelnut Grove. And Hazelnut Grove really served as friends and advisors, and experts on the village model. So they were very helpful in the early stage. So what that looked like for me was as folks from Hazelnut Grove were advocating for more villages in the wake of the state of emergency and asking, "Could you help with pod designs?" And the answer is sure. The kind of smaller design, that's kind of doable. But let's also look at the bigger picture of what it looks like to have these in this city. What would it look like to have city support and not have them be in a precarious situation where they could get swept at any time? And let's bring the architecture community into the conversation with that.

Todd Ferry:

So working with folks like Mark Lakeman involved in Dignity Village and others, we invited the architecture community, basically firms to sit down with folks from Hazelnut Grove and other folks in the Village Coalition to learn about what villages were like to visit them. And then think all right. So if we are going to design new pods or new ways of thinking about villages, how can we do that thinking about how they could be beautiful, healthy, well-made, and the structures that would allow them to receive investment and legally operate? And ultimately, that resulted in big charette that resulted in teams forming. It was called The Pod Initiative.

Marisa Zapata:

Okay. Pet peeve here, architecture man. What is a charette?

Todd Ferry:

Right. A charette is an intense period of design that brings together different stakeholders toward a common goal. And in this case, the common goal was ... this was a four or five hour period of design. It was held at Mercy Corps, and we were all collectively looking together. What would it look like? How can we come up with new typologies for pods? What might village in this case in 2016 look like? And then how can we go forward together?

Marisa Zapata:

Just to clarify, it's a design workshop?

Todd Ferry:

I mean if you want to say it very quickly and simply, sure. It's a design workshop.

Marisa Zapata:

Yes. In language that everyone understands.

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Todd Ferry:

Got it. And the listeners can hear this to stay in for architects right now.

Marisa Zapata:

Because y'all use words like charette.

Todd Ferry:

I'm making a note to try to slip in words like interstitial very soon. Another favorite that drives people crazy. So to their credit, we have an amazing architecture community who is just on board to say, "All right, we'll give this a shot." And in just two months time from this design workshop, from just two months time, they all designed and built pods together. And we displayed them downtown, the North Park Blocks and the [inaudible 00:23:41] parking lot as a way to invite Portlanders to come out and say when we're talking about villages and we're talking about pods, this is what it could be like. This is what we mean.

Todd Ferry:

And I think that having something tangible as opposed to just talking in abstract was hugely impactful. Everybody has opinions. Everyone says, "Well, I've seen this. I've thought about this." But I think having something tangible to say, when we're talking about it. We're talking about these specific ideas, that made a difference.

Todd Ferry:

So they were downtown for about three weeks. And ultimately during that time that they were on display, the city identified the lot in the Kenton neighborhood as a potential site for a village. So a team began pursuing that as a potential village. So that team included Joint Office of Homeless Services, our Center for Public Interest Design, the Village Coalition, Kenton Neighborhood Association, the Catholic Charities who would operate the village, and more. This team that was kind of quickly forming to come together to explore it as a pilot project, which ultimately by June of that year, ended up operating.

Marisa Zapata:

It's been really exciting to see the early work continue. And then the Kenton Women's Village has actually now been located on two different sites. But I think that as opposed to what you might hear about conventional displacement language, I feel like the move was very thoughtful as well. And y'all took a lot of that opportunity, right? To think about new pod models or new designs, right? From the site.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah. And we learned so much from the villagers and from those involved in that village in terms of how to improve it. Right? If it is a pilot period, we don't want to just think we're good. We're done. No, really. What works, what doesn't? And there was a lot that didn't work. There was a lot that could be improved upon.

Marisa Zapata:

Tell me some things that didn't work.

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Todd Ferry:

There was a lot. And when I say we, I should say that the team that was working on moving to the second Kenton Women's Village, it included people like SRG Partnership, Scott Mooney from there and his team, the Home Builders Foundation, Andersen Construction, LMC Construction. So a really good group of people in conjunction with Catholic Charities in the joint office and others. But some things that didn't work-

Marisa Zapata:

Catholic Charities was coming in to manage the site long term.

Todd Ferry:

That's right. That's right. So some things that we learned, and in architecture, we would talk about these things as post occupancy evaluation, and what's working, what's not, how you can enjoy it. But this was kind of ongoing, trying to learn from how this was operating. How can we make it better? One thing I'll say for example, is I was hearing that some of the pods at the Kenton Women's Village were having mold issues. And I couldn't understand the ones that they were saying had mold issues, they were really well detailed. I saw them being built. I went and checked them out, and I didn't understand where they could be leaking because this was the assumption. And then I spent a full day on site when it happened to be raining and seeing people come in and out to use the common facilities. And they were getting soaking wet, and they were going back in. And sometimes, they would change clothes.

Todd Ferry:

And what was happening is that folks were taking off wet clothes, putting them in the corner like you would do, changing. And then it might be a week before you can get to a laundromat. So ultimately, it was just this build up of wet things and moisture in the pods, because the village didn't have laundry facilities.

Todd Ferry:

So of course it seems obvious in hindsight, but then it's okay. So when we're thinking about it, we definitely want to be efficient with villages. They've got to have laundry facility, at least the ones that I would contribute to. Because this is going to help with overall health and the quality of the pods, right?

Marisa Zapata:

This is a good point. To emphasize that villages can be aesthetically very pleasing and they can be safe for residents. But the pods are not actually homes or houses. Right? Or apartment units. Meaning that they do not have bathrooms, interior bathrooms. They do not have interior kitchens, and they are a pretty small living space. And I think that what you and the people you work with have done has been quite amazing. Is emphasize the importance of common spaces, common facilities. Not porta potties for bathrooms, right? Actually having a dignified place to use the restroom. But also, just wanting to remind people that you can do a lot. It still requires people to go outside to get to a bathroom.

Todd Ferry:

Thanks for bringing that up. And also for more context is that what we're talking about today is really concentrated on Portland. And certainly, those within our village study, which were pods. There are well

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over at this point 115 villages that people would call villages of different kinds. And some of them do have different levels of utilities, and pods, and different kind of approaches of permanence. So, yeah, but when we're talking about them in Portland, they have limited utilities. They might have electricity, but they won't have water or sewers within the pod itself. Those would happen in a common facility.

Marisa Zapata:

So any other things that stand out to you as things that didn't go right in that pilot phase? I think that this is really helpful for people who are trying to think about making their own village. What are some paths that you all tried that you're like, "Yeah, this didn't work?" Like you said, it seems self-evident that laundry should be included, but not necessarily for the reason that you're talking about. Right? So what are some of the other things that came up?

Todd Ferry:

There's a lot. So I'll focus it on ones that I was specifically involved in. So I've worked with students on designing pods, prototypes. So evaluating other pods that existed or our pods, and we found this in the village research outcomes that there was a strong preference for pods that weren't so boxy, because they can often trigger institutional trauma. There's also just less individual spaces that you might carve out for a more private bed area for a desk, or for storage, or things like that. So there was a strong preference for those that weren't so boxy, even though boxy often can mean greater square footage, right? So there's a trade off there. So there were certainly findings like that.

Todd Ferry:

Materials that can manage being moved very well. They're very durable in that way. So often in architecture, we design for permanence. And we don't often think about the exact way that these things are moved. But having had several pods that designed and built with students that got moved in different ways, then watching the forklift put these straps around the roof, and the walls, and watching this just get really cinched and just holding your breath. It really changes one's perspective on how exactly these should be designed on the detail level.

Marisa Zapata:

Wasn't there an addition of, was it electricity, or fans, or heat?

Todd Ferry:

This is a great point. That's right. So in the early pods, we had worked with other faculty involved in the building sciences here at PSU. And we did things like blow door tests, which basically talk about how airtight a building is, and how it can hold heat, and how insulated these buildings are, and can body heat them up. Because if they're compact enough, it's a tight enough envelope, exterior wrap. Then the body could theoretically do that.

Todd Ferry:

Except people were complaining a lot about being cold. And it didn't make sense if you were just looking at data. But then again, if people have to go to the bathroom two times in a night, then you're basically having this big heat flush every time that you opened up the door. So it didn't really matter how efficient that the envelope was unless there was an active heat source. People were going to be cold.

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Todd Ferry:

There was an interim period at the pilot period at Kenton Women's Village where hot water bottles were used, but that's insufficient. The new one, all pods are fully electric. They have rating heating panels and others. And that's really appropriate for anything that a city was going to invest in.

Marisa Zapata:

I think all of these details are so important as we see. There was a really powerful article about some of these villages, similar villages in California where they were talking about basically the pods are functioning as jails, right? They're basically the size of a prison cell and without much more in them. Right? And I think that the concept sure is looking positive in some places as a former shelter. But you can also do this in a terrible way. So I think that the amount of thoughtfulness that y'all put in from the start and then the continuation of tinkering with things to make them as comfortable as possible for people who are experiencing homelessness.

Marisa Zapata:

This is Marisa Zapata. And I am here with Todd Ferry, a senior research associate with the Center for Public Interest Design at Portland State.

Marisa Zapata:

So turning a little bit from this, but I think very consistent with this idea of how do you learn lessons and build on practices. You were the driving force behind the idea of creating a howto guide. Greg Townley, the other researcher on the project and myself were like, "We have much nerdier questions. We're going to tell people what to do with our research? This is horrifying." I mean, not entirely. I can tell people what to do. But it just felt a more uncertain space for me, given what I was working on. But you really had this amazing vision for the how to guide. I'm wondering if you could talk about why this was so important for you.

Todd Ferry:

Yeah. Well, I think that there's a reality that often research that happens in academia very much stays in the realm of papers published in obscure journals, is hard to access, and isn't meant for general consumption. And it was important to anything that involved villages, particularly that leaned heavily on the wisdom of villagers that it could be useful for just a broad audience. So our goal with it became to let's make the data, the collection of our information as clear and transparent as possible. And then the recommendations be really led by those with direct experience, and not with those with the loudest voices or strongest opinion which is often how the decisions get made. But really those who have direct experience with it.

Todd Ferry:

Now as we've said, I've been involved in village design as one of team members at the CID and with many other partners. But in this case, interviewing village designers and village builders, approaching it as though I was starting from scratch was incredibly helpful. And I learned a lot about projects I had worked on specifically by just coming at it from an outside perspective and listening to those voices. Because you can work in parallel with someone, but have very different observations and takeaways. So

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that was a real treat to get to spend time to kind of critically evaluate the project in general, but then even some that I've been involved in.

Marisa Zapata:

For anyone who has not seen the guide, we all of course make sure to include links everywhere to take a look at it. It is absolutely gorgeous. And sometimes you'll hear the critique of planners and designers who are committed to producing beautiful documents, that there isn't the substance backing them. And then of course, people who might be writing substance, whatever that means, can't visually communicate in a way that matters. And I am so proud of this product because I think it does both. And I think there's graphics. There's very specific ideas around design. There's comics, right? There's just an amazing array of material to be as accessible as possible. And that was one of your commitments, right? Visual accessibility, but also accessibility to the public to have access to the document. Why was that so important to you?

Todd Ferry:

Because increasingly, these are happening. And they're happening. And unless we can make it clear in terms of those people who have lived in pods and who are involved in it, here's what they have to say about it. How can we make it better? Then we're replicating potentially the same mistakes, right? So like we just talked about with Kenton Women's Village, you don't want to just sit there and congratulate yourself on what happened. You want to think no, what can I learn from and how can you make it better? And then not stop there. It still has to evolve. So then in the next iteration, what can you learn? I mean, design is an iterative process. And that needed to happen here too.

Todd Ferry:

So in some ways, I think being able to leverage this great history that Portland has with Dignity Village, and Hazelnut Grove, and others. How can it inform other cities? And certainly trying to help municipalities do them better, because these things are just becoming increasingly common.

Marisa Zapata:

It's always tempting to want to put this kind of project into a book, right? And for similar reasons, we wouldn't want to have a formal publisher that then you had to pay for access to the book. At the same time, those are things that are prestige in academia, right? We chose to self-publish it. And that is the right decision because the goal is to get the information out there. But also for academics, it's like okay, well we chose not to do this other path. So what does that mean? And how do we withstand those pressures within academia to just be like, "No, we're going to do the thing that's accessible."

Todd Ferry:

It's such a good question. In this case, it felt like one way to look at it is that the village model was created by people experiencing homelessness and by activists. And this wasn't created in academia. And people like me who are in academia were just contributing small pieces to this movement and trying to think about how to transfer some of the power of the institution of the university and the students to be able to support some of these efforts. So in good faith, the research and how to guide would need to do the same thing. It would really need to honor this history and that work, and be able to continue to be a benefit to those who are experiencing homelessness and want to build villages for themselves in addition to municipalities who were exploring these.

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Marisa Zapata:

It is such a great and powerful summary of what it means to actually do work with community instead of extracting from community. This is Marisa Zapata from Portland State University. And I am here chatting with Todd Ferry, who is also my colleague of Portland State. So we talked about villages a lot. Can you talk to me about other forms of alternative shelter that y'all have been exploring?

Todd Ferry:

One great thing about working on this within the School of Architecture is that I get to work with absolutely amazing architecture students to envision and come up with new ideas for both village models, but then going beyond it. And in some cases, students are challenging it and thinking about new things.

Todd Ferry:

I had the great pleasure of getting to collaborate with the Anchorage Museum a few years ago, and worked with HRAC and Marta Petteni particularly on that exhibit. And students in my studio generated a range of ideas to try to think about particularly alternative shelter models that might be appropriate in cold weather, but that could also of course be appropriate with climate change. And is really just a reminder that we have not tapped the bottom of possibilities. So students generated things like what if our transportation stops converted into spaces for people experiencing homelessness, or what if the sides of buildings had infrastructure that folded down to support people in safe ways and they could access utilities? Or thinking about how over time, villages could evolve. All sorts of different ways we could think about that. And that was just in one design studio.

Todd Ferry:

So these are things I often bring into architecture studios as a way to both expose students to these issues, to work with partners who are experiencing homelessness and service providers who work with houseless folks. And then to really emphasize that all of the most important pieces of architecture are present in these things, in terms of all architecture is political. All of it is social, and it operates in this realm of dystopian capitalism sometimes, and oftentimes has this ability to make great change. And in a single pod, all of architecture is there from threshold, to how we dwell, to the way light enters a room, to physical comfort, to the way that we might interact with guests there, to the way that we work in a community. So we explore these things, and students are just a constant reminder of we have more work to do. There's more things to explore. And we can continue to learn from people like the folks at Hazelnut Grove who've become experts in this area.

Marisa Zapata:

Whenever I hear about your work, it always makes me feel very comforted that y'all are out there thinking about these things. And just so sad that you're having to spend time instead of focusing on the end of homelessness, figuring out how to keep people alive and comfortable while we as a society allow them to live outside. I don't mean allow them as in they would be punished for living outside, but allow them in the sense that we have not been willing to address our affordable housing issue. And it's just a profound conversation, right? We're talking about using benches and figuring out ways to convert benches. So someone might have a more comfortable, safer night of sleep. Instead of how do we build the most amazing affordable housing development that brings in these concepts of community and love.

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And it's very hard for me sometimes, because I'm like this is amazing. I'm so glad you're doing this. And I hate that we have to do it.

Todd Ferry:

Agreed. Agreed. And I think that it looks very different when people want to create an alternative form of lifestyle for themselves, versus if it's because of just a failure on a governmental side, which for the most part it is.

Todd Ferry:

But to your point, some things that are reasons to be optimistic or some things that I'm excited about is I'll be spending the next year ... I don't think we've talked about this. I'll be spending the next year trying to create a pilot project for an exterior rocket mass heater bench in the public realm, which-

Marisa Zapata:

That was a lot of words. I got to exterior and bench.

Todd Ferry:

It was a lot of words. Essentially, it is a very efficient way to warm up the thermal mass of a bench. And in this case, it would be in the public realm in order to keep people warm through contact with that bench, and hopefully create an amenity in public space. Portland's one of the only places, only cities where they can exist in residential atmosphere, but they haven't made their way into the public realm. But I think as a pilot to explore could this be a useful amenity for folks is exciting. As you're saying, should we need it? No, we shouldn't. It's a shame that we need to create something like that to keep people safe and warm. But at the same time, I think we have to do it.

Marisa Zapata:

I would also again, one of the million things that we talk about that would serve everyone. I would like a warm bench to sit on when I'm waiting for the bus. That sounds great to me.

Todd Ferry:

That's right. Well, and this is such a good point. I think that there's so much that we should be designing in our public spaces that support everybody. And of course that includes people experiencing homelessness. Instead, I think that often the default response is, "Well, we can't have public bathrooms. We can't have warm benches. We can't have spaces that are nice to be, because it will attract people who will want to be there." Which is insane.

Todd Ferry:

So if you create good spaces, people will want to be there and they should want to be there. And if they're experiencing homelessness, then they need that space more than anybody. And fine. Good. But instead, I think that we're creating just a lot of hostile architecture. And it's a huge mistake, and it's just making a much less welcoming city for everyone. So good spaces are good for everybody.

Marisa Zapata:

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I mean, this is the thing that I always find fascinating. The amount of time and money we'll spend envisioning a public space and then adding in this component of controlling cry in the space and deterring bad behaviors where, I'm doing air quotes by the way. Where that is code for people experiencing homelessness, people who are poor, people of color.

Todd Ferry:

It's such a good point. We need a diversity of voices if we are really going to design for everyone. And we make quite an effort in our village research and how to guide just to emphasize that people who've lived in villages and worked on villages, they're experts in this field. And villagers need to be part of future efforts. And they should be compensated for that expertise and really part of design teams.

Marisa Zapata:

Well, I only have one more topic and it's a big one. So we can maybe just talk about it for a couple of minutes and maybe you'll come back and talk about it more. We have talked about the right for people just to take over space and do what they want with it. I mean, maybe this is called subversive architecture. You're just going to go out and say is this anarchist architecture? I mean, I'm for it. I'm for it. People should just claim their space. I think I told you I was out interviewing people in one of the encampments. And they were like, unsanctioned encampments just to be clear. They were like, "You work at PSU." And I'm like, "Yes." They're like, "Can you just bring me a pod and drop it off?" And I was like, "Why can't I just bring a pot and drop it off?" It seems like a very reasonable choice.

Todd Ferry:

Absolutely. And I think that if there are people experiencing homelessness who identify and underutilized peace of land that could really support themselves as they form community, then that should be supported. And I think that you'd find all sorts of reasons for positive outcomes for them as people, for the way that it could impact the surrounding community, and the way that they find social support. And the way that that people can heal and have the kind of community that we all want.

Todd Ferry:

Obviously, often those sites are set aside for good reason. But it also means that we're probably not building on them. They're probably not going to become housing. So they're not going to stand in the way of that. So really, how can we think about these and support the kind of insight that folks have into that?

Todd Ferry:

One anecdote that we have in the village research and how to guide talks about the process of The AfroVillage, identifying a site for a max reused car. So potentially, The AfroVillage hub, which would provide services. And it's something they're pursuing an amazing team working on that. But the there was a site that its leader Laquida Landford had identified as a really good potential site for this. And working with partners over at BPS, they heard.

Marisa Zapata:

That's the city of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability.

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Todd Ferry:

That's right. So they entered in all these different factors and these different things to do a GIS site analysis. They basically created a spreadsheet of 1,600 sites throughout Portland, potential areas. Once that spreadsheet was created and all of the different kind of preferences for what kind of site would be desirable were put in, out of the 1,600 sites, it was that. There were two sites and one of them was the exact one.

Marisa Zapata:

Oh my God, I love this so much.

Todd Ferry:

I said from the beginning this is the site. This is what we should be looking at. I love that story. So the partners at BPS are amazing, and they were doing due diligence. But there is something to this recognizing that those people who are doing the grassroots work, they know it. They have this innate knowledge of place, of what's going to work for community. And I think that our city, but certainly all cities would be wise to just listen to that and support that's happening. And yes, that includes folks who want to take over on use sites.

Marisa Zapata:

Todd, why don't you tell me what people like about villages? What's it bringing people to this model?

Todd Ferry:

Well, I think it's for people who are living in villages or wanting to form a village because they're experiencing homelessness, I think that this idea of community, and safety. And having a place of one zone, regardless of what that timeline is for themselves to be their transition is really appealing. I think that the public is really fascinated by villages, because it seems such a logical solution, right? So you meet people and they're experiencing homelessness. And you can think okay, I might not be able to address the massive issue of homelessness in the United States, but I can create a space for this one person, right? A tiny house in a way.

Todd Ferry:

And the pods, the way they're done in Portland, they're small enough. And the barrier's low enough to them that they can really be done by a group of five or so people who are really interested in helping out.

Todd Ferry:

So when you start to do that at a larger scale, it becomes really rewarding. So for example, the team that worked together to create the second Kenton Women's Village invited the construction community to participate. So 21 teams formed and all offered to build and donate pods, which was amazing. So you had these people who were actively involved in directly addressing homelessness for individuals who might not otherwise be stakeholders in it. So I think that there's this really important element where people can actively be addressing a solution that is weighing on all of us. Right. So regardless of whether it's villages or other things, I think thinking collectively about how we can be more active in directly addressing homelessness as a society could have huge benefits.

Marisa Zapata:

Yeah. People just like to do things that they can conceptualize and put their hands around. I mean, when I start trying to explain why housing is taking so long, you can just see people's eyes glaze over. They're like, "This is really complicated." And they're right. It is. So it is great to keep people engaged in this discussion, and bring some people together in community.

Marisa Zapata:

I also think that one of the things that you're highlighting by asking the question of what do people like. We're also thinking about what do people not like? And one of the things I was really pleased to find when we did our survey as part of the study of people who were neighbors to the village was that people's concerns namely around resident behavior went down dramatically after the village was cited. A significant number of people did not actually know about the village ahead of time, have concerns about the village coming in. Or, were actually more concerned about the villagers' safety and acceptance. So I think that when we hear about villages being cited and neighbors coming out in arms, it is true. But it is a very small segment of the neighborhood. And I just think that's important to highlight because there are people who are living in the neighborhoods that want to go out and be part of creating these communities.

Marisa Zapata:

The last thing I wanted to ask you about, and then I'll invite you to share any parting thoughts is where is the village work heading? What do you see as the next steps for the village movement?

Todd Ferry:

I think it's clear we're going to increasingly see villages instituted across the country by municipalities. Not necessarily by people experiencing homelessness. Although I think that we need to keep those doors open, right? For self-governed villages to really form themselves and thrive. Unfortunately, I think that we'll see a lot of them that are only taking one piece of villages, which is the non-congregate individual sleeping units with shared calm facility, and not really put much effort or attention into making sure that there is this a sense of community and a sense of agency for those who live there. I think that if you include safe rest villages and others, I think there'll probably be at least 10 new ones in Portland in the next few years. And we'll see them around the country.

Todd Ferry:

Personally, I am an architect. I'm a designer. I want to see iteration and learning from what we're doing and not get comfortable in past solutions and always try to work with those with lived experience to do better. So I think that hopefully, we'll start to see villages in our region advance and learn from those that are happening around the country, and different things happening there.

Todd Ferry:

Locally, I think there's some work that excites me that The AfroVillage is doing. And in that case, The AfroVillage again, they're looking at how the village model can result in permanent housing. So what that looks like is beginning with recognition that often the most expensive part of a village is the shared common facility. So what if we begin with a house? Single family, multi family, doesn't matter. But it has things like the bathroom, kitchen, laundry, living. And it's got individual rooms that could be served as

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sleeping units. And then pods could be added over time. But at the end of a certain period, there was an investment there in house and land that could then go to permanent housing. In this case, the proposal is it would go into the hands of Black collective ownership with The AfroVillage. So I think things like that are really exciting, but it'll be-

Marisa Zapata:

I can interrupt for a second. One of the things that I think is so important about what you're talking about The AfroVillage and the space to learn and innovate is that the villages that we studied were largely villages that were started by and serving people who were white, right? Not exclusively. But over the set of villages, that's really what we were seeing. And Laquida Landford and her partners have really taken the model and innovated it for a way that worked for them. And it's really actually interesting because it starts to show up. If you're thinking about the housing and urban development continuum of homelessness services and structures, it ends up in a whole different category of transitional housing more. So it's really quite fascinating how those categories don't really describe what's happening. But how just having that space for innovation can really create something by and for people who are Black. All right, Todd. Well, that's all the time we have for today. Thank you for joining us on the Understanding Homelessness show. We hope to have you on here again.

Todd Ferry:

Thanks so much. It'll be my pleasure.

Marisa Zapata:

All right. Take care.

Speaker 3:

That was Todd Ferry with Portland State University, talking about the village research and how to guide. To read a copy of the report, go to pdx.edu/homelessness/village. Or you can go to [you understandinghomelessness.org](https://understandinghomelessness.org) to find a copy of this episode and links to recommended reading, including the village guide. Thank you so much for listening.